

**Material culture, context and meaning**

**A critical investigation of museum practice,  
with particular reference to the South African Museum**

**By**

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in the Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town**

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## ABSTRACT

The broad theoretical concern of the thesis is to elucidate the relationship between material culture and social relations, and to counter the analytical separation of cultural form and social practice, which is a pervasive problem in archaeology and material culture studies in general. This problem is addressed with reference to museum practice, focusing in particular on the social role of artefacts in two contextual domains - that of everyday life, as interpreted in ethnographic fieldwork, and that of a museum, which is in itself a complex cultural artefact. These two contexts are linked by the concept of recontextualization, which I suggest is a pivotal process in both museum practice and archaeology. The theory of 'structuration', as formulated by Anthony Giddens, is drawn on to overcome the problematic separation of cultural objects from social subjects. This leads to the conceptualization of meaning in material culture as being socially constituted and context-related, and the relationship of material culture to social relations as being one of mediation rather than objective reflection. Emphasis is thereby given to material culture as a resource that is actively implicated in the construction of social relations and identity. This theoretical approach is applied in two field studies and two museum studies. The former, undertaken in Transkei and the Transvaal Lowveld, investigate material culture in the social matrix of everyday use; the latter, undertaken with reference to the Ethnography section of the South African Museum, illustrate the process of recontextualization, which I regard as operating at both physical and cognitive levels. It is argued that processes of recontextualization, inherent in museum practice, inevitably change both context and the object-subject relationship, and therefore alter the range of meanings that objects evoke once located in a museum. Despite the apparent authenticity of exhibited artefacts, I argue that museum representations are composite artefacts of museum practice, rather than objective reflections of reality. I suggest that reflexive awareness of professional practice as social practice should be built into both archaeological texts and museum representations, through which knowledge of the social past is conveyed to the general public. This is consistent with the argument throughout the dissertation for an integration of object and subject, and a recognition of human agency, past and present. In conclusion, I argue for a more sensitive, reflexive approach to museum practice that would encourage an awareness of social context, and invite a more active participation by viewers in the generation of meaning. The dissertation is a contribution to this end.

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## PREFACE

A long-term professional concern with material culture and museum practice in South Africa forms the background to this project. By the early 1970s when I joined the Department of Ethnology<sup>1</sup> at the South African Museum, a rift between museum-based material culture studies and academic social anthropology had become entrenched and there was relatively little interaction among anthropologists working in these fields. In general museum studies in material culture tended to be descriptive accounts of form and technology, while the logistics of managing and displaying collections reinforced an object-centred orientation. On the other hand, social anthropologists, primarily concerned with social processes, tended to overlook material culture or relegate it to a passive position.

In archaeology academic interest in material culture had been sustained but the rise to prominence of the New Archaeology with its emphasis on scientific method, analytical techniques and systems theory had tended to eclipse the social dimensions both of the material record and its interpretation. Even in ethno-archaeological studies, social relations tended to be overlooked in favour of generalizations about material processes that could be applied across time and space. This limited focus further reinforced the asymmetrical relationship that had developed between social analysis and material culture studies in general.

The present project was initially designed as an ethno-archaeological investigation of the material culture associated with the subsistence cultivation of maize and the old African staples, sorghum and millet. However, during the course of fieldwork the perspective of the study was expanded to encompass the social use of domestic space and the active use of material culture in the context of social interaction. Thus the focus of the field studies shifted from being narrowly defined as the study of artefacts in relation to subsistence activities to become a more inclusive inquiry into the relationship between material culture and social practice.

My fieldwork experience led to an increased awareness of the social significance of material culture, and of the importance of understanding the subtleties of context when attempting to interpret

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1. In 1982 the name of the Department was changed to Ethnography to distance the Museum from the segregationist connotations that the term Ethnology had acquired in South Africa (see Davison 1990a).

material culture. This raised questions not only for ethnographic and archaeological material culture studies but for museum practice. Collecting artefacts in the field inevitably involves the alienation of objects from one social context and their incorporation in another. This focused my attention on the issue of recontextualization which I came to regard as a pivotal process in museum practice, and which became a central concern of the thesis.

Undertaking a critical investigation of museum practice from the inside, as it were, had advantages and disadvantages. Among the former I count access to museum resources and the first-hand experience of how things work at a museum, among the latter the difficulty of questioning long-established procedures and of articulating tacit knowledge. The reader should be aware of my position as a participant in the practice that I am reviewing. My motivation in undertaking the project was the conviction that a better theoretical understanding of the processes involved in museum practice would increase both reflexive awareness and the potential for effective use of archaeological and ethnographic collections in museum discourse. My intention was, and remains, both critical and constructive.

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## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the tangible and the intangible dimensions of social life, between material culture and society, has always been a fundamental problem in archaeology. That past social relations can be revealed through the analysis of material residues, be they cultural objects or modifications of the natural environment, is the underlying assumption that informs the practice of archaeology. It is also the assumption that underpins the communication of archaeological knowledge in museums. This dependence on material evidence, however, has not led to a sensitive theoretical understanding of the role of material culture in social life, nor has the production of anthropological knowledge through the interpretation of artefacts in museums been adequately investigated. In both cases the tendency has been to separate cultural form from social practice. In this dissertation I argue for their re-integration.

Contemporary archaeology takes as its subject-matter the study of material culture, inclusively embracing present, historic or prehistoric contexts (Hodder 1987). Archaeology is no longer concerned only with excavated artefacts, it studies material culture 'irrespective of time and place', and seeks to understand the relationships between material culture and social organization (Ucko 1983). It is now widely accepted that a theoretical understanding of material culture in the present is relevant to an archaeological understanding of material residues from the past. The anthropological study of material culture, both present and past, involves making inferences regarding the varied contextual meanings of artefacts. Ethnographic and other contemporary material culture studies can contribute to archaeological theory and knowledge by elucidating the relationships between the material, tangible dimensions of culture and the intangible, social dimensions thereof. The ethnographic field studies presented in this thesis were undertaken to this end.

A second concern of the thesis is to investigate the communication of anthropological knowledge through material culture in the context of museum discourse. As the discipline of archaeology has started to move towards a more reflexive awareness of the social and epistemological contexts in which the production of archaeological knowledge is situated, there has been an increased interest in how academic and museum practices shape, interpret and represent knowledge of the past (Leone 1982; Hall 1984; Shanks & Tilley 1987a; Tilley 1989; Hodder 1989, 1990a; Conkey 1990). While it is recognized that archaeological knowledge is constructed in the present through professional practice and that ultimately there can be no value-free account of the written or unwritten past, the way that archaeology is communicated is still strongly influenced by the rhetoric of the natural sciences. If archaeology is essentially interpretive, as is the entire field of the humanities, it

has not yet developed a genre of communication, 'a way of telling'<sup>1</sup>, that allows its interpretive nature to be expressed at the same time as imparting the results of rigorous research. The same could be said of the communication of anthropological knowledge through museum practice. The authority of both academic and museum practice is implicit in their modes of discourse, which have become conventionalized and have tended, until fairly recently, to go unquestioned. The museum studies presented in the second half of the thesis set out to question conventional practice through the critical analysis of representations of cultural 'Others' in certain displays at the South African Museum. In doing so, it is hoped to provide a point of departure for rethinking future practice.

The dissertation as a whole is an investigation of material culture within the diverse contexts of museum practice - fieldwork, collecting, classification and exhibition. These are interlinked through the concept of *recontextualization*, which I regard as operating at both physical and cognitive levels. When objects are situated in different settings, the physical context and the relationships between objects exert an influence on the way they are perceived. Thus context is important in providing a frame of reference for the interpretation of meaning(s) in material culture. It provides cues to which people respond when making sense of material objects.

In practice, context can operate at a number of different levels in the generation of meaning. Hodder (1987) uses the term 'contextual archaeology' to encompass contextual relationships of three different kinds, all of which are relevant to the interpretation of material culture. Firstly, there is the environmental and technological context in which objects are produced and used to a variety of ends. Secondly, there is the cognitive context in which an object might form part of a set of coded oppositions. This relates to the structuralist sense of meaning as residing in signs that can be decoded as part of a larger structure. (This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.) Thirdly there is historically constructed meaning, the actual range of associations that an object might evoke. Context in this sense relates to the content of meaning in a particular, grounded situation rather than to generalized theory or underlying cognitive structures. A concern with contextual meaning of this kind was eclipsed by the generalizing thrust of 'behaviourist' archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s but was the concern of an earlier generation of archaeologists who favoured a culture-historical perspective and were subsequently termed 'idealist' or 'normative' (Hodder 1987; Conkey 1990). The opposition between these approaches, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, is in itself part of a particular historical context, that of academic archaeology over the

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1. This phrase is borrowed from *Another way of telling* (Berger & Mohr 1982), which has also been used in an archaeological context by Spriggs (1984). The contemporary search within anthropology for a new vocabulary and mode of discourse can be situated within the post-modern consciousness of textuality (see Rabinow 1986).

past half century (see Trigger 1989). This, too, must be taken into account in the field of contextual meanings. Reflexive awareness in archaeological practice is an introspective awareness of the contexts, ideological and material, in which interpretations of the past are constructed. In referring to the social context of an interpreted artefact it would thus be more sensitive to use the plural case to include primary and secondary contexts of interpretation.

Although context is implicated in the generation of meaning, people (human agents) are the generators of meaning. This seemingly obvious point needs to be made as there is a tendency in archaeology, and other material culture studies, to fetishize objects. Artefacts that are intended to provide insight into the human past become of interest in themselves. The focus shifts from relationships between people and things, to the more immediately accessible relationships between objects themselves (Miller 1983). Contextual meaning, as I use the term, embraces the relationships between human subjects and cultural objects in specific spatial and temporal settings. The study of material culture is regarded as the study of relationships between people and things situated in time and space (Miller 1983, 1987). Although my primary concern is with material objects, a dualism between social subjects and cultural objects is rejected in favour of a model in which neither the social nor material dimension of culture is given priority but instead they are seen as mutually constitutive. As noted by Miller (1987), this approach avoids undue emphasis on artefacts *per se* while at the same time arguing that it is inadequate to study social relations in isolation from cultural context.

A division between the practical or utilitarian and symbolic dimensions of material culture is also rejected in favour of an integrated concept of artefacts operating simultaneously at practical and symbolic levels. The physical nature of an object always embodies information about its manufacture and its practical use but at the same time it may evoke symbolic associations. Potentially, objects work concurrently as tools meeting physical requirements, and as mediators in social relations. They are open to a multiplicity of meanings or readings relating to contexts of interpretation and awareness of the interpreter. However, the materiality of objects together with their symbolic potential make them particularly elusive to analysis.

For a number of reasons the mediating role of material culture in cognition and in the constitution of social relations has been a relatively neglected area of academic study. Miller (1987: 3) has suggested that

... the very physicality of the object which makes it appear so immediate, sensual and assimilable belies its actual nature, and that material culture is one of the most resistant forms of cultural expression in terms of our attempts to comprehend it.

It is as if the tangible form of an object tends to obscure the intangible, evocative properties that give it the capacity to communicate symbolically. Furthermore the levels at which material culture communicates cannot easily be articulated in words - the subtle distinctions and perceptions evoked through material symbols do not generally operate at the discursive level. In many cases they appeal to the senses and emotions which work at an unconscious level. In combining the abstract and the concrete in a single form the artefact has the capacity to allow fine discriminations of meaning, but as Miller (1987: 108) comments 'its extreme visibility and its extreme invisibility' present a particular analytical problem that has not been fully investigated within academic anthropology.

The study presented here attempts to further this investigation with reference to the varied contexts of museum practice. For the purpose of analysis, material culture 'in action', in everyday life, as interpreted in the context of ethnographic field studies, is contrasted with material culture in a museum setting, arguably also a field of ethnographic study (see Ames 1986). The arrangement and narrative of the dissertation leads 'from field case to show case'.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the historical and theoretical context of the study. In Chapter 1 the shifting status of material culture studies within the discipline of anthropology is traced, and special attention is given to the history of material culture studies in South Africa. The well-documented marginalization of material culture studies in anthropology as a whole, leading to the virtual separation of object-oriented studies from social anthropology, is discussed in relation to the local southern African context. Chapter 2 focuses on the relatively recent renewal of interest in material culture, and looks more closely at the theoretical concepts that inform the field studies that follow. A pervasive problem in material culture studies has been the conceptual separation of object and subject, and of structure and action. As noted above, the scientism of archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s exacerbated a dehumanizing tendency to which the study of artefacts is always prone. I draw on the theories of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu to provide a conceptual approach which emphasizes an integration of object and subject through social practice.

In Chapters 3 and 4, two field studies of material culture in the social matrix of everyday life are presented. One was undertaken in Pondoland, Transkei, and the other in the Transvaal Lowveld. The Pondoland field study focuses primarily on domestic households, on the social use of space and the role of material culture in constituting social relations. The region of Pondoland investigated is widely regarded as being conservative. Indeed, this was one of the reasons for choosing this area for ethno-archaeological research. Aerial photographs from the 1930s to the 1980s showed that the pattern of settlement had remained fairly constant over the past 50 years, despite the imposition of

resettlement schemes in neighbouring parts of the Transkei. I discuss the apparent continuity of settlement pattern and other aspects of material culture in relation to social and political strategies.

The Transvaal field study was undertaken at the village of Modjadji, famed rainmaker and hereditary queen of the Lobedu people. The study focuses on the material setting of the court and royal precinct of the capital. The mediating role of material culture is examined in relation to the ambiguity inherent in a political system in which the ritual power of the chieftaincy is vested in a woman but in which secular power is retained by men. Here again I address the question of how material culture evokes meaning in the context of social practice, situated in time and space.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the museum as a particular context of communication through material culture. It forms a pivot between the field studies and the museum case studies that follow. Firstly, I discuss museum discourse in general terms, focusing both on the production of knowledge through museum practice, and on the reception of museum representations. Secondly, I focus more finely on the Ethnography section of the South African Museum. When objects become museum specimens they inevitably undergo a process of recontextualization. They move from transience to permanence, from personal to institutional context, they are classified for curatorial purposes, annotated, and stored or exhibited. I review the systems of classifying ethnographic collections used at the S. A. Museum from the last century to the present.

This and the following chapters on museum discourse were written from the position of an insider. As a participant in the processes under review, I cannot claim the objectivity of distance. However, distance in itself does not ensure impartiality, and I would argue further that all interpretations are positioned. My own experience of museum discourse has informed this study in a number of ways not least of which is the emphasis on practice. In undertaking an introspective critique of museum practice, my intention is more than theoretical, it encompasses the possibility of precipitating change.

Chapters 6 to 8 are concerned with the Ethnography Gallery of the S. A. Museum as a particular context for the presentation and reception of anthropological knowledge. The first museum study traces the shifting status of Lobedu artefacts from their collection and documentation in the field through to their becoming museum exhibits. The particular focus is the Krige Collection of Lobedu material culture assembled in the late 1930s, and the representation of 'The Lobedu', forty years later, through the exhibition of this collection. The concern with recontextualized Lobedu artefacts in a museum setting provides a counter-point to the Lobedu field study presented in Chapter 4.

The second museum study is focused on a collection of life-casts of /Xam 'Bushmen', and the ways that they have been interpreted and displayed from the early twentieth century to the present. My concern here is with objectivization, the making of social subjects into museum objects. If alienation and objectivization are almost unavoidable parts of museum practice, an extreme example of this process is provided by a project, undertaken in the early decades of this century, to make casts 'from the living flesh' of people believed to be 'pure-blooded Bushmen'. I investigate the production of the casts and the ideas that have informed their presentation at the S. A. Museum from 1912 to the present. Particular attention is given to a large diorama of a nineteenth century hunter-gatherer camp in the Karoo that was completed in 1960 and remains one of the most prominent and popular displays at the S. A. Museum. Museum representations of 'the Bushmen' are evaluated, and the role of museums in the process of constructing and communicating knowledge of cultural Others is discussed in relation to the wider social and political context of South Africa.

In order to raise critical awareness of the mediating role played by museum curators in interpreting the past, an exhibition project was undertaken with the aim of displaying the history of the casts and drawing attention to the concepts that shaped their presentation at the S. A. Museum. The display was mounted in October 1989, and visitors were invited to express their views by completing a short questionnaire. This survey, and the responses received over the period of a year, are discussed in Chapter 8. The possibility of subjective recontextualization of museum artefacts forms part of this discussion.

Chapter 9 returns to the general concern with an anthropological understanding of material culture, context and meaning. The different strands of the thesis are drawn together to argue for a more sensitive treatment of artefacts that integrates the tangible and intangible dimensions of material culture, and emphasizes social practice. The multi-faceted relationship between people and objects has particular bearing on archaeological interpretation because of the singular importance of material evidence in the practice of archaeology. The seemingly obvious presence of material things, their apparent accessibility to description and presentation, tends to belie their ambiguity. In conclusion the implications for archaeology, and for the representation of archaeological knowledge in museums are addressed.

Having given a preview of the thesis in outline, I turn now to the historical background, against which more recent anthropological studies of material culture can be situated.

## CHAPTER 1

### ARTEFACTS, OTHERS AND ANTHROPOLOGY: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

#### Artefacts and Others<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the emergence of academic anthropology as a distinctive field of discourse, objects that were later to be classified on criteria of ethnic affiliation had found their way into 'cabinets of curiosities', the Renaissance forerunners of modern museums (Impey & MacGregor 1985; Stocking 1985; Ames 1986; Hooper-Greenhill 1989). In keeping with the Renaissance embrace of universality, exotic artefacts were included in a general class of things, referred to as 'artefacta', 'artificialia', 'artificial curiosities' or 'artificial rarities', which was complemented and opposed by a class of natural things usually termed 'naturalia' or 'natural curiosities'. The inclusive, generic grouping of artefacts suggests an attempt to integrate all things unfamiliar, including those made by exotic others, into a known reality. The Renaissance cabinet with all its diversity could be interpreted as a microcosm of the known universe (Clifford 1988). The arrangement of objects within these cabinets, however, was not intended to simulate the order of nature but was governed mainly by appearances and aesthetic criteria (Olmí 1985).

During the seventeenth century, the miscellaneous nature of early collections started to give way to the idea of more systematic collections such as that envisaged by the Royal Society of London. The Society's 'Repository' initially contained mainly natural history specimens and, although these were acquired through the purchase of a private cabinet of 'Natural Rarities', there were hopes that the collection would transcend these origins and become 'a valuable tool for the reform of knowledge . . .' (Hunter 1985: 163). Aspirations were for a 'complete' systematic collection rather than a haphazard array of things. The catalogue that was drawn up in the 1670s by the botanist Nehemiah Grew and published in 1681 reveals a comprehensive, taxonomic approach (Hunter 1985). Grew criticized the cult of rarity manifested in virtuoso cabinets and argued for including things common and familiar in the Society's collection. Although, through miscellaneous donations, the collection eventually resembled those of the eclectic private cabinets, the stated systematic aims of the Society

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1. I take the self/other relationship to be contingent on historical conditions, power relations and social hierarchy. Sharing a common discourse is antithetical to Otherness (see Voss 1990). In post-modern ethnography there is a striving towards an inclusive discourse (Tyler 1986), towards a genre that transcends the observer/observed : us/them distinction.

showed that an epistemological shift was taking place. Eventually knowledge ceased to be based on the interpretation of resemblances as in the Renaissance and instead was based on representation in descriptive schema (Foucault 1970).

By the time that the British Museum was established in 1753, knowledge of natural phenomena was in the process of being ordered within the system of nomenclature proposed by Linnaeus, whose *Systema Naturae* had first been published in 1735. From 1758 when the definitive tenth edition appeared, the binomial system of classifying organisms into genera and species according to observed morphology (in particular the features of the reproductive organs) became the established method in natural history. To describe visible differences and classify them systematically was the essential way of knowing. Description was *simultaneously* a way of representing and analysing phenomena (Cousins & Hussain 1984). Knowledge thus consisted of 'marking of points in a system of coordinates in which all possible knowledge could be placed' (Fabian 1983: 8). The classificatory programme was also to provide a model for the observations of 'primitive' people and their customs made by eighteenth-century traveller-scientists. Stocking (1968) argues that the notion of 'race', taken to comprise permanent hereditary differences between human groups, did not emerge in earnest as an explanation of cultural variation until the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> But as Cornwell (1989) has noted, long before the emergence of racialism as a scientific discourse, there had been differentiation of self/other relations on the basis of race. Indeed, he argues that existing racism was a precondition for scientific racialism. This point is germane to my argument in Chapter 7.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the growing number of artefacts collected by natural scientists in the continuing quest for knowledge were organized in typological categories but they were not yet classified on criteria of ethnic affiliation. The collections of the British Museum, much enhanced by material from the Cook Voyages, were still classed as 'Natural and Artificial Curiosities' (Stocking 1985). Only in 1845 were the artefact collections re-organized to form an 'Ethnological Gallery' (Chapman 1985). As explained later in the Handbook to the Ethnological Collections of the British Museum:

... until it was recognized in the latter part of the nineteenth century that man himself is bound by inevitable laws of development, the real scope of the new science was but imperfectly perceived. The progress of the science of man thus depended on two

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2. For example, Stocking (1968: 26-28) has noted that Degerando in his *Considerations on the diverse methods to follow on the observation of savage peoples* [c. 1800] did not use race as a concept but assumed that human nature was 'fundamentally the same in all times and places, and its development was governed by natural laws'. This was coupled with a philanthropic sense of the possibility of uplifting untutored beings to a higher level of civilization.

conditions, an extensive knowledge of the uncivilized world and the general acceptance of the theory of evolution (British Museum 1925: 2).

This can be viewed in the light of Foucault's insight that, during the nineteenth century, the study of natural science underwent a profound shift that allowed the human sciences to emerge as a complex field of knowledge, and simultaneously as a new mode of knowing. The emergence of biology, economics and philology as separate spheres of knowledge provided a new set of conceptual categories within which the adjacent social sciences were formulated (Cousins & Hussain 1984). The structure of the organism provided a key metaphor for the analysis of human groups, and knowledge organized in this way provided the epistemological moment for the emergence of modern anthropology.

... the moment when it appears that it is possible to link ourselves to other cultures in a mode of pure theory, a moment at which differences can be held within certain theoretical principles of structure and system (Cousins & Hussain 1984: 73, after Foucault).

The key concepts of modern anthropological discourse - society and culture - both linked to the idea of organic 'wholeness' can be traced to this period (Thornton 1988a). The concept of 'primitive society' that was to exercise the minds of anthropologists for the following century also crystallized in a distinctive form at this time (see Kuper 1988). Assemblages of artefacts, metonyms for the societies that produced them, were used increasingly to illustrate ethnological theories. From the 1860s till the early twentieth century these theories centred on the evolutionary issues of human origins, progress and the relation between race and culture (see Stocking 1968).

Ironically, although Darwin's theory of biological evolution stimulated a range of investigations under the popular banner of evolutionism, few early anthropologists were true to Darwinian theory, which was explicit in rejecting the notion of unilinear evolution (Ingold 1986; Kuper 1988). Darwinian theory required a conceptualization of abstract time as duration in contrast to the historical time of events. However, social evolutionists were too concerned with the stages that led up to civilization to be receptive to the radical implications of Darwin's ideas. Instead they embraced Lamarck's doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics and Spencer's view of evolution as unilinear progress (Stocking 1968). The influence of these views can be found in the writings of Lubbock, Tylor and Morgan among others. Darwin himself, when considering human cultural evolution, contradicted his own theory of biological evolution to 'endorse the progressive evolutionism of Tylor and Spencer almost to a fault' (Ingold 1986: 30). Small wonder then that so much confusion surrounds discussion of the evolutionary paradigm in anthropology (for full discussion of this issue see Ingold 1986: 29-73).

... the population, generally referred to as Bushmen. The belief that they were soon to become extinct, and that they exemplified an early stage in human development lent urgency to the venture.

A non-Darwinian evolutionary model, assuming a direct progression from primitive to modern society, was to become the prevalent scheme of organizing ethnographic collections in England and

Conflict on the frontier continued virtually to the end of the century reducing the impetus to undertake fieldwork, and elsewhere large numbers of the black population were integrated in the industrial and farming economies of the Cape Colony and Transvaal Republic, reducing a sense of the remote or exotic that imbued the ethnographic enterprise. In different ways, both of these factors would have militated against ethnological inquiry and collecting among the black majority by making them seem less distant, and therefore less 'other', than if they were a marginal minority. Later in the twentieth century when ethnological collecting among Bantu-speaking people was officially promoted, it was primarily directed to salvaging disappearing 'traditions' in rural areas and reserves, and even then ethnographic collecting was minimal relative to elsewhere in the world (see Tables 1 and 2).

By the end of the nineteenth century, in both America and England, museums of anthropology had been established at leading academic institutions,<sup>7</sup> and material culture was incorporated in teaching curricula. With hindsight one can see that lines of cleavage within the discipline were already delineated in the 1906 Oxford syllabus for the Diploma in Anthropology. The course was divided into 'physical anthropology' and 'cultural anthropology' and the latter into sociological, ethnological, technological and archaeological sub-sections<sup>8</sup> (Read 1906). There was a clear distinction between ethnology, concerned with the classification of cultural differences, and sociology, concerned with general social phenomena. The ethnological approach, which incorporated material culture studies, was eventually marginalized from mainstream anthropology, which embraced a predominantly sociological perspective. However, this was not always the case. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, material culture was an integral part of the discipline and, in the absence of field research, the relationship between anthropologist and the people who

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7. In 1866 the first major anthropological museum at an academic institution, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard College, was established (Stocking 1985). In 1883 Oxford University acquired the Pitt Rivers collection and appointed Tylor as Reader in Anthropology (Chapman 1985), and in 1884 the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology was established at Cambridge University. It attracted little interest among students until after 1900 when Haddon was appointed as Lecturer in Ethnology following his 1898-99 Torres Straits Expedition (Hodder 1983).
8. In the Oxford syllabus *archaeology* was concerned with 'the antiquity of man as determined by the earliest remains of his handiwork', *technology* with 'the comparative study of the origin, development and distribution of artefacts', *ethnology* with 'the comparative study and classification of peoples, based upon conditions of material culture, language and religious and social institutions and ideas, as distinguished from physical characters'; *sociology* on the other hand was concerned with 'the comparative study of social phenomena' (Read 1906: 57). This model was followed in South Africa when academic courses were established in the 1920s (see Schapera 1934).

Table 1  
Ethnographic collections in South African museums and universities.

Institution	Collection started	Approx. no. of specimens in 1989 *	Professional post created
<b>South African Museum</b> Cape Town	1825	13 800	1933, 1967 (2)
<b>Albany Museum</b> Grahamstown	1855	**8 000	-
<b>National Museum</b> Bloemfontein	1878	4 100	1967
<b>Kaffrarian Museum</b> King William's Town	1884	2 500	1978
<b>Natal Museum</b> Pietermaritzburg	1898	6 000	-
<b>National Open Air &amp; Cultural History Museum</b> (formerly part of Transvaal Museum, Pretoria)	1893	12 000	1921
<b>East London Museum</b> East London	1933	7 450	1959
<b>Africana Museum</b> Johannesburg	1935	28 000	1962
<b>McGregor Museum</b> Kimberley	1907	5 000	1958
<b>University of Cape Town</b>	1921	750	# @
<b>University of Stellenbosch</b>	1920s	6 000	#
<b>University of the Witwatersrand</b>	1926	1 500	#
<b>University of Pretoria</b>	?	1 065	#
<b>Total</b>		<b>96 165</b>	

\* - In all cases southern African material comprises the major part of the collection.

\*\* - Albany Museum's ethnographic collection was transferred to East London Museum on long-term loan in 1981.

# - falls under Head of Department.

@ - since 1961, housed at S. A. Museum.

Table 2  
Estimated size of ethnographic collections in other countries.

Country	Approx. size of collection	Source
Australia	>300 000	Reynolds 1981
Canada	>400 000	Reynolds 1988
U. S. A.	1 500 000	Fenton 1974
United Kingdom	>1 000 000	Schumann 1980



were studied was mediated by collected artefacts, which constituted primary evidence to support prevailing theories (Miller 1983).

The earliest published use of the term *material culture* is credited by Reynolds (1987) to E. B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture*, 1871. In his earlier *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) Tylor had included descriptions of technical skills and artefacts without using the inclusive term material culture. Although strictly speaking a contradiction in terms, material culture came into the anthropological vocabulary to denote the tangible, material elements of culture, defined in essence in contemporary anthropology as those things made or modified by intentional human agency.<sup>9</sup> Although Tylor did not define material culture explicitly, his understanding of the term can be inferred from his renowned definition of culture:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities or habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor 1871: 1).

Tylor's was an inclusive, humanist view of 'Culture', encompassing the material and non-material dimensions of all human social life. It was fundamentally different from the relativist view of plural cultures that was later to be advocated by Franz Boas and widely adopted by twentieth-century anthropologists. Significantly Tylor almost invariably used 'Culture' in the singular form (Stocking 1968). For him the evolution of culture was unitary, 'a total process embracing all mankind' (Ingold 1986: 44) and the task of ethnography was 'the classification and arrangement of the phenomena of culture' (Ingold 1986: 33). When he spoke of the culture of a group of people he meant their grade on the scale of civilization. Their material culture could be classified typologically, compared and ranked as a 'means of measurement' of progression in civilization.

Civilization actually existing among mankind in different grades, we are enabled to estimate and compare it by positive examples. . . . The principle criteria of classification are the absence or presence, high or low development, of the industrial arts . . . the extent of scientific knowledge, the definiteness of moral principles, the condition of religious belief and ceremony, the degree of social and political organization, and so forth. (Tylor 1871, cited in Stocking 1968: 81)

The comparative, typological approach to material culture espoused by Tylor is well illustrated by the arrangement of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford which could be considered the type-site of this approach (see Chapman 1985 for detailed discussion on Pitt Rivers, his ideas and the formation

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9. Definitions of material culture proliferate in the literature and the term is used differently in different places and within the many different fields that are concerned with objects. The above definition is an amalgam of Deetz (1977), Reynolds (1987) and Pearce (1989a).

of his collection). Pitt Rivers had assembled his collection with the purpose of illustrating evolutionary theories and in this it differed from other private collections of a less systematic nature. It was acknowledged as being 'no mere miscellaneous jumble of curiosities, but an orderly illustration of human history; . . .' (Coombes 1988: 61). The typological classification of objects and their arrangement in series of increasing complexity was thought to illustrate the evolutionary progression of man.

The premise that the past could be found in the present was explicitly laid out here by inclusion of archaeological exhibits (mainly weapons and implements) from the Stone, Bronze and Early Iron Ages, alongside typological 'series' of material culture from various colonies (Coombes 1988: 61).

It has been convincingly argued that the value of early, ethnographic material culture collections was related as much to a European concern with their own position in the scale of progress as it was to an interest in other cultures. This concern did not require personal contact with the makers of the collected artefacts as the real interest was not in 'primitive' people but in what their perceived primitiveness meant to notions of European history and superiority. Thus much of the nineteenth century impetus to collect the artefacts of non-western others, before it was 'too late' (for 'us' to appropriate 'them'), can be seen as involving a displacement in that *their* objects were sought in order to interpret *our* evolutionary history and to contribute to our ontological well-being (Dominguez 1986; Wilmsen 1989). The typological classification of ethnographic collections from the perspective of museum curators similarly reshapes the order of things and entails a western appropriation of non-western things. Ironically, in becoming part of a western historical trajectory, non-western people were denied a history of their own. Described conventionally in the ethnographic present, their history was rhetorically reduced to timeless, unchanging tradition.

Anthropological method was to change considerably in the twentieth century as participant-observation and direct communication in a vernacular language became the essential source of ethnographic data. The interpretive views of insiders came to be regarded as essential to the study of other cultures, and there was a shift away from an evolutionary, diachronic approach to situated, synchronic analysis of societies. As early as the 1880s Boas had reacted strongly against the typological classification implicit in the ethnological displays arranged by Otis Mason at the United States National Museum (Stocking 1974), and he later advocated an inclusive anthropological approach in archaeology (Cole 1976). Boas insisted that artefacts could not be treated as biological specimens isolated from historical and socio-cultural context. He argued that typological classification and display was flawed by the fact that unlike causes may produce like effects (Jacknis 1985). Instead he advocated that collections be arranged in their particular ethnographic context.

We have to study each ethnological specimen individually in its history and in its medium. . . . By regarding a single implement outside of its surroundings, outside of other

inventions of the people to whom it belongs, and outside of other phenomena affecting the people and its productions, we cannot understand its meaning (Boas [1887] cited in Stocking 1974: 62).

This expressed the elements of a relativist position that recognizes a plurality of discrete cultures, a view that was to become part of anthropological orthodoxy in the twentieth century. The concept of culture underwent a fundamental shift from a single line of progress to a multiplicity of diverse lines. Differences in degree became differences in kind - grades of culture became many different cultures (Stocking 1968; Ingold 1986). However, it would be incorrect to present Boas simply as a particularist. He was also concerned with the relation of the particular to the universal (Boas 1904, in Stocking 1974). These two related concerns came to constitute the central intellectual paradox of twentieth century anthropology (Leach 1982), namely the elucidation of a common humanity through an understanding of cultural diversity.

Anthropology has struggled long and hard to establish that 'cultural difference' is not about the peculiarities and oddities of 'other cultures', but rather about recognizing cultural uniqueness, while at the same time seeking out the similarities in human cultural life (Moore 1988: 9).

However, some would contend that this struggle has not been won in practice (Fabian 1983). Ultimately the relativist position risks creating a permanent asymmetry between observer and observed that runs counter to a humanist anthropology. This risk is particularly acute in the interpretation and visual presentation of ethnographic artefacts, as indicated in the following comment on museums by an academic anthropologist.

... the anthropologist often suspects that what it [the museum] does most is to reinforce in its gawping visitors their conviction of the utter quaintness, foreignness, and backwardness of the peoples whose works are on display. The museum is intended to cultivate; it does so by deculturating, and so defeats its purpose (Freedman 1979: 136).

While this comment represents an extreme view of museum practice, it cannot be dismissed as being entirely unfounded (see Halpin 1983). But as Ames (1986) has responded, while the museum context does affect the way objects are interpreted, the recontextualization process is of anthropological interest in itself. None the less, the negative attitude to museum-based anthropology expressed by Freedman is not an individual sentiment, it is closely related to the historical trajectory of the discipline. As anthropology became a fully-fledged academic discipline within universities rather than museums, it became increasingly concerned with theoretical, sociological issues and object-centred studies were marginalized.

### **Artefacts decentred**

It is well documented that, with the exception of archaeology which depends entirely on material evidence, anthropological interest in material culture waned as social anthropology gained ascendancy (Sayce 1933; Collier & Tschopik 1954; Gjessing 1962; Sturtevant 1969; Fenton 1974; McLeod 1976; Miller 1983; Stocking 1985). In Britain some interest in collections persisted through the 1920s among those anthropologists, such as Elliot Smith and Perry at University College London, who were concerned with the geographical spread of cultural traits. Diffusionist approaches could easily be encompassed within a typological classification of artefacts by emphasizing lateral connections rather than evolutionary progression. Indeed, as Miller (1983: 5) has noted, 'It was the very success of these interwoven connotations based around the evolutionary model, that led to the subsequent shift in the position of material culture studies'. In reaction to these earlier theoretical models, the emerging functionalist anthropology embraced synchrony, participant-observation and cultural relativism. Field investigation and communication in the vernacular gave social anthropologists direct access to their subject of study; indirect access through ethnographic collections was no longer essential to the discipline. Museum studies in material culture continued but 'their relationship with the concept of anthropology itself was fundamentally altered' (Miller 1983: 5).

Typological studies and displays, based on either evolutionist or diffusionist principles, continued in museums well into the twentieth century long after these theories had been superseded within the wider field of anthropology. This paradigm lag, to which museums are institutionally prone (Stocking 1985), helps to explain the rift between museum and academy. By the mid-1930s, material culture studies had come to occupy a minority position within the discipline of anthropology. Only archaeology, by the nature of its data, and museums, through their commitment to collections, remained primarily concerned with material culture. In both cases the sharp focus on artefacts encouraged a tendency to separate the study of objects from their socio-cultural context.

In functionalist social anthropology on the other hand, social systems tended to be analysed without taking the role of material culture in social life into account. Although the study of economic systems was naturally concerned with subsistence practices, production, distribution and exchange, the primary concern was with social transactions rather than the material objects involved in these networks. Only recently has the 'social life of things' been given serious academic attention (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). While there was scope for interdisciplinary study, as occurred in the Gwembe Tonga area before the Kariba Dam project was implemented, this was an exceptional case and the research was published as three separate projects (Colson 1960; Scudder 1962; Reynolds

1968). On the whole it does not seem unfair to conclude, in accord with McLeod (1976) and Reynolds (1987), that anthropologists working on material culture did not pursue the theoretical interests of the wider discipline and consequently became increasingly marginalized.

From the 1960s onwards, with the rise to prominence of symbolic anthropology<sup>10</sup> as practiced by Turner (1967) and Geertz (1973), and the pervasive influence of structuralism (Levi-Strauss 1963, 1966; Douglas 1966, 1970; Leach 1966, 1970; Badcock 1975) there emerged a different focus on objects as signifiers of meaning. Within symbolic anthropology material objects were interpreted as symbolic representations, as vehicles of meaning, as conveyors of cultural identity and, in Turner's work particularly, as symbolic 'operators' in the social process (Ortner 1984: 131). Analysing material culture as a system of symbolic communication using a semiotic model derived from linguistics was to have profound influence on anthropological, historical and contemporary cultural studies (Barthes 1967; Glassie 1975; Leach 1976; Baudrillard 1983). However, Sperber (1975) has argued that the application of semiological principles to the study of symbolic communication has theoretical flaws in that symbolism is not explicable as a system of encoded meanings. The limitations of a semiological/structuralist approach will be discussed in the following chapter.

Also during the 1960s, neo-evolutionist perspectives of the previous two decades (White 1949; Steward 1955), which had focused on mechanisms of technological advancement, were reformulated within the new paradigm of cultural ecology (see Ortner 1984: 132-134). The emphasis here was on adaptation to external conditions as the primary motivation for social change (Sahlins & Service 1960). Systems theory was to become an influential analytical model in both cultural anthropology (Harris 1969; Rappaport 1967) and archaeology (Binford 1965). The acrimony that characterized the debate between the cultural ecologists and those anthropologists concerned with symbolism was indicative of a deep division between scientific (materialist) and interpretive (idealist) approaches in anthropology

... the cultural ecologists considered the symbolic anthropologists to be fuzzy-headed mentalists, involved in unscientific and unverifiable flights of subjective interpretation, the symbolic anthropologists considered cultural ecology to be involved with mindless and sterile scientism, counting calories and measuring rainfall, and willfully ignoring the one truth that anthropology had presumably established by that time: that culture mediates all human behaviour (Ortner 1984: 134).

In archaeology the embrace of a behaviourist, adaptive concept of culture was linked to the rise to prominence of the New Archaeology in the 1960s and 1970s (Trigger 1989). This approach was

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10. Dolgin *et al.* (1977) bring together influential writings within symbolic anthropology, and Ortner (1984) provides a lucid synthesis of the field.

widely applied in ethno-archaeological studies (Binford 1968, 1978; Gould 1978, 1980; Kramer 1979). However, the emphasis on making law-like generalizations about deterministic processes bracketed human agency from the equation. As stated by Gould (1980: x-xi):

The first element of any convincing approach to ethno-archaeology involves establishing a basis for uniformitarianist kinds of generalizations about human behaviour that are not subject to alteration or amendment through symbolic or ideational manipulation by the human beings we propose to study.

The preoccupation with systems theory, with external causes, adaptive behaviour, environmental and demographic factors effectively dehumanized archaeological explanations of the past, while the gloss of scientific objectivity also served to obscure the human involvement in generating knowledge of the past. Critical reaction to the processual approach emerged in the 1980s, led by Hodder and his associates (Hodder 1982a, 1982b, 1985, 1986, 1987; Miller & Tilley 1984). In questioning the validity of Binford's 'Middle Range Theory' and claiming that culture is irreducible to external determinants, Hodder has brought archaeology back into the humanist anthropological fold. This move has also enlivened archaeological discourse by encompassing ideas from sociology, philosophy and modern cultural studies in synthesis with elements of existing archaeological theory. By transcending conventional disciplinary boundaries advances are being made towards an inclusive anthropological understanding of material culture (Miller 1983).

Numerous of factors seem to be encouraging the return of material culture to a more integrated position within the discipline of anthropology, which is itself undergoing a reassessment of scope and direction. The recent revival of anthropological interest in material culture is discussed in the following Chapter, which is concerned with the theoretical context of the present study. Before this however, I briefly review the position of material culture studies in anthropology as practised in South Africa.

#### **Material culture studies in South Africa**

The circumstances outlined above that led to a decline of academic interest in material culture in England and America during the early decades of this century provide a backdrop against which to view material culture studies in South Africa. Here the general assumption that academic anthropology 'was nurtured in museums and has matured in universities' (Fenton 1974: 19) does not hold, and despite the possibilities for local field research and collecting, I suggest that ethnographic studies in material culture were marginalized before ever having peaked.

Academic anthropology was established in South Africa in the 1920s with a composite intellectual foundation influenced in part by the ideas of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, and in part by the

romantic tradition in German *Völkerkunde* (West 1979; Sharp 1981; Kuper 1987; Gordon 1988). By 1932 two English-medium and two Afrikaans-medium universities<sup>11</sup> had established African studies departments which offered a range of courses in social anthropology, ethnology, archaeology and African languages (Schapera 1934). Ethnological and archaeological collections were started at all of these institutions, and at both the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town (Fig. 1) these collections constituted small museums that were used for teaching purposes as well as being open to the public (Museums Association 1933). This indicates that in the early years of the discipline there was some interest in material culture even in universities that were later to shift their attention more exclusively to social anthropology. The peripheralization of interest in material culture is well illustrated in the case of the anthropology department at the University of Cape Town, as outlined below, but a similar trend occurred at the University of the Witwatersrand where academic interest in ethnology and material culture studies waned in favour of theoretical, sociological concerns (Hammond-Tooke 1987).

In 1920, at a time of growing awareness of the 'native question' in South Africa, the state provided funding for the establishment of the School of African Life and Languages at the University of Cape Town (Gordon 1990a). For the previous three years Revd W. A. Norton, a missionary and philologist, had lobbied for the creation of a school that would be devoted to African studies, and he was eventually appointed to the first Chair of Bantu Philology in 1920, a year before A. R. Radcliffe-Brown took up the founding Chair of Social Anthropology (Robertson nd). Norton's role in the founding of the School has been over-shadowed by the reputation of Radcliffe-Brown but recent archival research has revealed that Norton's ideas were formative in getting the School established (Phillips 1988/9). Norton argued strongly for the specialized academic study of 'things Bantu' and at his initiative in 1918 the South African Association for the Advancement of Science motivated for the promotion of academic research in 'native philology, ethnology, psychology and sociology, for the training of administrators and others dealing with natives . . .' (Phillips 1988/9: 9). From as early as 1877, when Sir Bartle Frere had stressed the need to document African cultures 'before they changed beyond recognition' (Shaw 1978: 4), recommendations for ethnographic recording had been made but, with the notable exception of the work of the Swiss missionary H. A. Junod<sup>12</sup>, relatively little had been achieved. The establishment of a bureau of ethnology, which had

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11. Courses in anthropology were taught in English at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, and in Afrikaans at Stellenbosch and Pretoria. For the syllabuses of these courses see Schapera (1934).
  12. See Harries (1981) for a discussion of the work of H.A Junod in historical and epistemological context.

been suggested by various scholarly associations over the preceding years, was supported by Norton who argued also that Cape Town was more suitable than Johannesburg as a centre for African studies because of existing library and other resources, including those of the South African Museum (Phillips 1988/9; Gordon 1990a). In 1922, in a memorandum to the University senate, Norton noted that he looked forward to co-operation with 'our valuable Museum' and with its veteran director, Peringuey, 'a world-wide specialist in things African' (Robertson nd: 670). Thus, at this time there was no evidence of a division in interests between museum and academy. Even Radcliffe-Brown showed some interest in museum collections.

Prior to his appointment at the University of Cape Town, Radcliffe-Brown had been employed briefly at the Transvaal Museum<sup>13</sup> in Pretoria, and in his new position at the University of Cape Town he stressed the need for an adequate ethnological museum within the School. In a memorandum to the University senate in 1922, which echoed that of Norton, he commented that he hoped to be 'given some control of the ethnological collections of the South African Museum' (Robertson nd: 670). The Museum was by this time already well known for its anthropological interest in the 'Bushmen' and it seems that both Norton and Radcliffe-Brown envisaged drawing on museum resources<sup>14</sup>. None the less, Radcliffe-Brown's interests were primarily sociological. While still at Cambridge his concern had switched from the ethnology of Haddon and Rivers to the sociology of Durkheim (Kuper 1973), and at Cape Town he made a clear separation in the anthropology syllabus between social anthropology on the one hand, and ethnology and archaeology on the other (Schapera 1934). This effectively separated the study of material culture from the study of social organization.

The University of Cape Town ethnological collection was, from the start, more closely associated with archaeology than social anthropology. After A. J. Goodwin, a Cambridge trained archaeologist, had joined the School of African Life and Languages, close links were established with the South African Museum and in 1930 he became Honorary Curator of Ethnology and Archaeology. Finding the Museum's ethnographic collections poorly housed and in need of documentation, Goodwin recommended that the material be transferred to the University where it could be more adequately researched (Shaw 1978). Subsequently, part of the collection was sent

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13. Radcliffe-Brown remained Honorary Curator of Ethnology at the Transvaal Museum for two years after his departure. He also published a paper on 'native dolls' in the Transvaal Museum collection (Radcliffe-Brown 1925).
  14. Gordon (1990a: 19) comments that in naming the school 'African Life and Languages' instead of the more limiting 'Bantu Studies' reference was made to the existing holdings of the South African Museum.

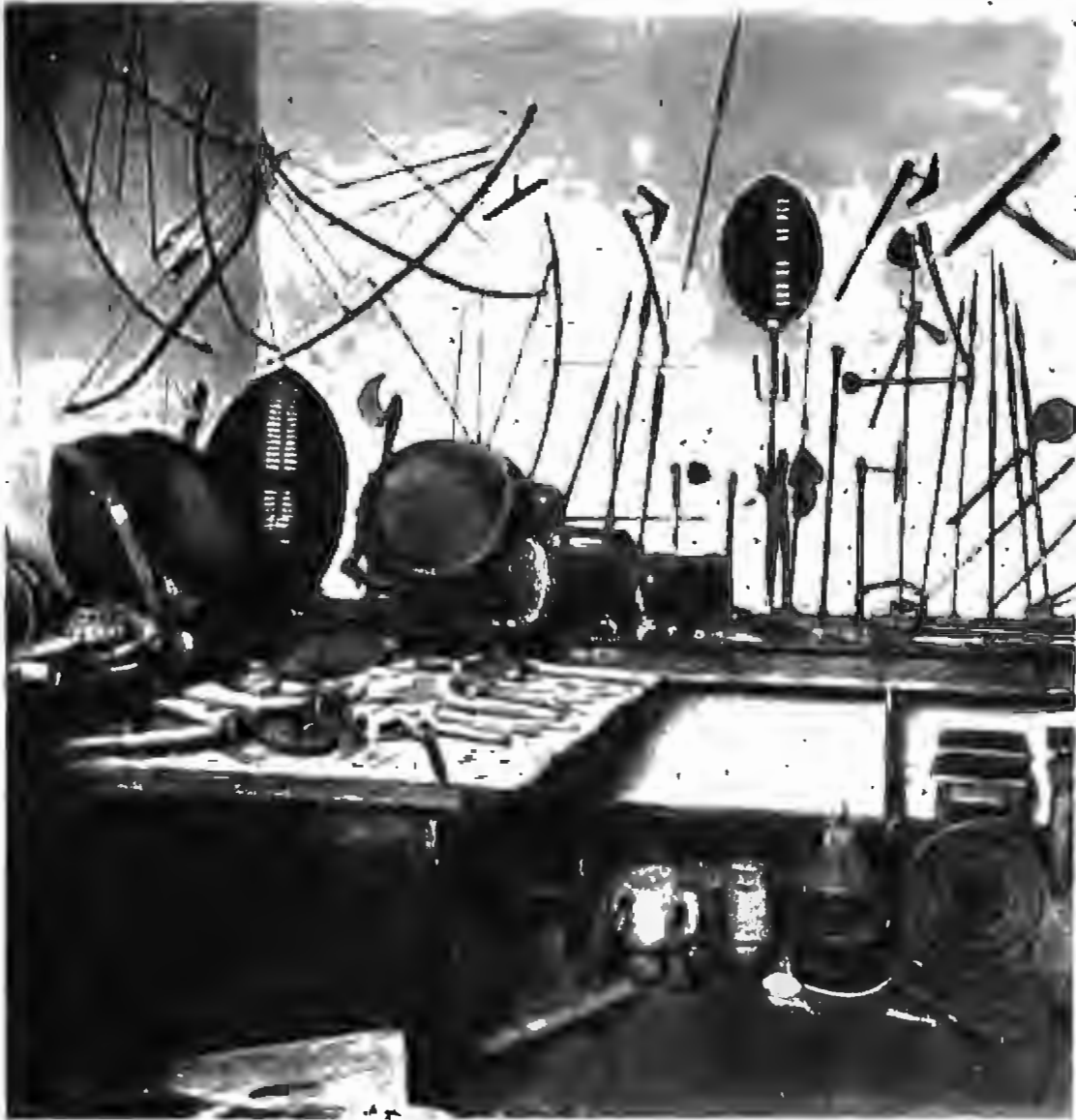


Fig. 1. Museum in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, c. 1940. (Photograph: Cape Times)

there on loan but this failed to generate the envisaged research and was returned to the Museum in the mid-1930s. By this time Margaret Shaw, a graduate of the University of Cape Town, had been appointed as the first professional ethnologist at the South African Museum and was developing a system for classifying the collection. As for the University ethnological collection, it grew at first as a result of Isaac Schapera's field collecting and from additions by other anthropologists, including Winifred Hoernle, Audrey Richards and Eileen Krige, who donated items from their research areas, but from the early 1940s there were relatively few new acquisitions, apart from a collection donated in the 1960s by the family of a former missionary at Livingstonia. Eventually the collection was used only by archaeology students for comparative reference purposes. In 1961, when most of the collection was placed in the care of the Museum at the request of the head of the School, Professor Monica Wilson, it comprised fewer than 500 items, and the collection had not provided the basis for a single publication.

The ascendancy of social anthropology, coinciding with the formative years of academic anthropology in South Africa, no doubt goes a long way to explain the relative lack of interest in material culture studies, which were associated with the outdated evolutionist and diffusionist approaches, but I would suggest that an additional local factor discouraged an interest in material culture among liberal social anthropologists in South Africa. Political ideologies have unavoidably affected the practice of academic anthropology, which has always run the risk of being co-opted to support political ends. (Ucko (1987) discusses the politicization of archaeology.) As the present professor of social anthropology at University of Cape Town stated in his inaugural address,

. . . an emphasis on culture - whether intended or not - can and does lead in this country to certain political inferences being drawn by others. . . . In a society where so much weight is given to apparent differences, we dare not underplay the similarities (West 1979: 10-11).

In view of this awareness, it is not surprising that there was a rejection of ethnicity as a determinant of behaviour, and a concomitant avoidance of the objectification of ethnic difference in material culture. An aversion to segregationist ideologies and sensitivity to the possible abuse of cultural anthropology made many social anthropologists shy away from the study of culture altogether. Having said this, I must add that in most cases it was a matter of emphasis rather than exclusion. It is fair to say that, in general, social anthropologists gave priority to the analysis of social systems and tended to overlook the cultural context in which these systems operated. This was not the case, however, within another, opposing anthropological discourse in South Africa, that of the *volkekundiges*.

Although it would be simplistic to assume that all Afrikaans-speaking anthropologists embraced *ethnos* theory in the German *Völkerkunde* tradition, the history of *volkekunde* in South Africa is

closely linked with the Afrikaans-medium universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria (Gordon 1988). Sharp (1981) has cautioned that it would be facile to presume a uniformity of intellectual position among either Afrikaans or English-speaking anthropologists, nor is it acceptable to assume a correlation between the *volkekunde* perspective and political support for racist policies. However, Gordon (1988) has recently documented the overt political agenda of the leading *volkekundige*, Werner Eiselen, and his segregationist followers from the late 1930s onwards. Furthermore, with regard to ethnicity, there is sound evidence for a divergence of conceptual approach between social anthropologists (mostly, although not exclusively, at English-medium universities) and those who align themselves with the *volkekunde* tradition, whether based at universities, museums<sup>15</sup> or government departments (West 1979; Sharp 1981). In brief, the *volkekundiges* tend to view ethnic identity as bounded, unchanging and determinant, whereas the former tend to regard ethnicity as being flexible and socially constructed, the result of a political process in which cultural resources are mobilized in the formation of groups (Sharp 1988). According to the *volkekunde* school, difference in material culture is a manifestation of a predetermined cultural entity. Material culture is an aspect of culture and a reification thereof. Material culture studies could thus easily give support to the ideology of difference, which, I suggest, accounts for its academic avoidance by most social anthropologists and for its encompassment by *volkekundiges*.

Anthropologists working in museums form a very small group compared with those at universities. At present there are 10 professional posts in the country for museum ethnographers (see Table 1), and three of these are at the South African Museum, which has a relatively long history of research activity on material culture. From the early 1930s ethnology at the Museum was equated with the descriptive study of material culture (Shaw 1957), within a system of classification of ethnic groups based mainly on linguistic criteria (Van Warmelo 1935; Shaw 1940). The system of ordering and displaying collections according to linguistic/ethnic categories, although arbitrary and not necessarily representative of the situation on the ground, has only recently been questioned within museum practice (see Chapter 5). Although the intention was to implement scientific standards of documentation,<sup>16</sup> the delineation and representation of cultural boundaries cannot avoid having political implications. In South Africa this is acutely so, considering that the classificatory ethnic divisions that became conventional in museum practice were the same divisions that became formalized in apartheid legislation.

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15. West (1979) implied that museum-based anthropology was part of the *volkekunde* school but this is an over-simplification as it should not be assumed that all anthropologists in museums are part of a unified discourse.

16. Recorded interview with E. M. Shaw, 21 November 1988. Tape housed in the Department of Ethnography, South African Museum.

This further explains why ethnological classification and its reification in material culture has been treated with reserve, if not total avoidance, by liberal academic anthropologists in South Africa. The relativist position in cultural anthropology readily lends cover to racialism. Ironically, although relativism in anthropology was originally proposed as a liberal response to racialist classifications of human diversity (Stocking 1968; Clifford 1988), it is a view easily co-opted to serve segregationist ends (Thornton 1988a). The theoretical underpinning of apartheid policy in its various guises, including 'separate development', 'Bantustans', and 'Homelands', in South Africa depended on an ethnological classification of cultural groups which had been initiated by the scientific fraternity over a decade before the Nationalist government came to power (Schapera 1934; Van Warmelo 1935).

By the 1960s, ethnology had lost all credibility at English-medium universities, and material culture studies were left largely to museum ethnographers (Hammond-Tooke 1987). At Afrikaans-medium universities that adopted a *volkekunde* position, there were varying degrees of continuity with the German 'ethnos' tradition.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, there was not a rupture with an earlier paradigm, as in the case of social anthropologists rejecting ethnology. Although material culture was not a major part of the *volkekunde* syllabus, it continued to be encompassed within the discipline<sup>18</sup>. Ethnographic collecting was also undertaken on a small scale by graduate students and staff attached to the *volkekunde* departments at Stellenbosch, Potchefstroom and Pretoria.

On the whole material culture studies were left to museum anthropologists whose work tended to be descriptive or technological within a chronological framework. The work of Shaw and Van Warmelo on the material culture of the Cape Nguni best exemplifies this approach (Shaw & Van Warmelo 1971, 1974, 1981, 1988). That the work was undertaken largely in isolation from the theoretical concerns of both social anthropology and *volkekunde* is an indication of the marginalization of museum-based material culture studies. While the usefulness of this work, especially to those working with collections, should not be underestimated, it addresses the descriptive questions 'what', 'how' and 'when' rather than seeking to interpret or explain 'why', which, as West (1979) has noted, is the fundamental quest of theoretical anthropology.

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17. As Sharp (1981) notes, although ethnos theory is not taught at all Afrikaans universities, it has never been explicitly challenged by these institutions.

18. A number of dissertations on material culture were submitted to Afrikaans-medium universities (Du Toit 1968; Weiss 1963; Van der Waal 1977). Also see articles in *Ethnologie*, the Journal of the Association of Afrikaans Anthropologists.

Most of the ethnological fieldwork undertaken at the South African Museum in the 1960s and 1970s could be described as 'salvage ethnography'. The perceived need to salvage traditions, a recurring theme in museological discourse for over a century, formed the main motivation for a long-term documentation project on 'Bantu Crafts' initiated in the 1960s. As noted earlier, ethnographic collecting was neglected at the time when it was flourishing elsewhere in the world, and until the late 1940s at the South African Museum there was little change. Thereafter, field collecting was undertaken but on a relatively small scale. The collection grew as a result of the Bantu Crafts Project but no specific area was researched in any detail, as the project was more in the nature of a survey. In 1990 the ethnographic collection as a whole, including donations, artefacts actively collected in the course of fieldwork and other acquisitions, numbered fewer than 14 000 accessions (see Table 1). Ironically, the largest single field collection was assembled not by museum ethnologists but by social anthropologists, E. J. and J. D. Krige. And that, too, is a relatively small collection, numbering fewer than 300 items (see Chapter 6). Thus, despite the rhetoric of salvage,<sup>19</sup> the Museum collection remained relatively small and museum research was peripheral to mainstream anthropology.

In recent years some museum anthropologists have sought to bridge this divide (Davison & Klinghardt 1987), and conversely there are indications that some social anthropologists are incorporating culture into their analyses (e.g. James 1989; McAllister 1989). The analysis of culture as a form of symbolic power, as a resource, which may be mobilized to strategic ends (Thornton 1988a), has brought culture into the centre of anthropological interest. Related to this is a renewed interest in 'traditions' as cultural resources that are drawn on in the contemporary construction of identity (Spiegel & Boonzaier 1988). Indeed, a process of cultural renegotiation is presently in progress as the status of ethnographic collections is being redefined in relation to the adjacent fields of cultural history and art history (Davison 1990a, b). The possibility of many readings of collected artefacts, as symbols of power or identity, as objects of aesthetic contemplation, as scientific specimens, commodities or curiosities, has drawn attention to the complex presence of collections. It has focused attention on recontextualization and the recursive creation of meaning; it requires a theoretical approach that integrates social subjects with cultural objects. This is my concern in the next chapter.

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19. See Clifford (1986) for a discussion of the 'allegory of salvage' in ethnographic writing.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL ORIENTATION: MATERIAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL LIFE

*What cannot be put into words, as Wittgenstein proposes, is what has to be done* (Giddens 1987: 99).

*... culture, divorced from social purpose, is practically inert* (Ingold 1983: 14).

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I suggested that the boundaries within anthropology and between related disciplines in the humanities were in the process of being renegotiated and reshaped. In this chapter I firstly look more closely at these shifting perspectives and consider how they might be contributing to a renewal of anthropological interest in material culture. Thereafter, I focus on the theoretical perspective that informs my own research. This draws on the work of Anthony Giddens (1976, 1977, 1979, 1984, 1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), both of whom are concerned with overcoming the dichotomy between structure and action in the analysis of social life. My perspective has also been influenced by Daniel Miller (1985, 1987) whose attention to the role of material culture in contemporary society has bearing on the interpretation of archaeological artefacts and museum specimens. In the course of arguing for a theoretical position that seeks to reconcile structure and action, I address the limitations of structuralist approaches that regard material culture as a form of coding analogous to language. Following Sperber (1975), I suggest that analysing underlying structural homologies in the patterning of cultural objects does not explain how these objects actually communicate in social discourse. It is argued that symbolic communication through material culture differs from the formal decoding of language. In practice symbolic communication works through evocation; what is conveyed or interpreted is in itself symbolic and not entirely explicable in semantic terms. This makes the status of symbolic phenomena very different from that of signs, which are paired with interpretations in a code structure. This distinction is of considerable importance in the analysis of symbolic expression through material objects.

#### *Rethinking 'things'*

During the past decade there has been renewed academic interest in material culture and a trend towards the reintegration of material culture into the mainstream of social and cultural

anthropological inquiry (Hodder 1982b; Hebdige 1983; Miller 1987; Reynolds 1984, 1987; Thomas 1989; Pearce 1989b). Within archaeology, which has always been object-centred, there is evidence of a move away from behaviourism and environmental determinism, in which people of the past were denied intentionality, towards finding ways of gaining access to the social past (Hodder 1986, 1987; Miller & Tilley 1984; Miller 1985; Moore 1986; Shanks & Tilley 1987a, b). Instead of being limited in advance by the residual, material nature of archaeological data, the aim of some recent ethno-archaeological investigations has been to understand 'all aspects of the relationship between the material and the social [dimensions], . . .' and to develop a more refined social theory of objects (Miller 1985: 4). Theory, Miller argues, should not be prematurely curtailed in relation to an apparent paucity of archaeological evidence about the social past. Thus, understanding the interaction between social relations and material culture in contemporary situations has become of considerable importance to the development of archaeological theory, as well as to social theory in general. The kind of ethno-archaeology that adopted an 'as if they were dead' approach, may well become obsolete and give way to research that aims at a fuller understanding of material culture in all its dimensions (Hodder 1986).

Another factor that may be contributing to a revival of interest in material culture is the current critical revision within the discipline of anthropology as a whole, and a perceptible shift towards the analysis of culture. Kuper (1988) has suggested that most anthropologists now recognize that the notion of 'primitive society' is an illusion, a construct of their own creation, and this has prompted a need to redefine the field of study.

Mainstream cultural and social anthropology today has abandoned primitive society and, with it, society itself. Instead it is embracing the second tradition of anthropology, the anthropology of Tylor and Frazer rather than Morgan and Rivers, the anthropology of culture (Kuper 1988: 243).

However, this embrace of culture should not be taken to preclude a concern with social practice and sociality (i.e. the nature of social relatedness). While it is true that a renewed focus on culture, and on anthropology as part of culture, is a notable trend within contemporary anthropology, this by no means excludes a concern with social relations. On the contrary, the interrelation between cultural form and social practice (between structure and action), which has always been a fundamental problem in the social sciences, has been addressed anew over the past two decades by a number of theorists, including Giddens (1977, 1979, 1984, 1987), Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Sahlins (1981), and has been applied in a wide range of studies spanning the disciplines of sociology (Bourdieu 1984), anthropology (Comaroff 1985), architecture (Mills 1986), and archaeology (Hall 1987).

The epistemological context of the concern with social practice can be located in the post-positivist philosophies of realism, hermeneutics and critical theory (Bhaskar 1975; Held 1980; Sayer 1984; Outhwaite 1987). Cartesian rationality, based on the idea of 'knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation', has been superseded by philosophies that question the very idea of a philosophically grounded theory of knowledge (Rorty 1980; Outhwaite 1987). Also challenged are positivist notions of objectivity or value-neutrality in observation, and the possibility of being able to separate the framework of inquiry from the conclusions thereof. Empiricists stressed the rationality and objectivity of scientific data but in failing to take cognizance of the wider social context of this claim, they tended to perpetuate the norms of the establishment<sup>1</sup> (Elzinga 1975). In post-positivist thought, claims for accurate representation are seen in themselves as part of social practice. According to pragmatist philosophy, representing the world and coping with the world are not regarded as being separate domains (Rorty 1980).

By the 1980s positivist epistemology had lost credibility among sociologists:

Those forms of philosophy, and therefore modes of social analysis based on them, which presume an unmediated access to consciousness are by now thoroughly discredited (Giddens 1987: 89)

Post-structuralist writers, including Foucault, Barthes and Lacan, have in common a 'critical attitude to Cartesianism' and a decentering of the subject or the author (Giddens 1987: 88). The text is regarded as having 'autonomy' and the author does not enjoy a privileged relationship to the text, but as Giddens argues, while Cartesianism can be faulted on many grounds, post-structuralist theorists have underplayed intentionality of social subjects as agents. In decentering the subject they have tended to lose sight of human agency altogether. I return to the issue of agency later in this Chapter.

In archaeology during the 1960s and 1970s, positivism informed the emphasis on archaeology as a scientific discipline and the concomitant reaction against earlier normative approaches (see Conkey 1990). However, during the 1980s recognition of the limitations of positivism began to cast doubt on the predominant paradigm of 'processual' archaeology, which aligned itself with the natural sciences and sought general laws from which explanations might be deduced. Although there are probably many archaeologists who still adhere to the notion that they might have unmediated access

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1. The mechanism, by which this is achieved, is to assert that science is value-free and then tacitly to project existing norms into the field of inquiry under the assumption of rationality (Elzinga 1975).

to the past through the systematic analysis of excavated material, this cannot be supported unless one dehumanizes both the past and the study of the past in the present. The realization that archaeology itself is part of social practice makes the positivist position untenable, and puts archaeology back into the humanities together with social anthropology, history and other socially oriented disciplines. Within this umbrella grouping, however, there is little coherence of theory or method.

By the 1980s many anthropologists felt that the discipline was in crisis<sup>2</sup> and that fragmentation into many specialized sub-fields threatened its coherence as a shared discourse (Hymes 1974; Ortner 1984). Not only was anthropology fragmented but there were grave doubts about the cultural and intellectual imperialism inherent in a practice that appropriates 'other cultures' as its object of study, and also about the appropriateness of prevailing research paradigms (Diamond 1974; Said 1978; Fabian 1983). There was an increasing awareness that from the time of its inception in the colonial past, 'a fearful asymmetry' had been implicit in the anthropological enterprise (Freedman 1979: 14). In a critical analysis of temporality in ethnographic discourse Fabian (1983: 160) concluded that,

... the root metaphor of [anthropological] knowledge remains that of a difference, and a distance, between thing and image, reality and representation.

For Fabian this distancing device results in an essential denial of 'coevalness' (co-temporality) and intersubjectivity to the subjects of ethnographic description - they become objectivized as cultural 'Others'. By placing the Other in another time, by spatializing time as distance, a fundamentally imbalanced relationship was created between the producers of anthropological knowledge and their 'object(s)' of study. Only by taking a different position, in which anthropology would be perceived 'as an activity which is part of what it studies' (Fabian 1983: 157), could there be a move towards *knowing* as an interactive, intersubjective process in contrast to the objective notion of *knowledge*.

Responding to the critiques of both Said (1978) and Fabian (1983), Richardson (1990) has pointed out that neither writer grounds his argument historically in analysis in the 'real' social world. Both 'locate the critique in the methodological categories' and conflate 'representation with the essence of what it represents ...' (Richardson 1990: 18). This raises an important issue of how images are sustained and representations perceived in social practice. Do people confuse images or representations with reality? Richardson suggests not, and warns against assuming that over-generalized constructions, such as Orientalism, play a determinant role in perception. None the

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2. However, West (1979) observed that crises are endemic to the discipline of anthropology, and that he would find the lack of critical introspection disquieting.

less, while questioning how perceptions of Others are formed and sustained in practice, he does not deny that the very possibility of the dialectical relation of self to other in anthropological discourse was founded on Western conquest.

The appropriation of other cultures in the quest for anthropological knowledge, and thereby power, is attested not only by the institutionalized discipline of academic anthropology, and the large corpus of ethnographic literature, but by collections of ethnographic artefacts held in museums throughout the Western world. During the 1980s both the ethnographic genre (Marcus & Cushman 1982; Clifford 1986; Tyler 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1986; Thornton 1988b) and museum representations of other cultures (Clifford 1985; Stocking 1985; Durrans 1988; Faris 1988) became the focus of critical introspection. Reflexive self-consciousness, although by no means a novel response to the problem of relativism (see Diamond 1974), gained currency as a therapeutic confession of implicit subjectivity. A symposium held at the British Museum in 1986, *Making exhibitions of ourselves: the limits of objectivity in representations of other cultures*<sup>3</sup>, captured the essence of this reflexive awareness. Representation through exhibition, as in ethnographic writing, is a genre, and cannot be value-free even though exhibitions are usually presented as such (see Morphy 1986). There is a growing literature on the ideological role of museum representations in America and Europe (Leone 1982; Horne 1984; Bennett 1988; Porter 1988; Vergo 1989), and since the mid-1980s the issue has received some attention in South Africa (Parkington & Smith 1986; Hofmeyer 1987; Stuckenberg 1987; Wright & Mazel 1987; Tomaselli & Ramgobin 1988). (I look more closely at exhibitions in the South African Museum in Chapters 6 and 7.)

By the 1980s some anthropologists considered that Foucault's famous wager that the modern study of Man 'would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea' (Foucault 1970: 387) had been won, thus giving way to post-modern cultural studies that would draw eclectically on developments in the fields of literary criticism, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis. Strictly speaking, work produced within this genre would also be 'post-anthropological', as claimed for the essays in the influential volume, *Writing Culture*, edited by Clifford & Marcus (1986). The distinction between 'them' and 'us' would be dissolved. However, within the post-modern collapse of 'difference' there is a danger that sensitivity to cultural diversity might be blunted (Hodder 1990b).

In response to this intellectual turbulence, other anthropologists saw not the demise of anthropology but the emergence of a new theoretical synthesis that would re-orientate the discipline

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3. I am grateful to Brian Durrans of the Museum of Mankind in London for sending me typescripts of some of the symposium papers in 1986.

and potentially reintegrate it. In a review of anthropological theory since the 1960s, Ortner (1984) argued cogently that this new orientation would centre on the concept of 'practice', also referred to as 'action' or 'praxis'. She regarded this not as a theory or method in itself but as an axis around which a variety of theories and methods were being developed. The common concern or problematic was formulated as the reintegration of structure and action through a theory of social practice. Related to this is the bridging of a number of related conceptual oppositions, including those between subject and object, individual and society, mind and body, knowledge and practice, and the idealist and materialist analytical positions. Although many anthropologists now recognize the need to transcend these stubborn and mutually reinforcing dichotomies, until recently much of the work produced by anthropologists perpetuated them by adopting polemical positions and by failing to take full cognizance of the production of knowledge as a social activity in itself (Sayer 1984). The point made some time ago by Berger & Luckmann (1966: 208) is still valid,

... a purely structural sociology is endemically in danger of reifying social phenomena. Even if it begins by modestly assigning to its constructs merely heuristic status, it all too frequently ends by confusing its own conceptualizations with the laws of the universe.

Recent theory that seeks to reconcile structure and action, and the related dichotomies noted above, also holds promise for the conceptual integration of material culture and social practice.

#### **Material culture and social practice**

A concern with the role of material culture in social life, that is with the relationship between cultural objects and social subjects, is a recurrent theme in this dissertation. A central tenet is that in everyday life material culture and social relations are mutually constitutive (Miller 1987; Sayer 1984; Ingold 1986). Following Giddens and Bourdieu the creative production of cultural objects is conceptualized as being the result of intentional action, carried out by people in the continuous flow of time. Both the manufacture of artefacts and their everyday use occur within the context of situated social practices. Objects and built structures do not, however, simply reflect social relations, they help to constitute and give meaning to those relations (Bourdieu 1977; Sayer 1984; Miller 1987).

That material culture is implicated in the ontogenesis of human beings as social subjects is shown particularly clearly in the importance of material surroundings and objects in infant development (see Miller 1987: 86-93). However, socialization does not stop on attaining adulthood, it continues recursively throughout peoples lives (Giddens 1987). Here, too, material culture is of importance in the continuing construction of identity. People, as social subjects, are continually interacting with the material world, as a setting for action and in their roles as consumers and producers. The

relation between producer and product is lucidly expressed by Giddens (1979: 43-44) referring to an author's production of a text. As the text is produced by the conscious action of the author, so the author's consciousness changes.

The author is not simply 'subject' and the text 'object'; the 'author' helps constitute him- or herself through the text, via the very process of production of that text.

With regard to the interpretation of meaning, the conscious intention of the author is but one possible reading of meaning. A text or cultural object should not be regarded as a 'fixed form' related to a set of particular intentions, it should rather be studied as 'the concrete medium and outcome of a process of production, reflexively monitored by its author or reader' (Giddens 1979: 43), intentionality being intrinsic to the continuous process of social life.

Regarding material culture as playing a mediating role in social relations differs fundamentally from views that define material culture primarily in terms of material possessions, technology, adaptive behaviour or the satisfaction of material needs (e.g. Wissler 1923; Gould 1977; Spier 1970). This is not to deny the importance of material conditions and production but to claim that even the most utilitarian of artefacts are invested with social value.

It is the object's relationship to the social group which is crucial, rather than its ability to perform a transformation of nature under the sign of utility (Miller 1987: 118).

The insistence that the anthropological study of material culture is the study of human social and environmental *relationships* through the material evidence of artefacts is a departure from all approaches to material culture that focus on objects in isolation from social context. The range of material culture studies in anthropology covers a wide field, including the analysis of production, consumption and symbolism in contemporary societies as well as the archaeological analysis of past societies.<sup>4</sup> Defining the study of material culture in terms of relationships presupposes an understanding of culture as being irreducible 'to either its object or its subject form' (Miller 1987: 11), culture being viewed as an essential medium through which social relationships are established, reinforced or transformed.

- In isolation material objects are intrinsically meaningless (Sayer 1984; Ingold 1986), but in social practice they are invested with meaning. Once vitalized by social intent, material culture 'conveys

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4. The scope of material culture studies in general is even wider, as shown by Schlereth (1982) in a review of the field in America. He recognizes nine research trends, namely art history, symbolist, cultural history, environmentalist, functionalist, structuralist, behaviouralist, national character and social history.

the social life of persons' (Ingold 1986: 268). As Evans-Pritchard (1940: 89) said over fifty years ago:

... people not only create their material culture and attach themselves to it, but also build up their relationships through it and see them in terms of it.

This process of *creating* meaning through material culture takes place recursively within time and space, and meaning can be considered immanent, continually in a process of being created rather than a fixed representation or reflection of behaviour. If, as Evans-Pritchard says, people see themselves in terms of their material culture, this is because material culture is implicated in the constitution of social relations, not because it provides a passive reflection of those relations.

Thus the metaphor of material culture as the 'Human Mirror' (Richardson 1974) oversimplifies the nature of the subject-object relationship by invoking a picture of the material object reflecting the social subject. By suggesting that material culture once created is a separate, objective reflection of the social realm (or an aspect thereof), the process of constructing meaning is left unexamined.<sup>5</sup> In practice material culture becomes meaningful through social interaction and is *constitutive* of social relations (Sayer 1984; Ingold 1986; Moore 1986; Miller 1987). Conceptualized in this way, material culture cannot *reflect* social relations because it is not separable from them. It cannot mirror that of which it is a part.<sup>6</sup>

Gift exchange, as described in the classic study by Mauss (1954 [1925]), provides a relevant example of the 'inseparability of persons and things' (Ingold 1986: 265). Here the giving and receiving of gifts 'is a part of the process by which boundaries of the moral person are *constructed* ...' (Ingold 1986: 266, original emphasis). Donor and recipient enter into an intersubjective relationship through the passage of gifts which embody this mutual interaction. The cultural object (the gift) becomes humanized through the agency of social purpose. Moreover, this intentionality may encompass a wide range of strategic possibilities unfolding over the course of time. Clearly this is a very different position from the Lévi-Straussian view of gift exchange as governed by mechanistic rules of reciprocity (see Giddens 1979: 27-33 for a critique of this view). The temporal dimension,

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5. Eagleton (1983: 136) has made a comparable point in relation to the post-structuralist critique of the linguistic sign as 'a translucent window on the object', which '... denies the *productive* character of language'.
  6. The mirror is a recurrent and problematic metaphor in anthropology. The discipline as a whole has been seen as a 'mirror for Man', ethnography being a reflection of human diversity (Kluckhohn 1945). This does not take account of ethnography as interpretation rather than accurate reflection. The current reflexive self-awareness introduces yet another mirror, as it were, so that the anthropologist sees both himself and his object of study (Thornton 1989).

which is overlooked in Lévi-Strauss's evaluation of Mauss's theory of gift exchange, is in practice essential to the activities of giving, receiving and later reciprocating. The time interval in the exchanging of gifts, unlike in the immediate exchange of commodities, imbues the gift with duration and makes it constitutive of social relations. 'The spirit of the gift, its vital force or subjective load, corresponds exactly to this durational content' (Ingold 1986: 269). Unlike in commodity exchange, gifts change hands without the objects being alienated from the field of intersubjective communication. Having said this, it should be noted that Appadurai (1986) has cautioned against drawing too sharp a contrast between gift exchange and the circulation of commodities. In accord with Bourdieu (1977), Appadurai sees economic interest, broadly defined, as entering the field of gift giving even when there is apparent disinterest. Following a different line of argument, Miller (1987; 1988) has suggested that the alienation inherent to industrialized commodity production might be counter-balanced by a subjective re-appropriation in consumption. This does not, however, alter the importance of the object in mediating social relations but adds the dimension of continuing recontextualization.

*Artefacts as mediators of social action*

The concept of mediation implies an avoidance of either object-centred or subject-centred approaches to social analysis. It seeks to bridge the material and non-material domains through an approach in which the object-subject relationship is integrated and grounded in social practice and historical conditions. This is one of the key analytical issues addressed by both Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Giddens (1976, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1987). I discuss their work below after some general comments on cultural mediation and on the limitations of applying a Lévi-Straussian structuralist approach to the analysis of material culture.

Cultural mediation is regarded as being simultaneously practical and symbolic, and open to multiple readings. Mundane things are as likely as ceremonial objects to become of symbolic value. This has obvious implications for the archaeological analysis of unremarkable, everyday things. The ordinariness of an artefact such as a domestic utensil does not make it less likely to be implicated in the symbolic construction of social relations.

. . . everyday objects continually assert their presence as simultaneously material force and symbol. . . . The use of artefact as symbol does not in any way detract from its significance as tool, material worked, or environment experienced (Miller 1987: 105).

The physicality of material objects, however, tends to belie their flexibility and sensitivity in evoking associations. The presence of the artefact and its ability to create subtle distinctions in perception

seems to work partly at a subliminal level, appealing to the emotions and the senses as much as to rational thought.

The artefact's affinity to the unconscious also allows it to play an important role in marking different forms of social reality, and allowing these and the perspectives arising from different social positions to exist concurrently without coming into overt conflict (Miller 1987: 108).

Thus the seemingly obvious physical presence of material things embodies a subtle social agenda. In one respect cultural objects are concrete, visible and amenable to detailed description, in another they are part of the abstract social realm and elude the closure that description implies. Miller argues that this may account in part for the difficulty in appreciating the importance of material culture in the constitution of social relations.

If one accepts that the symbolic capacity of an artefact is not fixed but related to the context of interpretation, including the social position and expectations of the interpreter, it becomes clear that 'meaning' can only be invoked in practice. This understanding differs in certain important respects from structuralist approaches that regard material culture as a form of non-verbal communication analogous in structure to language (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Leach 1970, 1976). A structuralist approach, strictly applied, emphasizes essential meanings encoded in homologous cultural forms and, therefore, cannot address contextuality or ambiguity of interpretation (Sperber 1975). It fails to grasp the concept of 'signification as a constitutive feature of the context of communication itself' (Giddens 1979: 97-8). Moreover, by failing to account for the responses of individuals as human agents, structuralism overlooks the role of the active subject in society and thereby restricts individuals to rule-bound behaviour.

The widespread sociological application of Saussurean semiology, to which structuralism is affiliated, has given rise to a pervasive misunderstanding of the word 'signifier', which as Descombes (1986) has noted, is used quite differently by linguists and sociologists. The former are concerned with the linguistic meaning of the signifier, as found in a lexicon, while the latter are concerned with signifiers as indicators of status, taste or membership of social groups. These two different senses of signification are incompatible in so far as the one deals with decoding paired phonetic and semantic representations while the other is a form of statement or utterance that involves something more than decoding a sign to be understood. Context, nuance, strategy, interpretation and ambiguity come into play. This is comparable to the 'difference between placing a piece on a chessboard in order to set up the game and moving that piece in the course of play' (Descombes 1986: 145, after Wittgenstein). As Mary Douglas (1973) has observed in similar vein, rules relate to formal systems, meanings to social practice.

Furthermore it has been suggested that the code model is flawed even as an explanation of verbal communication. 'Comprehension involves more than the decoding of a linguistic signal' (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 6). A process of 'inferential recognition' of the communicator's intentions is involved and this is related to the context of communication. A sentence (a semantic representation) may be uttered and interpreted in many different ways in varied situations but the code model (pairing sounds and words) brackets out everything but the linguistic structure, the grammar. Similarly in extending grammatical rules to non-verbal representations, code structure fails to account adequately for how communication is achieved in practice.

In the context of social practices, symbolic phenomena do not convey precise and predictable messages (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 8). Rather they work through evocation by focusing attention on possible associations. Sperber (1975: 70) argues that in practice Lévi-Strauss himself treats symbolism not as a 'means of encoding information but as a means of organising it'. Thus, symbols work without having precise meaning.

A representation is symbolic precisely to the extent that it is not entirely explicable, that is to say, explicable by semantic means. Semiological views are therefore not merely inadequate; they hide from the outset, the defining features of symbolism (Sperber 1975: 113).

Symbols are not paired with fixed interpretations or meanings in a code structure; rather they may be regarded as drawing on the 'surplus of meaning' inherent in signification as a whole (Ricoeur cited in Giddens 1979: 107). They constitute part of a complex representational system and their interpretation is recursively constituted within that system. Local exegesis is best understood as an accretion to the ongoing symbolic discourse rather than a definitive, fixed meaning. Unlike the signification of a coded signal, in symbolic discourse ambiguity is retained and, indeed, required. This gives material symbols their multivalent capacity to evoke many different meanings in the course of social interaction. However, as previously noted, devoid of involvement in social practice, cultural objects have no meaning at all, they are practically inert (Ingold 1983).

Much communication (evocation) through material culture and spatial patterning occurs at an implicit level of consciousness but this tends to be overlooked in structuralist analysis. By conceptualizing signification only in terms of consciousness (overt expression) and the unconscious (the covert structure that makes conscious expression possible) structuralists fail to take into account the importance of tacit knowledge.

Structuralist thought has no mode of coping with what I shall call *practical consciousness* - non-discursive, but not unconscious, knowledge of social institutions - as involved in social reproduction (Giddens 1979: 24).

This practical consciousness allows people both to act and reflexively monitor their actions without necessarily being able explain this facility in words. In everyday life people are not rule-bound by structural principles, they are knowledgeable agents who through their actions construct and potentially transform the social world. However, structure is both constraining and enabling. Following the Marxian dictum, it is recognized that knowledgeable, intentional actions may have unintended consequences (Giddens 1979, 1981).

The process of social life, taken to include cultural mediation, is never fully determined or static, but structuralist analysis is unavoidably premised on the flawed assumption that meaning is encoded in an unchanging source (Thompson 1979). Although it is true that structuralists never claimed to be addressing the dynamics of practice, being concerned rather with generalized underlying principles, this means that a code model cannot accommodate the ongoing processes and transformations of social life which constitute a major concern of anthropology. In short structuralism does not attempt to encompass a theory of practice, nor does it address the related issue of human agency or intentionality.

The above critique of structuralism arises from an alternative understanding of signification as part of social discourse. 'Signs only exist as produced and reproduced in signification', and signification can be regarded as being 'linked recursively to the communication of meaning in interaction' (Giddens 1979: 97-8). This avoids the problem of giving priority either to ideal, normative structure or to material determinants by stressing the production of meaning(s) in action. It also refocuses attention on the role of active social agents in the creation of meaning. Before discussing Giddens's theory of structuration in greater detail, I shall briefly introduce Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' which provides a set of structuring and anchoring principles that are particularly pertinent to the anthropological analysis of the material domain.

#### *The 'habitus' as a structuring principle*

Bourdieu (1977) seeks to overcome the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism by explicating the relation between the structural regularities of social behaviour and the purposeful action of human agents (Garnham & Williams 1980). At the same time he is concerned with the historical conditions that ground this relation and its reproduction.

It is necessary to abandon all theories which explicitly or implicitly treat practice as a mechanical reaction, directly determined by the antecedent conditions and entirely reducible to the mechanical functioning of pre-established assemblies, 'models' or 'roles' ... (Bourdieu 1977: 73).

This rejection of structural, objective determinism, however, in no way implies an acceptance of unconstrained, subjective free will. Instead, responses are defined in relation to a 'system of objective potentialities . . . in relation to a *forthcoming* reality . . .' (Bourdieu 1977: 76). People are continually involved in advancing their interests strategically through the use of cultural resources and the outcome is always uncertain in the face of counter strategies by others. Bourdieu suggests that the *habitus*, a set of dispositions that are internalized in early childhood, regulates and shapes the repertoires of social actors, while not restricting them to rule-bound behaviour.

The habitus as the regulating principle of practice operates through the play of difference between cognitive oppositions, such as high/low, male/female, left/right, inside/outside, dark/light, wet/dry. However, unlike in structuralist analysis, the oppositions of the habitus are not reduced to idealized determinants of behaviour. Bourdieu refers to a 'probabilistic' logic of practice according to which action is regulated, and the habitus is described as a 'strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever changing situations . . .' (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Thus the regulating principle is simultaneously a generating principle. This in essence is the structuring mechanism whereby social practice reproduces (or transforms) the structural dispositions that constitute the habitus. This is compatible with Giddens's concept of the duality of structure.

That the concept of habitus provides an elegant model for the analysis of spatial patterning and material culture in relation to social practice is amply illustrated by Bourdieu's detailed elucidation of the structuring structure of the Kabyle house and in his discussion of the homologies within this structure (Bourdieu 1977: 89-92, 143-158). On the basis of his fieldwork among the Kabyle in Algeria, he proposes that in non-industrial, small-scale societies which lack writing (an instrument that facilitates the objectification of power relations), material culture and the organization of domestic space is directly implicated in the exercise of symbolic power. This takes place not at a discursive level but is implicit in everyday practice. Inhabited space becomes the principle locus for the objectification of the generative schemes that produce divisions and hierarchies - it becomes 'a tangible classifying system' that reinforces and is reinforced in practice. But lest this appear nothing more than a rephrasing of a structuralist position, Bourdieu explicitly notes the indeterminacy of such taxonomies. Ambiguity and even contradiction is possible in practice which may take 'all sorts of liberties' with the system in the construction of meaning. In short he links the cognitive principle of binary opposition to a dialectical theory of practice in which meaning is continually produced, reproduced or potentially changed. The richness of Bourdieu's anthropological work has only been alluded to here; its seminal quality is attested by its widespread influence on other scholars (Hebdige 1983; Hodder 1982a, 1984; Comaroff 1985; Miller 1987; Moore 1986; Merriman 1989a).

I return now to Giddens who, like Bourdieu, addresses the key sociological issue of integrating structure and action.

*Structuration: the structuring of structure*

Giddens's theory of structuration entails rethinking a number of theoretical oppositions, most notably subject and object (individual and society), synchrony and diachrony, and the conscious and unconscious modes of cognition, the latter being of critical importance in understanding how structuration theory differs from structuralism. Structuration is essentially a theory of agency, and a philosophy of social action. It rejects both the deterministic position that individual action is determined by society, and the opposing voluntarist position that gives acting individuals priority in shaping social formations. Both of these positions are regarded as variants of functionalism, which structuration theory seeks to transcend. Although concerned with the structuring of social life, Giddens is explicit in rejecting the structural-functionalist fallacy that society operates as an organic whole to perpetuate itself:

According to the theory of structuration, social systems have no purposes, reasons or needs whatsoever; only human individuals do so. *Any explanation of social reproduction which imputes teleology to social systems must be declared invalid* (Giddens 1979: 7, original emphasis).

All social actors are agents in the sense of being knowing subjects whose actions are simultaneously constitutive of society and constituted by society. The conceptualization of the production and reproduction of society as *constituted in social practices* is at the core of the theory of structuration which replaces the dualisms noted above with the single notion of the 'duality of structure'. Structure is both medium and outcome of the recursive practices that constitute social systems. In Giddens's words:

By the duality of structure, I mean the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution (Giddens 1979: 5).

Thus structure does not have an absolute existence but rather consists of structural properties that are implicated in the ongoing production and reproduction of social relations. Temporality, the duration of lived time; is implicit in the duality of structure. Action is situated in time and space as a continuous flow of conduct:

. . . we must grasp the *time-space relations inherent in the constitution of all social interaction* (Giddens 1979: 3).

. . . the seeds of change are present in every moment of the constitution of social systems across time and space (Giddens 1981: 27).

Time is thus an essential part of social systems - both stability and change occur in time and space (time-space), as does social analysis. Giddens has shown that the distinction between synchronic and diachronic analysis is problematic and potentially misleading in that time tends to be associated only with social change or with the events of history. The contrast fosters the illusion that it is possible to capture a static 'timeless moment' in social life. Similarly Ingold (1986: 138) has noted that both synchrony and diachrony invoke an abstract sense of chronological time whereas social life is a process in real, lived, shared time. Both social interaction and anthropological interpretation occur in the duration of real, intersubjective time. However, in ethnographic writing this has often been obscured by the use of the ethnographic present which reduces duration to synchrony (Fabian 1983; Wilmsen 1989).

Structure and action are conceptualized as being mutually constitutive; structure being both enabling and constraining. The production of social life is carried on by knowledgeable social actors (agents) 'who both construct the world through their actions and yet whose action is also conditioned and constrained by the very world of their creation' (Giddens 1981: 54). An important distinction can be made here between action and behaviour. The key conceptual attributes of action are human agency and practical consciousness. If individuals were rule-bound or programmed by cultural coding they would behave but would not act. The distinction is between passive behavioural response and intentional active conduct, the latter being carried out in terms of strategic interests.

Giddens distinguishes three modes of consciousness by which knowledge may enter into social discourse - the unconscious, discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. That knowledge exists at the unconscious level is recognized but structuration theory is particularly concerned with the other two modes of knowing, the discursive (able to be expressed at the level of discourse) and the tacit (not expressible in words but in doing). The latter comes into play in virtually all social interaction. Social agents draw on stocks of knowledge that are only in part available to discursive consciousness. Much of what people do occurs at the level of practical consciousness which, although not discursive in nature, must not be confused with, or opposed to, the unconscious. Practical consciousness can be regarded as knowing how to get on with doing things, without necessarily being able to explain this action. Such knowledge exists in the form of memory traces and their recursive mobilization. In other words the distinction between tacit, practical knowledge and discursive knowledge is the difference between knowing *how* and knowing *that* (Ryle 1949).

*Contra* Lévi-Strauss, and following Wittgenstein, Giddens proposes that it is not the unconscious that makes much conscious action possible but practical consciousness. This is not to deny the

important role of the unconscious in accounting fully for human action but to contend that social life is not programmed by the unconscious alone. People draw on practical consciousness in all the activities of daily life and 'reflexively monitor what they do as an intrinsic part of what it is that they do'; this recursive processing is a 'chronic feature of even the most trivial of human activities' (Giddens 1987: 99).

Social action always involves the use of power, which can be analysed in terms of rules and resources (both material and non-material). Rules are conceptualized as a form of normative sanctioning, recognizable in the distinction between the right or wrong way of doing something. Rules do not determine practices but exist in conjunction with them. Resources, too, can only be realized in practice, in their social mobilization. Human agents use resources in the constitution of relations of autonomy and dependence. These relations of power are articulated through the use of resources that can be conceptualized as having two components, allocative and authoritative. The former refers to material resources and economic power, the latter to symbolic resources and political power. That power relations may be expressed through artefacts and spatial settings has provided a useful insight for the analysis of material culture in contemporary, historical and archaeological contexts (Mills 1986; Hall 1987). Spatial settings operate as structuring and controlling contexts for action and at the same time they are the result of social interaction.

The mediating role of cultural objects in social life is made explicit in Giddens's concept of the *contextuality of action*. In the course of everyday life people move in time and space interlinking both action and context, and differing contexts.

Contexts form 'settings' of action, the qualities of which agents routinely draw upon in the course of orienting what they do and what they say to one another. Common awareness of these settings of action forms an anchoring element in the 'mutual knowledge' whereby agents make sense of what others say and do. Context should not be identified with what makes a particular segment of action idiosyncratic (Giddens 1987: 99).

Taking practical consciousness into account is of critical importance to a theoretical understanding of the role of material culture in social life. It is largely within this sphere of consciousness that cultural objects are meaningfully constituted by people in the continual construction of reality.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Also see Goffman (1959, 1971).

In drawing selectively on those aspects of structuration theory that have bearing on material culture analysis, I have not attempted to do justice to the depth and scope of Giddens's work but to extract the essential concepts that have influenced my own conceptual approach. The field studies presented in the following chapters were shaped to a large extent by the ideas discussed above and by the seemingly obvious insight that in the routine activities of everyday life there is a continual interplay of social subjects (agents) and cultural objects. It is an insight, however, that has often been eclipsed in material culture studies by the over-riding physical presence of the object.

## CHAPTER 3

### FIELD CASE 1: THE SOCIAL USE OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND DOMESTIC SPACE IN PONDOLAND

*We should not cede tradition to the conservatives! The sedimentation of institutional forms in long-term processes of social development is an inescapable feature of all types of society, however rapid the changes they may undergo (Giddens 1979: 7).*

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to examine the domestic use of space and material culture in the light of the theory presented in the previous chapter. The study focuses primarily on the spatial patterning of artefacts and activity areas within a 'traditional' homestead in rural Pondoland, Transkei.<sup>1</sup> The organization of domestic space and the recursive use of artefacts are interpreted in terms of kinship, status and gender relations, and the exercise of power in on-going social practices. Particular attention is given to the well-documented structural features of settlement organization within southern Bantu homesteads (Kuper 1982), also referred to by some archaeologists as the 'central cattle pattern' (Huffman 1986a).

The case study described here was originally planned as an ethno-archaeological investigation of subsistence agriculture in Pondoland with particular emphasis on the technology of grain production, storage and processing. The aim was to characterize the material culture associated with the transition from sorghum to maize as the staple grain crop, with the ultimate intention of elucidating the archaeological record of early farming communities in southern Africa. The primary focus of the project was to be on food-processing technology. However, a concern with the social use of domestic space, which was implicit in the project from the start, in practice became the central concern of the study. In attempting to undertake an ethnographic study of the material dimensions of subsistence activities, socio-cultural factors intervened at every turn. Instead of allowing the technological correlates of behaviour to be isolated for the purposes of archaeological interpretation, the fieldwork drew my attention to the interrelatedness of material culture and social

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1. The material presented in this Chapter has been published in slightly abridged form (Davison 1988b).

strategies. This in turn underlined the importance of context in the interpretation of objects, and provided a point of departure for the thesis as a whole.

Although the specific concern of the study was with material culture in the context of rural domestic households, the museum context was present as an implicit counter-point in so far as the project was undertaken under the auspices of the South African Museum and it was anticipated that the results would eventually be fed back into museum practice<sup>2</sup>. However, as it happened, rather than the feedback taking the form of collections, displays or publications on the technology of grain cultivation, it took the form of raising questions about the museum setting itself as a context in which material objects are recontextualized and given new meanings. The implications of shifting spatial and conceptual contexts for an understanding of museum objects became a major part of the thesis project (see Chapters 5 to 8). With these remarks, intended as a preface to place this chapter in context, I turn my attention to the fieldwork undertaken in Pondoland.

*Time, place and method of study*

During June and July 1984, April and May 1985, and February 1986 field research<sup>3</sup> was undertaken in a remote part of the Libode district of Pondoland, Transkei (Fig. 2). A preliminary survey of aerial photographs dating from 1938 to 1983 had confirmed that during the 1960s part of the population in the Libode district had been resettled in grid-planned residential villages following the implementation of the 'Betterment' scheme<sup>4</sup>, which has been shown elsewhere in Transkei to have

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2. The relationship between research and other museum activities was envisaged as being complementary rather than 'schizophrenic', as has been suggested by writers noting that research in museums was often unrelated to curatorial and exhibition practice (Collier & Tschopik 1954).
  3. In the field I was accompanied by Lindsay Hooper, who was primarily responsible for assisting with photography and in surveying homesteads. The field photographs are housed in the Ethnography Department of the South African Museum. Catalogue numbers are as follows: black and white, 84/1-305; 85/1-155; 86A/1-84; colour, 274/1-207; 277/1-185; 279/1-142. Being a woman was an advantage in this particular project, in that it focused on the spheres of activity that were traditionally within the domain of women. Communication problems were overcome by working through local interpreters, both men and women. However, I do have a minimal working understanding of Xhosa, which is spoken in Pondoland. Through the co-operation of the Institute of Management and Development Studies at the University of the Transkei, a field base was established at the small village of Nkanga.
  4. The Betterment Proclamation No 116 of 1949 provided the legal framework for the rationalization of land in 'Native areas' into grazing, arable and residential zones. Ostensibly intended to rehabilitate agricultural land and improve stock-keeping practices, 'betterment', also referred to as 'planning', was widely mistrusted and resisted by the black rural population (Yawitch 1982).

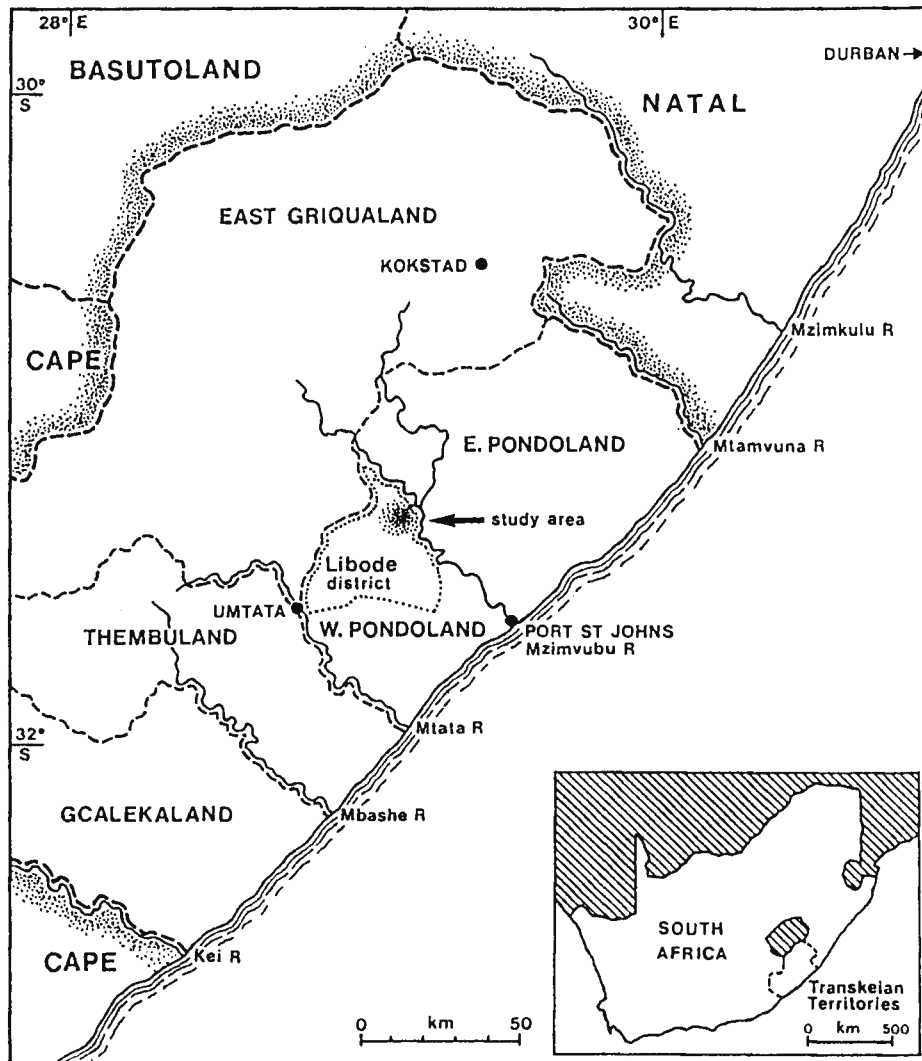


Fig. 2. Map showing the Libode district, Transkeian Territories, after 1910. (After Beinart 1982.)

had a negative influence on domestic production (De Wet & McAllister 1985). However, it was also evident from the photographs that there were areas that had not been affected. It was decided to concentrate fieldwork in one of the areas that had not been resettled, and which was, by reputation, one of the most conservative parts of Transkei. Although the inhabitants of this area had been involved in the migrant labour system since the end of the nineteenth century, it seemed that some degree of subsistence agriculture remained in operation. Fieldwork was planned to coincide with different seasons in the agricultural cycle.

Rural underdevelopment and poverty in the Transkei are well documented (Bundy 1979; Cragg 1984). Research undertaken in the early 1980s for the Carnegie Inquiry into poverty indicated that 34 per cent of the male population in the Libode district was absent at any one time, and with regard to economically active men the figure rose to as high as 93 per cent (Muller & Tapscott 1984). It was found that household subsistence requirements could not be met without access to cash from wage labour, migrant remittances or pensions. Subsistence agriculture continued to some extent but it was estimated that the contribution of home production to subsistence was negligible (Cragg 1984). In 1983 in the village of Nkanga, 23 per cent of the 202 households did not have access to arable land, and 47 per cent did not own any cattle, which were needed for ploughing and transport. In 1982/3 drought conditions were so severe that agricultural productivity could not be fairly assessed for the Carnegie Inquiry, but it was estimated that even in good years the household maize yield was less than 30 per cent of the annual subsistence requirement. It was in this area of documented insufficiency that fieldwork for the present project was initiated in June 1984, although it should be noted that the Carnegie figures were seen only after field research in the area had commenced.

The first impression gained was not one of abject poverty. During the previous summer the drought had been broken by good rains and there had been a reasonable harvest. Grain stores were not empty and there were indications that work-parties for threshing were being organized. It seemed that it would be possible to research techniques of subsistence cultivation albeit in a situation in which domestic production was severely limited. Moreover, while the Carnegie findings held true for most households, there were patent inequalities in access to resources that could not have been predicted from the reported statistics. Certain households presented a picture quite contrary to the impression given by the results of the Carnegie Inquiry. For example, the particular household that became the main focus of this study was able to supply about two thirds of its annual grain needs and had considerable wealth in cattle. In the course of fieldwork it emerged that the single most important factor that had allowed this and other households in the area to be relatively economically independent was the cultivation of dagga (*Cannabis sativa*) for sale. The fact that

dagga production was, and still is, illegal did not reduce its economic importance, but it did place a responsibility on the researcher to exercise discretion in reporting.<sup>5</sup>

Various methods of data collection were used, including informal interviews, recording oral histories, describing technical processes, surveying settlements and plotting of activity areas within homesteads. Perhaps the most important aspect of the fieldwork was simply being there, observing the daily routines and mundane activities, and seeing material culture 'in action' in the context of everyday life. A survey of 57 households<sup>6</sup> was undertaken specifically to investigate the range of grinding-stones in use (see Davison 1988a), and to record the spatial arrangement of artefacts within cooking houses and areas of food preparation. A more comprehensive survey of eight households was undertaken within areas of continuous historical settlement and in resettled villages (see Davison 1988a). Of these, the homestead or *umzi*<sup>7</sup> of one extended family was chosen for intensive study as it had been occupied continuously by members of the same patrilineal group since at least the turn of the century and thus allowed the processes of social and physical development over three generations to be investigated.

#### **Spatial organization, subsistence and social strategies**

The spatial organization of a settlement is structured in part by mechanical, logistic and technological variables, including facility requirements, the number of people to be accommodated and the scheduling of activities on a daily or seasonal basis (Oswald 1984). However, while factors

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5. The contribution of cannabis production to the local economy was omitted entirely in the Carnegie reports (Cragg 1984; Muller & Tapscott 1984). While this is understandable in terms of the criminal implications, it none the less misrepresents the economic status of the area. A measure of the scale of production is suggested by the fact that 61 304 kg of dagga (valued at over six million rands) were confiscated from Transkeians in 1988 (Lamla 1989). Although we were advised not to ask people directly about dagga production, it was acknowledged as being of vital economic importance to both large- and small-scale producers. A local dealer commented, pointing to large bags of dry dagga, 'these are our diamonds'. In 1985 a 30-kg bag of high-grade dagga would have fetched about R300-R400 at source and eventually have been sold for as much as ten times that figure.
  6. A 'household' is defined here as a co-operating group that is are usually co-resident and shares certain activities. The members of a household perceive themselves as constituting a co-operating domestic group even if members are temporarily absent. It is not necessarily a kin group although kin often form the core of the group. The spheres of action within the household include production, distribution, socialization and reproduction. I refer to the dwellings and material structures occupied by the household as the 'homestead'.
  7. The Xhosa term *umzi* refers both to the physical structures of the homestead and to the people who comprise the household.

of this kind constrain the range of physical possibilities, they do not determine the pattern of settlement. Moreover, if it is accepted that the use of technology, including skills and knowledge of the environment, is simultaneously practical and cultural, and since human interaction with the natural environment is always mediated by *ideas* as well as by technology (Ingold 1981), it follows that settlement layout is a complex artefact encompassing social, cultural and practical responses. I shall argue, in the case of the 'traditional' settlement described below, that spatial organization can also become a form of cultural resistance to imposed change.

*Settlement in Pondoland in historical perspective*

Twentieth-century accounts of settlement in Pondoland describe a pattern of dispersed homesteads distributed at irregular distances across the landscape, within reach of water, pasturage and arable land (Hunter 1936; Shaw & Van Warmelo 1972; Sansom 1974a). A homestead was a centre of productive activity, which drew on the resources of its occupants, usually members of an extended patrilineal group and unrelated dependants. They formed an economic unit with rights in livestock, land and other property. Control over cattle, the main medium of storing wealth, was strictly the reserve of men of the agnatic line. This control also gave men access to wives, as the passage of cattle was a necessary part of a marriage contract. Marriage was exogamous and residence after marriage virilocal, therefore wives marrying into an *umzi* were always from an unrelated kin group.

While acknowledging the paucity of explicit oral or written records of homesteads in the pre-colonial period, Beinart (1982: 18) comments that 'Mpondo traditions are suffused with assumptions about the relationships within them'. The layout of the homestead that provided the arena for these relationships was that of a central cattle enclosure surrounded by a semi-circle of dwellings which, in large homesteads, housed up to twenty married men. The centrality of the cattle-byre and the ranking of dwelling units to the right and left of the central great house spatially mapped a social hierarchy within the *umzi*. This constitutes an essential element of the 'central cattle pattern', which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Although a pattern of dispersed settlement predominated from about the mid-nineteenth century, historical evidence points to an earlier pattern of concentrated settlement in the post-Mfecane period, which both underlines the importance of cattle in the political economy, and draws attention to the way in which political conditions had bearing on the physical configuration of settlement (Beinart 1980).

In the 1830s settlement was centred on the Great Place of the paramount chief Faku. The missionary Boyce observed from one hill 'a hundred kraals, each of which contained from twenty to

forty houses . . .' (Steedman 1835: 268). The need to consolidate for defence and the reduction of herds in warfare accounted for this concentration of settlement. 'The absence of cattle enabled the Mpondo to maintain the close settlement that was so essential for defence, for they had no need of grazing grounds' (Beinart 1980: 122). During this period agricultural production intensified and gradually cattle were re-accumulated by the paramount and lesser chiefs, through raiding and the payment of tribute and fines. But large herds could not be retained in concentrated settlements and by the middle of the nineteenth century the population had spread out again, cattle-holdings were decentralized and the settlement pattern had reverted to one of dispersed homesteads.

Beinart's analysis clearly reveals the interplay of ecological and political factors that resulted in the decentralization of cattle ownership and the dispersal of homesteads, which increasingly became the nuclei of productive activities. He draws attention to the cohesive force of control over cattle by the senior men within large homesteads. 'It was only when brothers and sons within established homesteads were able to secure control over resources, a process no doubt attended by conflict, that they could extract themselves from the more immediate control of the homestead head' (Beinart 1982: 20).

The dynamic of settlement pattern was thus inextricably bound up with social relationships, the dominance of senior men and their control of resources. These issues remain relevant in attempting to understand more recent patterns of settlement and the material signifiers of social relations and authority structures.

#### *A homestead in Pondoland in the 1980s*

The homestead under discussion is situated at an altitude of about 870 m, on a ridge facing north-east in the hills that eventually drop down steeply to the Umzimvubu River. In 1984 the *umzi* was occupied by the headman or owner, his first wife, their four sons, two of whom were migrants in Johannesburg and therefore absent most of the time, the wives of the two older sons, four grandchildren, a brother's teenage son and also three children belonging to the sister of the head of the *umzi*. An unmarried daughter who worked in Umtata returned home occasionally. A second wife who had formerly resided there, occupied a separate *umzi* situated on the adjacent hillside to the south. The livestock holdings of the family were 43 cattle, 37 goats, 6 sheep, 4 pigs, 11 geese, 1 mule and about 40 fowls. The head of the household also owned a horse. They had three arable fields (each about 2-3 ha in size), two adjacent to the homestead and one a short distance away; in addition there were two smaller domestic gardens.

In favourable years the rainfall is over 800 mm per annum and it falls mainly in the warm summer months. These conditions allow both maize and sorghum to be cultivated but the unpredictability of rainfall is particularly threatening to maize. The soils in the area derive mainly from shales and sandstone or from dolerite. Those soils deriving from dolerite are usually deep clay loams with good granular structure.<sup>8</sup> These provided the best arable land and tend to withstand erosion. They are, however, less widespread than the poorer soils, derived from shales and sandstone, which consist mainly of sandy loams and are more susceptible to erosion. All the soils tend to be leached out and low in essential nutrients, except when commercial fertilizers or dung have been used to improve their quality.

A nearby spring provided water for the *umzi*, a wooded ravine behind the homestead was a source of plants for medicinal use and of small game. The soil near the spring was suitable for making the mud bricks of which most of the structures were built, and thatching-grass grew abundantly in the surrounding areas. The crops planted in the fields were maize, pumpkins and beans. Maize was also planted in garden plots adjacent to the *umzi*, together with sweet reed and sorghum. The latter was grown mainly for making beer and was not planted every year. Informants said that sorghum was less popular than maize because of the labour required to protect the ripening heads from predation by birds. In the past the children of the household had protected the fields but this was not possible when they attended school.

Historical records indicate that, during the early decades of the twentieth century, sorghum production had declined as labour migration had increased, and the pattern of cultivation had changed from single crop planting to mixed cropping (Beinart 1982). In Pondoland it had been customary for sorghum to be densely sown by broadcasting, unmixed with other crops. Maize, however, was planted at more widely spaced intervals together with beans and pumpkins, which grew between the maize stalks. This pattern of planting and cultivation was particularly suited to the use of ox-drawn planters and harrows. It was also better suited to intensive inputs of labour at more widely spaced intervals and was thus of advantage to small households, which depended on returning migrants or which could organize communal work-parties for short periods of intense activity. This shift in the pattern of cultivation allowed fairly small productive units to operate effectively, particularly if they had access to draught animals and the male labour to handle them. Following the conventional division of labour, women were excluded from handling cattle, but the use of the ox-drawn plough had brought men into the formerly female domain of agriculture. In the *umzi* under discussion, men and women co-operated in agricultural work, as summarized in Table 3.

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8. Soil samples from a former grain pit, analysed at the University of the Transkei, comprised 61% clay, 15% silt, 19% sand, and 5% other matter.

The daily routine of household activities and animal husbandry ran concurrently with agricultural work. The division of labour was based on both gender and age. The young men of the *umzi* took care of the herd, they milked the cows when they were in milk, made *amasi* (sour milk), and took the cattle out to graze. Women were mainly responsible for the routine domestic tasks. The daughters-in-law collected water for the *umzi* at sunrise every morning and at other times during the day when necessary. The second wife, living in her own *umzi*, collected water for herself and her children. Preparation and cooking of food were daily activities scheduled to fit in with the demands of agriculture. Here, too, the daughters-in-law shouldered the heaviest work of grinding maize to provide the daily meal of stiff porridge. This was usually eaten with a cooked vegetable such as pumpkin, beans, cabbage or wild spinach. Wild plant foods, *imifino*, gathered by women when they were cutting thatching grass or collecting firewood,<sup>9</sup> were used to a considerable extent and they added variety to the seemingly monotonous diet. The only cooking done by men was on rare occasions when meat was roasted on hearths situated near or in the cattle byre. This was in keeping with a wider pattern of domestic spatial arrangements that I now examine in more detail.

In 1984 the layout of the *umzi* (Fig. 3) consisted of a slightly curved row of circular, thatched houses (*izindlu*) for sleeping and cooking, smaller storage houses and a rectangular corrugated iron-roofed house which faced the entrance to the cattle enclosure (*isibaya*) across an open space, the *inkundla*. A goat-pen was situated to the west of the cattle-byre and there were three grain-pits in the *inkundla*. The grain-pits, which dated back to the time of the present owner's father, were no longer used for grain storage. Hearths were situated inside and outside the great house, near one of the store-houses and near the enclosures for cattle and goats. Those near the livestock enclosures were used exclusively by men, while the others were used by women in the daily preparation of food. The hearth near the grain-store was used mainly for brewing beer. The layout of the houses within the homestead could be regarded as a physical expression of the social units within the *umzi*, although this was not fixed through time, as will be shown below. The houses of wives were ranked to the right and left of the great house, *indlunkulu*, mapping on the ground, as it were, a social hierarchy which was of significance in establishing rights to property and to succession, usually vested in the eldest son of the great wife.

#### *The homestead over the past fifty years*

Aerial photographs of the homestead dating back to 1938 (Fig. 4A) and interviews with the present occupants, gave some insight into the physical development and social history of the homestead.

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9. Collecting large quantities of firewood was an arduous, regular part of women's work and involved walking long distances carrying head-loads of between 20-30 kg. Woods from different trees were collected for their particular properties as fuel.

Table 3.  
Agricultural calendar and related activities.

MONTH	ACTIVITY	LABOUR
January-February	Hoe, weed fields and gardens; reap green maize in gardens; protect sorghum from birds	Mainly women, every day for about 6 hours until fields are cleared of weeds (2 weeks per field); men harrow
March-April	Hoe, weed fields; carry maize home in baskets; collect wild plant foods Collect materials for sledges and construct sledge	Women, daily Men, as required
May-June	Dry maize harvest; carry maize to sledge Transport sledge with span of oxen Repair grain pits and store huts	Women with some help from men Young men Men
July-August	Thresh maize; store maize Gather thatch, wild plant foods Basketry, pottery Thatching, wood-work	Women and men (work party) Women Women Men
September-October	Plough gardens and fields Sow after first rains Hoe or harrow to loosen soil	Men assisted by women Women and men Women and men
November-December	Plough fields yet to be planted Plant short maturing varieties of maize Hoe to remove weeds	Men Men assisted by women Women

The present head (N) of the *umzi* was born there in about 1930. He recalled his father telling him that he too had been born there. His father's mother occupied the great house opposite the cattle-byre and his mother, the first of his father's three wives, occupied the house to the right. Both co-wives had houses to the left, until they moved away when separate homesteads were established for them.

As a young man, N had been a migrant worker, first in the sugar-cane plantations of Natal and then on the gold mines in the Witwatersrand. After going twice to the mines he married his first wife. He returned once more to Johannesburg and then went back to work in Natal. During this time, the mid-1950s, his father died and N returned to look after the *umzi*. Both N's grandmother and mother were still alive, and his grandmother occupied the great house, which faced north-east towards the rising sun and was directly opposite the cattle-byre. N's wife had her own *indlu* for sleeping (initially they had slept in a store-house, *unyango*) but she still cooked at the hearth of her husband's mother, which indicated her dependent status.

After N's grandmother died, the great house was used as a sleeping house for children; during the 1960s it was struck by lightning and demolished. After some years a modern rectangular house with three rooms was built in its place. The status of *indlunkulu* was transferred to the house of N's mother. This has remained the only *indlu* used for cooking (by N's wife and his sons' wives) and is still regarded as the great house (4 in Fig. 3). The spatial arrangements within this house were closely related to status and gender divisions within the household. The right-hand side of the house, as one entered, was the men's side and the left was for women. The house was also divided into back and front sections, and concentrically from the central hearth to the outer wall. In practice these divisions constituted a spatial mapping of social hierarchy worked out in terms of agnation, age and gender.

In the late 1960s N married his second wife. She occupied an *indlu* to the left of the original great house until some years later when a separate *umzi* was established for her. Initially she had slept in a store-house. That it was customary for a wife to use an *unyango* as a sleeping-house until she was given her own *indlu* draws attention to the fact that structures were not necessarily used exclusively for a single purpose, but rather that their use changed in relation to the social development of the household and with seasonal demands.

The *indlu* (1 in Fig. 3) next to the store on the west side of the *umzi* was kept by N for his own use and was not used routinely by women for daily domestic activities. It was used occasionally as a sleeping-house by an unmarried son and it was the place where the utensils used for milking and

making sour-milk were kept. This use connected the house with the cattle-byre and accounted for it being used mainly by the men of the household. After the harvest in 1984, however, this house was cleared of furniture and utensils to hold a work-party for threshing maize in which both men and women participated. This temporary conversion of N's house into a threshing-floor further illustrated the multifunctionality of structures within a homestead.

By the 1980s N's two older sons had married and brought their wives into the *umzi*. The wife of the eldest son had her own *indlu* (6 in Fig. 3) for sleeping, while the wife of the second son slept in a room in the rectangular house. Neither had their own houses for cooking or for storage, and both remained subordinate to their mother-in-law.

The eventual construction of a 'modern' three-roomed house (furnished with purchased sofa, arm-chairs and dining-suite) in the position of the former great house can possibly be regarded as according status to the 'new', the non-conventional. Expensive items of furniture and other commodities were literal indicators of wealth which could be mobilized to honour, impress or create the appropriate environment for certain kinds of social interaction. In the everyday routine of the family, the house was hardly used at all (with the exception of one bed-room) but it was here that unfamiliar visitors to the *umzi* were received and offered food.

This overview of the homestead layout over a period of approximately fifty years shows that the most conspicuous change was the demolition of the great house and the shift of this status to the house of the first wife. In the 1930s Hunter (1936) had noted that it was customary in eastern Pondoland for the position opposite the gate of the cattle-byre to be left open after the mother of the *umzi* had died. The great wife then occupied a position to the right of the original *indlunkulu* as was the case in the homestead described here. It seems, therefore, that during the development cycle of a homestead a change from the diametric opposition of cattle-byre to great house was not uncommon.

The likelihood of variation in spatial arrangement over time has cautionary implications for those interpretations of southern African archaeological sites that assume a static structuralist model of southern Bantu homesteads. The model proposed by Kuper (1982), which identifies key diametric and concentric oppositions in the spatial idiom and stresses an underlying structural order, should be understood as providing a frame of reference for social action but not as being determinant thereof. When used to infer political and economic relations from Iron Age settlement plans (Huffman 1986a), there is an underlying assumption that the spatial code has been interpreted constantly through time. It is as if the rules alone constitute the course of play, instead of the

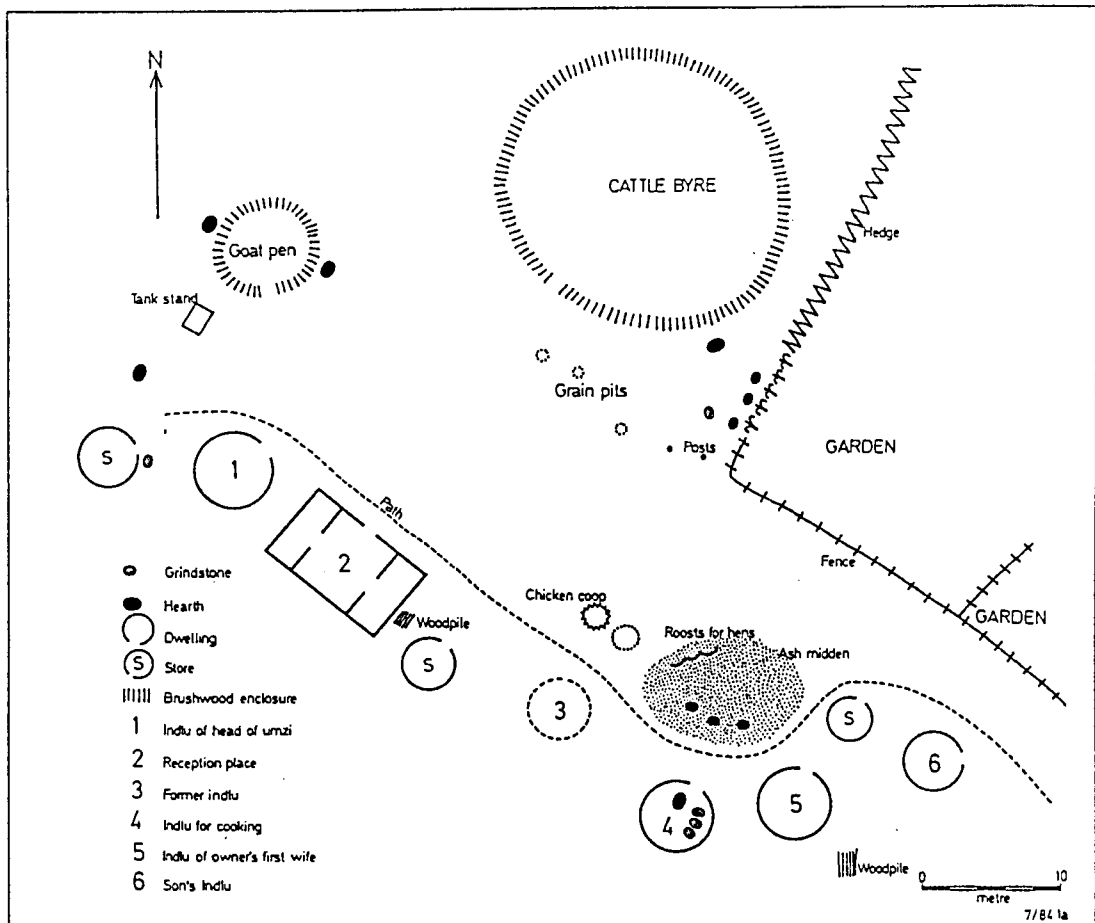


Fig. 3. Layout of homestead, showing positions of houses, stores, livestock enclosures, hearths and grinding-stones in July 1984.

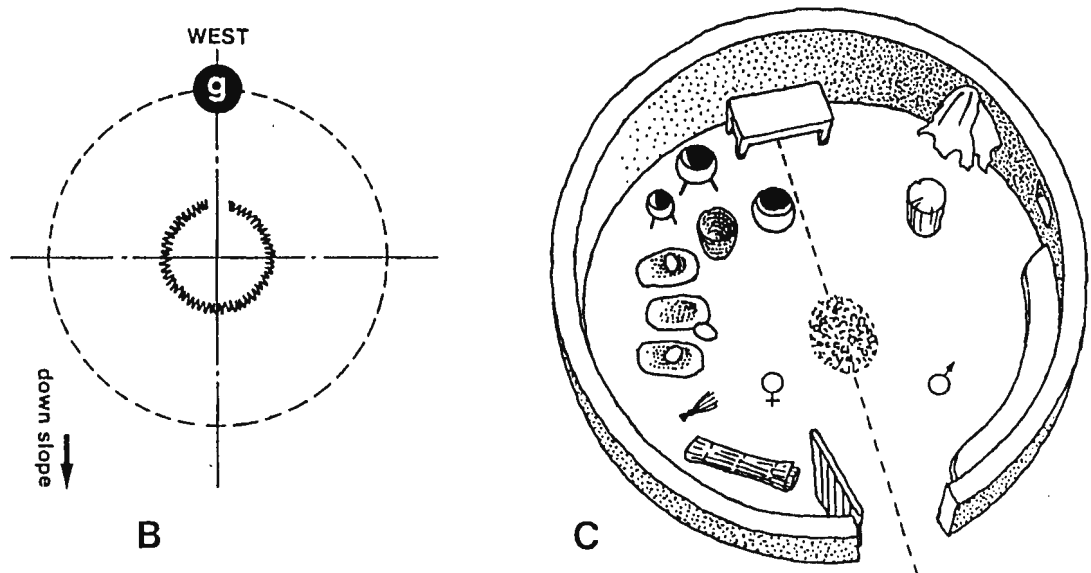
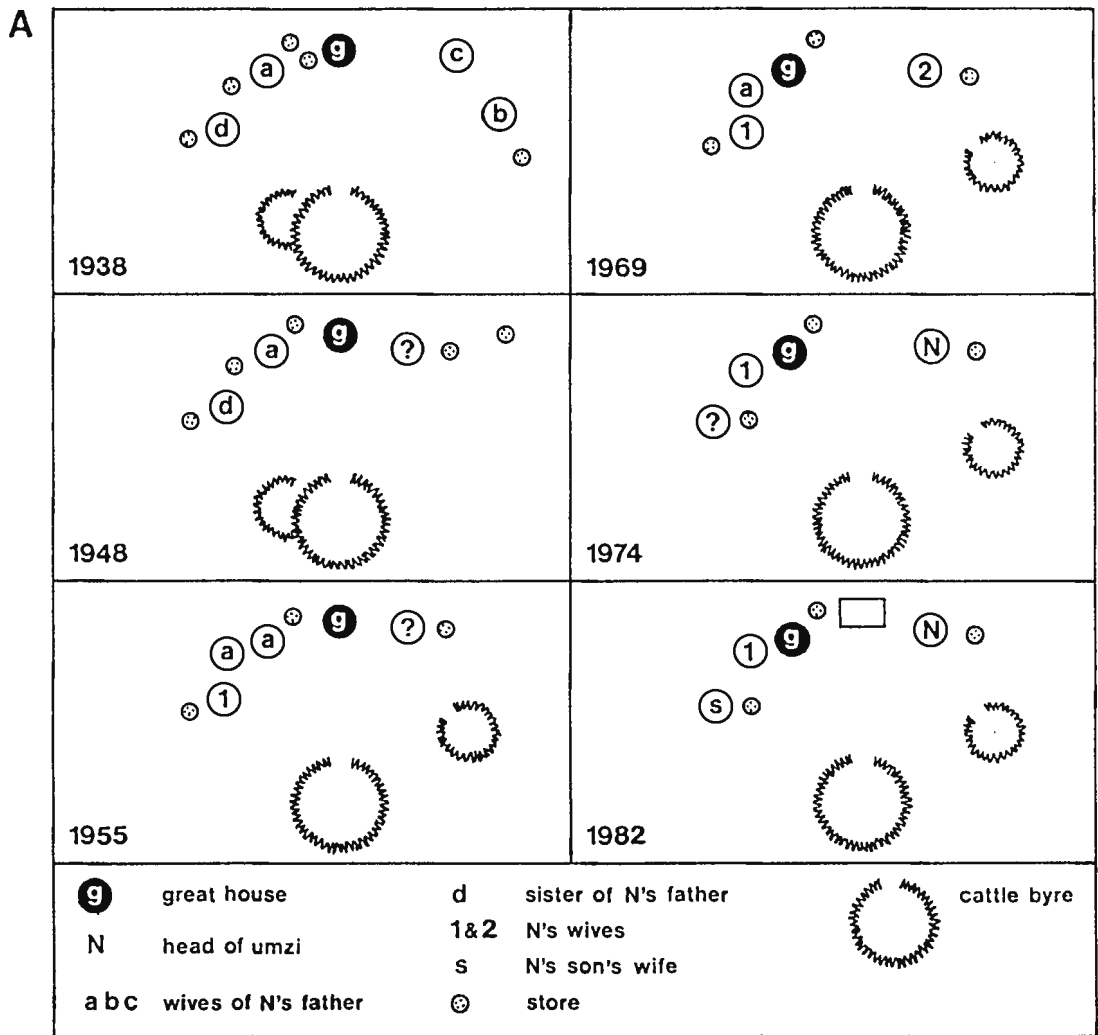


Fig. 4. A. Layout of homestead from aerial photographs, 1938, 1948, 1955, 1969, 1974, 1982 (Department of Surveys and Mapping, Cape Town). B. Spatial orientation in Nguni homesteads. (After Kuper 1982.) C. Spatial arrangement within great house (*indlu* 4 in Fig. 3).

interaction among players in relation to the rules. While it cannot be doubted that structuralist theory, which is based on the fact that cognition works by an ordering of differences, and by opposing sets of elements, has yielded important insights in anthropology, it does not accommodate human intentionality. As Bourdieu (1977) has lucidly shown, spatial patterning is, indeed, an articulation of structuring principles, in his terms the *habitus*, but people are not bound by sets of spatial rules. The problem with applying a passive structuralist model to archaeological data is that it is not sensitive to social and environmental change over time, and does not give adequate attention to the social practices that necessarily would have given the spatial order meaning. This does not negate the heuristic potential of the spatial model proposed by Kuper but it suggests that the articulation of this spatial idiom in social discourse should also be addressed.

Kuper (1982: 141, 152) himself has noted a 'wilful amount of play' in spatial variation and external projection of the underlying model and commented further that homestead layout was open to manipulation by individuals, as in the case of diviners who invert the conventional spatial oppositions for dramatic effect. However, the implications of such changes for the interpretation of the archaeological record have not been considered. In practice these variations are not simply distortions or transformations of the underlying order to be understood with reference back to a fixed model, they are important in revealing how mundane objects and their spatial arrangement may be used strategically by individuals or groups. They suggest that meaning does not simply inhere in the spatial order or in particular artefacts, but that it is related to context and continually reproduced, or transformed, through social action.

#### *Centrality of the cattle-byre*

Much attention has been drawn to the cultural significance of the cattle enclosure (*isibaya*) in the homestead layout of Nguni-speaking people (Kuper 1982; McAllister 1989; Kuckertz 1990). The *isibaya* was associated not only with cattle but with the authority of the agnatic line, past and present. It was the most important spiritual site in the homestead and, together with the great house, provided the arena for the enactment of all important ancestor rituals. The cattle-byre constituted a direct link with the spirits of former headmen who had been buried there. It was the place where the ancestors were given food when an animal had been sacrificed.

Cattle also provided men with the means of reproducing and extending the *umzi*. They provided the capability of contracting marriage alliances and of gaining clientage, and they had both jural and commercial value, in addition to their value as draught animals. The importance of cattle to people in Pondoland can be summed up in the following sayings:

*iinkomo yibank'yethu* [cattle are our savings account], and  
*iinkomo babantu* [cattle are people] (Kuckertz 1990: 191).

These two sayings give idiomatic support to the argument that cattle can be regarded as allocative resources [livestock available for distribution and convertible into other material resources] and indirectly as authoritative resources (a means of securing control over people) (Hall 1987, after Giddens 1984). Conceptualizing cattle as symbols of power, as resources to be used strategically in a range of situations, affords a different understanding of the social value of cattle from a generalized understanding of cattle as wealth and indicators of status. How the power vested in cattle is mobilized and symbolized must be related to specific social practices. In this sense, the centrality of the *isibaya* in the *umzi* under study should not be regarded as a passive continuation of tradition but as an active, strategic affirmation of agnatic authority. For more than three generations the *isibaya* had been in the same position within the *umzi*, 'binding'<sup>10</sup> the values of the long-term and the short-term in the interests of the senior men. Moreover, the productive and reproductive capacity of the homestead was directly linked to cattle through the payment of bridewealth which brought women into the *umzi*; as wives they provided domestic and agricultural labour, and as mothers they ensured the increase of the household.

The continued ritual importance of the cattle-byre was also confirmed in ongoing social practice. The placing of horns of cattle, which had been slaughtered for the ancestors, at the gate of the *isibaya* (Fig. 5), was a visible acknowledgement of the spiritual authority of the ancestral spirits. The horns could be seen as mediating between the secular and sacred realms, bridging the present and the past, as did the beasts that were offered to secure the favour of the ancestral spirits and thereby the well-being of the *umzi*. The continued practice of ritual sacrifice and the placing of horns on the byre perpetuated and reinforced the ideological values that they symbolically expressed. These values were inseparable from the exercise of patrilineal power by senior men, but they also embodied the ultimate dependency of men on the ancestors (Kuckertz 1990). Moreover, in practice the authority of the older generation did not go unchallenged by the younger men who had access to external resources through the migrant labour system. In this context the mobilization of symbolic power by the elders could be viewed as a means of negotiating and

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10. According to Giddens (1981: 19), 'there are three intersecting planes of temporality involved in every moment of social reproduction' - the immediate temporality of day to day life (*durée*), secondly the biological time-span of the life-cycle (*Dasein*) and thirdly the long-term passage of time (*longue-durée*) over which institutions are reproduced or transformed. The practices of everyday life 'bind' the temporality of the short-term to that of the long-term. This understanding of the different time horizons involved in the reproduction of social systems has important implications for the analysis of material culture.



Fig. 5. Entrance to cattle-byre, 1986, showing horns of cattle that had been offered to the ancestral spirits. (Photograph: P. Davison, South African Museum)



Fig. 6. Daughter-in-law grinding maize on left side of great-house, 1984. (Photograph: P. Davison, South African Museum)



Fig. 7. Men drinking beer in the great house, 1984. They are seated on a ledge on the right side of the entrance. (Photograph: P. Davison, South African Museum)



Fig. 8. Man grinding medicines near livestock enclosure, 1986. (Photograph: L. Hooper, South African Museum)

justifying their continued position of social control. The potentially disruptive independence of young migrants was deliberately restrained by ritualized stressing of conformity to conservative values.

The association of the cattle-byre with the agnatic line was emphasized by the exclusion of wives from the byre and from all handling of cattle. Adherence to virilocal residence after marriage and to the principle of exogamy, which prevented marriage within the clans of either parent, meant that a bride who came to live at the *umzi* of her husband's family was always from an unrelated kin group. As an outsider she was required to show extreme respect to the senior male relatives of her husband. This was expressed spatially in her having to avoid, *ukuceza*, all parts of the *umzi* which they frequented, in particular the *isibaya*, the *inkundla* and the men's side of houses. The spatial opposition between left and right within an *indlu* was not simply a gender division between women and men but a distinction between affinal kin and agnatic kin. Rules of avoidance that applied to affines did not generally apply to sisters or daughters, and as a wife had children and became more fully incorporated into her husband's family the avoidances became less strict. This reveals the ambiguity and potential social tension regarding wives - they are outsiders but nonetheless essential to the continuity and increase of the *umzi*. There is both complementarity and difference in relations of affinity.

Exclusion of wives from the cattle-byre and the *inkundla* had an important economic implication in that access to the grain-pits located there was thus also restricted. Although grain-pits were not always located within the *isibaya* or the *inkundla*, this was the preferred situation and another place was chosen only if the soil was unsuitable. The siting of the grain-pits in an area from which wives were excluded, can be seen as a strategic use of domestic space that allowed male control over the staple food resource of the *umzi* and over the products of women's labour in particular<sup>11</sup>. This point was underlined in a discussion with the headman of an *umzi* in which metal grain-tanks had replaced the grain-pits. He commented that it did not matter where the tanks were situated because as head of the household he held the key. This was a contemporary statement of patrilineal control over agricultural resources.

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11. The strategic use of space to exercise control over resources was also noted when the headman's house was temporarily converted into a threshing-floor for a work party. The locating of this activity in the headman's *indlu* subtly underlined his control over the harvest, and the hosting of the event enhanced his social status and fulfilled reciprocal obligations. See Ingold (1983) for a discussion of social appropriation of goods by means of spatial organization.

There also was a degree of tension, both social and economic, between the kin groups in a marriage contract. The transfer of bridewealth cattle (*ikhazi*) reduced the herd of the man's family and, as it was common for *ikhazi* to be paid in instalments, there was an on-going obligation for them to provide further cattle to honour the contract, and for the bride's family to reciprocate with gifts. A marriage transaction initiated a series of on-going reciprocal exchanges between wife-givers and wife-receivers. Conventionally agricultural products, grain or beer in baskets or clay vessels, were given by the wife's family and pastoral products, meat or livestock, were offered in return. In practice both the products and the utensils involved in these transactions were implicated in working out the delicate balance of social relations inherent in these exchanges, and in *reproducing* them across time and space.

*Spatial arrangement within the great house*

The spatial arrangement of artefacts in the great house (Fig. 4C) was implicated in the day to day articulation or 'living out' of kinship, gender and status relations. As previously noted, women used the left side of the *indlu* and men the right, and within this gender division there were more finely articulated spatial divisions (between back and front, centre and periphery) that related to social distinctions between affinal and agnatic kin, between old and young, and between kinsmen and unrelated visitors. These principles structured daily activities and at the same time were made meaningful through the recursive nature of these routine activities.

The male/female division in a house was most strictly observed by affines, women who had married into the *umzi*. This was explained in terms of the principle of respectful avoidance, *hlonipha*, according to which a daughter-in-law must avoid the men's side of the *indlu*, she must not look directly at her husband's senior male relatives or voice their names, she must not touch the milk calabashes or other cattle-related utensils. In houses with a hinged door, the door usually opened to the left providing a screen for those young women who were required to remain out of view of men. In former times it is likely that a wattlework screen inside the doorway would have served this purpose (Shaw & Van Warmelo 1972). In the case of an exceptional *indlu* which had the reversed gender division - men on the left as one enters and women on the right<sup>12</sup> - the owner explained that a hired builder had constructed the house with the door-hinge on the right and this necessitated a shift of orientation. Here the grinding-stones were on the right, as were all the other utensils

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12. The conventional male/female spatial division in many other parts of the Transkei is the reverse of that in Pondoland because the right/left orientation is reckoned from the doorway of the house facing outwards. The women's side is still conceptualized as being on the left (see McAllister 1989).

associated with the preparation of food and other domestic activities carried out by women. This case suggests that the observance of avoidance, related to the practice of exogamy, was an underlying organizing principle in the interior spatial division.

In most Mpondo homesteads the left side of the house was the women's side and the main area of domestic work (Fig. 6). On this side were the grinding-stones, baskets, grass mats, pots and other domestic utensils associated with the routine preparation of food. The hand-milling of grain, one of the most arduous domestic tasks, took place there. The heaviest work-load fell to the daughters-in-law who spent between one and two hours every day grinding maize and a further hour or more cooking it. Although, in this household, the number of grinding-stones was the same as the number of married women, this was not the case in other households. A particular grinding-stone was not used exclusively by one woman - there was co-operation between the women cooking in one house and the utensils were shared.

The association of grinding-stones for grain with the women's side of the *indlu* was widespread. In a survey of activity areas within 57 homesteads the grinding-stones were on the women's side (the left side, except in the above case) with only two exceptions. These two homesteads were not controlled by senior men but were headed by women, one of whom stated that as she was the head of the *umzi*, she could put her grinding-stone anywhere she wished. In choosing to place her grinding-stone on the right side she was asserting her independence by ignoring the recognized spatial idiom. In the other case the woman's husband had been working on the mines and had not returned for many years, none of his male relatives lived in the homestead and she was therefore not bound by avoidance rules. In another sense these women were also asserting their independence from the spatial convention sanctioned by the ancestors. Elsewhere in Pondoland, it has been noted that even in female-headed households the spatial pattern was maintained out of respect for the ancestors (Kuckertz 1990).

The men's side of the house was not associated with routine domestic work. A raised ledge just inside the doorway was used as a seat (Fig. 7). The fact that men sat there or on carved wooden stools but never on the floor on grass mats as the women did, can be read as a literal statement of elevated status in a social system in which men are dominant. Many of the artefacts placed on the right side of the house were linked materially with cattle - hides, thongs and utensils for meat. Spears and metal tools associated symbolically with male authority and with men's work were pushed into the thatch under the rafters. Small packets containing medicinal roots or other material were also tucked into the roof, and the stones used for pounding and grinding these medicines were found either on this side of the house or near the cattle or goat enclosures (Fig. 8).

Grinding-stones for medicines or snuff were much smaller and lighter than those used for grain, and they were used with different movements and showed a different pattern of wear. Being portable and multifunctional they tended to be found in different places at different times but they were always used in areas removed from those used for the preparation of food.

The hearth, *iziko*, inside the great house that was used daily by women for preparing grain-based meals was spatially opposed to the cattle-byre and the hearth used by men for roasting meat. In the context of ritual the great house was primarily the domain of women and the cattle-byre the sphere of men. The central position of the hearth in the great house gave it a special significance. In being neither left nor right, it was ambiguous and in a mediating position. In the performance of healing rituals this hearth was the focus of cognatic kin (wives and daughters), tempering the dominance of the male agnates who were positioned near the hearth in the cattle-byre. The *iziko* was also the spatial focus of the afflicted individual who might be either of agnatic or cognatic kin (Kuckertz 1983). The domestic hearth of the great house could thus be regarded as an integrating element within the household and a mediating pivot between kin groups.

Through use in everyday social situations utensils and their spatial arrangement in the great house acquired meaning. For example, the beer-pots usually located at the centre-back of the *indlu*, and used in the ritual offering of beer to the ancestors, became associated with the shades and with resolving social tensions through appeal to the ancestral spirits. Significantly, beer for libations was of preference brewed from sorghum, the former staple grain, rather than maize, the more recent staple. This practice symbolically linked the past with the present, as did the continued use of traditional containers. The large undecorated clay beer-pots were thus more than practical containers for beer; through their use in social interaction they became cultural mediators between members of the co-operative household group, and between the secular and the spiritual worlds. In this sense they could be regarded as playing an active part in shaping social relations as well as perceptions of individuals within the household. These perceptions were not predictable responses but related to social experience, and an ongoing process of socialization.

#### *Social experience of domestic space*

The patterned, recursive use of domestic utensils and other material items in the household routine reinforces and perpetuates social relations - it naturalizes the social divisions so that people come to regard them as customary. But the social recognition of the pattern makes it subject to possible manipulation, as in the above case of the deliberate unconventional placing of the grinding-stone. Material culture can thus be seen as a resource available for use in social strategies. 'The daily use

of material items within different contexts recreates from moment to moment the framework of meaning within which people act. . . . Artefacts, the organization of space and ritual are embedded in a means-to-end context' (Hodder 1982a: 10).

Bourdieu (1977) has argued convincingly that domestic space comes to have meaning only through social practice. This practice 'is informed by a set of conceptual schemes which are represented in the order of space, but the actual meaning given to the spatial order at any given time is dependent upon the nature of the activity concerned' (Moore 1986: 77). Thus, individuals may experience and use the spatial order in different ways. A system of spatial classification acquires meaning through social action and at the same time operates reflexively to structure and inform action.

In the Mpondo homestead described here the asymmetrical access to economic resources was spatially defined and made meaningful in the practice of everyday domestic activities as it was in the interests of the headman to perpetuate the existing order. For him the spatial order facilitated the exercise of both economic and symbolic power. For his daughters-in-law the spatial order was restrictive and subordinating. The same ordering principles, however, would have been perceived differently by a young woman in her parental home where she was not regarded as an outsider. Gender relations should not be reduced to a simple male/female opposition. 'Women are wives with respect to their husbands, but they are daughters and sisters with respect to their fathers and brothers' (Kuckertz 1990: 292). Perceptions were related to context. Although structural oppositions were identified, the conceptual scheme that organized space in the Mpondo homesteads investigated, was not a set of determinant rules. In Giddens's terms structure was 'both medium and outcome' of social practices. Meaning was invoked and experienced through practice by individuals in the course of everyday life.

The homestead described could be called 'conservative' or 'traditional'. Its layout had remained remarkably constant over a fifty-year period and many items of material culture were similar to those described in the 1930s by Hunter (1936). It was tempting to think of this as passive adherence to custom in a remote area where time had stood still, as it were. But this did not answer the question of why this and other homesteads in the area had remained traditional whereas in neighbouring districts this was not the case. It would be misguided, I suggest, to think that physical isolation accounted for their conservatism and that these households had consequently remained 'timeless' and unchanging. Even though remote, the area was by no means isolated from the rest of South Africa as confirmed by the prevalence of labour migration. In the case of the *umzi* under discussion, conservatism could not be attributed to poverty. Indeed, the converse is more likely to have been the case. I suggest that the apparent conservatism of the *umzi* was a positive and

deliberate response to current political and economic conditions, and a form of cultural resistance to the changes imposed by 'betterment' schemes. Elsewhere in the Transkei it has been shown that retention of traditional material culture and settlement pattern was an overt expression of resistance to imposed resettlement, which would have deprived people of their subsistence base (De Wet & McAllister 1985).

I would further argue that the apparent conservatism of this household represents the strategic use of a spatial idiom to provide a conventional front intended to deflect official attention from the illegal cultivation of dagga. Ironically it was probably the wealth derived from the production of cannabis that enabled them to choose to maintain a 'traditional' household. Moreover, the honouring of customary practice was strategic in that it was perceived of as pleasing the ancestors and, therefore, ensuring their continued benevolence. If one accepts that the potential for change and transformation is present 'in every moment in the constitution of social systems' (Giddens 1981: 27), continuity of practice is as much a part of time-space relations as is discontinuity. Far from being a passive retention of tradition, I suggest that the conventional use of material culture and domestic space was a case of active conservatism.

#### **Implications for archaeology and museum practice**

Some archaeologists believe that settlement organization *reflects* social organization and cosmology in a direct way, revealing 'a society's attitudes and values about such things as politics, economy, rank, status and religion . . .' (Huffman 1986b: 289). While it is true that all the non-verbal dimensions of culture incorporate information that is communicated, in practice symbolic communication through material culture cannot simply be decoded with the appropriate key. Sperber & Wilson (1986: 8) have suggested that cultural symbols do not convey precise and predictable messages but focus attention in certain directions that evoke meaning in the course of experience. Thus the meaning of material culture and spatial patterning is context related and socially constituted.

Structuralist models of spatial order represent conceptual sets of organizing principles for behaviour but they do not indicate how people make relevant use of these structural principles in changing social situations, nor do they account for individual perceptions and ambiguity (Hodder 1986). An understanding of material culture as being meaningful only in social context presents archaeologists with the problem of discerning past social practices through analysis and interpretation of material residues. For many this would seem an impossible task. But insights from recent material culture studies (Hodder 1982b; Moore 1986) show that cultural artefacts and

their spatial patterning have the potential for providing data on the ways in which artefacts are used actively in the working out of social relations, in the symbolic construction of reality. This understanding of material culture should be incorporated in the formulation of questions regarding the archaeological record and in the process of planning museum displays.

If the meaning of material culture is inseparable from its social matrix, the removal of objects from one context to another has inescapable implications for the range of meanings they convey. Objects that become museum specimens lose their *in situ* social meaning(s) but at the same time they gain a new range of meanings. This process of recontextualization will be my concern in a later chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### FIELD CASE 2: THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF MODJADJI'S COURT

#### Introduction

In this chapter I turn my attention from the role of material culture in the politics of domestic life in Mpondoland to its significance in the political realm of a chiefdom in the Transvaal Lowveld, namely that of Modjadji<sup>1</sup>, ruler by ancestral right and renowned rain-maker. In particular I focus on the material setting of the court at the capital, juridical centre of Modjadji's realm, in order to examine further the relationship between material culture and social practice. This Chapter also provides a counter-point to Chapter 6, in which I focus on Lobedu material culture as represented in the Krige Collection on display in the South African Museum.

Modjadji's subjects are a heterogeneous group of originally unrelated people, now collectively known as 'the Lobedu'<sup>2</sup> (Krige & Krige 1943). Their territory, officially demarcated as the BoLobedu district (Fig. 9), is situated in the wooded foothills of the northern extension of the Drakensberg range in the North Eastern Transvaal. In an environment formerly infested with malaria, tsetse fly and tick-borne diseases, the highlands and hillslopes provided the most suitable areas for habitation and this is where the earliest settlements were situated. The settlement pattern was one of dispersed homesteads usually occupied by an extended family and unrelated dependants. However, the capital, *mosatha*, was an aggregated settlement with clusters of houses grouped

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1. Since c. 1800 there have been five successive female chiefs all of whom have been known as Modjadji. The present ruler is Modjadji V.
  2. To some extent the notion of a unified 'Lobedu' identity is an ethnographic construct that glosses over the historical complexity of the situation on the ground. It is recognized that modern ethnic entities were created in part by outsiders such as missionaries, anthropologists, linguists and administrators (see Vail 1989). As a unit of study, therefore, 'the Lobedu' is a problematic entity that needs qualification. Where I refer to 'the Lobedu' in general, I mean those people who regard themselves as Modjadji's subjects.

There is no standard orthography for the dialect spoken in Modjadji's area - the bilabial consonant in Lobedu is frequently written in ethnographic texts as Lovedu. To avoid inconsistency, vernacular terms are spelt here as in North Sotho (the written language taught in local schools) but it should be noted that this is not always an accurate rendering of the spoken word. For example, in speech *kgôrô* would be pronounced *khôrô*.

around the central court, the *kgôrô* (Fig. 10A, B). It was, and still is, the largest settlement in the BoLobedu district, being both royal residence and political centre. In the early 1980s it had a population of well over 500 people, consisting mainly of members of the royal family, official representatives of other districts, and functionaries of the court.

Before describing the social context and material setting of the court in more detail, I will give a brief historical outline of the formation of Modjadji's chiefdom. This provides a background to the socio-political system that prevailed in the 1930s when anthropologists, E. J. Krige and J. D. Krige, undertook extended fieldwork among Modjadji's people and wrote their classic ethnographic monograph, *The Realm of a Rain-Queen* (1943). The processes that generated the social system, described in structural-functionalist terms by Krige & Krige, have continued to be effective in certain respects, although modified and reshaped in on-going social practice. It is pertinent to restate here that, following Giddens (1979: 69), I regard the structural properties of social systems as being 'the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems'. Thus social practices are regarded as recursively constituting social systems, and institutions are viewed as the 'most deeply-layered practices constitutive of social systems . . .' (Giddens 1979: 65).

By the late 1950s a number of factors, both external and internal, had considerably weakened the former bases of Modjadji's authority.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, in the 1970s certain key elements of Lobedu social organization continued to be perpetuated, albeit within much changed political and economic circumstances (Krige 1981). Indeed, it could be argued that in times of imposed change, long-established institutional practices may become important social resources to be drawn on strategically to cope with current uncertainties. A comparative study of Lobedu material culture in the 1930s (as represented in an ethnographic collection assembled by E. J. & J. D. Krige and now housed at the South African Museum) with that of the 1970s (as observed during my own fieldwork) revealed that women exerted a strong conservative influence within the society but that this was not a passive response to unchanging traditionalism (Davison 1984). Instead traditional skills were used in active, strategic responses to continually changing social and economic conditions. This affirmed that *both* continuity and change in material culture should be regarded as historically situated dynamic processes.

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3. Among the many new laws that were passed following the accession to power of the Nationalist government in 1948 was the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951. This made chiefs salaried officials of the government and thereby radically changed the basis of chiefly power (Yawitch 1982).

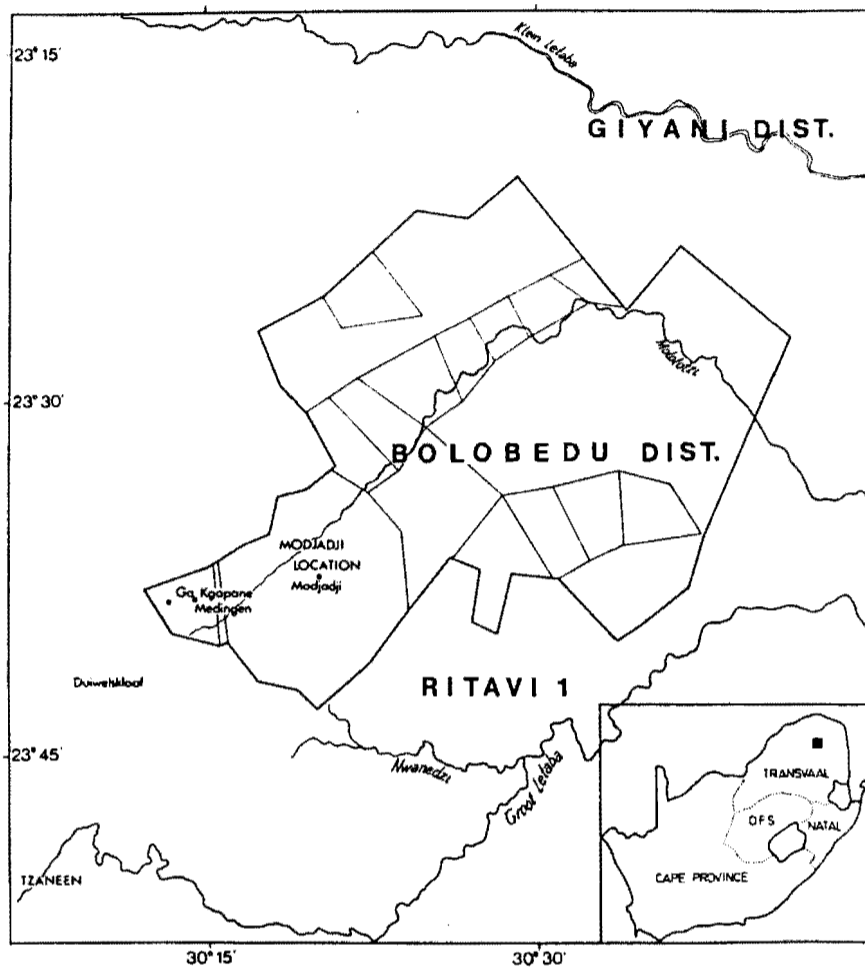


Fig. 9. Original Modjadji Location demarcated in 1892 and the BoLobedu district, Transvaal Lowveld, 1979.

### Historical outline

According to oral traditions (Krige & Krige 1943: 1-12), the history of Modjadji's realm can be traced to the disintegration of the Karanga state north of the Limpopo River during the sixteenth century. A break-away group is said to have migrated southwards, taking with them the esoteric secrets of rain-making and the sacred beads of chieftainship. During the 1600s they moved into the Lowveld and eventually established themselves as rulers over a wide area, conquering some of the previous inhabitants, who are said not to have known the use of fire, and incorporating others believed to have been distantly related to the people who were later classified as 'Sotho-speaking'. The immigrant group retained remnants of Karanga institutions but they also incorporated cultural features from the local population, and developed new mechanisms of social control and ritual power that over time became institutionalized through recurrent practice. Some of these institutional forms, especially those concerned with rain-making, have continued to be reproduced in practice.

Initially the Lobedu chiefs were men but at the end of the eighteenth century, after a period of internal disorder and a dispute over the succession between the two sons of chief Magodo, the first woman succeeded to the office of chief. She was a daughter of Magodo by a different wife from the mother of the disputing sons who had been sent into exile. This daughter became the first Modjadji, and she is said to have borne the following Modjadji through an incestuous union with her father. However, the identity of the royal consorts and genitors of successive queens has remained the secret knowledge of the most senior royal councillors.

During the first half of the nineteenth century the concept of divine chieftainship, associated with the power of rain-making, was reinforced and ritually elaborated to become a major focus of authority. The queen's perceived ability to make or withhold rain was the ultimate sanction of her power. Modjadji was also widely believed to control the spread of disease, especially smallpox, over an extensive area (Delius 1983). She is said to have received homage, tribute and supplication for rain from distant areas and powerful chiefdoms, including 'Zululand, Sekhukhuni, Ramabulana and Ngungunyane' (Kruger 1936), and she used her ritual power to consolidate and extend her secular authority. Many headmen sent a daughter to Modjadji in return for patronage, and these girls were accepted by her as *batononi*, royal 'wives' (see p. 74). By redistributing *batononi* in carefully planned political marriages an intricate web of social relations and obligations was forged between ruler and previously unrelated groups. Thus the mystical power of Modjadji as rain-maker and divine chief was by no means her only source of authority. The political implications of affinal kinship were developed and used to ensure her right to tribute in the form of human and material resources.

Existing links with Venda-speakers to the north were strengthened during the nineteenth century and Lobedu influence spread to neighbouring chiefdoms in the Lowveld, including groups now known as Narene of Letswalo and Sekororo, Thabina of Mogoboyo and Kgaga of Maake. The latter, in particular, show strong cultural affinity with the people of Modjadji - both groups practise matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, both allow marriage to be contracted between women, although a pattern of successive female chiefs did not emerge among the Kgaga, and both share a cultural emphasis on the ritualization of fertility and nature through initiation ceremonies and a drum cult (Hammond-Tooke 1981).

From about 1840 onwards, successive waves of immigrants from the coastal plains to the east entered the Lowveld as a result of the social disruption caused between 1835 and 1840 by the invasions of the Ndwandwe warrior, Shoshangane, in what is now southern Mozambique. After 1856, civil war in the Gaza kingdom compounded by attenuated raiding, drought, famine and disease drove more people westwards into the Transvaal (Harries 1983). Prior to this time small numbers of immigrants from the east had been assimilated as Modjadji's subjects but the large number of nineteenth-century immigrants were not readily absorbed or accepted. They were required to settle in the unhealthy low-lying river valleys and plains, and were regarded by Modjadji as cultural 'others', outsiders who purveyed practices that were potentially threatening to the well-being of her domain.

The cultural boundary between these people, who were later collectively referred to as 'Shangaan', 'Tsonga' or 'Shangana-Tonga' (as in Krige & Krige 1943), was marked in practice by social exclusion. Intermarriage between these immigrants and members of Modjadji's extended kin-group was not sanctioned and was rare in practice. This excluded them from the integrating network of affinal relationships that served to consolidate other diverse groups within the Lobedu polity. Of the many groups that were not related to the nuclear Lobedu, the Shangana-Tonga were considered 'the most alien' (Krige & Krige 1943: 15). The perceived 'otherness' of these people was expressed in Lobedu cultural practices in many ways. Maize, for example, which is said to have been introduced to the Lowveld by these outsiders, was not readily incorporated into Lobedu rituals. Similarly, domestic implements made by or associated with Shangaan immigrants were excluded from use in the capital<sup>4</sup>. These attitudes continued well into the twentieth century (Krige 1931:

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4. Until the 1950s the wooden mortars used for stamping maize were not allowed inside the capital, so women had to pound outside the village (see Davison 1984, fig. 52). On important ceremonial occasions when beer was brewed for the ancestors it was made from the African grains sorghum or finger millet rather than the more recent maize which was referred to in songs as 'teeth of the Tsonga'. E. J. Krige and J. D. Krige also noted in the 1930s that hens were not allowed in the capital as they had been introduced by the Shangana-Tonga.

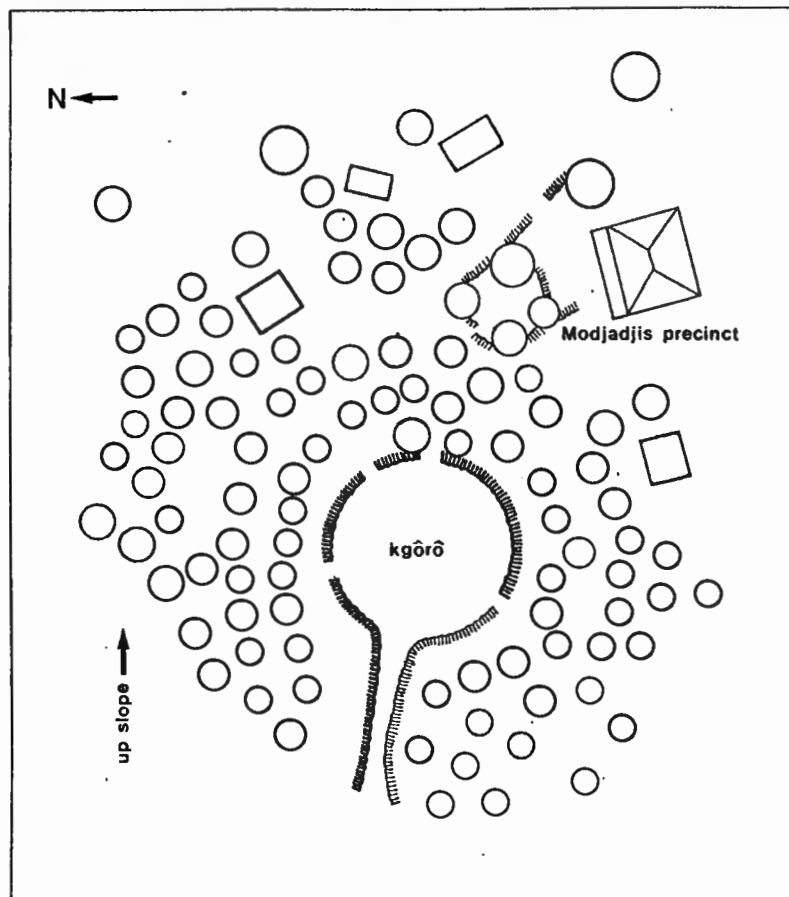


Fig. 10. A. View of Modjadji's capital, 1973. (Photograph: P. Davison, South African Museum) B. Diagram of layout of capital, from an aerial photograph, 1956. (After Mönnig 1963.)

233), although by the 1950s they were less strictly adhered to in practice.<sup>5</sup> The changing relationship between the Lobedu and the immigrant groups is salient to my argument concerning the material culture of the court. I suggest that the articulation of these social relations was manifested and perpetuated in the material setting of the court, notably in the carved poles that formed the palisade surrounding the court.

During the second half of the nineteenth century expansion of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) into Modjadji's territory initiated a period of unprecedented conflict and increasing encroachment on the land occupied by her subjects. From as early as 1855 the Volksraad imposed on chiefs in the Soutpansberg area an annual tax of five head of cattle (or five elephant tusks, or twenty-five copper rods, or twenty leopard skins) and appointed officials to exact this tax (Grimsehl 1955: 209). In 1861 Albasini, the official responsible for the Lobedu area, had cause to complain that Modjadji refused to pay the annual tax. Later that year a commando force took action against her and confiscated a large number of livestock as penalty. In the years that followed Modjadji remained intransigent and resisted further invasions of her territory (Grimsehl 1955: 205).

In 1866 the Volksraad changed the law regarding taxation so that Africans could be taxed individually and in 1876 there was a further revision according to which every male over 20 years of age was required to pay 10 shillings per year and, in addition, a hut tax of 10 shillings per year was payable. By the same ruling it was decided that 'locations' would be assigned to the more important chiefs who would be paid a salary and be required to keep law and order, and supervise the collection of taxes (Grimsehl 1955: 206). Modjadji, however, was not prepared to co-operate and her indignation was further aroused when in 1886, before the 'location' boundaries had been fixed, the Volksraad placed 'occupation farmers' on land already occupied by her subjects. The Lobedu resisted with arms and also by burning down farmers' houses and raiding cattle. In 1890 a commando force was sent to Modjadji to exact taxes, confiscate arms, and settle the unrest in the area (for details see Grimsehl 1955: 211-221).

In 1892 the boundaries of the Modjadji Location<sup>6</sup> were fixed despite strong opposition from Modjadji's councillors and headmen. The area was less than one tenth of the area that Modjadji

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5. Mantwa Modjadji, interviewed in 1981. Field records, including notes of this and other interviews cited in this chapter, are housed in the Ethnography Department, South African Museum.
  6. The demarcation of the Modjadji Location limited Modjadji's territory to approximately 17 500 morgen (179 km<sup>2</sup>). During the 1930s the area was increased to approximately 389 km<sup>2</sup> by the purchase of farms to the north and east (Krige & Krige 1943: 13), and in the 1960s trust lands to the north were included under Lobedu jurisdiction.

had previously controlled. Discontent over this dispossession of land continued and eventually led to armed confrontation in 1894 when General Joubert finally crushed Lobedu resistance and confiscated about 10 000 head of cattle in retribution (Grimsehl 1955: 236-250).

During these last unsettled decades of the nineteenth century, the Berlin Missionary Society established a station in Modjadji's area (Reuter 1905-6: 249). In 1881 the Revd F. Reuter founded the mission settlement at Medingen and started preaching among the Lobedu but with little early success. The drought of 1881-2 was attributed to the presence of the mission and Khashane, a Lobedu evangelist who aroused great suspicion, was eventually murdered in 1884. Reuter, however, persevered in his cause, established a school, trained young men in technical skills, and interceded on behalf of the Lobedu in negotiations with the Volksraad over their territorial boundaries. In 1895 Modjadji II followed the tradition of her ancestors in committing ritual suicide. By the end of her reign, her territory had been greatly reduced and the value system that sanctioned her authority was under increasing pressure. As she died childless, she was succeeded by her sister's daughter who became Modjadji III (Kuper 1982: 67-68).

Encroachment by white settlers continued in the years that followed. Natural resources were appropriated, and pressure on arable land increased. In 1910 it was reported that 'In the vicinity of Duiwelskloof and around Modjadji's location some farms are so densely populated with squatters that it is difficult for them to find sufficient land to cultivate without interfering with white settlers' (Blue Book on Native Affairs 1910: 260). Higher taxes payable in cash and an ever-increasing need for money to buy commodities forced men to become migrant labourers. By 1920 a railway line linking the Lowveld to the industrial centres of the Transvaal facilitated movement to and from the cities. By the late 1970s over 65 per cent of males were migrant labourers and absent from the reserve at any one time (Krige 1981: 151). Relatively few Lobedu women were migrants but many women commuted daily to work on farms, tea plantations and in light industry (Krige 1981: 155).

The annual recurrence of malaria in the Lowveld was one of the factors that discouraged intensive white economic development of the area until the 1950s when the large-scale use of pesticides lowered the risk of disease. Subsequently the area was developed by mining, farming and other industries, bringing new employment opportunities to the local population. But at the same time the resident black population increased following the Nationalist enforcement of influx control

measures in urban centres. The pressure on land, already too high to allow effective subsistence agriculture, increased even further<sup>7</sup>.

During the 1950s Nationalist policy was directed at emphasizing and manipulating ethnic subdivisions within the black population (Sharp 1988). Ethnic groups were defined for political purposes as discrete entities, separate cultures or even nations. The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 provided for the establishment of tribal, regional and territorial authorities for different ethnic groups, thus laying the foundation for the later 'homeland' or 'Bantustan' policy. Within this system the relative autonomy of traditional chiefs, councillors and headmen was greatly circumscribed by imposed administrative structures and appointed officials. In 1958 the BoLobedu district was incorporated in the 'North Sotho homeland' system with the establishment of a Tribal Authority and Treasury at Modjadji's capital. Shortly thereafter, a small court-house was built in the precinct of the capital to hear cases that were formerly heard in the *kgōro*. In 1972 the North Sotho homeland, known as Lebowa, was made nominally self-governing. However, Modjadji did not participate directly in the processes of government but was represented on the Lebowa Legislative Assembly by a senior kinsman.

In 1959 Modjadji III had died of natural causes, having rejected the rite of suicide followed by her predecessor more than half a century before. She was succeeded by her daughter, Modjadji IV,<sup>8</sup> who died in 1980 and was in turn succeeded by her daughter, Mokope. (Details of the succession are given in Kuper 1982: 66.) Modjadji V, the present chief, has moved away considerably from the conventional pattern of behaviour that the older generation considered appropriate and, indeed, necessary for the maintenance of social order. Most importantly, consultation between ruler and elders no longer follows time-honoured procedures.<sup>9</sup>

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7. According to the 1904-5 Report of the Transvaal Native Administration, the population of the original Modjadji Location was 14 434, giving a mean density of 81 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. In 1936 the population of the extended territory was estimated at 33 000 (Krige & Krige 1943: 13) giving a mean density of 85 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. By 1980, according to the official census for the BoLobedu district, the population had risen to 116 643, and the average density was well over 200 persons/km<sup>2</sup>. In the areas of most concentrated settlement the density is considerably higher.

8. Modjadji IV, also known as Magoma, had broken with tradition by forming a liaison with a man who was not approved of by the Lobedu royals. This gave rise to dissension, which still continues in attenuated form.

9. S. Modjadji, field interviews, 1987, 1990.

It could be argued that this shift is made apparent in the outward show of western commodities in the chief's precinct, but imported goods, western-style furniture and utensils are by no means confined to the chief's place. Furthermore since 1927 the chief's reception place at the capital has been a western-style house, although for decades it was more an indication of social status than of modern life-style. The actual living-area used by the chief remained vernacular in style - domestic courtyard surrounded by thatched houses for sleeping and cooking, and screened from the rest of the village by a palisade of pointed wooden stakes. To the present day the layout of this section of the capital remains relatively unaltered (see Fig. 10B). However, it is significant that the queen has recently commissioned the construction of a reception area and a large modern house to be built behind this old royal precinct. The explicit intention behind this plan is to allow her more freedom to lift the constraints on subjects and visitors that are still operative in relation to the *kgôrô* and the old village.<sup>10</sup> Here, indeed, material culture is being used in accord with particular interests, including taking advantage of tourism, but the outcome remains uncertain, as the project itself will inevitably change the settlement and the manner in which it is experienced by both insiders and outsiders.

#### **The material setting of the village**

The approach to the capital is along an avenue lined with debarked, pointed poles and shady trees. This avenue opens into the *kgôrô*, a circular space some 33 metres in diameter, also lined by a palisade of debarked poles. Most of these poles have pointed ends, some forked or branched, and a relatively small number are carved to represent human figures, stylized animals or utensils. The site of the capital is given ritual protection from malevolent forces by the use of special medicines (*diphaba*) applied to a series of pegs that were buried many years ago around the perimeter of the village. The medicines are renewed at intervals as deemed necessary by the chief. Buried below the threshold of the main entrance are a medicated wand of *muvilo* wood, believed to have the power to dispel evil spirits, and a small river stone, believed to neutralize malevolence, or to 'cool' any negative 'heat', that might threaten the capital. As a sign of respect it was, and still is, customary for subjects to remove their shoes before entering the capital.

The *kgôrô* was the traditional arena of the court and political meeting-place but it was not only used for this purpose. When court cases were not in progress, it might be used for recreational purposes or ceremonial gatherings, particularly those associated with the public performances of initiation schools. When not in use for communal activities of this kind, it was simply a village courtyard

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10. S. Modjadji, field interview, 1990.

where children played and men sat around fires on rough-hewn stools while discussing everyday matters. Paths from the *kgôrô* lead to the different sections of the settlement occupied in the main by families closely related to the queen. The path opposite the main entrance goes up through clusters of dwellings and domestic courtyards to the royal precinct that includes the western-style house, mentioned above, as well as a traditional domestic *mosha* and an area for brewing beer. The *mosha* comprises a domestic courtyard surrounded by four traditional cone-on-cylinder structures, used by Modjadji and her attendants for cooking and sleeping. Sharpened poles similar to those surrounding the *kgôrô* form a fence around the royal *mosha* giving this area a privacy not found elsewhere in the village.

Unlike the practice among Sotho groups on the Highveld where *kgôrô* poles were not exclusive to the courts of headmen or chiefs (Mönnig 1967), in the Lobedu area carved poles of this type were used *only* at the capital or at the court of a headman. In response to questions about this, local residents said that the poles indicated that it was the place of a chief or district head, and that poles of this type could not be used elsewhere. Thus at a glance people could distinguish places of authority from other settlements. Moreover, the practice continues - the gateway to the new part of the capital currently under construction is already flanked on both sides by rows of pointed poles. At this level of meaning, the poles of the *kgôrô* and those that marked the approach to the capital collectively constitute a visible sign of the chief's status and authority. This explicit association of *kgôrô* poles with political power has also been noted among the Venda to the north (Stayt 1931) and among other Lowveld Sotho groups. In 1905 the capital of the Kgaga at Mafalang was described by Junod as follows:

This village is set against a hill. . . . At the entrance one passes between two rows of poles which form a large gateway. They are highly polished, sharpened and some of them are surmounted by horns or capped with roughly-carved figures representing the faces of humans or of animals. They have been provided by the headmen [*les chefs de villages*] to embellish the royal residence . . . (cited in Hammond-Tooke 1981: 5).

The manner in which the *kgôrô* palisade was constructed, and the timing of its renewal, further affirmed the political nature of the site. When a new chief was installed it was considered appropriate to rebuild the *kgôrô*. A message would be sent out from the capital to all the district heads that men should bring poles to renew the *kgôrô*. The headmen organized the labour within their areas and the poles were then carried on foot to the *kgôrô* (see Krige & Krige 1943, pl. 13). According to custom, each man should contribute a pole and men who failed to comply could be fined for neglecting this duty, but in practice this seldom happened.<sup>11</sup> At other times when old,

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11. S. Modjadji, field interview, 1987.

termite-ridden poles had to be replaced or when there was to be a public celebration in the *kgôrô*, Modjadji would similarly send a message to the districts that new poles should be brought to the *kgôrô*. The men of the capital were responsible for building the palisade, using the poles assembled from Modjadji's subjects. I suggest that collectively the poles of the palisade represented the allegiance of people to ruler. Quite literally the poles of the palisade of the *kgôrô*, represented the tribute of every male subject who contributed a pole. Once constructed, the *kgôrô* palisade could be regarded as a material expression of the political incorporation and solidarity of the disparate groups that have been integrated through time under Modjadji's rule.

While the social organization and proceedings of the *kgôrô* have been fully described in the ethnographic literature (J. D. Krige 1939), relatively little attention has been paid to the material setting of the court. Although material culture was given some attention by Krige & Krige it was treated separately from social organization and was overlooked entirely in accounts of the court in process. I contend that the individual carved poles as well as the collective visual impact of the palisade constitute a neglected but important dimension of the *kgôrô* in practice. Interpreting this dimension, however, requires a historical perspective, an understanding of socio-political context and a theoretical approach to material culture that integrates social practice and its material setting. I argue that in defining the forum of court proceedings, *kgôrô* poles did not merely provide a passive setting for social action, but that *they were implicated in communicating meaning and reproducing a pattern of relationships over time*. To substantiate this a more detailed account of social context is required, as is a closer formal examination of the *kgôrô* poles. These issues are addressed in the two following sections.

#### **Social and cultural context of the court**

The generalized outline of Lobedu social organization that follows draws largely on the work of Krige & Krige (1943), later work by E. J. Krige (1964; 1974; 1975a; 1975b; 1981) and the analysis of Krige's work by Kuper (1982). The period referred to in these sources spans the 1930s through to the 1970s. As mentioned above, the *kgôrô* ceased to be the setting of the court in the 1960s and was, therefore, not used for this purpose during the course of my own fieldwork although it was still used for the public ceremonies connected with initiation schools. My account of the social context of the court focuses particularly on the marriage system as marriage was pivotal in the political system, and litigation at the court of the capital was primarily concerned with disputes arising from marriage contracts.

. . . the *raison d'être* of the *khôrô* and its law appear to be the preservation of the marriage system (Krige & Krige 1943: 141).

The most celebrated feature of Lobedu social organization relates to the role of women. Not only was the chief a woman, but women in general played significant roles in the social structure both as wives and as sisters. From a comparative perspective within southern Africa, Lobedu social structure has been characterized as a variant of the Sotho-Tswana system in which women 'enjoyed unusually high status and access to political and economic opportunity, . . .' (Kuper 1982: 76). But Kuper also suggests that, although women had access to power, especially as ritual intercessors, senior men retained power in practice.

The female rulers had the glory, but the substance of power remained with their male councillors: half-brothers, husbands, or lovers (Kuper 1982: 76).

Women could own property and hold high office but they were not involved publicly in politics and they were not part of the formal court organization. In family and other disputes settled out of court women played important roles but the *kgôrô* was the sphere of men. Although Modjadji was regarded as being the final arbiter in difficult cases, she was never present at court in person. The *kgôrô* was essentially a male arena, even though in principle Modjadji was recognized as the head of the *kgôrô* organization. The process of balancing power in a system in which men had control of the court system but in which women had pervasive informal influence, especially in their role as sisters, is central to my argument in this chapter.

As mentioned above, disputes arising from marriage contracts were the most frequently-heard court cases. Among the Lobedu, as among other Bantu-speaking people in southern Africa, a marriage was made legitimate by the transfer of cattle or other goods from the family of the groom to that of the bride. In the 1930s *munywalo* (bridewealth) usually consisted of five to eight head of cattle, a number of goats and a sum of money (J. D. Krige 1939). Because most of the cattle owned by Modjadji's people were tied up in marriage transfers, one of the few ways in which a young man could acquire the cattle required to contract a marriage was to use the cattle that his family received on the marriage of his sister. This use of her *munywalo* initiated a set of institutionalized social practices that continued throughout the lives of the 'cattle-linked' brother and sister. Having facilitated the marriage, the sister had certain rights in her brother's household (*mosha*), which had been established by means of her *munywalo*. Moreover in the new household the sister of the head of the *mosha* occupied the important position of *rakgadi*, the most appropriate person to intercede with the ancestors and offer libations to them on the behalf of the children of the *mosha*. To these children *rakgadi* was father's sister whom they must treat with great respect.

Closely related to the importance of this relationship between brother and sister was the institution of preferred marriage between a man and his mother's brother's daughter (MBD), his matrilineal cross-cousin. As noted above, frequently a man used his sister's bride-wealth cattle in order to

marry and establish a 'house' (*masha*). In later years the 'cattle-linked' sister had a claim on one of her brother's daughters as a wife for her son. From the son's point of view, this was the preferred cross-cousin marriage - he was marrying the daughter of *malume* (mother's brother). This girl would become the chief wife and bear the heir. She would also cook and draw water for her mother-in-law, assist her with domestic tasks and look after her in her old age. Although descent was patrilineal and residence after marriage viri-local, after a number of generations the preferred marriage pattern resulted in a merging of kin groups and an emphasis on bilateral kinship. In practice matrilineal kin were as important as patrilineal kin - affinity and descent were superimposed.

Should a 'cattle-linked' sister not have a son, she still had a right to a daughter of the 'house' that she had helped to found. In this case the sister might 'marry' the girl herself, using the bride-wealth of one of her own daughters, and appoint a man to father children in the name of the son that she lacked. A detailed description of 'woman-marriage' is given in Krige 1974. A woman of property could also create a 'house' by 'marrying' a younger woman and appointing a genitor to father children in the name of that house.

The relationship between Modjadji and her councillors paralleled that of a sister to her 'cattle-linked' brother in that she facilitated their marriages and was ritual leader in their households.

The relation of the Queen to her *vakololo* or councillors is of much the same pattern as that between uterine sister and brother in everyday life, the sister having ritual functions . . . while the brother is head of the family, responsible, if he is a headman, for holding court and dealing with political matters (Krige 1975b: 67-68).

Modjadji was in the powerful position of being able to intercede with the ancestors on behalf of all her subjects, and her ritual power as a rain-maker was the vital factor in validating the chieftainship. Praised as 'Transformer of the Clouds', she was regarded as the source of fertility and prosperity. Actual rain was a practical necessity but symbolically rain was also a metaphor for well-being or 'coolness', the antithesis of destructive 'heat'. Modjadji's mystical powers were perceived as an essential source of social security: 'Her rain-making powers safeguard not only agriculture from the caprices of nature, but the whole country from the attacks of its enemies' (Krige & Krige 1943: 283).

From throughout her area of influence headmen sent tribute to Modjadji to supplicate for rain, to pay homage and to solicit aid. The most notable tribute took the form of a daughter who was given to the chief as a 'wife' (*motanoni*). Modjadji received many such 'wives' who were accommodated in a special part of the capital where they were expected to remain chaste, and to serve Modjadji as

a young wife would her husband. Those who did not remain chaste were sent back to their families and eventually returned to Modjadji who would allocate them as wives to royal kinsmen, headmen or political clients. If a 'spoiled' wife were the daughter of a member of the royal family, she might be 'placed' to rule over a district in her own right. Thus an intricate network of strategic marriage alliances operated through time to extend and consolidate Modjadji's control over a wide area. The network of affinal links so formed was a significant integrating and controlling force within the social and political structure (Krige 1975b: 63-64). When Modjadji 'placed' a wife, no bride-wealth was exchanged but it was expected that in time a daughter would be returned, so ensuring continuity of the system of wife-giving and wife-receiving.

Thus, although Modjadji's power was ideologically centred on the control of rain, in practice political relations hinged largely on the complex of strategic marriage alliances that she initiated and the network of exchange relationships and obligations established in this way. It can be argued that the symbolic power of rain-making was a mask for the real political power exercised by the royal councillors through control of institutionalized marriage alliances. Social control was articulated downwards through an extensive network of political marriages.

Not only within the ruling group but throughout Lobedu social organization the political nature of marriage was particularly clear. This was linked to the pattern of preferred matrilateral cross-cousin marriage that favoured intermarriage within an existing extended kin group, the stress on affinity as well as descent, and the importance of women in the social structure, especially in their role as sisters. However, women were primarily important in domestic matters and in the sphere of ritual; in secular matters of public interest men were in control and they were responsible for the proceedings of the court.

The royal court (*kgôrô*) consisted mainly of men from the capital and neighbouring villages but any man could participate. The most important officials were the two leading councillors, drawn from competing factions within the royal family (Kuper 1982). District heads living some distance from the capital were represented at the court by intermediaries known as 'mothers'<sup>12</sup>, who would present cases and liaise with the chief councillors. All the young men of the district of the capital

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12. According to Krige & Krige (1943: 187) 'Mothers' have politico-legal and other functions . . . [they] are the messengers or ambassadors of the queen sent to settle disputes among her 'children' or to represent her, for instance, at the formal installation of a district head.' It is unclear why these intermediaries were called 'mothers'. The office could be held by a man or a woman, but in practice at court proceedings 'mothers' were men. Kuper (1982: 72) comments that the system of 'mothers' who represent the district head at court indicated the ' . . . formally subordinate status of the district head vis-a-vis the royals . . . '

acted as envoys or messengers of the court. Cases brought to the *kgôrô* concerned disputes over theft, adultery, assault and malicious harm, but by far the largest number of cases concerned disputes relating to bride-wealth (*munywalo*) exchanges. The *kgôrô* has been idealistically characterized as a forum of reconciliation and compromise, the proceedings being congenial and informal with the intention not to punish but to resolve conflict (J. D. Krige 1939: 115-124). Krige's analysis, however, was framed within a classical structural-functionalist paradigm and showed a marked tendency to underplay conflict.<sup>13</sup> Kuper's (1982: 65-76) later reading of the data on the Lobedu succession suggested that there were real struggles for power and status among competing members of royal kin groups. The court system, in which the leading councillors, drawn from the two leading factions within the royal family played pivotal roles, would have been a point of articulation for ongoing rivalries and shifting alliances.

As previously noted, the cases brought to the *kgôrô* were mainly connected with marriage contracts. Unlike the numerous domestic disputes that were settled out of court, disputes over *munywalo* had far-reaching legal consequences which had to be resolved in the public interest, in a public forum. Thus the *kgôrô* in process was largely a court to resolve conflicts arising from the network of relationships, obligations and exchanges between affinal kin. Ultimately the court was concerned with the politics of marriage. With this in mind, as well as the fact that *kgôrô* was used for other social purposes including the public dances of the boys and girls initiation schools, I return in more detail to the material setting of the *kgôrô*.

#### **The pallsade of the *kgôrô***

The majority of the poles in the palisade of the *kgôrô* had sharpened ends but some were carved to represent human or other forms (I refer to these as pole figures). Although figuratively carved poles have been referred to by a number of writers (Mönnig 1967; Schlosser 1975; Davison 1984), their physical attributes have been inadequately documented and virtually no attempt had been made to interpret their possible meaning(s). Although the case is by no means conclusive, on the basis of the data presented below, I suggest that the pole figures were unlikely to have been merely decorative, but that they reproduced in material form the social and political relationships between subjects and ruler.

Assembling data on pole figures was problematic in that during the course of fieldwork relatively few carved poles were recorded in use. Many of the carved poles that I had photographed during

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13. Gluckman (1975) has noted that J. D. Krige's analyses tended to over-emphasize the harmonious nature of Lobedu courts, and their difference from western judicial systems.

the 1970s had subsequently been removed by a private collector, and it was not possible to trace the men who had carved them. In 1987 when further fieldwork was undertaken specifically to investigate the material culture of the *kgôrô* there were no longer any figuratively carved poles *in situ* in the *kgôrô* and very few in the royal precinct. The relatively small number of pole figures recorded in the 1970s compared with photographs taken in the early 1960s and their even greater paucity in the 1980s probably relates to a number of factors important among which is the fact that the *kgôrô* was no longer the setting of the court. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the removal of carved poles by an outsider, with the approval of at least some members of the royal family, would seem to confirm a loss of social value vested in the poles.

Questions about the pole figures put to local residents of the capital met with generalized responses. According to a senior man of the royal family, those men from the sub-districts who had the necessary skills would distinguish their contribution to the *kgôrô* by carving a pole in the form of a figure. These distinctive poles were said to honour the chief. Unfortunately very little is known about particular carvers or their relationship to the ruling group. However, an elderly man who was interviewed indicated that the poles 'with a face' had been carved by 'those Shangaans'.<sup>14</sup> In view of the fact that Shangaan immigrants had long been regarded as outsiders, it was interesting both that they were represented in the palisade of the capital and that they might have carved their poles to be recognizably different rather than conforming to a perceived Lobedu style. A knowledgeable Lobedu elder confirmed that Shangaan subjects did bring poles to Modjadji's *kgôrô* and commented that some of them were distinctively carved; he also confirmed that subjects of Shangaan descent participated in Lobedu initiation schools but that intermarriage between the Shangaan and the 'true' Lobedu was very rare and not approved.<sup>15</sup> Thus, although Shangaan subjects sent tribute to Modjadji, they were excluded from the integrating mechanism of intermarriage. This suggests that the pole figures may have represented people who were political subjects but none the less socially differentiated.

In the absence of pole figures *in situ*, collections and photographs of carved poles provided useful sources of data on their formal, visual attributes. As far as could be ascertained, the most extensive assemblage of carved poles is a privately-owned collection of about 30 poles that were removed from the *kgôrô* of the capital at various times during the past 15 years. Regrettably, although it is known that the poles were from Modjadji's *kgôrô*, there is no specific information on who the

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14. H. Boke, field interviews, 1987, 1990.

15. S. Modjadji, field interview, 1987.

carvers were or on where they came from. According to the collector, particular poles were given names that might indicate a locality, a category of person, an event, an animal or object. Stylistically the pole figures vary and, as might be expected, they appear to have been made by a number of different carvers.

Having been removed from their original social and cultural context, certain pole figures that appeal to a western aesthetic sensibility have been given new meaning in a Eurocentric context of African art. In 1985 two examples from the collection mentioned above were included in the BMW sponsored exhibition, *Tributaries - a view of contemporary South African art* (Burnett 1985). Prior to this pole figures had been exhibited in the Gertrude Posel Gallery at the University of the Witwatersrand (Nettleton & Vogel 1979) and they had also been shown in Switzerland (J. Witt, pers. comm. 1987). More recently they have been included in a book on African art in southern Africa, where an attempt was made to describe pole figures in both formal and socio-cultural terms (Davison 1989).

With one notable exception, *kgôrô* poles are not represented in museum collections. The single pole in the South African Museum was collected by E. J. & J. D. Krige before 1937 when the palisade of the *kgôrô* at the capital was renewed (Fig. 11A). The top of this pole is a stylized depiction of a woman's head and upper body. It is the only pole figure from the Lobedu *kgôrô* in a public collection. An earlier figure, said to have been taken from Modjadji's capital in 1894 by General Joubert, is housed in the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum in Pretoria. It was said to have been positioned in front of the queen's private precinct at the point where subjects must show obeisance (Grimsehl 1955) but this provenance is problematic.<sup>16</sup>

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16. The figure has been said to depict Modjadji (Grimsehl 1955) but this is very unlikely considering its form. The head has a head-ring and a beard, and the stylized torso is covered with two pieces of cloth one attached at the neck, the other at the waist. The clothing suggests that the figure could represent a woman but head-rings were worn only by men. Furthermore they were never worn by Lobedu men but were a distinctive feature among Nguni-speakers, including the Tsonga-Shangaan, and were often depicted on figures carved by them. Until a recent re-examination of the figure, I had thought that the apparent head-ring might represent a hairstyle (Davison 1989) but this is not the case. The figure, therefore, remains problematic. It is very unlikely to have been positioned in front of Modjadji's enclosure where, in living memory, a figure of a woman has always been placed. It may, however have been a figure used in the context of initiation but this is supposition. Adding some light is a comment by the wife of General Joubert in her memoirs that a figure of Modjadji in the museum in Pretoria was made by Malaboch children (Rompel-Koopman 1916). While it is very unlikely that the figure, carved in hard wood, could have been made by children, the clothing may have been a later addition to the figure for the amusement of children. This might explain the contradiction of a male figure wearing clothing more appropriate to a woman.

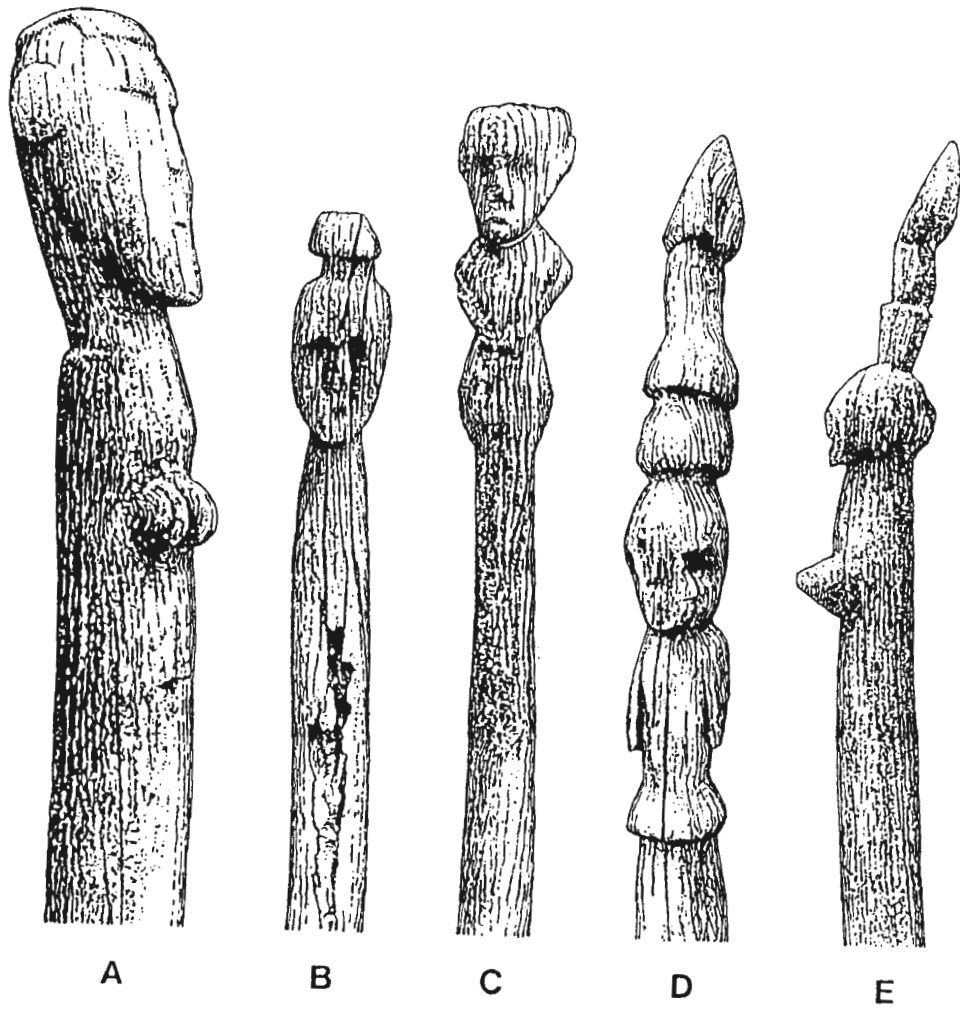


Fig. 11. Pole figures from Modjadji's *kgôrd*. A. SAM-9751, Krige Collection, 1,6 m but originally longer. B-E. collection J. Witt; heights: 1,7 m, 1,4 m, 2,0 m, 1,9 m (not drawn to scale).

Considering the paucity of specimens for study, photographs provide a valuable source of information on the material setting of the *kgôrô*. Those taken by the ethnologist, H. O. Mönnig, early in the 1960s are now in the collection of the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum, Pretoria, and are available for study. A view of the *kgôrô* (Fig. 12) shows the palisade after it had been renewed in 1959 for the installation of Modjadji IV, and prior to the removal of most of the pole figures. At this time the *kgôrô* was still the meeting place of the court, although the court was shortly to be relocated to a western-style building. The photograph shows a large number of pole figures mainly on either side of the opening in the palisade for the path that led up to the royal precinct. The other concentration of figures was around the main and side entrances to the *kgôrô*. Although local people say that pole figures were not placed exclusively at entrances, it does seem significant that they were placed where they would catch the attention of people entering the *kgôrô* and possibly work as visual reminders of social relationships.

In general pole figures conform to the elongated shape of the pole itself, the carved section extending the upright, lanceolate form. In all carved poles the style of representation is bold and direct with a minimum of detail, no suggestion of movement, and virtually no decorative finish or surface ornamentation. Many of the figures represent the upper part of a person - in some cases the presence of breasts or a characteristic hairstyle indicates that the figure represents a woman, some figures have no distinctive features of either male or female, and others appear to have a headring, which would suggest that they represent men of Nguni cultural affinity such as the 'Shangaan'. In a number of examples a head is surmounted by a utensil associated with women's work, such as a pot or a floor-beater (Fig. 11B, E). Other poles are surmounted by carvings in the form of domestic utensils, such as mortars and pestles, also used exclusively by women. In these cases there is also a possible association with 'Shangaan' immigrants who are said to have introduced these utensils to the area. Another example represented a hoe-head which possibly had added significance in that hoes were formerly associated with bride-wealth exchanges; yet another shows a figure surmounted by the pinnacle of a conical roof (Fig. 11D), and it could be argued that this pole gives visual recognition to the social relations that constitute and support a *mosha* or 'house'.

However, not all figuratively carved poles had domestic associations. By far the majority of poles were simply sharpened at the ends forming a single point, a fork, or a branched shape with pointed ends. The present *kgôrô* consists almost entirely of poles with sharpened ends, and in recent years this was the type of pole brought to the capital when sections of the palisade were renewed. By

analogy with Venda tradition<sup>17</sup> these stylized poles might have been metaphorically associated with masculinity, with piercing or protecting. Lending confirmation to this interpretation was a pole, still *in situ* in 1987, carved explicitly in the shape of a spear (Fig.13). Many of the pointed ends of forked poles are suggestive of animal horns, and these too may have evoked an association with defensive power. A noteworthy comparison is provided by contemporary Shona-speakers who refer to the monoliths at the entrance to the Western Enclosure of Great Zimbabwe as the 'horns of the king' in recognition of his power to protect his subjects (Huffman 1985: 70).

Other poles from the *kgôrô* were said to be stylized representations of crocodiles (Fig.14). Within the wide area of Modjadji's influence, crocodiles are known to have evoked a range of meanings associated with chiefly power and ritual authority. Through their association with both water and land, crocodiles were ambiguous, potentially dangerous and a source of power. The river stone in a set of divining-dice was 'a thing swallowed by a crocodile'. Symbolically the crocodile also stood for the authority of the chief, and motifs representing crocodiles recurred in the carvings on the drums that were used in rituals of fertility and chieftainship (Krige & Krige 1943; Van Warmelo 1971; Nettleton 1989). Moreover, many people living as Lobedu subjects had an attenuated totemic association with the crocodile.

In summary, the figurative poles examined or depicted in photographs fall into three groups: representations of people, animals and objects. The pole collected in the mid-1930s (SAM-9751) represents a woman with a characteristic hairstyle of the time (see Davison 1984, fig. 116). Later examples shown in Mönnig's photographs depict another typical hairstyle, that of a 'cap' of hair on the crown of the head with the surrounding area shaved. This style is worn particularly by girls in the *byale* initiation school which has been described as being closely linked to the rain cult. This cap of hair could be confused with a head-ring and a number of the poles depicted in photographs are ambiguous in this regard.

Of 22 carved poles in the private collection mentioned above, 14 represent the upper part of the human form, two represent crocodiles and the remaining six stylized domestic utensils or other forms. Of the 14 human figures, six depict women (based on the presence of breasts or a utensil associated with women), and three appear to depict men with headrings; the others lack

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17. Among the Venda poles of this type have a clear association with authority and with male potency (Van der Waal 1977: 85).



Fig. 12. Poles at one of the entrances to the *kgôrô*, c. 1960.  
(Photograph: H. O. Mönnig)

distinguishing features. One of the stylized forms was labelled *mogwera*, a male initiate; another *moruti*, teacher, which also suggests a connection with initiation school. Others were called after the names of places or people (J. Witt, pers. comm. 1987). While the paucity of data is lamentable, the fact that the poles were given names is in itself an indication that these individual carved poles were intended to evoke particular associations.

While the number of figuratively carved poles was very small in relation to the hundreds of simply pointed poles, both pointed and figurative poles must be taken into account when attempting to interpret the material setting of the *kgôrô* in relation to social practice.

#### **Poles and practice: an interpretation**

Within the capital only two areas were spatially defined by a palisade of poles, the *kgôrô* and royal precinct. Both *kgôrô* and royal living precinct are centres of power and both are visually demarcated by palisades but there is a counterbalance between them: the *kgôrô*, spatially in the front section of the settlement, is the realm of men, it is public and concerned with political matters; the royal *mosha*, spatially at the back, is the domain of women, it is private and concerned with domestic and ritual matters. This spatial counterpoint between the public and ritual spheres is echoed at different levels of social practice, and, indeed, in the delicate balance of power between a woman chief whose authority is believed to be divinely sanctioned and her male relatives who in effect hold secular power (Kuper 1982).

For spatial patterning to carry meaning, it is necessary to consider the way people actually used particular areas at particular times. As Moore (1986: 84) has noted:

. . . meaning does not inhere in the organisation of space but must be invoked . . . this invocation is the result of the practical activity of social actors in determinate social and historical relations.

It follows that the same spatial order can be interpreted or read in a number of different ways, depending on the actions and perceptions of individuals at different times, and that both *kgôrô* and royal *mosha* might be amenable to a number of interpretations from different perspectives. It would be simplistic, however, to regard the central position of the *kgôrô* in the village as merely reflecting its central importance in public life. It must be interpreted in terms of the social relationships that invested it with meaning at a particular time. The same is true for understanding the significance of the *kgôrô* poles. Having said this, there is no doubt that *kgôrô* poles were associated explicitly with political authority in the past, and that this association continues to the present day. This is shown by the fact that the modern gateway to the new section of the capital has

recently been flanked by poles brought there by the headmen of the districts under Modjadji's control. All people living in the area recognize that a palisade of this kind demarcates a spatial boundary and signals a site of political authority. The present Modjadji is thus mobilizing material symbols, which have accrued meaning through their association with past practice, in her own contemporary interests.

Understanding the figuratively carved poles that are no longer found in use is more problematic. It is acknowledged that relatively little is known about the significance and possible meaning of the pole figures but it is unlikely that they were merely decorative. We know that all poles were associated with political hierarchy in that they occurred only at the capital or the court of a headman, and that the figuratively carved poles were made by individual carvers as a distinctive and noticeable contribution to the capital. It is pertinent to note that men from the capital did not contribute poles but that all other men who owed allegiance to Modjadji were required to do so. Thus pole-bringers literally displayed their fealty to the chief. But this does not explain the form of the poles nor does it relate them to the changing social context of the *kgòrò* in action.

In fieldwork interviews aimed at gaining insight into local perceptions and understanding of figuratively carved *kgòrò* poles, it became evident that such meaning or symbolic associations that might have been experienced in particular social situations could not readily be articulated or explained. Considering the subliminal nature of much symbolic communication and the fact that meaning is perceived in context, this is not surprising. It follows, however, that the interpretations offered here were not explicitly confirmed by the Lobedu people themselves. As one of many material representations it is likely that *kgòrò* poles formed part of a complex communication system that resonated on a number of levels, and allowed a range of interpretations to be reworked over time. However, if my thesis holds, the poles cannot be understood except in social context, and in the absence of field observation, this can only be inferred from the existing ethnographic records of Lobedu social organization.

As noted above, the *kgòrò* was primarily concerned with the interlocking network of marriage contracts and exchanges that operated as an integrating mechanism within the Lobedu polity. Those who brought tribute to Modjadji in the form of 'wives' also at various times brought poles to the *kgòrò*. It is suggested that the poles surrounding the court served as visual reminders of ongoing relationships and obligations between wife-givers and wife-receivers, and between subjects and ruler. Over time the pole figures of the capital would come to symbolize the relationship of district headmen to the royal line, and the exchange of tribute and particularly women, in return for the patronage of the state. This would help to explain the relatively large number of poles representing women or objects associated with women's work.



Fig. 13. Palisade with pole representing a spear, Modjadji's precinct, 1987.  
(Photograph: P. Davison, South African Museum)

It can also be argued that although the court proceedings were exclusive to men, the importance of women in the social organization was acknowledged by the presence in the surrounding palisade of figures that depict women and the domestic domain. The *kgôrô*, however, was not only used for the court but also as an arena for the ceremonial singing and dancing of the *byale/bogwera* initiation schools. These were essentially celebrations of fertility associated with the rain cult and the divine authority of the queen (Krige & Krige 1943: 139). It is possible that in this context the figures representing women acknowledged the role of women in procreation and their importance in ritual intercession, while the figures named initiate and teacher referred explicitly to particular initiation schools.

The pole figures representing men require a different interpretation. The presence of headrings on some of these figures links them with Nguni tradition and suggests that they were made by Tsonga-Shangaan immigrants to the Lobedu area. Furthermore, stylistically many of the poles show marked similarity to Tsonga-Shangaan carving. The treatment of facial features and ears is very similar to that of Tsonga figures described by Nettleton (1988). Considering the history of the incorporation of Shangaan immigrants into Modjadji's territory, it is plausible that inclusion of these poles at the capital represented an on-going process of political negotiation between Modjadji and these outsiders. The very distinctiveness of the poles marked them as being 'other', but at the same time as making a visual statement of cultural difference their distinctive form drew attention to their cause as honourable subjects. Elderly men commented that the carved poles 'from Shangaans' were a way of honouring the chief. It is interesting that although intermarriage between Lobedu and Shangaan was strongly disapproved, Modjadji did accept 'wives' in tribute from Shangaan subjects (Krige & Krige 1943). These women, however, were never allocated as real wives to Lobedu men but retained the minor status of a daughter. Even today a social distinction between the Lobedu and people whom they generally term 'Shangaan' is perpetuated, although a distinction is also made between those people originally of Shangaan descent who have been living in Modjadji's territory as subjects for generations and have gradually become accepted, and those who are regarded as complete outsiders and are not accepted.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Nettleton & Vogel 1979), by analogy with the Tsonga custom in which ritual figures were used as house and field guardians, that the pole figures of the *kgôrô* may have been guardian figures. No ethnographic evidence, however, was found to support this. The protection of the capital was not effected by guardian figures and there is no known Lobedu tradition of ancestral power figures which might lend credibility to the suggestion that the pole figures were in themselves invested with spiritual potency.

In short it is suggested that those who owed political allegiance to Modjadji were materially represented in the *kgôrô* by the poles they were required to contribute, and that the regular renewal of the poles was related to ongoing political and social relationships. It was only in the context of these relationships and of particular events that the material elements of the *kgôrô* would have communicated meaning. Important among these relationships was the political negotiation with outsiders who were culturally alien but dependent on Modjadji for patronage in the form of land, rain and well-being. Even more important was the political, strategic nature of the preferred pattern of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage that the *kgôrô* system served to regulate and uphold. This in turn underlined the subtle balance of power between wife-givers and wife-receivers, and between men and women, especially in their role as sisters.

Changes in economic conditions over the past thirty years have altered the dependency of brothers on their cattle-linked sisters, and there has been a concomitant shift from the pattern of cross-cousin marriage. Although this remains the preferred form of marriage among conservatives, by the late 1970s its incidence had decreased by more than half (Krige 1981). Changes in external political conditions and the establishment of a Tribal Authority at the capital resulted in the termination of the traditional court system. The relocation in the 1960s of the court from the *kgôrô* to a modern court-house was not only a spatial shift but also brought with it changes in the administration of the legal procedures and in the relations of power. It is not unexpected that in these circumstances there would have been a decline of local interest in the material culture associated with the *kgôrô*.

Initiates do still dance at the capital but since the installation of Modjadji V in 1982 there seems to have been a further erosion of the spiritual values that gave the initiation schools meaning. It is of interest that Krige (1980: vii) notes that in 1974 an initiation school was held explicitly 'to reinforce the loyalty of people to their queen at a time when a relentless struggle for power was going on in high places . . .' and also so that the substantial initiation fees would accrue to the queen and not to the Tribal Authority. Clearly cultural resources were being drawn on strategically to serve particular interests in the face of a struggle for authority. The fact that the carving of pole figures did not form part of this strategy indicates that they were not relevant in this particular context.

While many questions remain unanswered, it is suggested that the carved poles of the *kgôrô* were constitutive of social and political relationships between ruler and subjects, and that they were actively implicated in the perpetuation of these relationships while the *kgôrô* was in use. The meaning of the poles was inseparable from the social and political context of the *kgôrô* and from the

value system that invested the activities of the *kgôrô* with significance. The fact that most of the carved poles are now in the hands of private collectors indicates a loss of their former local significance and symbolic value for both ruler and subjects. However, it also draws attention to the commodity value that pole figures have acquired in a continuing renegotiation of their value and meaning in different social contexts. The process of recontextualization is my central concern in the following Chapter, which introduces the museum as a particular context in which material culture communicates meaning.

## CHAPTER 5

### AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MUSEUM PRACTICE

*'An object in a museum case', he wrote, 'must suffer the de-natured existence of an animal in the zoo. In any museum the object dies - of suffocation and the public gaze - whereas private ownership confers on the owner the right and the need to touch. . . . The collector's enemy is the museum curator. Ideally, museums should be looted every fifty years, and their collections returned to circulation . . .'* (From *Utz* by Bruce Chatwin 1988)

#### **Introduction**

The preceding two chapters were concerned with material culture in the matrix of social life. The case studies, although quite different from each other, both drew attention to the active role of material culture in reproducing social relationships, and to the importance of taking social context into account when attempting to interpret material culture. In this and the following three chapters my attention moves to another context in which material culture is made meaningful, that of museum practice. I reconsider the time-honoured activities that constitute museum practice - collection, classification and exhibition - as forms of professional practice, situated in social context, and open to critical evaluation and change.

Firstly I present a general view of museum discourse in order to clarify my assumptions and provide a conceptual context for the case studies that follow. I also examine, with particular reference to the South African Museum (SAM), the shifting classificatory status of ethnographic collections. The two chapters thereafter investigate specific representations of cultural Others at the Museum. They focus on artefacts removed from the context of everyday use to that of a museum, which is in itself both complex cultural artefact and a setting for communication through collected, interpreted artefacts. Following on from the case studies, the reception or 'reading' of museum representations is discussed in Chapter 8. The key concept throughout is recontextualization which I regard as operating at a physical level when objects are relocated, and at a cognitive level when they are perceived subjectively by individual viewers.

A museum is both a context in itself, in which collected objects are preserved, classified and exhibited, and part of a wider social and historical context within which it is given meaning as an institution in society (Vergo 1989; MacDonald 1990). Kaspar Utz, in Chatwin's story, draws

attention to the alienation of objects once they become museum specimens, to their removal from contexts in which they would have been animated by human contact or, as in Utz's case, by the touch of the connoisseur. However, there is a counter argument to this position that museums are in themselves social institutions that hold collections in trust for the benefit of all. Private ownership of collections, it could be argued, is in itself a rarified and elitist pursuit. Museums, on the other hand, are for everyone. Both of these positions need qualification and elaboration. Modern museums, although open to all, retain elements of elitism that can be traced to their historical connection with private collections.

In 1594 Francis Bacon enumerated the following among the requirements of a learned person - a perfect library, a garden, provision for rare animals, birds and fish 'so you may have in small compass a model of the universal made private', and also a 'goodly, huge cabinet wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form or motion . . . may be kept; shall be sorted and included' (Bacon cited in Impey & MacGregor 1985: 1). Some four centuries later, although within a much changed social and intellectual context, 'keeping and sorting' remain fundamental to museum practice. So, too, does the association of museums with learning and the authority of specialized knowledge. Modern museums are also associated with 'culture' both in the inclusive anthropological sense and in the exclusive, Western sense of cultivated refinement. In practice, 'Museums form the logical point of transition or articulation between the two major senses of "culture" . . .' (Wagner 1977: 501). With regard to collected artefacts, this articulation is accompanied by a spatial recontextualization and a shift in value that occurs when objects become museum pieces - they are elevated by the museum context from low 'culture' to high 'Culture'. However, from another perspective this elevation is also an alienation of the object from the vitalizing field of social interaction.

#### *Museums as cultural artefacts*

Dylan Thomas's remark that the museum in his home town, 'should be put in a museum', is an apt reminder of the fact that museums in themselves are composite artefacts and that they tend to be chronically prone to historical inertia or paradigm lag. By the very nature of their commitment to the collection and preservation of things historical or endangered museums are conservative. But having said this, it should be noted that there is no necessary correlation between this conservatism and the manner in which collections are used or exhibited. As cultural resources, collections can be interpreted and exhibited in many different ways. The use of sophisticated display techniques is no guarantee that the content of a display will have current interest; conversely, older displays may assume contemporary relevance as evidence of past practice.

Many long-established museums have 'out-dated' displays that preserve both early museum technology and former conceptual approaches to collecting. These displays, like all displays, are artefacts of museum practice and, as such, can provide insight not only into the material on show but also into the ideas that informed the arrangement and content of the displays.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to deconstruct the conceptual and ideological frameworks of these displays to reveal how knowledge was generated and communicated within them, and thus gain a more reflexive understanding of museum discourse and its changes over time. Recently this possibility has been taken seriously by a number of anthropologists and museologists with the result that museum representations have become the subject [pretext] of critical scrutiny from a number of different perspectives including those of literary theory, semiotics, post-structuralism and critical anthropology (Halpin 1983; Leone 1983; Ames 1986; Eco 1986; Clifford 1988; Shanks & Tilley 1987). As James Clifford (1985: 245) has advocated:

It is important to resist the tendency of collections to be self-sufficient, to suppress their own historical process of production. The history of the collecting and recontextualization of non-Western objects is now, ideally, a part of any exhibition.

He went on to comment that early displays were of interest in that they preserved a particular moment in the history of collecting within the discipline concerned. In principle, these remarks are pertinent to all museum displays. In accord with Clifford, I suggest that making visitors more aware of the historical processes that gave rise to collections and exhibitions would enhance their understanding of museum practice and stimulate a more active, creative response to displays. In particular I am concerned here with large, well-established institutions dating back to the last century. I assume that *all* museums, including natural history museums, are cultural artefacts, products of social forces, operating within a social context and serving social ends. In situations of flux or transformation, as in contemporary South Africa, museums face the predicament of operating within and responding to rapidly changing conditions, while at the same time being institutionally prone to conservatism and committed to conventions that have their roots in the past.

Within the international museum profession, however, a shift away from the conventional image of museums has been taking place. Museums are no longer viewed as didactic institutions but as a 'potent social metaphor and as a means whereby societies represent their own history and that of

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1. As long ago as 1904 David Murray, writing on the history of museums, commented that the seemingly extraordinary exhibits and arrangements in old museums have much to tell the historian of science, and he noted that it had not yet occurred to any museum to display the history of the concept of a museum.

other cultures' (Lumley 1988: 2). Many successful museums in Europe see their brief as 'changing attitudes' rather than educating the public (The Times Review, 3 March 1990). There is a growing recognition that through the processes of museum practice social values are encapsulated and the vicissitudes of prevailing trends are charted in three-dimensional, visual form. At the same time there is greater acknowledgement of the political implications of museum practice (Ames 1986; Morphy 1986; Coombes 1988). In presenting history, museums imbue the past with present intent, they remake the past and re-present it in another context (Lowenthal 1985). This is an unavoidable process, awareness of which should be built into museum practice. Although yet to have a major impact on museum practice in South Africa, these issues have been debated at a number of recent conferences, and remain high on the agenda within the Southern African Museums Association (SAMA).<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note the ripple effect as reflexive awareness and various forms of deconstruction theory have spread from discipline to discipline and from centre to periphery. Ideas that were current in Britain in the early and mid-1980s have had a delayed reception within the South African museum fraternity, and there is a further delay in the shift from theory to practice by which time the ideas themselves may have lost currency where they originated.<sup>3</sup>

In all visual discourse, including that of museum displays, the meaning of what is communicated is generated by an interaction between what is viewed and how it is received. I assume that meaning for viewers resides in how the content of a display is subjectively read and interpreted. In this sense, viewers produce meaning for themselves in terms of their own preconceptions and existing knowledge. As in reading literary texts, all 'readers' of museum displays are socially and historically positioned. But it must be acknowledged that in museum discourse the producers and receivers of interpreted knowledge are seldom of equal status - on the one hand there are specialists, legitimized by their being part of an authoritative institution, and on the other hand members of the general public coming from a wide range of educational and social backgrounds. Access to cultural resources and knowledge is not evenly distributed and the 'dialogue' in museum discourse tends to be heavily weighted in favour of the professional view. As Eagleton (1983: 73) remarks, an

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2. The politics of representation formed part of the proceedings at the SAMA Conference in 1987; the South African Conference on the Conservation of Culture in 1988; the SAMA History Conference in 1990, and the Wits History Workshop in 1990. The agenda for the SAMA 91 Conference directly addresses the political context of museum practice. The work presented in this thesis can also be located within this context.
  3. This point was made by Brian Durrans in correspondence about the 'Representations' symposium at the British Museum in 1986 (SAM E6, Durrans to Davison, 25/9/86). In more general terms, Ardener (1989: 194) has noted that disciplines are often 'out-of-phase' with regard to theoretical movements. For example, structuralist archaeology in the 1980s was using anthropological theory of the 1960s and 1970s.

idealized, hermeneutic model of history as a 'living dialogue between past, present and future ...' is often 'a monologue by the powerful to the powerless'. Nonetheless, despite the asymmetry of the relation between the museum profession and the visiting public, there is no certainty that the professional message will be received as intended.

Thus two strands, seemingly in tension with each other, are implicated in museum discourse. One is that a museum is an authoritative institution in which knowledge is generated and meaning created, controlled and communicated through exhibition and education programmes. This gives museums both ethical responsibilities and power.<sup>4</sup> The other is that despite the authority of museums, viewers' responses are essentially subjective and unpredictable. Viewers bring their own meanings to displays and *ambiguity* characterizes the museum experience at a number of different levels. For the present discussion these two strands will be unravelled and treated separately as the contexts of production and reception.

### **The context of production**

#### *The spatial authority of museums*

Although the earliest public museums and the related emergence of the museum profession date to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the nucleus of these museums in Europe and Britain was usually a much older private collection or 'cabinet of natural and artificial curiosities'. It is well documented that these privately-owned cabinets had frequently been the property of royalty, nobility, the rich or the well-educated (Chubb 1925; Stocking 1985; Impey & MacGregor 1985; Ames 1986; Hooper-Greenhill 1989). Remnants of cultural elitism, traceable back to these origins, have continued in subtle ways to effect the public image of museums. However, the modern museum movement developed within a very different epistemological context from the Renaissance cabinets and *Wunderkammern*. In Foucault's (1970) terms there was a shift from knowing through the interpretation of resemblances, relations of similitude and analogy, to knowing through the imposition of classificatory terminology and taxonomic order (see Chapter 1). Moreover, there was a concomitant shift from private, individualistic collecting of unique items to systematic collecting by institutions that aimed to educate the general public.

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4. This was underlined at the 1989 Conference in the Hague of the International Council of Museums. The conference theme, 'Museums: Generators of Culture', acknowledged the powerful role that museums play in determining and perpetuating what is perceived as the cultural identity and heritage of a nation. See Tomaselli & Ramgobin (1988) for a critical evaluation of ideology and museums in the southern African context.

However, even when 'noble cabinets' and other private collections were taken over by the state to be made more widely accessible and used for educational purposes, the content of collections continued to be shaped by an educated elite, and museums were controlled by members of the upper-classes whose values they both expressed and perpetuated. Furthermore, new specialized methods of administering and curating collections created a split 'between producers and consumers of knowledge, expert and layman', and power relations within museum discourse were 'skewed to privilege the "work" of the museum, the production of knowledge through the compilation of catalogues, inventories and installations' (Hooper-Greenhill 1989: 71). Although from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, in Britain and its colonies, museums were promoted as institutions for the edification and enjoyment of the general public, their central message was to confirm and give concrete expression to the established social order (Bennett 1988; Coombes 1988; Merriman 1989b).

In this respect, at least from 1855 onwards, the South African Museum was not exceptional. The Museum was established by Lord Charles Somerset in 1825 and Andrew Smith, an Army Surgeon and graduate of Edinburgh University, was appointed as 'Superintendent'. By 1830, however, Smith's expeditions into the interior and his other duties had resulted in the Museum being neglected and closed to the public (Summers 1975). In 1854, the Governor of the Cape Colony, Sir George Grey, invited Edgar Layard, a naturalist who had also read Law, to take up a Civil Service post at the Cape with a view to his becoming Curator of the SAM. In 1855 the Museum was reconstituted under a Board of Trustees, two of whom were nominated by the Governor and the third elected by subscribers. Layard was appointed the first Curator, and the Museum was 'open for the reception of objects illustrative of the Arts, Manufactures, Natural History, and Productions of South Africa (Government Gazette 1855). According to the South African Museum Act of 1857, the Museum was legally incorporated in the state and, thereafter, all three Trustees were appointed by the Governor. Although the aim of the Museum was for the 'practical information of the mercantile community, the instruction of youth and the amusement of all . . .' (Government Gazette 1855), the shaping of Museum policy was controlled by Government appointees. In later years, the size and composition of the Board changed to include members from the Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch, and the City Council but Government nominees have always comprised a majority on the Board. While the Trustees have not had occasion to intervene in the planning of displays, it has been Museum policy to avoid confronting political issues and to emphasize scientific neutrality.

Scientific discourse, however, is inextricably linked to the exercise of power through disciplinary knowledge (Foucault 1970), and museums provide one of the institutional channels through which

the knowledge engendered by scientific disciplines can be disseminated to the general public. The spatial layout within museums tends to be linked to the classificatory constructs that underpin scientific discourse. As Summers (1975: 43) comments on the early layout of the SAM:

The rigid classificatory arrangement described by Layard was usual in all museums of the period, and this tradition of 'Order' was carried on by Sclater when he arranged the present building in 1897 . . . . It was indeed the outcome of the systematisation of science, started by Cuvier and Linnaeus, which was so closely in accord with nineteenth-century scientific thought.

Thus spatial arrangements within the Museum enunciated the prevailing paradigm of knowledge,<sup>5</sup> and in so doing the museum affirmed its standing as a scientific and educational institution. If, as Bourdieu (1984) suggests, one of the strategies used to accrue 'symbolic capital' is to claim ideological disinterest, museums would gain elevated status by proclaiming, as they do, the neutrality of scientific discourse. Knowledge generated in museums would thus be given the credibility of 'truth' which, as understood by Foucault (cited in Rabinow 1984: 74), 'is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to the effects of power which it induces and which extends it.'

Although museums are open to all,<sup>6</sup> in practice many museums retain elitist connotations through their association with professionalism, rationalism, and their control and patronage by the well-educated upper-classes. Among the general public, museums are associated with education as well as discernment, 'one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production' (Bourdieu 1980: 225). Results of a survey in Britain undertaken by Merriman (1989c: 15) confirmed that visiting museums is in part 'an act of cultural affiliation expressive of membership of a certain cultivated group'. This implies that museums, like other cultural artefacts in society, are used strategically in social differentiation.

Exclusiveness is particularly prevalent in the patronage of art museums where the principle of connoisseurship still tends to pertain, but elitism also operates, if less obviously, in social history and ethnographic displays that tend to over-simplify or sentimentalize the culture of subordinate social groups (Bennett 1988). In order to counter the elitism of museums, since the late 1960s the idea of

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5. Peponis & Hedin (1982: 23), using the insights of Foucault, argue that spatial organization in museums relates not so much to the content of knowledge as to the underlying rules that govern the generation of knowledge.
  6. In South Africa certain museums, such as the one at the Voortrekker Monument, restricted entrance for black visitors to one afternoon per week. However, the SAM has always been open to all races without restriction.

museums as community centres has gained currency. A number of American museum professionals concerned with neighbourhood museums have suggested that the very word 'museum' conjures up negative associations of dry scholasticism, and further that conventional museums mean very little to the under-privileged sectors of society (Robbins 1971). In similar vein, Ames (1986) has commented that the problem with museums is that being called museums predetermines their mandate. But as Handler (1988: 1036) responded '... they *are* museums and thus cannot surmount, or even fully recognize, the epistemological and political assumptions that influence museums and their relationship to others.'

Neighbourhood museums in America, serving under-privileged communities, usually in predominantly black areas, were pioneered explicitly in response to the perceived irrelevance of existing institutions to these communities. In South Africa, where the problem of socio-economic and educational deprivation exists on a proportionately larger scale, the museum profession has only recently started to consider the implications for museum practice. The 1987 SAMA Conference in Pietermaritzburg was a watershed in this regard. Racial discrimination was confronted directly by a number of speakers, including the late John Kinard of the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum, Washington D.C., and the meeting was forced to recognize that museums are inextricably involved in cultural politics. However, despite increased awareness of the problem, the critical issue of democratizing museum practice has not yet been seriously addressed. The time-honoured, conventional image of museums still tends to prevail, perpetuated emblematically in the classical portico of the internationally recognized museum logo.<sup>7</sup>

The description of museums as secular temples (Cameron 1971), in which certain values as well as valuable collections are enshrined and celebrated, has proved a fertile analogy. The association of museums with temple, cathedral or palace is often made explicit in the imposing architecture of museum buildings, especially those dating to the last century or earlier (Figs 15, 17). These buildings evoke a combination of aesthetic and spiritual authority, implicitly conferring credibility on their collections and on the knowledge conveyed within them. This metaphorical consecration occurs by association and extension in more recently designed museums that enshrine and elevate the secular values of modernism and postmodernism, and in those existing buildings (railway stations, warehouses, etc.) transformed into museums from a range of other uses. Even innovative museums, such as the Design Museum and the Museum of the Moving Image in London, which are not dependent on public-sector funding, have not entirely transcended the conventional museum imprint (Lumley 1987).

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7. The Museums and Galleries Commission in England recently affirmed that the portico emblem is 'still the symbol which says 'museum' to most people' (Runyard 1990: 45).



Fig. 15. South African Library and Museum, c. 1882.  
(Cape Archives, AG 3897)

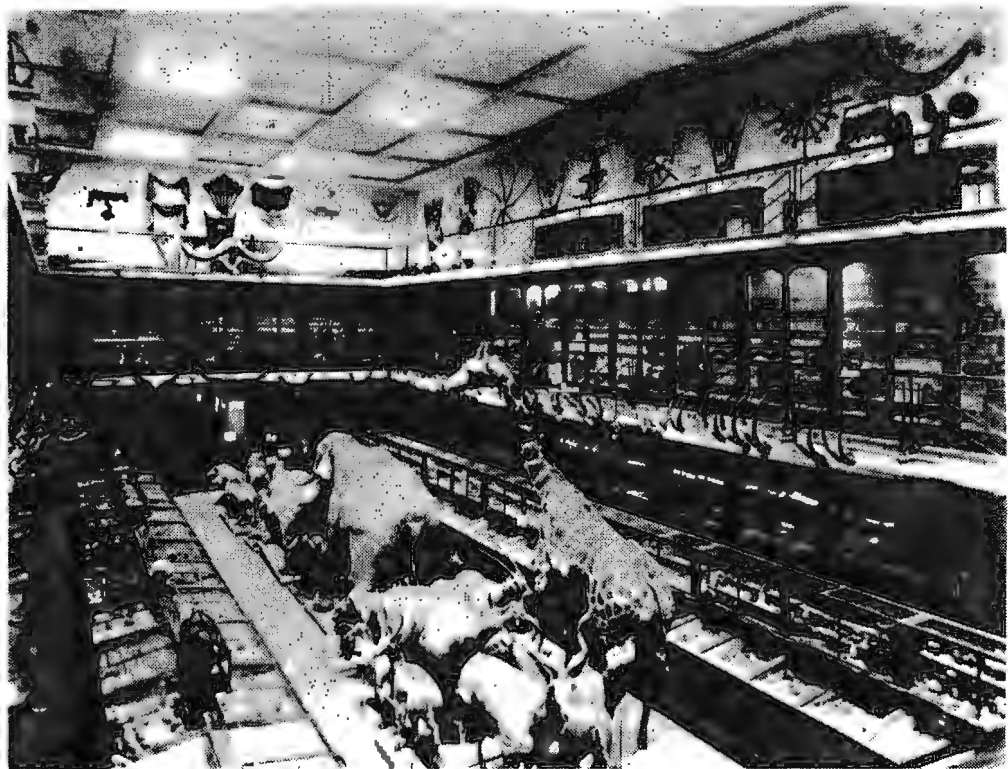


Fig. 16. Interior of Museum gallery, c. 1882. (Cape Archives, AG 1875)

By extension, the institutional status of museums automatically confers authority on the people who work there. As Hooper-Greenhill (1988: 224-5) has commented:

Curators speak from the security of institutions that are sanctioned within society as places of worth and value. Their words and deeds have a legitimation and a power that is accorded to them by this institutional context. . . . The discourse of the museum reinforces and is reinforced by governmental, educational, and cultural agencies. . . . the words of the curator enmesh with the power and control networks of society and have a resonance beyond the power of the individual worker. This resonance is felt by those who enter the museum as an authority effect.

The personal attitudes of museum staff can do much to balance this effect but museums remain controlled and controlling environments. The disciplined, if not hushed, atmosphere that characterizes formal museums elicits a degree of conformity and respect from visitors. At a conceptual level there is the control of what is communicated, at a practical level there is the regulation of the physical climate to ensure the conservation of collections and, thirdly, security control to prevent theft and damage. Although protection of collections is an essential curatorial responsibility, there is a tendency in many museums for security arrangements to be obtrusive and intimidating to the visitor. Uniformed security officers are often explicitly associated with policemen and their surveillance can be disturbing to visitors. A benevolent image of a museum as institutional guardian of public collections is easily distorted into an authoritarian image. This is particularly likely in a regimented society such as South Africa where the police are a threatening presence in the everyday lives of many ordinary people, and where until very recently access to many public amenities was racially segregated by law.<sup>8</sup>

*The rhetoric of authenticity*

The irony of museums is that, although they offer an experience of 'real things' and receive much of their credibility by promoting this attribute, the context in which these real things are presented is entirely artificial. 'Authentic specimens' are interpreted for the general public within constructed settings comprising visual, written, spatial and sometimes aural elements. This changes the contextual relationships that are implicated in the generation of meaning for viewers. In short, museum displays offer representations, *mediated* versions of reality.

In practice, however, the constructed, mediated nature of displays is naturalized by an illusion of authenticity. Indeed, the most apparently real displays are often the most artificial as in life-like

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8. It should be noted that racial segregation has never been applied at the South African Museum.

dioramas or habitat scenes (Eco 1986). (This is discussed in some detail in Chapter 7.) However, the perceived authority of museums tends to eclipse the interpretative processes by which exhibitions are produced. An exhibition is shaped by processes of selection, scripting and design, none of which is free of implicit assumptions regarding the subject-matter to be communicated. All involve choices made from particular theoretical positions and within a wider academic and socio-political context. Furthermore, the complexity of the subject tends to be reduced and simplified for non-specialist visitors. The result is a partial version of the subject. Baudrillard (1983: 120) makes this point in relation to image-making (simulation) in the news media.

Both objects and information result from a selection, a montage, from a point-of-view. They have already tested 'reality', and have asked only questions that 'answered back' to them. They have broken down reality into simple elements that they have reassembled into scenarios of regulated oppositions, exactly in the same way that the photographer imposes his contrasts . . . .

It is instructive to pursue this further and consider an analogy between photographic images and museum displays. Both photographs and display scenarios have a semblance of reality; both have presence, composed and framed, and both also imply an absence of those things excluded from the frame by the perceptive lens of the image-maker. Both tend to be regarded as representing the objective truth. In both cases this is not so. However, in some ways, a display may be more like a painting or a drawing than a photograph in that every element is consciously constructed or recontextualized. In a photograph, by contrast, 'the material relation between the image and what it represents . . . is an immediate and unconstructed one', a photograph 'quotes' from reality, it has traces of reality whereas a drawing re-creates reality (Berger & Mohr 1982: 93). Nonetheless, when a photographic image is isolated from the moment of its production, it is like a quote out of context and becomes open to many interpretations and allusions.<sup>9</sup>

In museum displays 'specimens' can be regarded as traces of reality but their presentation in a constructed setting is always a re-presentation of reality. *How* things are displayed may have more impact on visitors than what is displayed. As a verifying and emotive device, photographs are often incorporated to provide context for specimens and to evoke associations in the mind of the viewer. Photographs used in this way are documentary and tend to be accompanied by a written caption or label which fixes the meaning of the image. They become part of the supporting evidence that lends provenance and authenticity to the exhibits. Precise documentation is one of the elements that reinforces an over-riding association of museums with authoritative knowledge.

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9. Giving meaning to an image always involves making a connection between it and other experiences. 'An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself' (Berger & Mohr 1982: 89).



Fig. 17. South African Museum, c. 1900. (Cape Archives, E 8145)

Because museums are widely recognized as places of specialized knowledge and discernment, what is represented in a museum is taken on trust to be authentic. Simply by being in a museum objects are not only regarded as authentic but *authenticated*. Although modern museums aspire to be associated with enjoyment and leisure as well as education, they are primarily associated with the experience of collections of authentic artefacts. Without such collections, interpreted by professional researchers and exhibited for the public, museums would not be museums in the conventional sense.

However, the curators and designers who shape the content and give form to exhibitions tend to remain anonymous specialists who communicate knowledge impersonally. Authorship is seldom acknowledged but the anonymous museum expert is implicitly credited with accurate, unbiased knowledge. Almost invariably displays are labelled, as in academic discourse, in the third-person which implies veracity and creates a sense of objectivity. The conventional distancing device of formal display in glass cases reinforces this impression as well as affirming the interest and worth of the exhibited objects and the validity of the related texts. Even objects that are not spatially distanced in glass cases, are contextually framed by the museum setting. Exhibits may be within touching distance, but they remain spatially detached. Furthermore, the technical prowess of museum installations may add to the perceived status of museum generated knowledge.<sup>10</sup> However, while the museum context confers authenticity on both written and visual texts, this status is also recursively affirmed by public expectations of experiencing 'real things' and authoritative, scientific knowledge in museums.

Until the last decade few curators had seriously questioned the social and political implications of their role in authenticating particular views both by inclusion and exclusion (Leone 1981; Halpin 1983; Wright & Mazel 1987; Bennett 1988; Porter 1988).

A large public museum may express and authenticate the established or official values and images of a society in several ways, *directly*, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and *indirectly*, by subordinating or rejecting alternate values (original emphasis, Ames 1986: 9).

The claim that museums are neutral and objective in what they choose to present to the public is no longer tenable. This does not mean that there is deliberate manipulation but that all information is

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10. Ames (1986: 10) correctly points out that when a museum uses advanced and expensive display techniques, such as dioramas and audio-visual devices, it is demonstrating its own impressive technological capability as much as the content of the display.

presented from a particular point of view which may consciously or unconsciously be serving particular interests. It would be misleading to regard this simply as 'bias' because that in itself assumes the yardstick of objectivity (Lumley 1988). More cogent is the suggestion that ideologies and inequalities prevalent in society are transferred unknowingly into museum practice. Thus museum representations tend to implicitly reinforce dominant values and give visual affirmation to existing social hierarchies. For example, in social history displays women are usually marginalized to the domestic sphere, and the conventional Eurocentric definition of the patriarchal family is reinforced, while disadvantaged people, such as migrants, tend to be overlooked entirely (Porter 1988). In South Africa interpretations of history in museums have almost invariably been presented from a colonial perspective. This is reflected in the images on the publicity leaflet of the South African Cultural History Museum, in which the culture of the indigenous people is not represented (Fig. 18). A more inclusive South African history has yet to be given expression in museums. However, there are moves in this direction. One of the objectives of historical archaeology is to provide material evidence of the social past that will allow a more sensitive interpretation of history from the perspective of the underclasses (Hall *et al.* 1990).

Although for many museum professionals authenticity presupposes neutrality on issues of social concern, this claim is flawed. The basic mission of museums to collect and preserve those things deemed to constitute the cultural heritage implies the advocacy of certain values. Moreover, there is a need to disaggregate the general term 'heritage' and to be explicit about what is included and excluded. It is pertinent to ask *whose* cultural heritage is given priority in museums.<sup>11</sup> In answering this question the socio-political implications and the power relations of museum practice become acutely obvious.

Representations are produced and their production, and control over their production, both create power. The producers of representations therefore have ethical responsibilities to the subjects of their representations. They also have a weapon, for affecting people's attitudes, which can be directed towards changing images or promoting a particular policy or ideology (Morphy 1986: 25).

National museums can rarely be separated from the political context of nationalist interests. The establishment of many national museums during the nineteenth century in many countries throughout the world related directly to nationalist ideologies. The amassing in Europe of ethnological collections and ethnographic texts was inseparable from colonial power relations that allowed the West privileged access to the cultural and historical resources of colonized societies

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11. Discussion was focused on this issue in the session on ideology and culture at the 1988 conference in Cape Town on the Conservation of Culture.

# SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURAL HISTORY MUSEUM



Fig. 18. Cover of publicity leaflet, South African Cultural History Museum, 1989.

(Asad 1973; Fabian 1983). By providing a show-case for chosen collections, be they products of scholarship, invention, local manufacture or colonial conquest, museums both represented and authenticated national concerns. This legacy from the past presents a challenge to contemporary museums to recognize a constituency that transcends limited national or sectional interests.

One way of revealing the hidden dimension of museum discourse would be to make explicit the implicit conceptual positions that underpin interpretations. Museums could explore creative ways of drawing attention to museum processes and to the underlying classifications and assumptions of displays (Schlereth 1978; Lumley 1988). For example, by consciously subverting the conventional categories, questions can be raised about the very notion of order. Imagination can be used to reveal the arbitrary nature of museum conventions, and to restore ambiguity to artefacts. This was one of the aims of the exhibition, 'Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl', held in 1985 at the Museum of Mankind in London, in which the artist Eduardo Paolozzi created an exhibition combining ethnographic objects, sculptures, animal skulls, mechanical devices and a miscellaneous array of things to 'contradict our tendency to isolate phenomena and impose a separateness of the object . . .' (Paolozzi, cited by Lumley 1988: 18). The project was controversial, provoking strong responses both positive and negative (Coombes & Lloyd 1986; Kaeppler 1989), but this can be regarded as an indication of the exhibition's success.

Exhibition projects, undertaken with public participation, rather than from 'above', would make museum resources more accessible and help to decentre the authority of the 'specialists'. If, however, museums are to be *of* the people, and not simply *for* the people, there will have to be changes in the governing structures of museums to include representatives of community organizations. This would inevitably result in a shift in the balance of power within museum discourse.

### **The context of reception**

#### *Popular responses to museums*

In acknowledging the conceptual control exercised by museum professionals and the implicit power vested in museums, there is a tendency to overlook the capacity of museum visitors to respond to museum exhibits subjectively, or idiosyncratically, and even to subvert the intended meaning.<sup>12</sup> Museum-goers are not passive victims of ideological mystification or propaganda and, even though,

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12. For example, Bennett (1988) has suggested that the Beamish Open-air Museum can be read as a text that reveals the myths of bourgeois society.

as has been argued above, museum displays present selective interpretations of knowledge to the public, museum discourse is characteristically open-ended. The range of meaning an exhibition conveys to viewers is not necessarily consistent with the meaning intended by those responsible for its production. This was affirmed by responses to a recent exhibition of African beadwork at the South African Museum.

The exhibition, 'Ten Years of Collecting (1979-1989)', showed an impressive array of southern African beadwork on loan from the Standard Bank Foundation collection of African art at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The pieces on exhibition had been collected for their aesthetic qualities, they were intended to be viewed primarily as art objects, and were displayed at the Museum with a minimum of contextual labelling. Pieces were grouped regionally and the provenance of each piece was noted on the label. Historical background and cultural context were provided in a series of essays in a printed catalogue, which was for sale but also available for perusal on loan. The aesthetic quality of the beadwork was enhanced by elegant mounting and careful lighting. The design concept was in deliberate contrast to that in the permanent ethnographic displays which emphasize the customary ways of life of cultural Others. The way of showing the beadwork was intended to be a form of rhetorical detribalization, a deliberate understatement of 'difference'. It was thought appropriate and in keeping with the nature of the collection to present the beadwork simply as fine beadwork.

However, art critics and members of the public alike expressed disappointment at the brevity of the labels and the absence of photographs showing how the pieces on show were used. Moreover, viewers expected to be given ethnographic data about beadwork manufacture, about stylistic variation and colour symbolism. They did not seem to welcome the opportunity of simply looking at the beadwork from an aesthetic perspective, nor of exploring meaning for themselves.<sup>13</sup> Considering that the collection had been received with unanimous acclaim when exhibited in an art gallery setting at the University of the Witwatersrand, the responses to the exhibition at the Museum seemed to relate to the particular spatial context, and to visitors' expectations of the museum setting. Whereas in an art gallery setting minimal labelling was unproblematic, in the

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13. An experimental project undertaken by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia deliberately stripped objects of explanatory labels in an effort to free them from intellectual interpretation. Objects were presented as objects, 'rather than as evidence for the truth of scientific or generalizing statements'. This project, however, was regarded as appropriate in a University Museum but less so for the general public which '... wants to know what the objects "mean"' (Halpin 1983: 268). This observation was confirmed by responses to the beadwork exhibition.

SAM the relative lack of ethnographic data was a departure from convention that did not find favour with many viewers. Ironically, in this case the visual 'text' was too open.

None the less, I would argue that openness is one of the redeeming elements of museum discourse. Exhibitions differ from most other media in that they need not be viewed in sequence but allow visitors to set their own pace, to come and go as they please and make their own symbolic associations. Exhibitions, like other artefacts, may evoke many readings; they do not have fixed meaning. Although it has been argued that museums have been superseded as an information medium by television, museums remain socially important in that they are public places and provide an '*open*, as opposed to a *closed* experience' (Roy Strong quoted in Lumley 1988: 14, original emphasis).

. . . one's own thoughts and choreography rarely follow the script suggested by the museum designer. The private script need not preserve the didactic public seriousness, much less the conceptual wholeness. The visitor's script is a more complex affair: disconnected, improvised and usually fun (Annis 1986: 169).

The ambiguity of artefacts makes them open to many responses and nuances of interpretation, allowing both recreation and re-creation in the sense of making meaning anew. The stimulus to create new meaning sparked off by the physical presence of an array of interesting, evocative objects may in part account for the attraction of museums and their growing popularity in Europe and America.<sup>14</sup> Museums provide a means for giving substance to the motivating myths that sustain identity and affiliations within society (Hofmeyer 1988). As such they can be powerful vehicles for raising popular consciousness but they can also foster nostalgia and gloss over the conflicts of history in favour of a picturesque past (see Lowenthal 1985). This, too, may in part account for the popularity of museums and heritage institutions. The very notion of 'heritage' has become commoditized. In Britain there is a flourishing heritage industry which retails 'a sanitised image of the past' (New Statesman & Society, 22/29 December 1989). Within post-modern superficiality material culture has never been more open to appropriation in the game of image-making. Hodder (1990b: 14) has suggested that the archaeological past is particularly amenable to post-modern claims to meaning, being both fragmentary, tactile and easily 'packaged', both figuratively and literally, to suit the consumer. Museums are, of course, partly in the business of

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14. According to recent reports from the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the museum movement is flourishing on a global scale. The Euroamerican museum fraternity looks forward to the twenty-first century confident that museums will become of increasing public service (Commission on Museums for a New Century, 1984; ICOM Report, 1989). In South Africa, however, there is a less complacent attitude about the future of museums, and boom conditions do not prevail.

'packaging the past' (see Hudson 1985), but they are also public cultural institutions and as such are resistant to commoditization. As Kopytoff (1986: 73) has noted, while commoditization homogenizes value, 'the essence of culture is discrimination'. In this sense, museums are symbolically powerful institutions, publicly precluded from the commodity sphere.

It is inappropriate to generalize about popular responses to museums without adequate survey data from both museum visitors and those who stay away (Hooper-Greenhill 1988), nor is it appropriate to talk about museums in general as they differ widely in scale and vary from open-air site museums to formal galleries. More finely focused local studies are needed to assess responses to particular kinds of museum and forms of display. Research is also needed on the attitudes to museums within different sectors of the population. In South Africa, as far as I am aware, very little work has been done in this regard. At the SAM no survey of the visiting and non-visiting population has ever been undertaken, nor have visitor responses to the Museum in general or to particular displays been adequately investigated. The surveys that were initiated as part of this project, were unprecedented at the SAM. (The results are presented in Chapter 8.) The apparent lack of concern with visitor responses, beyond an interest in attendance numbers, would seem to be a wider museum phenomenon. As Hooper-Greenhill (1988: 213) has noted of museums in Britain:

Quantity not quality seems to be the name of the game, and evaluation of the work of the museum is measured by weight of bodies rather than by depth of experience.

#### *'Reading' exhibitions*

The processes of recontextualization that characterize museum discourse involve an interplay of multiple levels of interpretation. Reading any display, at the simplest level, is an interpretation of an interpretation. This hermeneutic process is considerably more complex when cultural objects are presented in historical, ethnographic or archaeological displays (Sperber 1985; Shanks & Tilley 1987). Artefacts that have been alienated from their original contexts, possibly interpreted in the course of fieldwork, classified for curatorial purposes, re-interpreted in scripting and recontextualized spatially in an exhibition, undergo continual re-interpretation in the minds of exhibition viewers.

In this process, akin to consumption as analysed by Miller (1987), there is the potential for viewers to re-appropriate subjectively artefacts that have been distanced from their original social contexts, objectified and reduced to museum specimens. The likelihood of this creative response occurring

would seem to depend on the degree to which the viewer could relate to the object/subject<sup>15</sup> on display inter-subjectively. This would involve imaginatively 'humanizing' the context of the object and responding to this image. If, as happens in museum practice, material culture is inevitably reified, that is reduced to objects removed from human subjects, creative response would depend largely on the ability to transcend this reduction. Having said this, a number of constraining factors must be considered.

Important among the constraints is the perceived authority of museums, as discussed above, and the emphasis on collections of *things* per se, rather than as vehicles for ideas and shared knowledge (Gathercole 1989). But of additional concern with regard to anthropology displays is the extent to which viewers are able to imagine themselves as having something in common with the people who made the objects on show. Notions of 'primitivism' and 'difference' may intervene to prevent a perception of human mutuality, which forms the basis of anthropological understanding (see Leach 1982). Systems of classification that underpin ethnographic representation tend to stress 'difference'. Indeed, the appearance of cultural distinctiveness often accounts for the presence of a particular object in a museum collection, and the manner in which ethnographic objects are displayed may serve to evoke a mistaken sense of 'otherness' rather than to affirm a shared humanity. In the South African context this problem has been compounded by the pervasive effects of racial segregation, by decades of apartheid in education<sup>16</sup> and a range of policies deliberately aimed at reinforcing cultural differences. Indeed, the present Tricameral Constitution is premised on the perpetuation of 'group' separation. Within this political structure, cultural differences easily take on a semblance of primordial determinancy.

In the ethnographic displays at the SAM the particularities of cultural difference have tended to eclipse cross-cultural human similarities. Museum practice compounds the problem through its systematic focus on objects removed from social subjects. Differences are reified in classificatory schema, which do not necessarily have historical validity or accord with the self-identity of people so defined. It is important to recognize that museums and the systems of classification they embody are products of historical processes. Recognizing these processes is the first step towards

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15. From a philosophical perspective, 'the world is not an object "out there" to be rationally analysed. . . . We emerge as subjects from inside a reality that we can never fully objectify, which encompasses both "subject" and "object", which is inexhaustible in its meanings and which constitutes us quite as much as we constitute it' (Eagleton 1983: 62).
16. Not only are there separate school systems for different racial groups, but the content of what is taught in certain subjects reinforces racism. Perhaps the most blatant example of this is the National Senior Certificate course on Criminology and Ethnology.

rethinking museum practice. With this in mind, I now look more closely at the shifting classificatory status of the objects that now form the ethnographic collections at the SAM.

### **Classifying other cultures at the South African Museum**

From the time of its inception in 1825 until 1963, the South African Museum was a general museum housing and displaying natural history collections as well as 'articles of human manufacture' of both local and exotic origin. In 1855, when the Museum was formally constituted under a board of trustees and Edgar Layard became Curator, its stated aim was 'the formation of a complete series of the natural and artificial productions of South Africa'. From the annual reports published since that time it is possible to trace the shifting classificatory status of the collections that now fall within the disciplinary divisions, ethnography and cultural history.

From 1855 until 1896, when a Department of Anthropology and Antiquities was formed, 'articles of human manufacture' were grouped as a general Miscellaneous Collection. Within this collection there were weapons and implements, coins, books and all other manufactures both classical and modern. They were displayed for the public in a gallery together with the natural history collections (see Fig 16). Layard's report of 1856 to the Trustees captures something of the visual miscellany of the early galleries:

On arriving at the head of the lower flight of stairs . . . the visitor will have on his right hand the larger Mammalia . . . . Overhead are placed a fine collection of horns of South African antelope . . . . Against the wall are arranged, as trophies, various implements of war and the chase, belonging to different nations. . . . Crossing the end window by the Aquarium, which now holds a Burmese Alligator, and still confining his attention to the wall, the visitor has before him some wonderful specimens of savage ingenuity.

The 'native implements' within the miscellaneous collections were described in various ways in the reports. Although 'ethnographic' artefacts were mentioned by Layard as early as 1861, in 1870 these were referred to by the acting-curator as 'objects of curiosity', and in 1874 by Roland Trimen, Curator of the Museum from 1872-1895, as articles of 'existing Barbarous Races'. More often they were referred to simply as 'native implements'. However, a proposed new gallery, reported on in 1876, was to be devoted to the exhibition of 'weapons and other implements of savage and half-civilized tribes, together with miscellaneous articles of human manufacture; . . .'

In 1881 a distinction within 'implements' was made between those of South African origin and those from elsewhere, and from 1882 the miscellaneous collection was divided into three groups - 'native implements', 'work of civilized races' (mainly coins, Roman pottery, guns, etc.) and books. In 1891 the former category 'native implements' was listed as 'work of native races', and in 1892 as 'work of uncivilized races'. The perception of 'native' as synonymous with 'uncivilized' was thus explicit.

In holding this view Trimen was a man of his time, subscribing to the widespread assumption that physical type and culture were directly related, and that race was a determinant of history. These views, coupled with the notions of unilinear evolution and social Darwinism, were expressed dogmatically in Theal's prolific and influential writings on the history of South Africa published between 1874 and 1910 (see Saunders 1988: 9-44). For Trimen, as for Louis Péringuey (Director of the Museum from 1906 to 1924), who later would build up a collection of Khoisan crania and initiate the making of life-casts of 'pure Bushmen' for the Museum, race was the key to understanding the history of modern civilization.

In 1896 the status of the Miscellaneous collections was changed by William Sclater, Director from 1896 to 1906, when he formed the Department of Anthropology and Antiquities. Subsequent accessions were listed in the same register without separating ethnographic items from antiquities. During Sclater's term of office the Museum received two influential visitors - in 1899 Henry Balfour, Curator of the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, and in 1905 Alfred Haddon who had led the Cambridge Torres Straits Expedition (1898-1899) and was a convincing proponent of a natural science approach to anthropology (see Urry 1984: 44-48). Haddon's address to the joint meeting of the British and South African Associations for the Advancement of Science drew critical attention to the almost complete lack of interest and expertise in 'the science of ethnology' in South African Museums. His comments were not unjustified.

In the reports from 1906 onwards, however, a greater interest in anthropology is apparent. The physical anthropology of Khoisan groups, a subject of particular interest to Péringuey, was an area of prime concern over the next two decades. From 1911, physical anthropology, ethnology and archaeology were treated, as in British academic curricula, as sub-divisions of anthropology. The headings in the reports show fluctuating interests within this field. Until Péringuey's death in 1924 the department was reported on as Anthropology and Ethnology. Thereafter, as interest in physical anthropology waned, the department was referred to as Ethnology and Archaeology. From the mid-1920s John Goodwin, a lecturer at the School of African Life and Languages at the University of Cape Town, took an active interest in the stone artefact collections and in the previously neglected ethnographic collections. In 1930 he was appointed Honorary Curator of Ethnology and Archaeology, and it was through Goodwin that Margaret Shaw, a University of Cape Town graduate, was appointed in 1933 as the first full-time ethnologist at the Museum.

One of Margaret Shaw's first tasks was to make a separate register for the ethnographic collections and to devise a system of classifying and cataloguing ethnographic material. The aim was to bring

scientific standards of documentation to the ethnographic collections. In the process, the boundaries between ethnology and the disciplines of both cultural history and social anthropology were drawn more clearly. By focusing attention on material culture as 'a study in itself' (Shaw 1978), artefacts were in effect distanced both from their historical and social context. At the time, the *relationship* between material culture and society in historical context, now considered to be of primary interest in material culture studies, was an issue of relatively minor concern. This was made clear in an address by Margaret Shaw to the Museums Association in 1957:

Material culture and technology are wholly museum subjects, indeed it is they that are usually meant when mention is made of an ethnological department . . . . Social anthropology or primitive sociology is not a museum subject. Nevertheless, for proper knowledge of the material culture some sociological research is necessary - for example when objects are connected with ceremonial, when ceremonial is connected with the making of certain objects, and of course tribal histories (Shaw 1957: 301).

That social relations were not regarded as *always* being significant in understanding material culture underlines a growing theoretical separation of material culture studies from the wider field of social anthropology, and suggests an emphasis on objects *per se*, a tendency to which museums are especially prone. The mention of 'tribal histories', rather than history in general, reflects an ethnological concern with the tribe as the unit of study. This focus was, however, by no means restricted to the practice of ethnography in museums as shown by the wider academic concern with 'tribes' and later 'peoples' (Schapera 1937; Hammond-Tooke 1974).

For the present discussion I am concerned only with southern Africa as this is the region best covered in the collections, and it has always been the primary focus of exhibition projects. In museum practice the ethnology of southern Africa was concerned with the 'traditional'<sup>17</sup> material culture of Khoisan and Bantu-speaking people, and it did not include the material culture of European settlers. The classification of the Khoikhoi and San was regional and based on Schapera's (1930) synthesis of historical, linguistic, and ethnographic sources; that of the Bantu-speakers was based primarily on Van Warmelo's (1935) *Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* which, with minor modifications, remains the basis for the system in current use. The classification adopted in the survey was based on a combination of criteria among which language was prominent.

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17. As Spiegel & Boonzaier (1988) point out, the term 'traditional' is ambivalent - it can evoke connotations of legitimate customary practice or negative conservatism. In both of these senses traditions are actively mobilized by people in an ongoing play for power or prestige. In museum-based ethnology this active sense of tradition as a resource has not been addressed. Instead tradition tends to be equated with timeless custom, usually described in the ethnographic present.

It is important to note that prior to Van Warmelo's survey there was no standard orthography or ethnographic classification, although the analysis of southern African languages started by W. H. I. Bleek in the 1860s had provided an initial framework (see Thornton 1984). As a vernacular language was given standard written form by missionaries or others, a multiplicity of language forms was eventually reduced to one authorized version, which was fed back into local communities through church and administrative channels (Harries 1988). This literally glossed over existing cultural variation and flexibility, and created a synthetic uniformity that was later taken as representative of a real situation. As Goody (1977) has argued, the simple act of listing transforms the order of differences by giving them written form, by making them more visible and definite, less flexible. This was precisely the case in the delimitation of ethnographic boundaries in South Africa for the purposes of classification and administration. As recently as 1932 the ethnographic map had not been completely charted, as noted by the Inter-University Committee for African Studies:<sup>18</sup>

We do not even possess an authoritative list of all the Bantu tribes of Southern Africa (Schapera 1934: 235).

The term 'authoritative' is telling; it draws attention to the authority implicit in the task of classification. By 1935 a comprehensive list and classificatory system had been produced by the Government Ethnologist, who at the time, however, pointed out the tentative nature of the classificatory divisions.

... many of our tribes remain practically unknown to this day. Even the work of classifying such tribes, done in these pages, can for this reason not in each case claim to be final (Van Warmelo 1935: 5).

In correspondence with Margaret Shaw about the system for cataloguing ethnographic material, Van Warmelo suggested a grouping in 'culture-areas' when the 'actual tribe' was not known:

This classifying into groups is just the hardest part of all, but it is the only way, because you will have many things from a district or culture area without knowing the actual tribe (SAM correspondence, 16/7/1940).

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18. Prior to 1932, when an Inter-University Committee for African Studies appointed a sub-committee to inquire into the published and unpublished information on the ethnography of South Africa, a great deal had already been written on the 'Native peoples'. Early sources include reports of survivors of ship wrecks and records of Portuguese travellers, later sources include the accounts of missionaries, administrators, explorers and traders. By the middle of the nineteenth century 'a vast mass of miscellaneous information' relating to ethnography could be found 'scattered about in more or less fragmentary form' in various journals and reports (Schapera 1934: 223). Although there were even some works devoted entirely to particular 'tribes', no system of classification had yet been formulated, and such descriptions as existed were not by 'professional students of Native life' (Schapera 1934: 223).

By culture-areas Van Warmelo meant 'such areas as I have tried to outline in the Survey', and he once again drew attention to the lack of certainty with regard to boundaries:

Most of those culture-areas have boundaries so ill-defined as to make their very existence doubtful - certainly from a material culture point of view (SAM correspondence, 26/8/1940.)

Nonetheless, in museum practice Van Warmelo's *Preliminary Survey* . . . became the standard reference work, the basis of the system adopted for cataloguing ethnographic material (Shaw 1940) and the conceptual framework within which field research was conducted.

In the process of bringing systematic order to previously unmanaged collections, artefacts were registered, catalogued and documented according to a set format. These procedures can be regarded as collectively transforming an object into a museum specimen. Through this process the status of an object increases, it is recontextualized and its meaning is circumscribed for museum purposes. Museum processing creates a more precise identity for an object than it ever had when in use and, furthermore, it becomes durable even if ephemeral in other circumstances.<sup>19</sup> In practice an object becomes a specimen through being given a place in a classification system and, once classified, the annotated artefact both gives substance to the category and becomes more resistant to other interpretations.

At the SAM the problems and uncertainties of classifying objects often unaccompanied by documentation were fully recognized but, in practice, an accessioned object had to be given a place in the system, arbitrary and tentative as it might be. That a procedure for grading the source and reliability of the catalogue data was introduced, and remains in use, shows sensitivity to the problems of misinterpretation or possible variation in interpretation. However, that the classification itself is a conceptual construct from a particular perspective has tended to be overlooked.

For example, a major grouping such as 'Nguni', an arbitrary category of convenience adopted by linguists and ethnologists (Van Warmelo 1935, 1974), has been reified in museum practice. Wright (1986) has shown that the term Nguni has no historical validity as a generic designation for a group of people but it has, nonetheless, become entrenched in the ethnographic literature. Furthermore,

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19. For an interesting discussion of the possible shifts in value of an object from low status transience to high status durability, see Thompson (1979). Kopytoff (1986) suggests that things can be analysed in terms of culturally informed biographies.

museum displays on 'the Nguni' give a tangible presence to this conceptual construct and incorrectly imply that 'the Nguni' are a group of people. Thus the text of an introductory label to a display on 'The Nguni' at the Museum draws attention to the linguistic basis of the grouping but also refers to *people of Nguni stock*, thereby giving the term a different connotation - that of a group having common ancestry. Similarly, in referring to 'expanding groups of Southern Nguni' on the eastern Cape frontier between 1820 and 1860, Winer & Deetz (1990: 57) not only use the term anachronistically but imply some form of social grouping. In fact, the people who speak the languages designated by linguists as 'Nguni' do not refer to themselves collectively by that name, nor do they claim common ancestry, nor is there any other sense in which the term has collective meaning for those whom it describes. An inversion has occurred in which ethnographers have displayed a classificatory construct of their own making, when the intention was to encourage an understanding of others. This draws attention to the paradox that, while museum ethnography is ostensibly concerned with 'other cultures', the museum process involves an appropriation of their culture by ours in both a physical and a conceptual sense.

There is much more that could be said on the subject of ethnographic classification but the point that I want to make here is that the classificatory categories, such as those used in cataloguing systems, are constructs that are culturally and historically specific. This is also true in the case of the classificatory division between cultural history and ethnography. As shown above in the case of the SAM, the separation of ethnography and cultural history can be traced to the nineteenth-century division between 'works of native races' and 'works of civilized races', which in the early twentieth century became the anthropology (ethnology and archaeology) and antiquities collections, respectively. During the 1930s, when ethnology became a professional department, disciplinary boundaries were, by exclusion, drawn more firmly. Ethnology was concerned only with the 'traditional' material culture of Khoisan and Bantu-speaking people, whereas the 'history' collections, comprising classical antiquities and material relating to the colonial period, were treated separately both for curatorial and exhibition purposes. The history collections were eventually transferred to a separate museum (see Davison 1990a).

In practice Van Warmelo's classification not only provided a convenient model for the curatorial management of collections but was taken to represent groups of people having certain cultural features in common. As shown in the conceptual framework of exhibitions and in museum publications spanning half a century (see ethnographic publications in the *Annals of the South African Museum*), these categories were adopted as units of study and the underlying assumptions were never tested in the course of fieldwork. However, as Sharp (1980) has pointed out, many of these divisions were imposed for administrative purposes rather than being part of an ethnic

consciousness felt by the people so categorized. In this sense classificatory categories, such as 'the Pedi', 'the Tsonga' or 'the Zulu', do not necessarily coincide with the self-identities of the people concerned and, therefore, may not be the appropriate conceptual categories for ethnographic research.<sup>20</sup> The issue of how cultural symbols are mobilized in social and historical context requires a different approach that investigates the nature of boundary formation rather than assumes the existence of ethnic divisions. This kind of study necessarily bridges the disciplines of anthropology and history and shows how material culture is made meaningful and used strategically in social practice (for a good example of this approach see Klopper 1989a).

Although ethnology as practised at the SAM was not consciously aligned with *volkekunde*, research undertaken at the museum did not raise questions about the notion of bounded ethnic groups. Consequently, almost by default, displays structured on the principle of ethnic difference could be seen to be giving implicit support to the ideology of segregation.<sup>21</sup> The case studies that follow illustrate the processes of museum practice in more detail.

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20. Sharp (1988: 90) noted that the process of dividing Africans conceptually and practically into discrete groups had begun long before Afrikaner nationalists created apartheid. The varied political and cultural entities that constituted the pre-colonial African population were often misunderstood by white settlers and cast in a European conceptual mould that assumed political and cultural boundaries always coincided and were clearly defined. These ideas, however, were inappropriate in an African context.
  21. In 1982 the name of the department of Ethnology was changed to Ethnography in order to create a symbolic distance from these connotations. In adopting the name Ethnography, the term was defined in the broadest sense of encompassing written or material cultural texts, not necessarily pertaining exclusively to 'other cultures'. Recently the name of the department has been changed to African Studies & Anthropology, in order to express the field of study more clearly.

## CHAPTER 6

### MUSEUM CASE 1: REPRESENTING 'THE LOBEDU' IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM

*... an exhibition in which a museum presents the artefacts of another culture may itself be examined as an artefact of our own. We look for the unintended messages conveyed along with the official ones (Ames 1986: 32).*

#### **Introduction**

In 1978 a permanent display of the Krige Collection of Lobedu material culture was mounted in the Ethnography Gallery of the South African Museum (SAM). In this Chapter I focus on this collection as an assemblage of ethnographic artefacts made by social anthropologists in the 1930s, and secondly as the subject of a museum display in the late 1970s. I use the Krige Collection as exhibited at the SAM as a case study in recontextualization, and I attempt to show that the display is a composite artefact embodying the perceptions that informed the making of the collection, subsequent interpretations, and also limitations imposed by the museum context. In conclusion I focus more finely on a single artefact in the Krige Collection, a carved pole from Modjadji's court, and discuss its recontextualization as an exhibited museum specimen.

A brief history and ethnography of Modjadji's people, who are known collectively as the Lobedu,<sup>1</sup> was presented in Chapter 4. Modjadji's chiefdom, situated in the foothills of the Drakensberg range in the northern Transvaal, has become widely known as the 'Realm of a Rain-queen'. Her reputation as ritual queen and powerful rain-maker has ensured Modjadji almost legendary status among the Bantu-speaking people of southern Africa, and the nature of her power has attracted both academic and popular interest. From the 1930s to the present, Lobedu social organization has been the subject of ethnographic description and extensive anthropological analysis (E. J. Krige 1931, 1932, 1938, 1964, 1975a, 1975b, 1975c, 1981; J. D. Krige 1934, 1937, 1939; Krige & Krige 1943, 1954; Leach 1966; Mönnig 1961, 1963; Sansom 1974b; Kuper 1975, 1982), and their material culture

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1. Since the early nineteenth century these people have been ruled by a succession of female chiefs, all of whom have been known as Modjadji.

has been described in technological detail (Davison 1984). During the past decade Modjadji has increasingly become the focus of media attention and the target of tourism.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1936 and 1938 the social anthropologists E. J. and J. D. Krige undertook extended fieldwork in Modjadji's chiefdom and made an ethnographic record of Lobedu social structure that formed the basis of their esteemed monograph *The Realm of a Rain-Queen* (1943). During this time they also built up a collection of artefacts with the purpose of bringing together objects that represented the full range of the material culture of a single 'tribe' at a particular time. The collection was later used as a teaching collection by Professor E. J. Krige at the University of Natal, and was donated in 1970 to the South African Museum.

During the period in which the collection was used by Professor Krige, it was housed in the Department of African Studies at the University of Natal but, in mid-1969, in view of her retirement as professor at the end of that year, Krige approached various public institutions about her possible donation of the collection. Her letter to the Director of the South African Library/Museum [sic] reads as follows:

Dear Sir,

I have a collection of every type of artifact that comprises the material culture of the Lobedu tribe of the Northern Transvaal which my husband and I collected during the period 1936-38, when we were doing anthropological field research in that tribe. I believe it must be unique for Africa. Most museums have objects collected from different people, sometimes exhibited together in 'culture areas' but never representing the whole material culture of any one people. . . . I retire at the end of this year and am now faced with the problem of what to do with the collection. . . . I am not offering the collection for sale but should be prepared to *donate* it to any museum that would be willing and able to keep it together and exhibit it as an entity . . . (SAM correspondence, E6/21 June 1969).

The Director of the Museum responded positively to this offer and, in May 1970, the collection, together with a short ethnographic description of each item, was received by the SAM. The collection could not go on display immediately as the Ethnography Gallery was in the process of being renovated and redesigned to accommodate displays on the major ethnic groups of South Africa. In thanking Krige for the donation the Director explained that there would be some delay

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2. In August 1987 a programme titled 'Modjadji' was presented on radio in the 'Perspective' series of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, and in 1988 the Rain-queen was featured prominently on the popular television show, 'Treasure Hunt'. The novel 'She' by Rider Haggard, said to have been inspired by an earlier Modjadji, adds to the mystique of the present Modjadji. Both outsiders and local people have capitalized on the Modjadji myth. Hotels in the surrounding areas offer tourist trips to the village of the Rain-queen and to the nearby forest of cycads (a nature reserve controlled by the Lebowa Nature Conservation Department). Both are mentioned in the tourist guide of the Automobile Association.

before the collection was exhibited but assured her that it would eventually be displayed as a whole as 'our example of a Transvaal group' (SAM correspondence, E6/6 March 1970, Barry to Krige). This comment related to the underlying concept for the arrangement of the new gallery which was to show ethnic groups within a geographical framework. The sections of the gallery that were already on the drawing-board took priority and it was 8 years before the section of the gallery devoted to the Krige Collection was completed. However, in the interim the Museum supported field research in Modjadji's area, and undertook a project to cast a life-size figure for use in the display and to collect the materials required for the reconstruction of a domestic courtyard and cooking-house at the Museum.<sup>3</sup> The curatorial processing of the collection itself was undertaken shortly after it was received by the Museum in 1970. Later in this chapter I discuss museum processing in some detail but firstly I focus on the collection and its classification *before* it was received by the Museum.

### **The shaping of the Krige Collection**

The Krige Collection was made at a time when academic interest in material culture was declining and a divide was developing between social anthropology and the study of material culture. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the collection was made at all by anthropologists whose primary interests lay in the analysis of social systems. However, in South Africa the 1920s and 1930s, material culture was still receiving some academic attention. Winifred Hoernlé (Tucker), under whom Eileen (Jensen) Krige studied at the University of the Witwatersrand, and whose influence Krige later acknowledged, collected items for university museums on her expeditions in Namaqualand in the early 1920s and her diaries reveal a sensitivity to the part that material culture plays in the shaping of identity (Carstens, Klinghardt & West 1987). Before being appointed Research Fellow and Lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1923, Hoernlé had read anthropology at Cambridge under Haddon, Rivers and Myers, and had visited Germany where she met Wundt, and France where she was strongly influenced by Durkheim's sociological theory (Krige 1960). Hoernlé's experience thus encompassed both ethnological and sociological approaches to anthropology, and although social anthropology soon gained academic ascendancy both at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town, ethnographic collections made by anthropologists in the 1920s and 1930s suggest an inclusiveness of inquiry that was later to wane within the discipline as practised in South Africa (see Chapter 1).

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3. When I joined the SAM, the Krige collection had already been accessioned and catalogued but it had not been used as the basis for further research. In 1973 I started a project to compare the contemporary material culture with that represented in the Krige Collection. Fieldwork was undertaken in 1973, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1981, 1983, 1987 and 1990.

In the 1930s Isaac Schapera, who had also taught Krige at the University of the Witwatersrand, made an ethnographic collection in the course of his extensive fieldwork among different groups of Tswana-speaking people, and Audrey Richards did likewise among the Bemba people of Zambia. Hugh Stayt, who wrote a monograph on the Venda people of the northern Transvaal, made a small collection of artefacts for the University of Cape Town and he, too, acknowledged Hoernle's influence. However, as a separation between social anthropology and material culture studies became more firmly entrenched, few anthropologists working at the English-language universities in South Africa took an interest in collecting. That field anthropologists working among the Mpondo (Hunter 1936), and later the Swazi (Kuper 1947) and the Bhaca (Hammond-Tooke 1962) did not regard material culture as a necessary part of their ethnographic research can be related to the ascendancy of social anthropology in the curricula of universities that followed the British school of the discipline. Ethnology continued to be practised only in museums, and in the form of *volkekunde* at Afrikaans medium universities. It seems significant that, although Krige continued her field research among the Lobedu until the 1980s, her interest in collecting was concentrated in the 1930s. That the collection was only erratically extended over the subsequent years, even though there was the opportunity for making a systematic, comparative collection over time, would seem to underline the separation of social anthropology from material culture studies.

There are no written records from the 1930s relating to the making of the collection but, from a recent interview<sup>4</sup> with Professor Krige, I understand that the intention was to make a comprehensive collection of Lobedu material culture of that time, bearing in mind logistic difficulties. It is of interest to note that E. J. and J. D. Krige were encouraged to make a material culture collection by N. J. van Warmelo, the Government Ethnologist who was conducting research at the time among Venda-speakers to the north of Modjadji's area, and he assisted by transporting the material they collected to Pretoria. However, the Kriges did not use a set schedule for collecting and documentation, as was suggested by Van Warmelo. None the less, it can be assumed that there were unstated criteria for inclusion and exclusion, which can be inferred from the collection itself and from the way that the collection was later ordered and annotated by E. J. Krige. (Krige's inventory of the collection is given in Appendix 1.)

The collection, comprising 248 items, was grouped by Krige into a number of functional and typological categories as follows:

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4. Recorded interview with E. J. Krige in Durban, 4 December 1990; tape housed in the Department of Ethnography at the South African Museum.

Utensils, tools and other objects connected with cooking, domestic activities and homestead  
 Dress and ornamentation  
 Various types of pot, other utensils made of clay and tools used in moulding pots  
 Musical instruments and objects used in dancing  
 Weapons  
 Smoking and snuff-taking  
 Girls' initiation  
 Play activities and toys  
 Ironwork and objects made of native iron  
 Medical appliances and instruments.

The collection was listed and numbered in this sequence, each object being identified by means of a vernacular term and a brief description. That the collection was regarded by Krige at the time of its donation as a comprehensive collection of 'every type of artifact [sic]' comprising Lobedu material culture in the 1930s was emphasized in correspondence with the Director,<sup>5</sup> and later in discussions with me about the exhibition of the collection (Krige pers. comm. 1976).

However, although the collection was said to be comprehensive, the written ethnography by Krige & Krige (1943) included references to numerous objects not represented in the collection. Krige herself later noted that many items in use in the 1930s were not represented in the collection.<sup>6</sup> Not only are there many gaps in the collection but the number of examples of the things that were collected is too small to allow any assessment of the range of stylistic variability. The impression gained from the collection is that a single specimen was taken to represent a typological category. As indicated in the correspondence, artefacts were abstracted from their social context as specimens.

Moreover, with few exceptions, Krige's notes on the collection do not include the sub-district or village of origin of particular objects. The collection *as a whole* is attributed to the Lobedu area. The omission of a precise locality could (incorrectly) be taken to indicate that all the items were collected in the same place, but according to Krige (pers. comm. 1976) the collection was made in the area of the original Modjadji Location, as well as farms and Crown Land to the north and the area of the Medingen mission station (see Fig. 9). The fact that individual items have no contextual documentation regarding precise locality and spatial setting suggests that this was not considered to be relevant. While it is true that all the items come from the same general region, the lack of

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5. SAM correspondence, E6/23 February 1970, Krige to Barry.

6. In 1982 Krige sent me a 'table of objects of Lobedu material culture in the period 1930 to 1940 ...' (typescript in SAM Library). This included 48 items not represented in the Krige Collection, not counting imported items of western origin.

precision on locality suggests that a generalization about a 'culture area' had been made in advance. If cultural uniformity were assumed, regional variation would not have been an issue for investigation.

Similarly objects were not attributed to particular owners, makers or users. Information on social context in the notes on the collection is generalized and, with a few exceptions, individuals are not mentioned. Potters, basket-makers and wood-carvers are represented by their work but their names and places of residence are not recorded in the related documentation. Thus the makers and users of artefacts are rendered anonymous. Significantly, the only potter to be named made pots that did not conform to a conventional local style, while producers of 'traditional' pottery remained anonymous. In the rest of the collection, it is impossible to identify particular craft-workers or to assess the degree of specialization that existed at the time. All items are simply attributed to 'the Lobedu'. This anonymity seems to indicate that recording the names and social status of individuals or families was not considered relevant - if the collected object was a specimen of a general cultural form, one could stand for all. Material culture was thus conceptually separated from ongoing social life in which people, as knowing subjects, would have used material culture as a resource in a range of social situations. Because the relationship between material culture and social relations was not investigated by the collectors, the way in which particular objects might have carried meaning in social context can only be inferred indirectly from the written ethnography.

Well over 90 per cent of the domestic utensils in the collection bear no sign of ever having been used, suggesting that they may have been commissioned from the makers, or possibly received as gifts. In a recent interview<sup>7</sup> Professor Krige confirmed that this was so. It is clear that her intention was not to acquire a situated assemblage of artefacts that showed the patina of human use but rather examples of the *types* of artefact in general use, in which case a new example would suffice. These are two quite different conceptual approaches to collecting. For the purpose of showing *how* artefacts were used in the context of everyday life at a given time rather than *what* objects were used, it is necessary to document or collect objects *in situ*.<sup>8</sup> That most of the things in the collection lack contextual data and any signs of wear or human use underlines the conceptual separation of material culture from social practice. Collected objects remain things in themselves rather than being part of social life. Ironically, a factor that favoured the collection of unused

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7. See footnote 4.

8. It should be noted that undertaking research on material culture does not necessarily involve collecting.

artefacts was Krige's reluctance to ask people to part with things in daily use.<sup>9</sup> This in itself shows sensitivity not only to the owners' feelings but to the importance of material culture in social life.<sup>10</sup>

Yet another issue that cannot be addressed through analysis of the collection is whether differences among the sub-groups within Modjadji's realm were expressed in their material culture. Although Krige & Krige provided a wealth of data on the interrelationships between groups in their written texts, this was not integrated with data on the collection. This once again draws attention to the conceptual separation of material culture studies from the concerns of social anthropology. Indeed Krige confirmed in later correspondence that material culture was peripheral to her research interests.<sup>11</sup> However, I must stress that I am not suggesting that the lack of detail on provenance and social context was careless documentation on the part of the collectors. On the contrary, their scholarship would render this argument inappropriate and unconvincing. I do suggest, however, that the lack of such data is indicative of a conceptual position. It would not have been considered important to document provenance in detail if the material was assumed *in advance* to reflect a cultural entity, and this would seem to have been the case. Individual items were specimens of general types, and the collection as an entity was taken to be representative of a generic tribal grouping called 'the Lobedu' who were situated in 'the Lobedu area'. Indeed, in writing the authoritative monograph on Lobedu society, Krige & Krige were responsible for giving 'the Lobedu' textual reality, for 'capturing' them in writing.

As Hammond-Tooke has recently commented, however, the model of a generalized, bounded society which permeated the ethnographic texts of the 1930s and 1940s is no longer tenable and this casts doubt on the validity of the 'tribe' as a unit of study:

In effect the great ethnographers were writing about constructs whose exact nature was extremely problematic - *the Tsonga, the Mpondo, the Lobedu, the Swazi* (Hammond-Tooke 1990: 10, original emphasis).

This point has become acutely obvious during the past decade, as historical research on the nature of ethnic consciousness in southern Africa has revealed that ethnic affiliation is flexible, uneven and historically constructed in relation to political interests (Sharp 1988). In the past the delineation of ethnic boundaries was often the result of intellectual intervention by missionaries, administrators,

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9. Interview with E. J. Krige, 4 December 1990.

10. There is always a tension between researching material culture in social context and building up a collection for museum or other purposes. The two activities are seldom compatible.

11. SAM correspondence, E6/25 March 1981, Krige to Davison.

linguists and ethnographers, who tended to impose on African social groupings their own Eurocentric schema as a means of ordering an otherwise uncontrollable reality (Harries 1981, 1988, 1989; Ranger 1983; Vail 1989). Also emerging from this research is the important, strategic use of material culture and other cultural 'traditions' in the creation and expression of ethnicity (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Klopper 1989a). In the Krige Collection, however, possible differences in material culture among Modjadji's subjects have been levelled out. This was effected in part by the selective acquisition of things deemed 'traditional', and in part by the absence of specific contextual data on items collected. Thus the active use of material culture was suppressed.

Having said this, it must be acknowledged that the Krige Collection is indeed unique in having been collected in the field by social anthropologists at a particular time in the history of Modjadji's people, and at a particular time in the history of anthropology. This latter dimension allows the collection to be analysed as an expression of the theoretical concepts that were current when it was assembled. Krige & Krige's written ethnography is similarly a product of the intellectual climate of the time. Introducing a volume of essays in honour of Eileen Krige, Argyle & Preston-Whyte (1978) have commented on the influence of Malinowski on the Kriges' interpretive assumptions regarding the interconnectedness of social institutions. However, critical appraisal of functionalism has demonstrated that this theoretical position tends to involve a reification of society, an oversight of human agency and a false opposition between synchronic and diachronic analysis (Giddens 1979).

As if aware of this, Krige (1980: x), in her introduction to the first paperback edition<sup>12</sup> of *The Realm of a Rain-Queen*, draws attention to the fact that the final chapter of the book deals with 'culture contact and culture change' and comments that this was 'unfashionable in the theoretical climate of the 1930s'. None the less, an awareness of continuous time and process is not integrated in the body of the monograph, which is written in the ethnographic present with an overriding emphasis on functional stability despite the impact of external factors. The traditional institutions of Lobedu society are described as operating to maintain structural continuity and internal harmony in the face of changing external conditions. With regard to material culture 'modern conditions' were said to have led to a decline in craftsmanship and degeneration, implying a harmonious, traditional past:

You see petrol tins side by side with water pots, ugly sacks ousting the picturesque granaries, patched pieces of boxwood replacing reed doors, cast-off European clothes instead of graceful coverings of skin, machine-made blankets beside hand-woven grass

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12. The authority of the monograph is confirmed by the fact that it has been reprinted five times since it was first published in 1943, and is still prescribed for anthropology students.

mats, and axes and knives, no longer from the smithy, but only from the stores (Krige & Krige 1943: 50).

Significantly, not a single example of these discordant items is represented in the Krige Collection. This reveals a filtering process to remove those things that did not accord with a preconceived, idealized notion of a traditional way of life, a witting or unwitting rejection of objects that were at odds with an illusion of cultural integrity or wholeness.<sup>13</sup> By selective acquisition only those items that were of 'native' manufacture were collected. Things that were not 'picturesque' or locally made were excluded, even though they were mentioned in the written ethnography. Underlying this selectivity is an imposed conceptual construct of what constituted the typical material culture and identity of the social grouping called 'the Lobedu'. However, the actual use of material culture by these people themselves was not given recognition in the collection.

By the 1930s, more than 90 per cent of Modjadji's subjects were unrelated to the original founding group (Krige & Krige 1943) but whether or not this heterogeneity was manifested in the material culture cannot be assessed from the Krige Collection. However, the published ethnographic literature reveals that material culture was indeed mobilized by sub-groupings within the Lobedu polity. Immigrants from the coastal plain east of the Lebombo mountains, who came to be known collectively as 'Shangaan', were said to wear distinctive clothing, to construct their houses and granaries differently from the Lobedu, and to use a range of utensils that were regarded as alien at Modjadji's capital. Another grouping that used material culture to signal their difference was that of educated Christians who adopted western dress, modern housing, and purchased household goods. With regard to the latter, Krige & Krige (1943: 326) stressed the economic motivation rather than the symbolic use of material culture in the construction of identity.

Money subserves some purely economic purposes: it purchases various European articles, such as clothes and cloths, sewing machines and soap, candles, lanterns and paraffin, sieves and enamel dishes, iron objects, cycles, and wagons. But, compared with articles of local manufacture, these introductions are insignificant except among Christians.

This comment helps to explain the absence in the Krige Collection of the items mentioned but it also points to the fact that the collection process was informed by a preconceived idea of what constituted the material culture of 'the Lobedu'. It follows that the collection cannot but give an

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13. Clifford (1988: 232-33) has pointed out that in anthropological collecting the notions of wholeness and authenticity were closely linked. Collecting objects that represented a 'culture' implied collecting those things that formed part of a coherent whole, rather than those that were hybridized or emergent. Authentic artefacts and customs were salvaged from time, through ethnographic collecting and writing.

incomplete picture of the material culture of Modjadji's realm in the late 1930s. As suggested above, the picture presented by the annotated collection is an idealized view, through the lens of the collector, of the 'traditional' material culture of a 'traditional' society. The collection as a whole stands for the society as a whole; it is a tangible expression of cultural integrity. With the exception of a few items such as those said to be 'Shangaan-carved' the records on the collection give the impression of cultural homogeneity. That this impression conflicts with the heterogeneous situation on the ground documented by Krige & Krige themselves, draws attention to the fact that the collection is not a reflection of reality but a construct, a representation of reality. My own awareness of this stems from adopting a more critical approach to the seemingly obvious classificatory schema used in museum practice (Davison 1990a).

My earlier work on Lobedu material culture was based on the assumption that the Krige Collection was 'representative of the material culture in the 1930s unless the collector's notes state otherwise' (Davison 1984: 42). That 'the Lobedu' was an appropriate unit of study was not questioned, and the issue of cultural boundaries was not of great importance to my project, which was primarily a study of form and technology. At that time I used the Krige Collection as a base-line for comparison with my own field observations.<sup>14</sup> My primary concern was with the artefacts *present* in the Krige Collection and with changes in material culture recorded forty years later; my concern more recently has been with the implications of *absences* in the collection, and with what the collection *represents*.

I have suggested above that the Krige Collection can be regarded as an artefact of anthropological practice in the 1930s, and that it embodies a theoretical position rather than being neutral or unbiased. This is, of course, true for all collections. All museum collecting presupposes a conceptual framework. As Parezo (1987: 3), writing on the formation of ethnographic collections at the Smithsonian Institution, has commented:

Objects housed in museums reflect the biases and preconceptions of the collectors. The researchers' theoretical orientations, their research problems and goals . . . their aesthetic preferences, and the time frame in which they worked have affected what was collected and when it was collected.

However, the physical presence of collected objects tends to distract attention from the forces that shaped collections and invites an interest in their intrinsic properties. As Thomas (1989: 41) has recently commented, the materiality of objects presents conceptual difficulties, '... common sense

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14. In correspondence between 1978 and 1984, E. J. Krige generously provided me with data from the 1930s which supplemented her existing notes on the collection.

biases our perception towards material continuity rather than contextual identity and the process of recontextualization'.

Collecting is inevitably a process of contextual displacement. Objects are physically and conceptually shifted from one context to another. A displacement of this kind occurred when the Kriges assembled their collection in the 1930s, another shift of context occurred when the collection was transferred to the SAM in 1970 and, once in the museum, further recontextualizations occurred as the collection was processed, and eventually exhibited and viewed by the public. While recontextualization is a general social process, necessary to the interpretation of phenomena, my emphasis here is on those processes of recontextualization that form part of museum practice. My contention is that objects are made meaningful in relation to context and that the contextual identity of an object undergoes a series of transformations once accessioned into a museum collection. Before entering the museum domain objects have a contextual history of production and social use, and after being collected they undergo a number of contextual shifts. The contexts of relevance to the interpretation of ethnographic collections can be summarized as follows:

- Context of manufacture
- Context(s) of use before collection
- Context(s) of collection/appropriation
- Context(s) of classification and research
- Context(s) of exhibition
- Context(s) of reception

So far this Chapter has been concerned with the shaping of the Krige Collection, that is with the context of its collection. I now turn my attention to the recontextualization of the collection at the Museum and focus in particular on the contexts of classification and exhibition.

### **The Krige Collection at the South African Museum**

#### *Context of classification: the accessioning process*

Accessioning or registration<sup>15</sup> is the single most important procedure in the process of giving an object the status of a museum specimen. It is a rite of passage through which every object, no matter how mundane or rare, must pass in order to become a formal part of a museum collection. Until an acquired object has been accessioned as a museum specimen it has not entered the

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15. At some museums accessioning and registration are two separate procedures (Chenhall 1978). At the SAM accessioning and registration are carried out as a single procedure and the terms are used synonymously. There is an extensive museological literature on documentation methods but my concern here is with the principle of making an artefact into a specimen.

institutional domain where it will be conserved and held in trust for posterity. Once accessioned, an object moves from low status transience to high status durability (see Thompson 1979) and becomes part of the approved cultural heritage of the nation. Although at the moment of purchase or exchange, an object destined for a museum collection is commoditized, once it becomes a registered specimen it is removed from the system of commodity exchange that pertains elsewhere. The process of accessioning is also a process of relocating objects in a new social and spatial setting in which they are precluded from commercial transactions. Only by the formal procedure of de-accessioning can an accessioned object re-enter the commodity sphere. At the SAM this has never happened in practice. Thus the museum domain is 'enclaved' in the sense of being a defined sphere of activity, a cultural site, in which objects are decommoditized (Appadurai 1986). Kopytoff (1986: 65) refers to this as a process of 'singularization'. It occurs when an object takes on singular or unique cultural value in a particular context, such as a museum, in which it is set apart from the commodity sphere. However, this shift in context is not without irony. In one sense, museum specimens are priceless because they are not saleable; in another their status as museum specimens confirms their potential commodity value and enhances the market value of similar objects in the commercial sphere. Attempting to place a monetary value on museum collections for insurance purposes draws attention to this ambiguity.

Power is always implicated in the process of acquisition, which can also be regarded as a form of cultural appropriation. Power relations are inherent in the questions of who collects, what is collected and why. In the case of public museum collections, such as those of the SAM, the underlying power of the state is compounded with the power of academic professionalism. The curatorial staff of state-subsidized museums are empowered by their professional status and their officially sanctioned positions to make decisions about which things, in the public interest, should be elevated to the status of museum specimens and thereby become a privileged part of the cultural heritage. Related to the professional authority vested in curators is the symbolic power of knowledge or connoisseurship. The right to 'singularize' certain objects as museum specimens is based to a large extent on what is perceived and accepted as expert knowledge. As well as formalizing the status of the chosen object as a museum specimen, accessioning gives formal recognition to the discernment of those who control what will be acquired.

In practice accessioning is a process of documentation which involves entering an identified object in a register, writing the registration number indelibly on the object and noting in the register key data on provenance and mode of acquisition. Closely linked to registration is cataloguing which involves a more fine-grained classification of specimens according to a consistent set of criteria. The purpose of the catalogue is to record the available data on collections and to make them accessible for research, exhibition or education projects.

If one accepts that meaning is always context-related, it follows that after an object has been accessioned into a museum collection it has a different range of meanings from those which it had before it had become a museum specimen. On exhibition objects are given meaning by the particular setting, form of labelling and mode of display, but even in a study collection a numbered, classified and catalogued object evokes a different set of responses from a similar non-accessioned object. The museum context endows objects with a sense of recognized worth. Accessioned specimens have, as it were, been given the seal of authenticity as historically, culturally or scientifically important objects.

In the cataloguing process, however, the former ambiguity of an object is circumscribed by the need to fit it into an established system of classification. Thus the very quality of ambiguity that is central to an object's capacity to have many social readings or interpretations is curtailed by a system of standardization. The latter has become all the more pertinent since the introduction of computer-controlled, collections-management systems. A potential shift of meaning, usually a reduction, would seem to accompany the need for consistency of format and terminology. This is akin to problems inherent in translation from one language to another - nuance is often lost in the process. Even attempts to standardize orthography may involve subtle changes in meaning for some readers. Such is the case in South Africa where certain written forms of African languages have become associated with a racist system of Bantu Education, and consequently imposed orthographic standardization has taken on an acutely political dimension (Murray 1980). Sensitivity to such an issue cannot be accommodated in a cataloguing system which depends on consistency.

In cataloguing systems the weighting of classificatory criteria is, to some degree, arbitrary. A ranking of attributes is invariably part of classification - a choice has to be made regarding which attributes are significant. Objects that do not fit neatly into the existing named categories, and thus challenge the system, are for curatorial convenience made to fit. Once catalogued, an object has become a *specimen*, it has a new reality constituted in the set of attributes by which it has been described. In the process other contextual meanings or interpretations of artefacts are reduced. The meaning of an object becomes coterminous with a classificatory category rather than being open to the many interpretations that may have given it social relevance at different times and in different contexts. For example, an ivory armband that prior to being accessioned may have been perceived in a number of different ways in different social contexts - as a link with the ancestral spirits, a token of valour, a product of the hunt, a valuable exchange commodity, a symbol of chieftainship, an object associated with masculinity, or with untamed nature, or with exploitation - would be reduced to the class of 'ornaments'. Similarly, a pole from the palisade of Modjadji's

court, which I have suggested above embodied the relationship between ruler and subject, is catalogued according to its practical function as a pole and is attributed to 'the Lobedu' even though it may have been made by a non-Lobedu subject. Furthermore, an object may have had a number of different owners of different cultural affinities, and even a single owner may have attached differing value to the object at different times. In addition, cultural or ethnic affiliation is by no means always clear. A good example of the difficulty in ascribing a cultural identity to an object is provided by the Tsonga-speaking people living in the Kosi Bay area of Zululand. For political reasons these people have assumed Zulu identity but historically and culturally they are related to the Tembe-Tsonga people of southern Mozambique. For cataloguing purposes a choice must be made, and the complexity of the situation on the ground must be contained within a limited range of categories. At best a system of cross referencing might attempt to accommodate a multiplicity of possible classifications.

It is important, however, to make a distinction between a system of classification for curatorial purposes and the broad field of knowledge and human experience in which an object might have been significant. Classifications are systems of ordering data for particular purposes, and they always embody a cultural selection of appropriate criteria. As Barthes (1964, cited in Sontag 1983: 222) has suggested,

. . . inventory is never a neutral idea; to catalogue is not merely to ascertain, as it appears at first glance, but also to appropriate.

Museum systems of classifications often appear to be directed to certain practical ends such as curatorial efficiency, consistency, accessibility and data retrieval, but classifying or naming is essentially a cultural process of ascribing meaning.

. . . it [classification] is the activity of placing a particular object into a meaningful category *vis-a-vis* the rest of the perceived world of experience (Chenhall 1978: 6).

The question of whose perception of the world is privileged in a system of classification is seldom asked. However, in the case of ethnographic collections it is clear that museum classifications derive from etic rather than emic perceptions of the objects concerned. That is to say, systems for classifying ethnographic collections are cultural constructs from one culture (usually Western) imposed on material from another culture (usually non-Western).

Ethnographic artefacts once accessioned and catalogued become part of a different cultural context. However, it is important not to confuse the categories of meaning ascribed to an object for cataloguing purposes with the meaning(s) that it might have evoked before entering the museum domain. Potentially a specimen always has more meaning than that which is captured in the written

records. This is so for both well and poorly documented collections but is more obvious in the case of the many museum specimens that lack provenance or contextual data. The very presence of an object without known provenance draws attention to the absence of knowledge about it. Cataloguing an object, even if only limited information is available, fills this gap to some extent by placing it within an established ordering system. However, an object that resists such standardization remains open to interpretation in a way that a well-documented object does not. It is not my intention to make a virtue of the problem of undocumented museum specimens but to stress that objects, well-documented by museum standards, may still be open to other readings.

The ethnographic collections at the SAM are classified according to cultural affinity (from which ethnic group does the item come?) and to function (what is the object and what is its use?). In practice both of these categories give rise to uncertainty. Ethnic groups are not bounded entities and in many cases it is difficult to place an object securely in a cultural or ethnic category as in the case of the Zulu/Tembe-Tsonga example cited above. It is pertinent here to make a distinction between a cultural *group*, which implies a social aggregation and a sense of belonging on the part of fellow members (makers or users of the collected artefact), and a cultural *category*, which is a classificatory construct used for convenience by curators. Classificatory categories are based on sets of selected criteria and, although useful in making sense of complex phenomena, they are always arbitrary to some degree (Thornton 1988a).

With regard to function, it is assumed that every artefact had an *original* function that can be identified for cataloguing purposes but an object may have been multifunctional or ambiguous, it may have had a complex social history in which it was used for different purposes at different times, and may thus not fit neatly into the existing categories. Curatorial practice, however, requires that a specimen be accommodated within the system. Consequently one has to build into a consideration of catalogued material that the classification is in itself a construct and not necessarily the only way of making sense of the material.

The Krige Collection was accessioned as SAM-9671 to SAM-9919 with the objects following the sequence of the donor's inventory (Appendix 1). With regard to the function of the types of object in the collection, fairly detailed information was provided by the donor. This was supplemented by Krige's published ethnographic works. All items were attributed to the Lobedu 'tribe', within the wider cultural grouping North Eastern Sotho, and all were said to have come from the district of Duiwelskloof which was formerly the nearest white magistracy to Modjadji's area. As noted above no data on precise localities accompanied the collection, but it is also of interest that additional data was not requested by those working on the collection at the SAM (from 1973 I have worked on the

collection). It seems possible that Krige might have had more precise data in her field notes but that this was not sought by the museum or offered by Krige herself suggests that the data was not considered necessary. From the museum perspective, the paucity of documentation was compensated for by the professional authority of the donor.<sup>16</sup> The collection was authenticated simply by virtue of having been collected by Krige & Krige, who had attributed it to 'the Lobedu'.

Clifford (1985: 244-5) has suggested that museums can 'unravel self-evident, dominant taxonomies' and that the power relations inherent in ethnographic collecting can be revealed in museum displays:

The history of the collecting and recontextualization of non-Western objects is now, ideally, a part of any exhibition.

In the late 1970s, however, at the time of planning the exhibition of the Krige Collection, the possibility of incorporating in the display an account of the concepts that informed the making of the collection and the display itself was not taken into consideration.<sup>17</sup> Below I consider the ideas that did inform the planning of the display and resulted, in 1978, in the exhibition as it stands in the Ethnography Gallery.

*Context of exhibition: Representing the Other*

The relation of self to other is at the heart of ethnographic discourse, and this relation of similarity and difference is given tangible expression in ethnographic collections and exhibitions. But, although human similarity underlies the possibility of cross-cultural communication, ethnographic exhibits tend to evoke notions of difference or primitivism. As Stocking (1985: 4) has pointed out, the experience of the objects of others by outside observers is 'in some profound way problematic'. Part of the problem resides in a complex three-dimensionality that encompasses both viewer and ethnographic object. At the time of viewing observer and object are in the same spatial context but

16. The collection, although very small by comparison with ethnographic collections in England, America or Australia, stands as the largest collection in the country made in the field by professional social anthropologists. This gives the collection special importance. Indirectly it also draws attention to the relative lack of interest among social anthropologists in ethnographic collecting.

17. A reflexive approach to collections and exhibitions at the SAM dates from the second half of the 1980s, stimulated by a range of the current writing, including the critique of ethnographic discourse as literary genre, the work of Ames (1986) and Halpin (1983) at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, and the issues raised at the 'Representations' symposium in London in 1986 (Morphy 1986).

ethnographic objects, in their often unfamiliar physical forms, tend to evoke a sense of cultural distance or Otherness. Paradoxically the museum context may be used to bridge this distance by stimulating awareness and respect for cultural diversity but may, at the same time, affirm deep-seated prejudices regarding differences of race or culture. Prevailing classifications that equate ethnography with Others, and align ethnographic collections and exhibitions with those of natural history cannot but reinforce a division between 'them' and 'us'.

A complex time dimension is also implicated in viewing, in the present, objects that were produced and collected in the past, and re-presented in a display at yet another time in the past. However, in conventional museum practice the historical context of displays is seldom made explicit, and the people responsible for the interpretive framework of an exhibition tend to remain anonymous, thus suppressing the constructed nature and authorship of museum representations. None the less the processes of producing an exhibition are always contingent on subjective ideas and interests (Stocking 1985; Clifford 1985; Morphy 1986; Shanks & Tilley 1987a; Lumley 1988; Vergo 1989).

When the display of the Krige Collection was planned in the mid-1970s, the prevailing concept that informed the layout and content of the ethnography gallery was that of 'tribal' or cultural distinctiveness of the various Khoisan and Bantu-speaking people within the southern African region. A display representing 'The Lobedu' was, therefore, in keeping both with this concept and with Krige's condition that the collection be displayed as an entity showing 'the material culture of a single tribe'.<sup>18</sup> From about 1940 until the replanning of the gallery at the beginning of the 1970s the ethnographic collections from southern Africa had been displayed in a series of wall-cases that were somewhat overshadowed by the large central show-cases showing life-casts of 'Bushmen'. The arrangement (Fig. 19B) was described as follows by the ethnologist who was responsible for both the concept and design of the gallery:

. . . for the most part the arrangement is primarily tribal, then slightly geographical. Chronology is represented to begin with by the fact that the tour of the tribal section of the wall cases starts, as seems right and proper, with the Bushmen and continues with the Hottentots. Thereafter, geography carries on; and the Herero come next, followed by the great Sotho-Tswana group. . . . The Sotho-Tswana are followed by the Nguni (Zulu-Xosa) and the Shona. The other side of the hall begins with the Balobedu and Bavenda . . . They are followed by the Baila and the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia, the Mampukushu of the Okavango, and, finally, the Ovambo (Shaw 1941: 163).

In addition to the cases showing the material culture of these groups, there were cases devoted specifically to the crafts of pottery and basketwork. Within the tribal groups the aim was to draw

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18. SAM correspondence, E6/23 February 1970, Krige to Barry.

attention, as far as possible, to the distinctive characteristics of particular ethnic groups as described in the available ethnographic and historical literature. Shaw (1941: 165) noted in an address to the South African Museums Association that identifying the distinctive features in the material culture of different groups was difficult in the light of the paucity of knowledge in this field, but went on to comment that museums should '... fight against the tendency of ethnographic displays to point not to the eternal variety of mankind but to the eternal sameness'. In short, this expressed the intended emphasis of the gallery. At odds with this, however, was the modular design and layout of the gallery that imposed a uniformity of appearance on the displays (Figs 19B, 20).

The conceptual framework for the newly designed gallery did not differ in principle from that of the old, but the major linguistic groupings, Nguni and Sotho, were allowed more space and within these groupings a series of themes, such as cattle-keeping, military organization, and reciprocity, were chosen to illustrate cultural features thought to characterize the groups. The large central cases were entirely removed, allowing room for deeper cases along the walls and a number of free-standing boxes and columns (Fig. 19C). The wall-cases contained displays on 'The Bushmen', 'The Southern Nguni', 'The Northern Nguni' The South Sotho, and The Tswana'; the smaller free-standing cases were devoted to special features such as a reconstructed Khoikhoi mat-house, a cast of a potter at work and a display of artefacts from Great Zimbabwe.

The emphasis on ethnicity within the SAM contrasted starkly with the reluctance among social anthropologists to stress ethnic differences in the face of the prevailing political ideology that manipulated ethnic differences to segregationist ends. According to the ethnologist responsible for planning the gallery, a position of factual neutrality was intended (Shaw pers. comm., 1988) but, by default, in ignoring possible, unintended political implications, the design of the gallery lent credibility to the questionable idea of bounded ethnic groupings and reinforced an ideology of cultural difference. Over the years, the emphasis on ethnic difference and the exclusion of displays that show urbanization or inter-group contact has exposed the Museum to criticism (Hudson 1975, 1977). The fact that the 'new' displays of the 1970s were regarded as permanent (with the exception of two of the free-standing cases, the displays have remained unchanged since they were mounted) has meant that they have become increasingly out of keeping with the ideas held by the professional staff.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, the dates when displays were constructed are not indicated in the gallery, therefore the viewer visiting the Museum for the first time in 1990 would have no way of knowing

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19. Considering wider Museum priorities, and that mounting these displays involved a considerable investment of technical expertise, time and money, there has been a certain degree of resistance among the design staff to changing them. However, at present the gallery is under review.

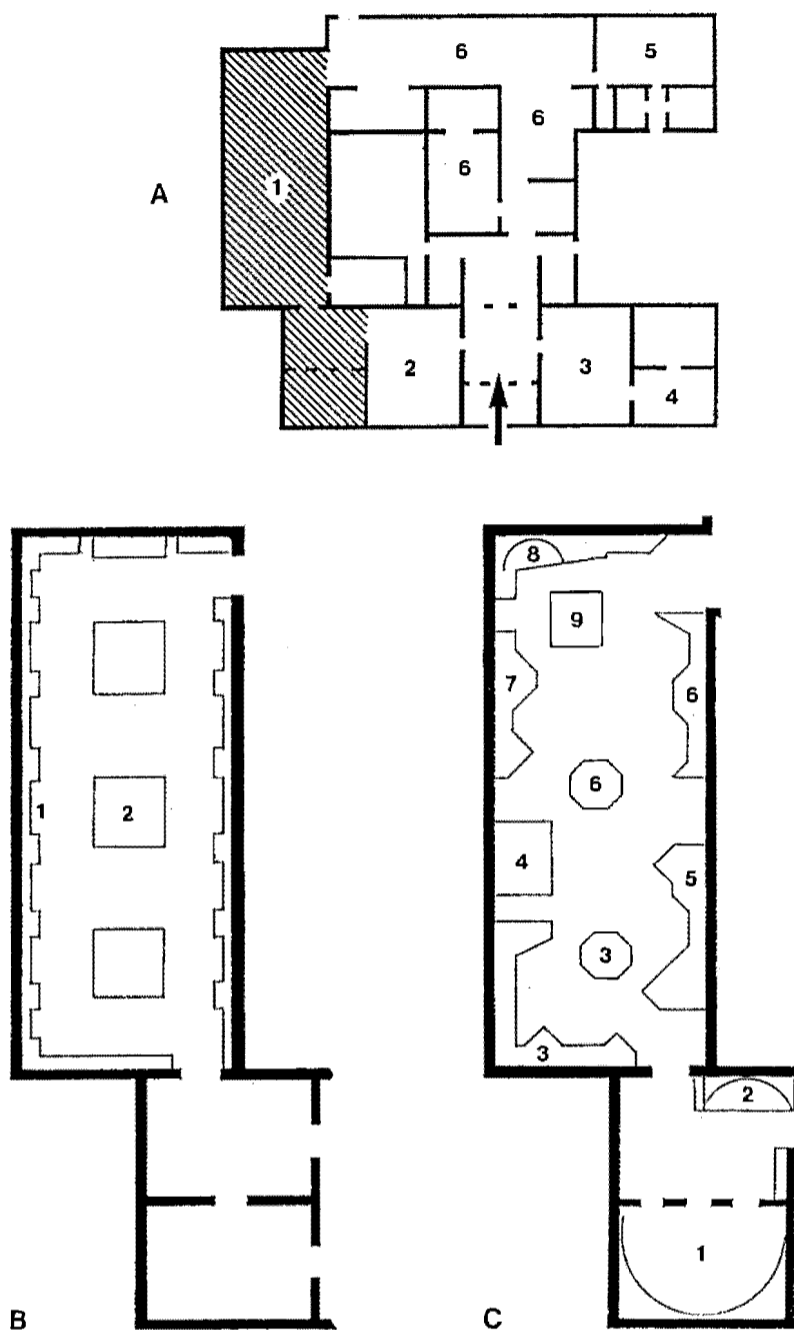


Fig. 19. A. Ground-floor plan of South African Museum, 1978. Key: 1, Ethnology; 2, Archaeology; 3, Special exhibitions; 4, Entomology; 5, Lecture hall; 6, Palaeontology.  
 B. Layout of display cases, Ethnology Gallery, 1942. Key: 1, Typological displays; 2, Life-casts of Bushmen.  
 C. Layout of display cases, Ethnology Gallery, 1978. Key: 1, Bushman diorama; 2, Peer's Cave diorama; 3, The Bushmen; 4, The Hottentots; 5, The Southern Nguni; 6, The Northern Nguni; 7, The Tswana; 8, The Lobedu; 9, Great Zimbabwe.

that most of the displays in the Ethnography Gallery were designed and mounted more than a decade ago. The fact that most of the labels are written in the present tense compounds the problem and tends to suggest timeless continuity when in fact both the collections and their use in displays should be historically situated. I shall return to this issue below specifically in relation to the Krige Collection.

The aesthetic quality of the new displays differed greatly from the earlier ones. The latter had been mounted during the war years when the Museum was under-staffed and under-funded. The old display cases were of a standard design, and the exhibitions were scripted and executed by the ethnologist in charge of the ethnographic collection (Shaw 1941). The new cases were designed under contract by an architect who had researched international trends in museum architecture, and the arrangement of material within the cases was designed by a professional display artist, assisted by technical specialists and advised by the curatorial staff.<sup>20</sup> One of the most striking differences in the visual impact of the gallery was achieved by the use of life-casts clothed in traditional dress or ritual costume and positioned to show a particular activity or posture. In the older displays no attempt had been made to create a semblance of reality - the objects in cases were clearly displayed as labelled museum specimens in conventional museum cases but in the new gallery the use of convincingly life-like figures created a new contextual dimension that had the possible effect of blurring the distinction between representation and reality. These figures remain focal points in the gallery attracting more far more attention and curiosity than the other exhibits (this impression was confirmed in interviews and by observing visitors in the gallery). Possible reasons for the attraction of these figures are discussed in Chapter 7 in relation to a diorama in the room adjacent to the formal ethnography gallery.

Another difference in the newly-designed gallery was in the style of labelling and the use of silk-screened photographic images to provide visual context for the exhibits. No primary colours were used; instead the range of colours used was selected to sympathize with the textures and materials of the objects displayed. For example, red ochre was chosen for the screened panels relating to the people of the Transkei, and beige for those relating to desert dwellers. The overall effect was to evoke an organic symmetry between objects, images and written text. The same type-face and style of labelling was used throughout the gallery thus also giving the gallery a sense of aesthetic coherence through typographic consistency. While sensitivity to the ethnographic object was a major concern of both curator and designer, the structural design of the gallery and the

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20. The architect was Mr M. Miszewski; the artists were Mrs H. Luckhoff and Mr J. Kramer assisted by Mr A. Byron, and the ethnographers were Miss E. M. Shaw and myself.

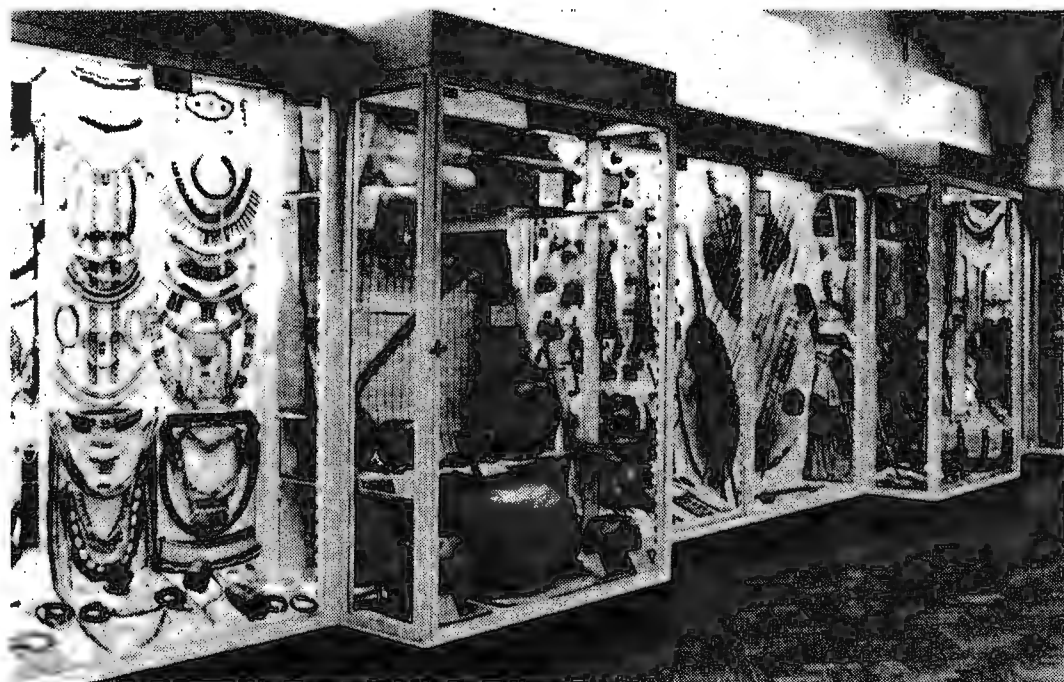
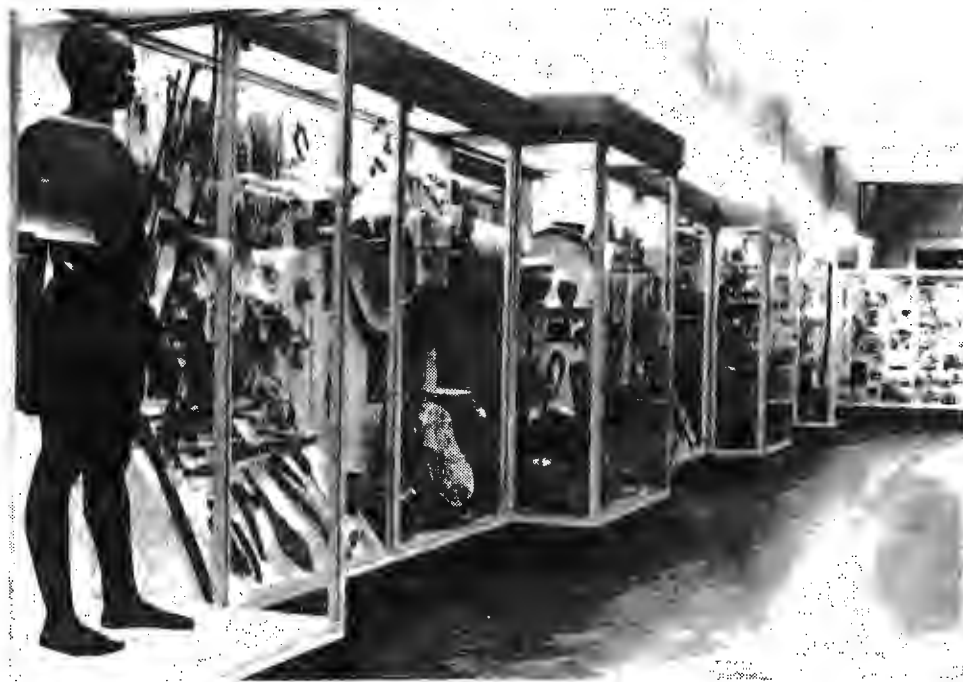
arrangement of exhibits were strongly influenced by a Eurocentric aesthetic of modernism. International museum trends had been carefully researched, and professional skills and standards were made manifest in the gallery. While the technical excellence and aesthetic harmony of the displays acknowledge a respect for the material on exhibition, at the same time the gallery is also a sophisticated expression of museum professionalism and authority.<sup>21</sup>

From the Museum perspective, the display of the Krige Collection was required to fit into the overall conceptual framework and aesthetic realization of the gallery. 'The Lobedu' would represent 'The Northern Sotho' thus complementing the existing Sotho and Nguni displays. This, it was thought, would also accord with the donor's wishes that the collection be displayed as an entity. However, the fact that the collection was shown as one of a number of displays in a gallery with a uniform aesthetic quality reduced the impact the it might have had in a different gallery and handled in a different way. Krige herself was disappointed that the collection had not been given more space.<sup>22</sup> In fact, a significant shift of emphasis had occurred in the process of planning - to accord with the 'tribal' framework of the rest of the gallery, the focus of the exhibition became 'The Lobedu' as represented in the Krige Collection, rather than the Krige Collection as a unique ethnographic collection made by anthropologists in the 1930s. *What* was exhibited was determined by the content of the Krige Collection (itself a partial representation of Lobedu material culture) but *how* it was exhibited was determined by the existing blueprint for the Ethnography Gallery. The result was a museum representation of Krige's representation of Lobedu material culture.<sup>23</sup>

*'The Lobedu' on show*

The brief was to display the Krige Collection of Lobedu material culture as a whole. Within the relatively limited space available, however, it was impossible to include every single item in the

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21. Halpin has commented on a superbly constructed exhibition of Northwest Coast artefacts at a museum in British Columbia that one could '... see the clash of two cultures and *experience* the technological and political ascendancy of one at the expense of the other.' (Halpin 1978 (original emphasis) cited in Ames 1986: 33). However, the recontextualization of objects from another culture in a museum display may also be empowering for the members of that culture, if not read as a subtle form of patronization. Involving 'others' actively in the display of their own culture would reduce a possibility of the latter.
  22. Krige was also unhappy that the display was situated at one end of a long gallery; she felt that the collection merited a more prominent place in the Museum (Krige pers. comm. 1982).
  23. Sperber (1985: 11-12) has made the point that all ethnographic descriptions and interpretations are representations, that is they 'stand for' something else. Often what they stand for is also a representation, such as a local interpretation of an event. He suggests that representations should be accompanied by a 'descriptive comment' that 'identifies the object represented and specifies the type of representation involved'. The same could be said for visual representations in museum displays.



**Fig. 20. Displays in Ethnology Gallery, South African Museum, 1940s.  
(South African Museum Photographic Collection.)**

collection but it was agreed that an example of every kind of artefact in the collection should be included.<sup>24</sup> The sub-divisions in Krige's inventory were used as a guide to grouping items for display. It was decided that there would be an introductory label on the outside of the case, and in keeping with the rest of the gallery, the headline title would be 'The Lobedu'. Inside the case there would be three main labels on panels with screened images to illustrate the subjects concerned - Economy and Crafts, Belief and Ritual, and Recreation. Most of the collection could be accommodated within these themes, and the large number of domestic utensils and other household objects would be shown in a reconstructed cooking-house and courtyard. This would be the central feature of the display and formal cases would extend from it on both sides along the adjacent walls. As in the rest of the Museum, written text would be in English and in Afrikaans. There was no consideration of including an African language - the implicit assumption was that Bantu-speakers visiting the exhibition would be able to read English or Afrikaans.<sup>25</sup> This also applied to foreign visitors.

The display (Fig. 21) is a combination of a thematic display in which labelled artefacts illustrate the theme in three-dimensional form, and a situational display in which unlabelled objects are arranged in a recreated domestic setting. A large blow-up of Modjadji's village forms the backdrop of the courtyard scene. This is the only actual photograph in the display but on each panel there is a silk-screened photographic image appropriate to the text. These images are credited to the photographers, five in all, but the dates of the photographs are omitted. Only one photograph was taken by Krige in the 1930s, the others were taken by museum photographers in the 1970s, but as screened images they have been made contemporary and aesthetically homogeneous.<sup>26</sup> By implication the images are taken to be contemporary with the collection (the introductory label states that it dates to between 1936 and 1938) but they are in fact contemporary with the exhibition of the collection. This incongruity raises complex issues of temporality and historical authenticity. A consideration of the tenses used in the texts of the labels provides clues to some of the perceptions of temporality that inform the display.

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24. Krige gave her approval to this when I discussed the space problem with her in 1977. As I was largely responsible for the content of this display, my comments are in part a documentation of the display process, as I saw it then, and in part critical commentary on the display, as I see it now.

25. The issue of trilingual labelling has subsequently been discussed without consensus. Considering the high level of illiteracy, a spoken commentary would be more effective than a written text. This would apply to African languages as well as English and Afrikaans.

26. By using screen-printed images, differences in quality and format could be removed to create a uniform aesthetic appearance in the gallery (Kramer pers. comm. 1990).

*Ethnographic past and present*

The text of the main labels is written almost entirely in the present tense. For example, the label headed 'Economy and Crafts' starts as follows:

The Lobedu are agriculturalists and pastoralists. Agriculture provides the staple food but wild plants, fruits and insects add variety to the diet. The natural vegetation also provides the material for craftwork . . .

Similarly in the label headed 'Belief and Ritual':

The Lobedu believe there are mystical ways in which the power of nature may be controlled . . .

The past tense is used when describing the history of Modjadji's people, when acknowledging the donation of the collection, and to denote the remote past. For example, 'Before money was in circulation, trade took the form of exchange of goods . . .' Objects, such as locally forged metal hoe-heads, that were rare at the time Krige collected them are also labelled in the past tense. Otherwise the labels for individual objects are in the present tense, implying continuity or contemporaneity. The predominant use of the ethnographic present despite the fact that the collection was made in the 1930s is a rhetorical convention that serves a number of related purposes. Most importantly, it suppresses historical context and thus deflects attention from questions that the past tense might provoke. If the collection were historically situated in the past, issues of change and continuity would be foregrounded almost by default. It would become necessary to address economic and political issues such as migrant labour, land shortage and shifting political alliances. By using the present tense time has been arrested for the purpose of showing the 'traditional way of life', in much the same way as the classic ethnographic monographs convey a static view of 'traditional' societies.<sup>27</sup> The use of the ethnographic present re-presents social systems as coherent self-perpetuating, functional entities while at the same time it understates human agency, intentionality, historical contingency and the power relations that are inherent in the social use of cultural resources. The predominant use of the present tense in the 'The Lobedu' exhibition, and indeed in the entire Ethnography Gallery, suggests to the viewer that this is how a particular ethnic group lives, this is what they believe and this is their material culture. It simplifies and idealizes what is presented. As was shown above, the Krige Collection, made in the 1930s, is an idealized

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27. Spiegel & Boonzaier (1988) have shown that the qualifier 'traditional' is seldom neutral. It frequently relates to the mobilization of a past symbol for present purposes or interests. In segregationist South Africa 'traditional' has also long been used as a distancing device and euphemism for 'tribal', 'primitive' or 'non-Western'.



Fig. 21. 'The Lobedu' display, South African Museum, 1978. A. Situational display, interior of cooking house. (Photograph: A. Byron, South African Museum.) B. Courtyard scene and thematic display of musical instruments. (Photograph: J. Hosford, South African Museum.)

representation of Lobedu material culture at that time. Exhibited forty years later and labelled in the ethnographic present, the collection perpetuates the semblance of cultural stasis.

Having said this, I must add that one exceptional label has been written in the past tense. This is the label that describes the objects in a reconstructed cooking-house and courtyard that was built at the museum in 1978 for the exhibition. Paradoxically, the past tense has been used to label this recent artefact whereas the ethnographic present has been used for the Krige Collection. I suggest this was done to give legitimacy to a modern reconstruction juxtaposed with a much older collection. The tense difference draws attention to the fact that the reconstruction is a representation of a different kind from the rest of the display. The label states explicitly that this part of the exhibition display is a reconstruction:

Utensils of everyday use are shown here in a courtyard and cooking hut which have been reconstructed following the method that was common in the 1930s. . . . The figure of the Lobedu woman in the hut was cast from a mould made at Modjadji's village in 1976.

The description that follows on from this places the utensils in a context of past use:

The main daily meal of porridge and vegetable relish was cooked in clay pots on the hearth and served into calabash or wooden vessels. . . . A shelf under the roof was useful for storing sleeping-mats, bags and seed-grain that needed protection from the ants . . .

This label is positioned to the left of the reconstructed house, it is removed from the actual scene so that it does not interrupt the naturalism of the display which, as in a period room, is allowed to communicate uncircumscribed by written text. Individual objects are unlabelled as they are less important in themselves than in their relationship to each other. Despite the past tense of the label (which by no means all viewers read), the perceived temporality of the situational display itself is problematic. The constructed past is presented with an immediacy that conflates present and past, in much the same way as does the ethnographic present. Here again time is generalized and suspended in relation to a static museum context. Shanks & Tilley's (1987a: 77) comments on a period room in the Castle Museum in York are pertinent here:

Situational display attempts to overcome the distance of the past. Artifacts are reassembled into 'realistic' association and no longer stand on their own. The distance between past and present is suspended in an arrested synchronism.

The label draws attention to the constructed nature of the display but the scene itself subverts this awareness by seeming so convincingly natural. The presence of a life-like figure of a woman cooking does much to enhance this effect. I am not suggesting that viewers cannot distinguish between a representation and a real-life situation, but an illusion of reality is created by the display technique. The overriding message that the scene conveys is simply that this is how Lobedu people

live (or lived, if the label is noticed). Either way the representation is assumed to be an accurate rendering of a scene based on well researched data. The credibility and authority of the museum context is such that few visitors question its claim to authenticity. The physical presence of museum specimens, objects certified as being the 'real things', is a powerful source of authenticity, and this in itself lends a sense of veracity to museum interpretations. There is a reciprocal verification between specimen and museum annotation - they lend each other credibility.

However, the presence of objects in an exhibition also creates a counterpoint of absence. As discussed above, a consideration of absences in the Krige Collection reveals much about the collectors' preconceptions in the 1930s. Similarly, the tension between presence and absence in the exhibition, 'The Lobedu', reveals some of the unstated assumptions that informed its production in the late 1970s.

### *Presence and absence*<sup>28</sup>

Although it is the residue of human use encapsulated within artefacts that gives the study of material culture anthropological relevance, this can only be inferred indirectly from the material record. The human presence residual in artefacts must be interpreted by other human beings in order to acquire meaning. This is patently so in the case of the fragmentary record of the past provided by archaeological artefacts but it is true also for all artefacts recontextualized in museum collections and exhibitions. At every level of museum practice there is an interplay of object and subject, and of presence and absence which goes on continuously as viewers construct meaning in response to exhibited artefacts. A tension between presence and absence is invariably implicated in the interpretation of cultural objects removed from their original contexts of human manufacture and use. An exhibition of ethnographic artefacts (objects classified as Other) implies the absence of a different cultural context in which these artefacts would be, as it were, at home.

If, as I have argued, the meaning of a cultural object or a material text always resides in the relationship between the object and how it is received by the interpreter, artefacts may evoke a multiplicity of meanings. Moreover, artefacts may appeal to the emotions as much as to rational intelligence - intuitive responses to the aesthetic quality or mystery of an object may account in part for the impact that it could make on human consciousness. In principle the meanings of an artefact are continually in the process of being constructed in the many contexts of subject/object interaction. In the case of ethnographic exhibits, the object stands for an absent human subject in a

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28. Ideas expressed in this section have been influenced by Berger & Mohr (1982); Shanks & Tilley (1987); Miller (1988); Clifford (1988); Jordanova (1989).

different context. I would argue that an ideal of communication through ethnographic objects would be a form of vicarious intersubjectivity mediated by the interpreted object. Simply stated, the object would be a vehicle for conveying meaning between people of different cultures. However, in practice this would be a complex hermeneutic process in which meaning would be generated in relation to subjective theoretical positions and cultural values.

I have suggested above that the process of museum classification reduces the polysemic nature of cultural objects by placing them within a standardized system of ordered relationships. This does not mean that the status of classified objects is fixed on a permanent basis but that it is fixed for curatorial purposes. The problem is that arbitrary classifications are frequently reified in the context of museum displays and given a semblance of unmediated reality (Davison 1990a). In addition to this epistemological issue, the conceptual framework of an exhibition usually glosses over ambiguity in the interests of presenting a readily consumable product.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the Krige Collection the product was pre-determined by the existing concept of the gallery as a whole. The collection was taken to represent another 'traditional' southern African 'tribe', in this case 'The Lobedu'. Ethnicity, as expressed in material culture, is the common thread running through the gallery. But as noted above, ethnicity is treated as a given rather than a subject for investigation and thus there is a lack in the gallery as a whole of any sense of the active or strategic use of material culture to define ethnic identity. Traditional artefacts are presented as representations of 'ways of life' but the way they are socially mobilized as cultural resources is not addressed.

Instead of focusing on the historical relationships between social practice and material culture, objects from the Krige Collection are presented as material quotes from the standard ethnographic monograph by Krige & Krige (1943). Moreover, the quotes are selective, being limited both by the exhibition rhetoric and by the content of the collection. Apart from the lack of anything that is not 'traditional', there is no reference in the exhibition to the exercise of power, to labour migration, or to demographic pressure. However, considering the importance of women in Lobedu social organization and the extensive literature on the subject, perhaps the most conspicuous absence in the exhibition is the omission of any material on the roles of women. That an exhibition on 'The Lobedu' does not address the roles of women would seem to require some explanation. The answer seems to relate to the point made previously that social relations and material culture were conceptually separated both in the shaping of the Krige Collection, and in the Museum

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29. Displays are often targeted at a hypothetical audience, while responses of actual viewers are seldom analysed. Complex issues are thus avoided in advance without evidence of their unacceptability.

representation of the collection. Thus the exhibition, abides by the brief to show the collection of Lobedu material culture as an entity (the Krige Collection as representing 'the Lobedu') but it fails to communicate adequately the human relations that animated material culture in social use.

Perhaps this was inevitable considering that relatively few of the objects in the collection had been in everyday use but were, instead, examples of the types of object in use. However, even those objects that had been in use were conceptually reduced to a category in a collection, once they had been removed from their original social context. In conclusion, I illustrate this point with reference to the social history of a single item in the collection - a pole from the palisade of the capital. In Chapter 4 this pole, among others, was discussed in relation to the social setting of Modjadji's court. Here I focus on the museum context and the recontextualization of the object.

#### *Contextual meanings of SAM-9751*

A carved pole (see Fig. 11A) from the court (*kgôrô*) of the Lobedu capital was collected by the Kriges in 1937 when the palisade of the *kgôrô* had been renewed and the older poles discarded. In E. J. Krige's notes on the collection the pole was described as '*lebala la kgôrô ya khosi: courtyard pole, one of many carved poles surrounding the courtyard of the capital*'. A description of the use of the *kgôrô* was also given in the notes, and attention was drawn to the fact that when poles were required for the *kgôrô* of the capital, Modjadji sent word to her headmen in the sub-districts and they organized the men of their areas to take poles to the capital; some men, Krige noted, added 'a touch of individuality to their pole' by means of decorative carving. Although the formal attributes of *kgôrô* poles were thus reduced to mere decoration, this information did provide the pole in the collection with provenance and a generalized situational context. This information, complemented by contextual data and photographs in Krige & Krige (1943), made it clear that the pole was associated with the royal court. However, within Krige's inventory of the collection the pole was grouped, somewhat anomalously, with 'Utensils, tools and other objects connected with cooking, domestic activities and homestead'. This may have been for want of a more suitable category in the inventory but it confirms the point made earlier that the classification of collected objects does not necessarily accord with their meaning(s) in social practice. In addition, the pole was physically altered by the collectors who had it sawn off at the lower end in order to transport it more easily. The removal of the staked end that made the pole practically effective in use can be regarded as literal transformation of the object into a collected specimen.

In Chapter 4 it was suggested that the carved poles of the royal *kgôrô*, the meeting place of men, represented the relationship between subjects and ruler, and that those poles carved to represent women, or women's labour, could be regarded as an acknowledgement by the maker (always a

man) of the pivotal role of women in Lobedu social organization. This interpretation was based on field investigation of the spatial context of carved poles at the capital, reconsideration of the ethnography relating to the *kgôrô* in action, field interviews and a study of *kgôrô* poles in a private collection. However, this interpretation has not been included in the presentation of the *kgôrô* pole (SAM-9751) at the Museum. In keeping with the Krige inventory, it has been hung in association with the section of the display on 'Economy and Crafts'.

The main focus in this part of the display is on tools used in metal-working, pottery, wood-carving and skin-dressing. The *kgôrô* pole is flanked on one side by a series of locally crafted arrows and on the other by a panel of text and screened images of potters at work. The label makes no attempt to describe the manufacture of the pole or to interpret its form but simply refers to it as a carved pole from the *kgôrô* of the capital. Positioned as it is in a corner, the viewer might be forgiven for not noticing it at all. The aesthetic quality of the pole has been given no acknowledgement in the manner of display but then neither has the social context. The fact the Museum was committed to showing every type of object in the Krige Collection in a relatively small case may provide part of the explanation, but this manner of display was made possible by the fact that the pole had become simply one of many specimens in a collection to be displayed.

However, if removed from the context of the Krige Collection on display, the *kgôrô* pole would be open to other readings. For example, the sculptural form of the pole might evoke meaning for the viewer. The pole is carved to represent a woman's head and torso but the pole-form itself might suggest phallic connotations. Considering the bilateral emphasis of Lobedu kinship, an iconic merging of male and female would not be inappropriate. While this is speculative, the point I wish to make is that the physical presence of the object has the potential to stimulate creative thought and indeed the pole figure might be perceived as both art and artefact.<sup>30</sup> As alluded to above the process of recontextualization is continuous and depends in part on the ideas that the viewer brings to the object.

The recurrent argument of this chapter has been that Lobedu material culture as represented at the SAM has been conceptually separated from Lobedu social life. This is summed up in the irony that the single object in the Krige collection that overtly represents a woman has not been used as a vehicle to communicate the most celebrated feature of Lobedu social organization - the importance of women as sisters and wives, and in the case of Modjadji, as ritual queen. Although the exhibition

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30. Together with other poles from Modjadji's *kgôrô*, SAM-9751 has been described in a volume on southern African art (Davison 1989).

was intended to be about the Lobedu people, it is essentially a display of the types of things that were collected in the 1930s by Krige & Krige, mediated by museum anthropologists and designers. As such it is a visual representation of a representation, a composite artefact of museum practice.

## CHAPTER 7

### MUSEUM CASE 2: REPRESENTING 'THE BUSHMEN' IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM

#### Introduction

In response to a recent article by Solway & Lee (1990) that sets out to revise 'revisionist' assumptions regarding southern African hunter-gatherers, Gordon (1990b: 126) noted that 'The people labelled Bushmen are one of the most heavily commoditized groupings in the annals of academe, . . . .' Few anthropologists would contest this observation, and indeed it is possible to trace shifting paradigms within the discipline of anthropology as a whole by tracing the varying modes of analysis brought to bear on data from southern African hunter-gatherers. As Trigger (1990: 134) pointed out in response to the same article,

Periods marked by a strong faith in the regularity of human behaviour and in rationality as its primary determinant have been characterized by the belief that modern hunter-gatherer societies provide living examples of Paleolithic life. This view was embodied in the 'theoretic history' of the Enlightenment, the unilinear evolutionism of the 1860s and 1870s, and the neo-evolutionism of the 1960s . . . In intervening periods anthropologists have been preoccupied with the diversity, particularity, and contingency of human behavior, as a result of which they have had serious doubts about the extent to which modern hunter-gatherers accurately represent the nature of pristine societies.

Not only have the people called Bushmen<sup>1</sup> been commoditized as the subject of intensive academic investigation by anthropologists and other scientists, they have also been represented in a variety of ways by travellers, script-writers, film-makers, journalists and novelists, as different as Laurens van der Post, Alex la Guma and J. M. Coetzee. Over the past two centuries Khoisan people have been

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1. Both 'Bushman' and 'San' are terms applied by outsiders to people who lived by hunting and gathering in southern Africa; both are problematic and imprecise but 'San' has become the preferred academic usage in recent years. However, where the term *Bushmen* is used in this dissertation it reflects historical usage and should be read as if in inverted commas. The same applies to the use of the term *Hottentot* instead of Khoikhoi. Where possible I use the names by which people referred to themselves, such as /Xam for the hunter-gatherers of the Karoo. The term Khoisan is used here to refer inclusively to southern African foragers, hunters and herders; it implicitly draws attention to the difficulty in sustaining a categorical distinction between Khoi and San groupings.

culturally appropriated and reduced to a range of stereotypes, including the bestial primitive, marauding savage, noble savage (often depicted as fallen from grace), marginalized minority, curiosity, children of nature and, related to this, harmless people living in timeless balance with their environment. The common denominator of these stereotypes, which have entered popular consciousness to varying degrees at different times, is that the people so classified are denied voices or histories of their own, they become objects of scientific or popular interest because of their difference from the observer; they are cultural Others. However, as the insights of post-structuralists have shown, the very process of distancing the Other is intimately linked to the construction of Self, which is defined and visualized in contradistinction to a perception of Others. Academic discourse on cultural Others, such as the Bushmen, has served to privilege and give dominance to a particular mode of representation in which human subjects are conceptually distanced as objects of study (Fabian 1983). If the discipline of anthropology as a whole is premised on objectivizing cultural Others, anthropology as practised in museums provides one of the clearest examples of this process. I aim to demonstrate this below.

My intention in this chapter is to consider the ways in which Bushmen have been represented at the South African Museum (SAM) from the early twentieth century to the present. I will focus in particular on a collection of life-casts of people deemed to be 'pure Bushmen', and the way these casts have been presented at the Museum as displayed objects for public viewing. Through this case study, I hope to elucidate the way in which museum practice has operated to reify 'the Bushmen' as a racial group, to literally objectify them as physical specimens, and to privilege certain anthropological interpretations relating to them. In the latter part of the chapter I examine the most prominent current display on hunter-gatherers at the SAM, a diorama in which 13 cast figures are used to depict life in a nineteenth century hunter-gatherer camp in the Karoo. Before focusing on the diorama, however, I outline the history of the casting project, which pre-dated the production of the diorama by almost half a century.

#### **Objectivizing the Other: the casting project, 1906-1924**

The association of the South African Museum with an ethnological interest in Bushmen and Hottentots can be traced back to the founding of the institution in 1825 by Dr Andrew Smith. This is affirmed in Smith's own writings and those of early visitors to the museum, such as Lieutenant T. Duthie who recorded in his diary of 1832 that he and Dr Murray of the South African Institution had gone to the Museum 'to see the Hottentot woman of Smith's' (Kirby 1965: 116). Percival Kirby, Smith's biographer, was unable to find any further reference to this exhibit, and it is not

recorded in the Museum's annual reports which date only from 1855, nor in the accession registers which also date only from that time.<sup>2</sup>

In 1830 Andrew Smith published a paper on the origin and history of the Bushmen, in which he expressed the view that 'Saan' (Bushman) and Hottentots belonged to a single race and that their languages were related.<sup>3</sup> In holding this opinion Smith echoed a view that had been widely held in the eighteenth century but which was contested and debated in the nineteenth century as race increasingly became the subject of 'scientific' investigation (Elphick 1977). There was little dispute, however, regarding the belief that both Hottentots and Bushmen were among the low orders of humanity. While Bushmen were generally regarded as being degenerate and brutal, explanation of this condition varied considerably from climatic factors to their assumed low position in the Great Chain of Being, and the possibility of absolute biological difference (the polygenist view). The latter gave rise to a scientific discourse on race that attempted to establish racial distinctiveness on morphological criteria. Among these the cranial index (length : breadth ratio of the skull) was believed to be of taxonomic significance in classifying racial types, and was also thought to be linked to intellectual capacity (Stocking 1987). Phrenologists used skull dimensions as evidence to support theories on unequal intellectual capability among different races, and there was a widespread popular belief in the correlation of race and physiognomic features with moral disposition<sup>4</sup>.

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2. That Andrew Smith was an active collector is well documented but most of the ethnographic material that he collected on his expeditions was later sold to defray the costs of his travels. The list of articles delivered to the Association for Exploring Africa that underwrote Smith's expedition of 1834-36 included '9 Sets of Bosjesman Bows and Arrows' (Lye 1975: 299). From 1855 onwards when accession records were kept, Bushman artefacts appear intermittently in the lists of acquisitions classified with the Miscellaneous Collections under the various sub-headings such as 'Work of Uncivilized Races', 'Native implements' or 'Work of native races' (SAM Annual Reports).
  3. Smith, like most other early travellers, stressed the wild and treacherous nature of the Bushmen. None the less, he also made a careful record of their material culture and customs (Kirby 1965).
  4. During the nineteenth century the perceived connection between race and moral disposition was elevated to the status of knowledge, and was given credibility in scientific publications. In contemporary South Africa the association of race, culture and criminal behaviour, long since discredited elsewhere, has been perpetuated formally in the education system, in a senior-certificate course titled 'Ethnology and Criminology'. This course is not widely taught at schools but it is taught at Technikons, private Colleges and, significantly, it is part of the syllabus at Police Colleges.

As a surgeon, Andrew Smith had been trained in anatomy in Edinburgh,<sup>5</sup> qualifying a few years after Robert Knox, who later became a vociferous advocate of polygenism. There is evidence to suggest that Smith's views differed from those of Knox (Kirby 1965), but he was doubtless a participant in debates on the contentious issues of racial and cultural evolution. It is of interest that he presented the cranium of a 'notorious Bushman murderer' to the Anatomical Museum of the Royal Army Medical Corps in Chatham where, after returning to England, he served as Principal Medical Officer from 1837-1845 (Morris 1987: 14). The explicit connection of immorality with race in this case can be regarded as being both reflective of an existing popular racial stereotype and constitutive of an emerging scientific racialism. This was but one of many Khoisan skulls that found their way into European collections during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when such collections were used as scientific evidence for morphological studies. Morris (1987: 12) comments,

These osteological remains were considered to be part of the native fauna of distant lands and no natural history collection could be considered complete unless it contained a representative quantity of human skulls.

That skulls of Bushmen were regarded as faunal collections is telling, if not surprising, considering that an evolutionary paradigm taken from natural history had a strong influence on the emerging ethnological sciences.<sup>6</sup> Historical time-depth and the principles of stratigraphy, demonstrated scientifically in the earth sciences, were increasingly drawn on to explain human variation,

... those who encountered peoples and cultures very different from themselves for the first time and on a large scale, necessarily attempted to place them in time as well as in space (Thornton 1981: 21).

From 1859 onwards Darwin's theory of evolution provided, by analogy, a range of biological explanations for human cultural differences (Gilman 1985). The language of biology was transferred metaphorically to the discourse of the social sciences. Social evolutionists, however, misused Darwin's theory of natural selection in the promotion of selective breeding or eugenics, and they also misinterpreted his concept of time by linking it to the idea of cultural progress. A preoccupation with the stages leading to civilization resulted in the replacement of an abstract

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5. Smith entered Edinburgh University in 1813, and Knox graduated in 1814 (Kirby 1965). At this time the shortage of cadavers for anatomical dissection had resulted in the practice of exhuming corpses for this purpose. Smith's biographer notes that it is possible that Knox and Smith were among the 'amateur resurrectionists' (Kirby 1965: 4). Although not directly related, this practice of exhumation for scientific purposes prefigured the later practice of excavating Bushman graves for skeletal specimens.
  6. In 1847 when ethnology was included in the British Association for the Advancement of Science it was grouped with 'Zoology and Botany' (Altick 1978).

concept of time as duration over millennia with 'the conviction that Time "accomplished", or brought about things in the course of evolution' (Fabian 1983: 15). Anthropologists increasingly used time as a device for the affirmation of physical and cultural difference as *distance* (Fabian 1983). Indeed, in order to treat people as specimens, as objects of study, it was *necessary* to distance them in concept both temporally and spatially. Accordingly Bushmen and other 'primitive' people could be treated as living fossils - specimens to be appropriated for the advancement of science. Racialism informed the process on two levels, being both the product of, and the prerequisite for, this mode of analysis. As Cornwell (1989) has argued, by the time the idea of race was formalized in scientific discourse a popular ideology of racial differentiation was well established and indeed gave social meaning to scientific theories on race.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries racial typology and the relationship between race and culture remained subjects of intense public interest and academic investigation. As the power of the scientific disciplines of biology, natural history and ethnology increased, the 'primitive' or 'lower' races were increasingly regarded as anthropological specimens. The scientific status of these disciplines did little to dispel the popularly held view that Bushmen and Hottentots were 'savages', genetically akin to the apes; these ideas were, on the contrary, reinforced. By the mid-nineteenth century the idea of the noble savage had been superseded by confidence in European superiority and capability, a conviction that was supposedly backed by scientific evidence drawn from ethnological studies. Successive exhibitions in London of aboriginal inhabitants of Africa and America confirmed public prejudices regarding other races.

One particular exhibition in London that had a notable impact on the popular image of the Bushmen was held in 1847 at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly. To give an aura of scientific credibility to the venture it was preceded by a lecture delivered at the Exeter Hall by the anatomist and ardent polygenist, Robert Knox<sup>7</sup>. The lecture was publicized as addressing, among other things, 'the great question of race' (Altick 1978: 280), while the exhibition poster advertised: 'Bosjesmans . . . The most singular specimens of that decreasing race of human beings . . . that from their wild habits could never before be induced to visit a place of civilization.' However, despite being billed as providing an opportunity for 'gratifying the Man of Science and the Student of *Zoology*' (my emphasis), the exhibition was a spectacle of human degradation. The Times described the

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7. Not surprisingly, the effusive announcements of Knox's credentials glossed over the fact that his academic career had been tarnished some twenty years earlier when it was revealed that the corpses he had been acquiring for dissection were victims of the notorious murderers, Burke and Hare (Altick 1978; Stocking 1987).

Bushmen as 'little above the monkey tribe, and scarcely better than the mere brutes of the field' (cited in Altick 1978: 281). From this and numerous other reports it is clear that no attempt was made to present the Bushmen humanely, let alone as noble savages. Not only were they objects of curiosity but they were a source of extreme gratification for the Victorian public whose self-esteem was greatly enhanced relative to the spectacle of squalid savagery.<sup>8</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, in southern African settler society a distorted stereotype of bestial Bushmen had served a more insidious purpose than simply affirming the cultural superiority of the settlers. By classifying the Bushmen as animal-like plunderers, the inhumane treatment of these people at the hands of the colonizers had been rendered justifiable, and made to seem natural or, at least, acceptable (Guenther 1980). Violence and counter-violence characterized settler relations with dispossessed Khoikhoi and San in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Marks 1972; Newton-King & Malherbe 1981), although, as Wright (1971: 35) has pointed out, 'treatment of Bushmen varied from place to place and from time to time, and largely because of the economic value of captives as servants it never went as far as complete extermination.' Throughout southern Africa, the resistance of the indigenous population was eventually quelled, and by the second half of the nineteenth century the numbers of hunter-gatherers had been greatly reduced. Those that survived in the Cape Colony were no longer living as hunter-gatherers but as labourers and squatters on farms. By this time they had ceased to be a threat to the settlers, but remnant groups were becoming of increasing interest to philologists and ethnologists as living examples of a low order of the human species. The tendency to romanticize the hunter-gatherer way of life was also emerging.

The main objective behind collections of skeletons believed to be pure examples of the Bush racial type was to amass morphological data that would advance an understanding of human origins, and shed light on the debate regarding the unity or plurality of mankind, in particular on the physical differences between Hottentots, Strandlopers and Bushmen (later divided geographically into Kalahari Bushmen and those of the Cape Colony). The methodological assumption of these osteological studies was that racial purity would be manifested in certain, defined morphological

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8. A sympathetic comment by the missionary Robert Moffat (cited on the exhibition poster) that it was deprivation and brutal treatment that had made the Bushmen become 'desperate, wild, fierce and indomitable in their habits . . .' is an indication of a more humane point of view according to which the Bushmen were considered as human beings amenable to improvement. But the more general reaction of visitors was that of dissociation and revulsion (Altick 1978).

features<sup>9</sup>, and variation from these features would indicate impurity. Ideas of this kind were still current in the early twentieth century when Louis Péringuey<sup>10</sup>, Director of the SAM, sent numerous specimens of crania to Dr F. Shrubbsall in London in the hope of unravelling the ethnological origins and relationships of the Bush and Hottentot races.<sup>11</sup> In South Africa at that time most of the supposedly scientific ideas regarding race were derived directly from overseas specialists and a growing body of literature published abroad, which lent legitimacy and topicality to the local discourse on race (Dubow 1989). Indeed, scientists working in South Africa aligned themselves with a cosmopolitan scientific fraternity. In 1902, when the South African Association for the Advancement of Science was founded, it was based explicitly on the British model.

In 1905 the British Association for the Advancement of Science held a formal meeting in South Africa, the proceedings of which were published the following year. At this meeting A. C. Haddon, president of the Anthropological section, concluded his address by stressing the importance of investigating the Bushmen and Hottentots, who represented 'very primitive varieties of mankind,' and who were 'rapidly diminishing' in number (Haddon 1906: 525). Among the audience were the Director of the South African Museum, William Sclater, and other Museum scientists, including Péringuey, who also heard Professor F. von Luschan, Director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, recommend that casts from the living subject should be made of the few extant full-blooded aboriginals of the Bush and Hottentot races. The unsettled question of racial ancestry and the firm belief that the Bush races were doomed to extinction seem to have formed the primary rationale behind the proposed project to make life-casts of 'true' Bushmen and Hottentots as a scientific record of their particular physical attributes. Indeed, the urgency of the project was underlined by the difficulty experienced in locating *pure* aboriginals for the edification of the Association (Péringuey, SAM letterbook, 7 January 1907).

With this impetus Péringuey, who had become Director of the South African Museum in 1906, initiated a project that was aimed at making an accurate physical record of members of the few

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9. The limitations of a typological classification based on predetermined criteria were only fully recognized during the second half of the twentieth century (Morris 1987).
  10. Péringuey had worked at the Museum since 1884 as an entomologist, but he also had an interest in archaeology and physical anthropology. In 1897 when the Dept of Anthropology and Antiquities was formed he, together with the Director, Sclater, shared responsibility for this department. After his appointment as director in 1906 he took full responsibility for the anthropology collections and built up a skeletal collection as well as the life-cast collection.
  11. See the published Annual Reports of the South African Museum for 1909, 1910, 1911; and SAM letterbooks, 1911-1912, now housed in the office of the Director.

remaining groups of 'pure-bred' Bushmen and Hottentots. Hoping to enlist the official support of the Cape Government in locating suitable subjects, he wrote to the Under Colonial Secretary of the Cape as follows in 1907<sup>12</sup>:

*Modelling from life aboriginals of the Bush and Hottentot Races*

Sir,

Owing to the rapid disappearance by reasons which I need not mention here, of the pure specimens of the Hottentot and Bushman races the Trustees of the Museum are endeavouring to obtain models from the living flesh which would enable the exact physical reproduction of the survivors of these nearly extinguished races.

I have of late endeavoured to locate pure types of both sexes, but not as successfully as I would have expected. Moreover some of these live at distances so great that the expenditure of travelling to such parts greatly militates against the successful result of my endeavours.

But the Cape Government would greatly assist the Trustees of the Museum in securing the last vestiges of these people,

1. by asking the Civil Commissioners to inquire of their respective jurisdictions as to the presence there of *true* Bushmen and Bushwomen, Nama Hottentots and Korannas and to report to you.
2. by obtaining similar informations from the Superintendent of Prisons, or jails in the country.
3. by authorizing us in the case of men and women in jail to have the casts and necessary photographs and measurements taken by experts. The process is not a long one; it is very simple and absolutely painless.

The importance of securing these physical reproductions, while we still can do it, is so great that I doubt not that you will grant my respectful request for the information and instructions mentioned herein.

The project received the support of the Colonial Office, and assistance was duly requested from the Secretary for Native Affairs, as well as Convict Stations and Magistrates in the northern districts of the Colony and in the Bechuanaland Protectorate. In most cases those responding to Péringuey's request showed willingness to assist but, not surprisingly, expressed some difficulty in locating 'pure aboriginals'. The reply of the Superintendent of the Convict Station in Kimberley to the circular sent out by the Under Colonial Secretary exemplifies this uncertainty:

Sir,

. . . I have the honour to state that we have a number of Bushmen, Hottentots, and Koranna convicts stationed here. Amongst them are fairly good specimens of their race, but I might point out that it is most difficult nowadays to find a pure-blooded specimen.

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12. SAM letterbook, 31 July 1907.

... might I ask whether the Director of the S. A. Museum is not in a position to suggest someone who could confer with me at this Station any Sunday morning between 9.15 and 10.15 a.m. It could then be decided whether the types we have are *pure enough* for their models to be taken ....

(my emphasis; SAM letterbook, 19 September 1907)

The reference to 'a pure-blooded specimen' draws attention to the fact that the project was premised on the notion of racial purity, and furthermore that, for scientific purposes, people could be reduced or dehumanized to objects of study, to 'specimens of their race'. Considering that it is a general practice for convicts to be de-personalized and made to conform to disciplinary procedures, it can be assumed that suitable 'specimens' in convict stations were not given the right to refuse being photographed naked, measured in minute detail and cast 'from the living flesh'. However, it seems that those who were not convicts required some persuasion. Dorothea Bleek commented in a letter written to Péringuey from Prieska, 'It is exceedingly difficult to get photos of the natives without clothes on. Perhaps your modeller will be more fortunate than we were'.<sup>13</sup> In practice the project depended on the unequal relations between those who were cast and those who captured their likeness in plaster and on film. Although my particular concern here is not with the photographs that were taken in the course of Péringuey's project, the existence of a large series of photographic studies of Khoisan people depicted naked, as anthropological specimens, underlines the unequal power relations that underpinned the project.<sup>14</sup> These photographs were not publicly displayed, but the images remain a poignant reminder of the reduction of the human subject to object of study (Fig. 22). They reveal, acutely, the dehumanizing nature of the project. However, the expression of unease on the face of the young woman depicted in Figure 22 seems to challenge the anthropological gaze.

Although very little is known about the interaction between Museum modeller and the people who were cast, there is some evidence of reticence on the part of proposed subjects. An example of an unwilling subject is recorded in a letter<sup>15</sup> from Péringuey to Secretary for Native Affairs in the Transvaal. A Bushwoman, whose physical attributes had been examined previously by members of the Anthropological Committee of the Association for the Advancement of Science, refused to be

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13. SAM correspondence, 6 August 1911.

14. As Banta & Hinsley (1986: 58) have remarked in relation to a comparable project undertaken in Brazil in 1865, 'These images raise disturbing questions about the anthropological camera as a weapon of power ...'

15. SAM letterbook, 14 September 1907.

cast and would not be persuaded to reconsider her decision. In the face of this disappointment Péringuey was hoping to enlist official support in persuading the woman to submit to being measured and photographed 'under different aspects' so that an accurate model of her could be made. There is no record of this having been accomplished. The woman's refusal to comply seems especially poignant considering that Péringuey had relied on the power of officialdom to further his project. I am not suggesting that physical coercion was used but that bureaucratic power would have been exerted. Elsewhere Péringuey states explicitly that Bushmen were likely to acquiesce to being modelled 'if the request comes from someone in authority'.<sup>16</sup> Repeated appeals through the Colonial Secretary for the co-operation of Magistrates, Constables, Chiefs and Missionaries were justified in terms of the perceived urgency and scientific importance of the casting project. Thus the authority of science was linked to that of the state to give the project official status and credibility.

In December 1907 Péringuey sent James Drury, museum modeller, to Kimberley and Upington to photograph, measure and make life-casts of 'thoroughbred' San and Khoi.

Over the following 17 years Drury applied his considerable technical skill to making casts 'from the living flesh' wherever subjects deemed suitable were to be found. He cast Khoisan people in Prieska, Carnarvon and other villages in the Northern Cape; Grootfontein and Sandfontein in South West Africa; Kanye in the Bechuanaland Protectorate; and the Lake Chrissie area of the eastern Transvaal. He also cast convicts in Cape Town, Kimberley, Windhoek and Gaborone if they conformed to the assumed 'pure' physical type. During this time Drury made body-casts of at least 65 people (including 14 convicts) whom he also photographed and measured in anatomical detail.

The genitalia of both men and women were considered to be of special interest as taxonomic classification was based to a large extent on these features. If the sexual parts of Bush or Hottentot people were shown to be significantly different from those of other members of the human race this would be irrefutable evidence of polygenism (Gilman 1986). However, despite the fact that the polygenist argument was easily disproved by the evidence of inter-racial breeding, interest in the genital features of Bush and Hottentot people persisted. The genitalia of women were of particular interest, in view of speculation regarding the significance of the so called 'tablier Hottentot'. The exhibition of Saartjie Baartman ('The Hottentot Venus') in London in 1810, and the subsequent dissection, after her death in 1815, of her genitalia by Cuvier, had drawn both popular and academic

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16. Péringuey to Colonial Office, SAM letterbook, 25 March 1908.



Fig. 22. Photographic studies of an anonymous Khoisan woman, Caledon, c. 1912. (South African Museum Photographic Collection.) A. Modestly attired. B. Anthropological study.

attention to the physical characteristics of Hottentot women.<sup>17</sup> Gilman (1986: 237) has shown that by the mid-nineteenth century the image of the physical attributes of Hottentot women had assumed 'a certain set of implications' associated with exotic sexuality, biological abnormality and moral degeneracy. It can be argued that the framing of this discourse in scientific terms was a form of sanctioned voyeurism and, simultaneously, an appropriation of the subject as a specimen.

Interest in the physical 'peculiarities' of Bush and Hottentot women had not waned by the time the Museum's casting project got underway in the early twentieth century. Péringuey's instructions to the Museum modeller were to make a special cast of the genital area and, failing that, to take detailed photographs, measurements and note of the skin tone of that area.<sup>18</sup> On his expedition to Kanye in 1908, Drury was given the following instructions by Péringuey:

For Drury - Memorandum about the Modelling

I would like to have first, a group of five or six, men, women and children photographed in the position they naturally assume, either in sitting down, or as if they were on the march: the man carrying his few arms and chattels; the woman carrying what they generally carry, the youngsters probably carry nothing.

But apart from these two groups, and I think that Mr Harvey will be from his knowledge of statuary quite able to make them assume positions that will not make the models appear too stiff, you may have to take single people somewhat like the figures we have. Try also to place them in such a position that would not prove too fatiguing, in order to avoid also stiffness in the reproduction.

Do not chose [sic] the two decrepit specimens. But I would far prefer however to have those with all the wrinkles of the body, especially the belly, than to have them as well fed as our previous specimens.

Pay special attention to the hairs in your note of the specimens, of the colour or expression of the eye, of the shape of the ear, and above all copy the colour of the skin, and verify your slab a couple of days after you have painted it in order to make *quite sure* of the genuine colour.

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17. The presentation and representation of Saartjie Baartman has been described by a number of writers, see Kirby 1954; Altick 1978; Gould 1982; Gilman 1986; Fitschen 1989; Ritchie 1990. A series of early nineteenth century prints and cartoons of the Hottentot Venus show an exaggerated emphasis on steatopygia. A number of these are reproduced in the catalogue of prints in the Africana Museum compiled by Kennedy, 1975.
18. Péringuey's letter to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 14 September 1907, stresses the importance of data on the 'apron'. After Péringuey's death Drury & Drennan (1926) wrote an article on 'the pudendal parts of the South African Bush race', in which they comment on 'the great anthropological and medical importance' of the genital peculiarities of the Bush races but fail to justify this claim.

Of course photographs of the full face, the quarter and side views will be taken of each. If you run short either send for more at Mafeking, or reduce the three views of the face to two.

You must not forget however that we are not likely for some time to come to have such an opportunity and any photograph, provided it is a good one will prove of great value to us.

Men are of course desirable; women still more so. You will be very careful to take all their peculiarities, including the 'apron'. A special moulding of the same to be added to the statue is very much wanted. You will endeavour to find out more or less the age of the young ones. Could you take a woman with her little one on the back, wraps and all, it would indeed look very natural.

But to resume avoid any stiffness in the attitude you will take the models in.

If for reasons unavoidable you were leaving Kanya without finishing the models in hand, it is understood that Harvey will remain a few days longer. You would then take down with you such parts as have already been taken, Harvey bringing down the rest.

As to the remuneration to the Chief you are authorized to give him from 5 to 10 pounds provided he gives you all facility for taking the casts. You would however not make him the present until you have ascertained from some person in authority or the Missionary whether you should give him the full sum or the other.

As to the Bush people you will probably get at the stores the shirts and petticoats suitable for them. The knives you have. If need be you might get more on the spot.

As to the Graphophone. Read carefully the instructions. If you have no time to attend to that part of the undertaking, ask the Missionary there to be kind enough to do so, while you are proceeding with the modelling. If need be I could send more cylinders.

Endeavour to buy the garments of these Bush people in order to clothe the reproductions with if you can, provided their garments or arms are not manchester or [? Birmingham] goods.

If any native curio other than Bush was procurable you may buy if not dear.

You will let me know of your arrival and how you are getting on. It may be that I take a run up that way, but I am afraid that Finances will not permit.

I should not like you to lose some useful opportunities for the sake of a few shillings, but I am compelled to recommend a careful handling of the fifty pounds you take to cover expenses.

I am enclosing all correspondences with the Resident Commissioner's office. In case of need you should apply to him.

(Péringuey to Drury, SAM letterbook, 1908: 718-20)

This memorandum clearly conveys some of the assumptions and emphases of the project. The stress on accurate recording of physical attributes, notably exact skin colour (skin pigmentation

remains one of the most manifest signifiers of race), facial features and genital characteristics underlines the fact that questions about race motivated the project. Indeed the project was regarded as adding evidence to the debate on the classification of the racial stocks of Africa which, as Dubow (1989: 5) has commented, was accompanied by 'hairsplitting distinctions with respect to sub-races and the relationship between races'. The frequent reference to 'specimens' confirms that the human subjects referred to by Péringuey had been objectivized conceptually before they were literally objectivized as casts. Indeed this was a precondition for the project.

The memorandum also reveals an emphasis on 'traditional' artefacts that was characteristic of museum collecting-practice. Although purchased shirts, petticoats and knives were suggested as gifts for the people who were cast, Drury was explicitly instructed not to acquire garments of trade-cloth for the Museum. No interest was shown in documenting the actual living-conditions of the people to be cast. If garments were acquired they should be of the type that would allow the casts of 'pure' racial types to be dressed in specimens of true 'traditional' attire. Both of these notions were idealized constructs, and yet ironically Péringuey was concerned that the casts should appear natural. This was a quest for simulated naturalness to be achieved by completely artificial means.

As it happened, Péringuey was disappointed in the results of the Kanye expedition although three casts of pure 'Basarwas' were obtained. Greater success was achieved a few years later in Prieska, where Dorothea Bleek, daughter of the philologist Wilhelm Bleek, was undertaking linguistic studies among a remnant group of /Xam Bushmen, then living in a semi-permanent squatter camp on the outskirts of Prieska village. The racial 'purity' of this group was affirmed on 'philological grounds', supported by the presence of 'physical characters that could not be ignored' (SAM Annual Report for 1911: 22). That people having features assumed *in advance* to be typically Bushman were selectively cast is evident from this comment, and from much of Péringuey's correspondence. For example, when asked by the Resident Magistrate in Kanye which kind of Bushmen from Ngamiland he wished to cast, since they varied in size, being 'diminutive, medium or large', Péringuey replied, 'By nature the real Bushman is small . . . It would thus seem that if the Masarwa Bush are large, one can assume that they are not of pure blood, and the diminutive kind would therefore be preferable'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if the casts showed features presumed to be 'typically Bushman', it was because those people who were cast had been pre-selected to show such features - the results of the project simply provided a tautologous reinforcement of an existing idea. Those people who did not conform to a preconceived stereotype were excluded from the project or regarded as 'half-breeds'.

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19. SAM letterbook, 20 June 1915.

For museum purposes the casts were registered as specimens in the physical anthropology collections, together with the human skeletal collections. Although some personal details of the subjects cast were kept on record, the plaster-casts were essentially museum objects, 'specimens' identified primarily by registration number, and by those details recorded in the accession register - racial type, sex and area of origin. As displayed they were not intended to evoke a presence of the social beings whose bodies had been cast (appropriated) at a particular time, for a particular purpose but were presented as generalized examples of a racial type. In the previous chapter I showed how collected, classified Lobedu artefacts were separated from their social and historical context but in the case of the casts the alienation was even greater in that the bodies of racial Others were literally objectivized and reduced to scientific specimens. This has a parallel in the field of medicine:

As the object of science, the individual was reduced to the finitude of the observable, the space defined by the gaze as neither more nor less than that of his or her own body (Cornwell 1989: 7, drawing on the insights of Foucault).

Through the casting project, there was a classification and reification of Bushmen as racial Others, and a perpetuation of this racial stereotype in the form of the casts as displayed and labelled in the Museum. The rest of this chapter is concerned with how the casts from Prieska were initially displayed at the SAM, and with the production of the diorama, in which they were later situated in a 'natural' setting.

#### **Displaying the Other: the Cape Bushmen**

In 1911 Drury cast 13 people, identified as members of the /Xam grouping of southern Bushmen, and in the same year the figures were exhibited at the SAM to exemplify the racial attributes of the Bush people of the Cape. In this process the living subjects were reduced to museum objects, 'specimens' that were later placed in glass cases for public viewing (Figs 23, 24). People who in actual life were living as farm labourers or domestic servants, having survived a long period of conflict with the Cape Government, became numbered casts, examples of a racial type. Janikie Achterdam (Figs 25, 26) was one of the people from Prieska who was cast by Drury. In the museum her cast was displayed naked, literally stripped of all cultural and social context. The lack of clothing presupposed the Otherness of the /Xam, as it would have been unthinkable to display naked or near-naked<sup>20</sup> models of people with whom viewers might identify subjectively. It also

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20. Most of the casts on display were naked except for a small apron or loin-skin. An unstated assumption may have been that Bushmen were close to nature, and that this justified their being represented in their natural state.

affirmed the authority of the museum to appropriate racial and cultural Others in the interests of science. The display label read as follows:

**CAPE BUSHMEN:** The Bushmen of the Cape appear to have been the purest-blooded representatives of the Bushman stock, much purer than those of the Kalahari and other more northerly districts. They are now practically extinct. They were light in colour and of small or medium height; the prominent posterior development (steatopygy) of the women was a characteristic feature of the race.

To anthropologists the Bushmen are one of the most interesting races in the world. There are strong grounds for suspecting that they are of the same stock as the remote Upper Palaeolithic period. This cannot yet be definitely asserted but recent discoveries in North and East Africa have tended to strengthen the probability considerably.

(A key to the figures followed, giving approximate age of the subject and locality in which the cast was made.)

It is noteworthy that, while drawing attention in this label to purity of stock, Péringuey wrote a series of articles for the Cape Argus in 1913 in which he noted the difficulty of distinguishing between the San and Khoi. He had commented in the Annual Report for 1910 that the results of anthropological analysis of some 162 skulls, the largest number of skulls of this type to have been studied by one specialist, showed that no difference between Bush and Hottentot skulls could be distinguished (see also Péringuey 1911). Furthermore, while stating in the label that the Cape Bushmen as a physical type were practically extinct, the newspaper article noted that a surprising number of people speaking a Bushmen language were still to be found in the northern Cape. Considering that the purity of the /Xam had been attested in part on linguistic criteria, this must have been confusing evidence for Péringuey. Even in his own terms, the museum label was thus contradictory to the known evidence. None the less, the label remained in place, unmodified, for almost fifty years, during which time the public image of the South African Museum became widely associated with the exhibition of 'The Bushmen'. This was actively promoted by the Museum in the press and other forms of publicity,<sup>21</sup> and many visitors came to the Museum primarily to see the Bushmen displays (Lotter & Botha 1962).

Cornwell (1989) has made a useful distinction between 'racialism' (the historical, academic discourse on race that flourished in the colonial period and continued until its demise in the mid-twentieth century after Nazism had sensitized the world to the effects of racialism) and 'racism' which is still a pervasive form of behaviour that discriminates between self and other primarily on

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21. Images of the Bushman casts have been widely reproduced in leaflets, books, and on postcards.

the basis of physical differences. 'Racist behaviour typically manifests an inability or refusal to recognise the full, equivalent subjectivity of the other, and consequently exhibits a tendency to dehumanize or objectify that other' (Cornwell 1989: 4). In this sense, it can be argued that the early exhibits of Bushmen casts as specimens of racial Others were informed by both racialism and racism.

The prominence accorded the displays of the casts of /Xam and other San groupings was quite out of proportion to any proven anthropological importance. According to Péringuey's own assessment in 1918, 'The results of the examination of the large and representative [collection of] material of the 'San' Race accumulated at such great cost and difficulties by this Museum has not, I regret to say, materialized much' (SAM Annual Report for 1918). No later academic research contradicted this point of view, but the display of casts none the less remained unchanged until 1932 when the casts were given even greater prominence in the centre of the new Ethnology Gallery. By this time Isaac Schapera (1926, 1930) had already published his argument that the physical resemblances between Hottentots and Bushmen were greater than their differences, and that they should be regarded as an inclusive 'Khoisan' group. However, this position was not adopted at the Museum in the 1930s, and only very recently has the use of the terms Khoi and San been discussed in Museum publications (Wilson 1986) and introduced, to a limited extent, in exhibition labels.

Not until the late 1950s were the casts removed from their prominent position in the large central cases of the Ethnology Gallery, where they had overshadowed all other exhibits for years. The ethnologist responsible for the material culture displays had commented in the early 1940s,

The main attraction of the gallery is undoubtedly the collection of life-casts of Bushmen and other figures, the work of Mr Drury . . . With one or two exceptions the figures are not dressed as they are considered to be mainly of anthropological rather than ethnographic importance.

There is no need for me to discourse on the obvious facts of their scientific importance or technical merit, but I should like to record with gratitude the publicity they give the rest of the gallery. They not only draw lagging footsteps into yet another room, but a large number of people come to the Museum specially on their account. The fact that many of these latter go away again as soon as they have seen the Bushmen, in the apparent conviction that there is nothing else to see, is a fact that must be borne with fortitude (Shaw 1941: 161).

For almost half a century countless visitors, including thousands of school-children each year, viewed an exhibition that gave credibility to a flawed anthropological notion of racial typology.<sup>22</sup>

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22. Racially prejudiced views that have their roots in earlier centuries have been perpetuated in South African school text-books until very recently (Smith 1983; Mazel & Stewart 1987). This would have influenced the responses of children to museum displays on the Bushmen and other African people.



**Fig. 25.** Janikie Achterdam, Prieska 1911. (Photograph: D. Bleek, South African Museum Photographic Collection.)



**Fig. 26.** Cast of Janikie Achterdam (SAM-AP3895) on display in the South African Museum, c. 1912. (South African Museum Photographic Collection.)

Although it was not only in South Africa that an evolutionary paradigm remained the most prevalent model in ethnographic museums long after its rejection by academic anthropology (see Coombes 1988), in the socio-political context of South Africa this could not but have reinforced and added credibility to an ideology of essential racial difference and inequality. Moreover, the power of this ideology would have been made all the more effective through being endorsed by an institution that claimed a position of scientific neutrality. That the presentation of the casts was perceived as being value-free is confirmed in a press report on Drury and his modelling skills (Cape Times, 7 February 1925):

The value of the plaster casts lies in their absolute impartiality, their pure, unadulterated 'objectivity'. They are the Bushmen themselves without the gloss of 'interpretation' or extraneous adornment . . . every shade of facial expression is caught. Every expression, indeed, that the mind projects through the physical organism is recorded.

However, as shown above in Péringuey's memorandum to Drury, the casting project was not impartial, nor was the presentation of the casts neutral, even if they appeared so life-like and natural that viewers tended not to question the implicit assumptions underlying their exhibition. It was less politically contentious to represent 'the Bushmen' as an anthropological type that was virtually extinct, and therefore of scientific interest, than to confront social issues of colonial dispossession, racial conflict and integration. Then, as now, the emphasis was on the 'traditional' past. The people who were cast in Prieska in 1911, and those cast in convict stations and elsewhere over the subsequent years, were represented at the Museum completely bereft of their social and historical context. It was the 'pure' physical type beneath the European dresses, jackets and trousers that was deemed to be of interest.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, however, if one had looked closely at the casts on display, one could have seen in Drury's accurate rendering of the skin pigmentation of his subjects pale and darker tones that corresponded to the clothed parts of the body and those that were exposed to the sun. This minutely observed detail, fulfilling Péringuey's instructions to a fault, bears testimony to the ideas that informed the casting project. Stripped of the social and cultural context of the subjects who were cast, the figures on display reveal Péringuey's scientific interests, Drury's casting expertise and the unequal power relations inherent in the execution of the project. In brief, the casts are authentic artefacts of scientific racialism and museum practice in the early twentieth century.

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23. Notes on some of the figures made by Drury include their prison records which list their 'personal effects'. For example, the effects of a 17 year-old young woman (SAM-AP3897, identified as a 'half-breed') cast at the jail in Cape Town, where she was serving six months hard-labour for stock-theft, included a skirt, blouse, 2 petticoats, chemise, 3 handkerchiefs, bodice, lace collar and shoes. As represented in the cast, however, she is naked and stripped of all personal contextual detail, to which one might relate subjectively.

The emphasis on race in the early exhibitions can be related to Péringuey's interest in physical anthropology but the promotion of the exhibited casts for decades after his death in 1924 seems to require a different explanation. In the first years of the casting-project the collection of casts was considered to be mainly of scientific value, to be viewed only on special request (Finch 1909), but by the 1930s the casts had become important exhibits *in their own right* as unique specimens. In 1926 the gallery showing the casts was described in the publicity handbook for the city of Cape Town as '... perhaps the most celebrated section of the Museum' (Finch 1926: 53), a renown which Drury actively promoted during his 40 years at the Museum and for a further 21 years in his retirement (Rose 1961). For decades after Péringuey's death Drury continued to stress and publicize the 'scientific' importance of the casts although the anthropological basis of this claim was never made explicit. Thus a flawed concept of racial typology not only remained unchallenged at the Museum but was promoted both in the displays and in publicity media. Indeed the casts had proved a major visitor attraction, and they were a source of pride to the institution. As noted in the official history of the Museum written to commemorate its 150th anniversary in 1975, 'The whole series [of casts] is a unique possession of the South African Museum and one which is deservedly famous' (Summers 1975: 104). The emphasis on the unique and the famous draws attention to one of the fundamental characteristics of museums that links the modern museum with the ancestral cabinet of curiosities.

... it was the rare, outlandish piece which immediately conferred status on a collection and spread its fame beyond the scientific world. What attracted and astonished visitors was not only the great number of objects on show but also, perhaps above all, the display of objects unique to a particular collection (Olmi 1985: 8).

Elements of curiosity and voyeurism cannot be dismissed when trying to understand the impact of the casts on viewers. The physical attributes of the casts have been a constant source of fascination to viewers over the decades. As noted above, that it was thought appropriate to display the casts virtually naked is an affirmation that they had been reduced to physical specimens, to be appropriated by the public gaze. The people who were cast, and by implication their descendants, were distanced and denied the sensibilities of the observer. The paradox and problem of the casts is that, although they are objects (artefacts of museum practice), they have an immediacy of presence that gives them a semblance of being human subjects, treated in the manner of preserved animals. Indeed many viewers have been convinced that the casts are not made of plaster but are the remains of real people who have been preserved by taxidermists. Eventually a small display illustrating the casting technique was made to counter these suppositions, but at the same time this display underlines the power of the Museum to objectivize other races.

Lest it be thought that the presentation of living Bushmen as a human spectacle was confined to the nineteenth century, it should be noted that, in the Union Pageant of 1910, Bushmen took part in a re-enactment of the colonial encounter with the indigenous population. '... chattering Bushmen dance their baboon dances and flee before the hordes of Hottentots; the Portuguese arrive in brilliant blue uniforms, with flashing spear and flashing armour ...' (Cape Times, 31 October 1910). In 1937 a group of Kalahari Bushmen were exhibited at the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg (Dart 1937). In 1952 a group of hunter-gatherers, described as 'Wild Bushmen', was transported to Cape Town from the Kalahari to be exhibited, 'unadulterated by civilization', at the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival.<sup>24</sup> In 1968 another group of Bushmen were unhappily on public display in Cape Town,<sup>25</sup> this time at the South African Cultural History Museum where they were ostensibly demonstrating arrow-making and bead-making alongside demonstrations of other crafts including diamond-cutting, pottery, sculpture and glass-blowing (Cape Argus, 18 September 1968). As recently as 1986, a small group of destitute hunter-gatherers was taken around the country by a white farmer hoping to promote his own tourist business.<sup>26</sup>

The planning and construction of the Bushman diorama at the SAM in the late 1950s can possibly be seen as an attempt by the new director, Alfred Crompton,<sup>27</sup> to counter the explicit racialism that had informed the earlier displays. In the political context of South Africa in the 1950s this might seem unlikely but it should be remembered that by this time within scientific anthropological discourse a paradigm shift had occurred and the Bushmen increasingly were studied from an

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24. The group was described as 'The wild Bushmen from the heart of the Kalahari Desert ... See them as they are in their natural surroundings - Nude! unadulterated by civilization!' (Anon. 1952, Souvenir - Jan van Riebeeck Fees).
25. This was part of the Cape Arts Festival of 1968. It is of interest that the Director of the SAM had refused on humanitarian grounds to have live Bushmen on show at the SAM (Shaw pers. comm. 1989). The organizer of the show insisted that the people were not on display but their crafts. None the less, the Bushmen themselves received widespread publicity.
26. In August 1986, Mr L. Hennig of 'Kalahari Tours', based in Kuruman, brought a group of 'Bushmen', who lived on his farm near the Botswana border, to Cape Town, as part of an advertising campaign for his company. These people, who were poorly treated by Henning, have recently been in the news again as another farmer, in the Ceres district, has offered them refuge on his game reserve where they will be trained as guides, and the women will do craftwork (Cape Times, 16 January 1991).
27. Crompton, a palaeontologist, was Director of the SAM from 1956 to 1964. He was a committed research scientist and was instrumental in promoting the scientific image of the Museum as well as revitalizing its exhibition programme. Crompton was also instrumental in keeping the Museum open to all races at a time when the Separate Amenities Act was being enforced in South Africa (E. M. Shaw pers. comm 1989).

ecological perspective. Moreover, in practice the shift of focus from the casts *per se* to hunter-gatherer subsistence did nothing to alter the perception of the Bushmen as racial and cultural Others. The casts remained the most prominent objects on display, indeed their existence was part of the reason for planning new displays in which they might be recontextualized and presented in a more 'natural' setting.

#### **The 'Bushman diorama', 1960-1987**

Under Crompton's directorship the SAM was transformed by his 'energetic guidance' from being a largely dormant institution into being active and outward-looking (Annual Report for 1956/7). Improved finances from an increased grant-in-aid from the Department of Education, Arts and Science did much to facilitate this change, although the financial status of the Museum was by no means adequate to increase the professional staff as much as Crompton and the Trustees regarded necessary (Annual Report for 1957/8). However, a number of new staff members were employed, and new research and exhibition programmes were initiated (Summers 1975). The first professional display artist was appointed in 1957, and a specialized taxidermist was appointed in 1959. This facilitated a new exhibition programme, including the construction of the Bushman diorama. Also during this time, the emphasis on natural history at the SAM was strengthened by the possibility of the cultural history collections being transferred to a separate museum in the historical building of the Old Supreme Court. The collections classified as 'historical' were relocated to this building in 1964 and this section of the SAM eventually became autonomous as the South African Cultural History Museum. The ethnographic collections remained at the SAM where, by their association with natural history, the nineteenth-century connection of Anthropology and Zoology was perpetuated. Practice in natural history museums at that time had shown that specimens were most successfully displayed in habitat groups or dioramas, and it was in keeping with this convention that Crompton advocated a diorama to exhibit the Bushman casts in a reconstructed natural setting. As reported in the press:

Cape Bushmen casts are to be removed from their glass cases to a special room now being prepared . . . , they will be seen against the colourful background of their natural environment as hunters, crude implement makers and inhabitants of primitive shelters (Cape Times, 4 September 1959).

Although it can be assumed that the paternalism apparent in this report was not intended by the Museum, there was clearly a potential discrepancy between the received and intended message of the display. According to the curator responsible for the ethnographic content of the diorama, the display was simply intended to show the way of life of hunter-gatherers in the Cape Colony (Shaw pers. comm. 1987). The reconstructed scene was based on an early nineteenth century illustration

by S. Daniell (Fig. 28) and on contemporary descriptions by early travellers of hunter-gatherer camps in the Karoo. The larger number of people in the reconstructed scene than in the Daniell print can be explained by the wish to accommodate as many casts as possible and to illustrate a number of different hunter-gatherer activities.

However, although the subject of the diorama was the Bushmen way of life, its execution expressed the professionalism of the Museum. As Crompton reported, the scene 'reflects with great credit the ingenuity, skill and competence of both professional and technical staff' (Annual Report 1959/60). This confirms an observation made in the previous chapter that the sub-text of a museum display is often a visual statement of professional prowess (Halpin 1983). The actual text of the label<sup>28</sup> to the diorama (Figs 27, 29), situated outside the case, read as follows:

**A CAPE BUSHMAN CAMP IN THE KAROO:** This diorama shows some activities of hunter-gatherers. The viewer should imagine that a large flock of birds has flown overhead and attracted the attention of the group.

With the exception of a few in Gordonia, there are no Bushmen living in the Cape. The figures shown here are **PLASTER CASTS** of living people aged between 18 and 60, excepting the man making fire who was alleged to have been about 100. They were nearly all living in the Prieska and Carnarvon districts. The casts were made by Mr James Drury, modeller at the Museum from 1902 to 1942.

It is noteworthy that, although the display was meant to depict a camp-scene in the early nineteenth century, this was not mentioned in the label. There was no attempt to situate the depicted scene in Khoisan history, except to indicate that there were no longer Bushmen living in the Karoo. The implication was, therefore, that the activities depicted were timeless or traditional and generalized. The casts (museum objects), however, were given historical provenance and more attention in the label than the hunting and gathering way of life, which the display set out to illustrate. This inversion confirms the perceived importance of the casts as unique museum objects.

As the largest display in the anthropology section of the museum, the diorama has an imposing presence. Technically it succeeds in creating a sense of space, while the human scale and skillfully contrived naturalism give the scene an aesthetic quality of realism.<sup>29</sup> As Umberto Eco (1986: 8) has commented on the Museum of the City of New York, 'the diorama aims to establish itself as a

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28. In 1988 this label was changed and a project to recontextualize the diorama was initiated by myself and my colleague Gerald Klinghardt. In 1989 a display 'About the Diorama' was mounted and survey of visitor responses started.

29. Schweizer & Thorn (1961) give a detailed technical account of the production of the diorama.

substitute for reality, as something even more real'. The background is a finely painted landscape of the Beaufort West area of the Karoo, and the technical problem of merging the background and foreground has been resolved by placing a number of figures in the space between these two planes to create perspective and an impression of distance. Rocks, accurately modelled on those of the area, have been positioned on one side of the scene, while plants, stones and soil collected in the Karoo evoke a convincing sense of place. The central figures in the scene are two hunters holding bows and arrows, and a woman reclining in the shade of a mat-shelter placed under an acacia tree. In the background three young women and a young man appear to be walking into the veld; on the left two older women with marked steatopygia regard the scene passively, while another pounds edible bulbs; on the right a man reaches for a club and another is engaged in cleaning a stretched skin; and in the foreground an old man is kindling a flame with a pair of fire-sticks. The careful placing of utensils - ostrich egg-shell flasks, sieves, skin bags, tortoise-shell vessels and quivers - gives convincing visual detail and organic texture to the scene. All thirteen of the cast figures are dressed in skin clothing. Until 1984 the casts of women were shown wearing nothing but a small frontal apron, thereby drawing attention to their physical features, especially the steatopygia that Péringuey had alluded to in an earlier label.<sup>30</sup>

The diorama is one of the best known and most popular displays in the entire Museum, and has a country-wide reputation. Its technical excellence, together with the popular interest in Bushmen, give the display undoubted appeal. However, even in the diorama setting, interest still tends to be focused unequivocally on the life-like figures, plaster casts of living people. Despite the stated intention to display the way of life of Bushmen rather than their physical attributes, past concerns have been perpetuated primarily because the casts (artefacts of those past concerns) have assumed undue importance as museum pieces. During the construction of the diorama, Drury, long since retired, was quoted in the Cape Argus as saying:

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30. In 1984 I was responsible for clothing the casts in cloaks and aprons that accorded with historical and ethnographic descriptions of women's dress. These sources indicated that San women always had their buttocks covered, therefore the previous absence of clothing could not be justified on grounds of ethnographic accuracy. The clothing of the casts of men was also changed slightly at the time to accord with historical descriptions. In 1990 further adjustments to the clothing of the casts were made. Not surprisingly, some tour operators accused us of false modesty in covering those physical attributes of the casts that had become such a tourist attraction. Postcards of the undressed casts, which were produced by a commercial company in the 1970s, are still in wide circulation despite the changes in the display. Recently, these postcard images have been reproduced to support an ideological critique of museum authority (see Ritchie 1990).



Fig. 27. Views of the Bushman diorama, c. 1960. (South African Museum Photographic Collection.)

Museums all over the world contain more or less the same sort of things. But there is only one museum in the world where you can see life casts of Bush people and that is in Cape Town. I want to leave the Bushman [sic] as a unique collection to South Africa . . . (Cape Argus, 30 January 1960).

However, at no time after the 1920s were the casts used as a source of scientific data. It seems to have been assumed that, simply because they were casts of seemingly 'pure Bushmen' they had scientific value. Although this view was actively promoted by Drury to enhance his own reputation, it was difficult to justify rationally. In 1967 Dr T. H. Barry, who had succeeded Crompton as Director in 1964, was quoted in the press as saying that Drury's 'contribution to science was in persuading the superstitious Bushmen and Hottentots to pose for the casts - not a comfortable business to say the least, with the plaster of paris becoming hotter as it set . . .' (Cape Argus, 8 April 1967). Thus the stereotypes of the past remained unchallenged.

Adding to the popularity of the diorama is its human scale and convincing detail. But it convinces by means of artifice. The accuracy of the representation cannot be measured against anything but the etching by Daniell, on which it was partly based, and that too is an idealized iconographic representation, which refers aesthetically to a classical image of the 'noble savage'<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 28). The material in the display creates an illusion of homogeneous contemporaneity - there are no individual labels and no dissonant items to disturb the sense of timelessness. In fact, the items of material culture in the diorama are not contemporaneous with the casts or with each other, nor do they come from the same geographical region. They have expediently been chosen to create an imagined reality. The social history and provenance of the artefacts in the diorama are secondary to their primary use as props in a tableau. A 'levelling of pasts' has occurred in which casts mingle with objects from different times in a 'continuum that the visitor is not invited to decipher' (Eco 1986: 9). Paradoxically, the diorama achieves its naturalism by being an entirely unnatural construct of museum practice.

The success of a diorama depends on the principle of recognition - viewers relate the content and style of the display to their own prior experience and knowledge. As a display convention, the diorama is most widely used in natural history habitat displays in which mounted animals are placed in a simulated natural setting. By presenting casts of people in this manner, viewers are prompted to make a conscious or unconscious association with the natural realm, an association encouraged

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31. Klopper (1989b) has shown how aesthetic conventions have intervened in representations of 'the Zulu' by Angas. Similarly, Daniell was an artist working within certain iconographic conventions. I am grateful to Sandra Klopper for her comments on Daniell's illustration.

by the pervasive popular view of the Bushmen as 'children of nature' and encouraged by the idealized version of hunter-gatherer existence in the widely read novels of Laurens van der Post, as well as in film and television coverage (Maughan-Brown 1983; Tomaselli *et al.* 1986; Biesele 1990).

Until recently assessment of visitor responses to the diorama was based largely on broad generalizations. In an attempt to get a clearer picture of visitors' perceptions, the survey that is discussed in some detail in the next chapter was initiated. Prior to this survey, however, I conducted a series of interviews with visitors to the Ethnography Gallery and a number of themes recurred with reference to the diorama. The realism of the figures and the display as a whole made an impression on most viewers. As noted above, the association of the casts with taxidermy is explicit for many visitors. Despite a small display case showing the technique of making life-casts, visitors continue to be confused. Only half of the 72 people that were interviewed realized that the display was intended to depict the early nineteenth century; a quarter placed the display in 'no specific time', while the other quarter was divided into those who thought the display represented the present (8% of those interviewed) and those who thought it represented the early twentieth century (15%). The absence of labelling inside the case leaves the diorama open to a range of interpretations shaped by preconceived ideas both academic and popular. Tourist-guides frequently perpetuate the stereotypes of television and popular literature. Prevalent among these since the 1970s has been the idealized image of the San as gentle people living in isolated, archaic harmony with their environment. At one level this perception can be related in part to the increased corpus of academic knowledge on the Kalahari San disseminated through the publication of ethnographic field research undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s, and of subsequent theoretical re-assessments of the hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence (Lee & DeVore 1968, 1976; Sahlins 1974; Marshall 1976; Lee 1979; Silberbauer 1981). At a less academic level, the increasing public awareness of the problems of environmental pollution and diminishing resources resulting from technological development has favoured a nostalgic perception of the hunter-gatherer way of life.

The Museum has not attempted to counter this and other popular myths about the Bushmen, despite ample evidence on which to draw (see Wilmsen 1989). Indeed, the diorama tends to reinforce an illusory, static view of the hunter-gatherer past. The contemporary political context of the Kalahari San had not been displayed at the SAM, until a very recent, temporary exhibition of photographs,<sup>32</sup> nor has the colonial history of maltreatment and dispossession of Khoisan people

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32. The exhibition, 'Shaken Roots', consisted of photographs by Paul Weinburg of dispossessed Bushmen in Namibia. It was shown from December 1990 to January 1991.



Fig. 28. Aquatint 'Bosjemans frying locusts' by Samuel Daniell, 1805, from *African scenery and animals, 1804-5*.



Fig. 29. The Bushman diorama, South African Museum, 1989.

throughout southern Africa been addressed in the South African Museum. Social history has been overlooked entirely despite the existence in the Museum collections of photographs and ethnographic accounts that would have allowed the social context of the people who were cast to be communicated. These photographs (see Figs 23, 25) show the living conditions near Prieska of some of Drury's subjects. They reveal an unromantic historical picture of life at the time and challenge both Péringuey's scientific vision as well as later idealized, timeless perspectives on hunters and gatherers (Klinghardt 1987). Of course, they also challenge the re-presentation of the casts in the diorama. Increasingly, through researching the history of the casts, it became apparent that the diorama, as an artefact in itself, could be used to heighten public awareness of museum practice and to create a more active response among viewers. Consequently a new display project was initiated to place the diorama in historical context, and to make explicit some of the underlying assumptions of the casting-project. This resulted in the display entitled 'About the Diorama' that is discussed below.

#### **Recontextualizing the diorama, 1988-1990**

The first step taken in recontextualizing the diorama was to change the label to indicate that the scene was intended to represent the early nineteenth century. Since the end of 1988 the label to the diorama has read as follows:

In the early nineteenth century */Xam* hunter-gatherers lived in the semi-desert Karoo. From hill-top camps they could watch the movements of game on the plains and spot the approach of enemies. Their way of life was shaped by the seasonal availability of edible plants, water and the movements of game. To avoid overusing food and water supplies */Xam* bands ranged widely within hunting territories which were defined by recognized landmarks. By the mid-nineteenth century most hunter-gatherers in the Karoo had been killed in fighting with advancing colonists and displaced Khoikhoi. The survivors were drawn into colonial society as labourers and servants.

This label was placed on the right of the diorama. Later the following heading was placed above the display: *A hunter-gatherer camp in the Karoo, about 1800*. For those visitors who read labels, this placed the scene in a time-frame but it still did not draw attention to the display as a representation. Moreover, many viewers do not read the labels but prefer to experience the scene visually in terms of their own frames of reference. For some viewers, especially children, the reality of the display is almost uncanny but for most viewers there remains a tension in the diorama between its constructed nature and the illusion of reality that it evokes. The rhetoric of naturalism accounts in part for the success of the diorama but this naturalism also eclipses the museum processes of authorship and interpretation that underpin the display. The intention behind the project 'About the diorama' was to make the conceptual structure of the diorama visible.

It could be argued that making these processes public would be a subversion of the authority of the museum, and of the position of neutrality and authenticity that it claims. However, this can also be seen positively as a means of creating insight into museum practice and of stimulating viewers to generate knowledge independently. By increasing public awareness of the history of the diorama, it was hoped to elucidate the concepts that gave the display its present form and to stimulate discussion about the manner in which the Bushmen have been commoditized in both academic and popular discourse. In accord with a number of writers (Clifford 1985; Shanks & Tilley 1987; Bennett 1988; Durrans 1988), it was felt that there was the potential for creative intervention by making explicit the implicit assumptions and value judgements that underlie museum practice. This was proposed in relation to the displays of Bushman casts that had been mounted at the SAM from the early twentieth century to the present. By revealing that there was a contradiction between what was known by Péringuey and Drury and what was shown in the Museum, it was also hoped to open the concept of neutrality in museum representation for public debate.

In attempting to create greater critical awareness, it was hoped that a different range of responses to the display might be evoked. As noted above, the skin-tone of the casts has been so faithfully reproduced that one can distinguish areas tanned by exposure to the sun. These faint colour variations unintentionally provide historical evidence of another context and another field of knowledge about the Bushmen. However, photographs showing this context have only recently been displayed alongside the diorama. For almost half a century an outdated evolutionary paradigm informed the exhibition of casts as anthropological types, thereafter some of the casts were placed in storage, and others were arranged in 'natural' settings, the Bushman diorama (also known as the Karoo diorama) being the largest and most important of these. A much smaller diorama of a coastal cave scene was later constructed opposite the Bushman diorama to illustrate a contrasting hunter-gatherer habitat. In May 1989 a memorandum motivating for the mounting of a display about the history and production of the Bushman diorama was submitted to the Director of the SAM by myself and my colleague Gerald Klinghardt. It read as follows:

#### Rethinking the 'Bushman Diorama'

The diorama depicting a nineteenth century hunter-gatherer camp in the Karoo is a display of considerable ethnographic and museological interest. It has great popular appeal and over the years has become one of the key attractions to the Museum.

The diorama was planned to place the casts made by Drury in Prieska in 1911 in a natural environmental setting. The reconstructed scene is an interpretation based on historical records but it has no precise historical prototype - it is a composite construct dating to the late 1950s (it was completed in 1960) and is a reflection of both anthropological and museological ideas at the time.

Although the technical excellence of the display has been widely acclaimed, the content of the display is open to misinterpretation. An obvious criticism is that it presents a paternalistic view of idealized hunter-gatherers and therefore lacks historical validity. Other criticisms derive from a perceived natural history approach to a display of people - the casts are seen as the equivalent of mounted animals.

We consider that these problems may be overcome by providing more historical information on the people depicted in the diorama, as well as on the casts themselves and their display at the Museum. The objective would be to focus attention on the social history of the people that Drury cast, and to create an awareness that a museum display is an interpretation subject to existing theories and is therefore open to discussion.

The translation of these ideas into visual form is a project that we should like the Design section to undertake. In our opinion it would be preferable to work towards the kind of display that is easily changed and updated.

The main sources of relevant data are archival documents and photographs. These would be suitable for exhibition in either a documentary panel or an audio-visual presentation. The design project will have to devise a way of counteracting the visual dominance of the diorama as it stands.

The suggestion was approved and the display was mounted later in the same year.<sup>33</sup> While it by no means counters the visual dominance of the diorama, it is in a prominent position directly in line of vision on entering the Anthropology Gallery.

#### *About the Diorama*

The exhibition (Fig. 30) comprising a series of five documentary panels was intended to give the appearance of a project in progress, and was deliberately kept as free of academic jargon as possible. On the first of these panels is a large colour photograph of the diorama with the following caption:

This display, constructed in 1959, has become one of the major attractions of the South African Museum. It depicts an encampment of 19th century hunter-gatherers in the Karoo. The figures, however, were made in 1911 when it was thought that the 'Bushmen' were becoming extinct.

The second panel, headed *The people who were cast*, attempts to provide some insight into the social history of Drury's subjects, who through the casting process became museum objects. By showing a series of photographs of the people who were cast as they were living in Prieska in 1911

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33. The display was undertaken in part as a pilot experiment so that we could assess visitor interest in this kind of display. I was assisted in the planning and selection of material was by Gerald Klinghardt, and the mounting was done by John Kramer of the Design Department.

juxtaposed with images of how they were later represented at the SAM, we hoped to elucidate the museum process of objectification. The introductory text reads:

By 1911 when the casts were made for the Museum people in the Cape who had formerly lived by hunting and gathering had become shepherds and labourers on farms, or were working as servants in villages. Some of these people living in Prieska were identified as 'pure Cape Bushmen' on the basis of their language and physical features.

A series of labelled photographs follow, showing /Xam men and women in their living conditions at Prieska in 1911. Brief biographies of some of the people, who appear as anonymous figures in the diorama, are outlined. For example, Guiman or "Ts'hoi'ke /tounis (also called Antoni), from Stuurman's Puts near Kenhardt, was a leading elder among the /Xam at Prieska and was one of the few people who could play /Xam music on the gora. A photograph shows Guiman standing clothed outside a rough hessian shelter in Prieska; this is followed by an anthropological study of him unclothed, and finally an image of the cast of Guiman in the diorama, representing the prototypical hunter. A similar series of images of Janikie Achterdam, whose cast is the central feature of the diorama, is also shown.

The third panel, headed *How the casts have been exhibited*, shows the different ways in which the casts have been exhibited at the Museum. Photographs and press reports are used as illustrations. The label reads:

Over the years the casts which were made for the Museum between 1908 and 1911 have been displayed in different ways, reflecting prevailing academic perceptions of people called "Bushmen".

The first image shows Drury and an assistant in his studio at the SAM working on some early figures, under the watchful eye of Péringuey. This is followed by a series of images showing the casts as exhibited from 1911 to the present.

The fourth panel, headed *How writers created 'the Bushmen'*, is more academic in intent and attempts to draw attention to the way in which the Bushmen have been commoditized in ethnographic writing. This is done by showing the covers of publications from the 19th century to the present to illustrate changing perspectives and prevailing attitudes of the time. The text is divided into three sections - the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 1950-1970, and 1970 onwards.

#### 19th century and early 20th century

The earliest studies of 'Bushmen' were based mostly on travellers' reports and a limited amount of fieldwork. They put forward the view that 'Bushmen' were living examples of primitive people and thus 'ancestral' to modern civilization.



Fig. 30. Documentary display 'About the Diorama'. (Photograph: J. Hosford, South African Museum.)

## 1950 - 1970

During this period intensive field studies of small groups of Kalahari hunter-gatherers were undertaken. From these generalizations were made about hunting and gathering as a way of life once shared by all people. A romantic vision of 'Bushmen' as children of nature emerged in both academic and literary works.

## 1970 onwards

During the past two decades earlier views have been rethought and set in historical context. It is now recognized that the hunting and gathering way of life was never static but has always been part of wider ongoing social and political processes.

The final panel headed *What is your response to the diorama?* presents copies of some of the critical or controversial published responses to the diorama, and invites visitors to respond actively to the display by filling in a short questionnaire. (Responses to this will be discussed in the next chapter.)

At one level the display, 'About the Diorama', is an attempt to link theory and practice by showing the conceptual underpinning to the diorama, at another level it is an attempt to raise public awareness of museum practice. However, there remain many unresolved critical issues relating to the ethnographic representation of cultural Others. The power of museum professionals to appropriate, classify and represent the Other in the name of science has been a recurrent realization in this study. The privileging of certain interpretations of the hunter-gatherer past, and the exclusion of less picturesque aspects of Bushman history, affirmed the power of museum curators to promote and make visible particular versions of the past. For almost half a century the SAM presented the Bushmen casts primarily as specimens of a racial type. The human subjects who were cast were objectivized and placed on display for public viewing. Some of the casts are still on display, although an attempt has been made to contextualize their presence in the diorama by drawing attention to the history of their production. There remains an element of academic appropriation; this would be so even if a wider range of interpretations or 'voices' were accommodated within a display of a different kind. The people depicted cannot speak for themselves. However, although Cape Bushmen no longer form a viable group to be consulted on how their past should be communicated in the Museum, it would be possible to acknowledge this as a significant silence, an absent voice among the many voices speaking for them.

Having discussed the processes of museum re-presentation in some detail, I now turn my attention to the reception of museum displays. In museum discourse, as in all discourse, meaning resides in a *relationship* between the receiver (viewer, consumer) and what is received. Horizons of expectation influence perception, and the relationship between what is seen and what is known remains unsettled (Berger 1972; Jauss 1982). In the next chapter I discuss this unsettled relationship.

chapter is with how museum visitors have responded to these representations. In view of the paucity of data on visitor responses to the anthropology displays, two qualitative surveys were undertaken as a part of this thesis project.

It is noteworthy that there was no precedent at the South African Museum for attempting to evaluate the range of meanings conveyed by a particular display or gallery. In the 175 years of the Museum's existence, the main index of public response has been attendance figures, which do not give any indication of qualitative experience. No demographic or attitude study of the non-visiting public has ever been undertaken and there is, therefore, no information available on the factors that might deter people from visiting the Museum. As far as I could establish, the only formal survey commissioned by the SAM was a pilot study in January 1962 intended to provide demographic data on visitors, their motivation for visiting, and their preferred displays. According to this survey, in which there were 336 respondents, the Bushman diorama was by far the most popular display, more than three times as popular as the diorama displays of birds and prehistoric animals, which ranked jointly in second place (Lotter & Botha 1962). The 1962 survey, however, was not primarily directed at visitor responses to museum representations. There was no attempt to evaluate the reasons for the impact on the public of particular displays, nor indeed to evaluate public responses to any aspect of the Museum, from the impressive facade of the building to the provision of facilities for visitor comfort and enjoyment.<sup>2</sup> This lacuna suggests an attitude of complacency, at best, and indifference to the public, at worst. Indeed, engaging in matters relating to public service may not be considered to be in the interests of museum professionals whose primary commitment is to scientific research. It may be convenient not to know how visitors respond to exhibitions and to the museum in general. On the other hand, curators may assume that to have produced an exhibition is sufficient in itself, irrespective of its reception.

The two surveys described later in this chapter were aimed primarily at gaining insight into visitor responses to particular ethnographic exhibitions. Before discussing the objectives of the surveys in more detail and presenting the results, I shall briefly re-state my theoretical position and provide some background to the wider social context of South Africa, within which museum discourse is

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2. Kenneth Hudson, editor of *The Good Museums Guide* and assessor of museums world-wide, considers museums as encompassing a 'package' of qualities including: the building; the collections; the presentation and interpretation of material on display; museum publications; the museum shop; educational programmes; publicity; management and attention to the physical comfort of visitors. Highly rated museums not only had interesting displays but impeccable toilets, sufficient seating, comfortable temperature levels, a good coffee shop, friendly assistants and a welcoming atmosphere (Hudson 1985). None of these qualities has ever been formally evaluated at the South African Museum.

## CHAPTER 8

### RECEIVED MEANINGS

#### Museum displays subjectively re-interpreted

##### Introduction

In the novel, *In the Fog of the Season's End*, by the late African writer, Alex la Guma,<sup>1</sup> the character Beukes recalls waiting for a fellow political activist at the South African Museum. In the zoological gallery, 'He had been alone, a stranger in a lost dead world . . .' but in the anthropology section he had mused:

These Bushmen had hunted with bows and tiny arrows behind glass; red-yellow dwarfs with peppercorn hair and beady eyes. Beukes had thought sentimentally that they were the first to fight (La Guma 1972, cited in Voss 1990: 66).

La Guma goes on to describe, 'the still hunters holding their primitive bows in petrified readiness'. This response to the exhibited casts gives cause for guarding against making assumptions about the way the display might be received, and it also highlights the salutary fact that the perpetuation of racial stereotyping is not restricted to white writers. Of particular pertinence here is that, despite being artefacts of museum practice, the casts had, for La Guma, the capacity to evoke creative, subjective response. This affirms the theoretical position outlined in Chapter 2 that meaning in material culture is not fixed but continually re-created in human consciousness and experience. Even the diorama, static and bounded by a glass case, remains unbounded in the realm of the mind.

My concern in the previous two chapters was with the production of meaning through museum practice. In particular I tried to elucidate the ideas that informed representations of 'the Lobedu' and 'the Bushmen' in the Ethnography Gallery of the South African Museum (SAM). In both cases the focus was primarily on the museum processes of recontextualization, classification, annotation and display. These processes, I suggested, served to order and objectify the subjects of representation, to reduce them to categories and circumscribe their meanings. My concern in this

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1. Alex la Guma, born in 1925, was son of Jimmy la Guma, President of the Coloured People's Congress. As well as being a journalist and novelist, he was a political activist and communist ideologue. He was accused of treason and banned in South Africa. He died in exile in Cuba. I am grateful to Tony Voss for drawing my attention to this reference.

situated. In doing this I shall not attempt to be comprehensive but draw attention to those features of South African society that could have bearing on attitudes to state-subsidized museums and on responses to museum representations.

#### **Contexts of reception: possibilities and limitations**

In theory, I assume that the visual text of an exhibition is 'read' differently by different viewers in terms of their existing knowledge, expectations and values. An exhibition is always received subjectively by viewers who re-interpret what they see within their own frames of reference. My focus in this chapter thus shifts from the creation of meaning by museum professionals to the reception of this produced meaning by the visiting public ('consumers' of museum displays). Of course, the received meanings of museum visitors are also produced meanings but they are individual and personal rather than generalized or with any claim to universality. The knowledge generated by museum practice on the other hand is widely regarded as being universally true, wherein lies much of its authority. None the less, it would be wrong to assume that visitors to museums were unknowing victims of the authority of museum-generated knowledge. The reception of museum displays is more complex than a passive acceptance of didactic messages. The issue is essentially epistemological, and poses questions about how knowledge is generated and transmitted, and how orthodoxy is achieved. Within the current debate on museum practice there is increasing recognition that positivism is an inadequate philosophy of knowledge (Saumarez Smith 1989; Lumley 1988). Instead displayed artefacts are regarded as being open to multiple interpretations, and meaning is conceptualized as being produced through an interaction between receivers and producers of museum displays, even though the latter are seldom present in person at the moment of interaction.

Giddens (1987: 99-107), discussing cultural production and the signification of written texts, has made a number of points that also have relevance for understanding other cultural texts, such as museum displays. For Giddens, time and space are basic to the generation of meaning in the social exchanges that occur within the varied settings of everyday life. The setting or context of social interaction provides points of reference for mutual orientation, and forms an anchoring element in the production of meaning. Meaning is not merely built into formal codes or sets of differences but is conditioned by the variable contexts of social interaction. When people communicate with each other in conversation, meaning is sustained by mutual understanding of context as well as of language. However, unlike in conversation, communication through artefacts, or 'cultural objects', often occurs without the co-presence of producer and receiver. Interpretation cannot, therefore, be conditioned by the mutual recognition and knowledge that co-present individuals share. 'As a

consequence of this, the 'consumer' or receiver becomes more important than the producer in the interpretative process' (Giddens 1987: 101). In the case of museum exhibits, the institutionalized setting provides a significant anchoring element in the construction of meaning by viewers but does not necessarily determine their interpretation of the material on display. Other factors, preconceived assumptions and expectations, intervene and play a part in the subjective process of creating meaning.

As I have tried to show in the previous chapters, constructing a display, and thereby producing meaning, is a project that always involves a number of levels of conceptual and visual interpretation within a particular spatial setting. However, there is no certainty that viewers will receive the meaning as conceived by the producers nor that spatial parameters will determine the way visitors 'read' exhibitions. Although the physical setting undoubtedly exerts an influence on perception, and spatial relationships form an integral part of any exhibition, received meanings cannot be reduced to these factors. As in reading written texts, a display may engender or evoke multiple interpretations.

No text is read in isolation; all reading occurs within frameworks of 'inter-textuality' as well as in settings involving drawing upon mutual knowledge (Giddens 1987: 107).

Certain museum exhibitions, for example those natural history displays based on taxonomic principles, tend to evoke a sense of closure or fixity of meaning by using conventions of classification and annotation that leave little room for questioning. Frequently the aesthetic conventions and spatial arrangements of such exhibitions compound the sense of ordered knowledge. In an analysis of the layout of two contrasting exhibitions at the Natural History Museum in London, Peponis & Hedin (1982) have shown that in the bird gallery, dating to the nineteenth century, the highly structured gallery design paralleled the spatialization of classificatory knowledge. Taxonomic order was clearly articulated in a formal spatial rhetoric, whereas in the Human Biology Hall, designed in the 1970s, the spatial organization is fragmented, less overtly didactic and more likely to provoke an active exploration of meaning. The exhibition has been very successful in communicating with the general public, although it has received opposition from scientists (Halstead 1978). There seems to be an emerging concern in international museum practice, in principle at least, to resist closure and encourage participation in the construction of meaning.<sup>3</sup> With regard to the anthropological past, a more participatory approach to display would allow the visitor to be a co-discoverer of meaning, co-author in constructing the story of the past

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3. This awareness is expressed by a number of writers in the volume titled 'The new museology' edited by Vergo (1989). The display project 'About the Diorama', discussed in the last chapter, is an attempt to involve viewers in the process of representation.

from available sources. This would accord with what Shanks & Tilley (1987: 97) have called a 'redemptive aesthetic' for museums. This ideal presupposes both that museum practice would be less authoritative and that visitors would be willing and confident enough to engage in independent interpretation of cultural resources.

Although some would argue that the museum enterprise is beyond redemption, fated to become obsolete, this view is overtly contradicted by the world-wide popularity of museums and the increasing recognition that museums and heritage institutions of various kinds are playing important roles in contemporary society (Merriman 1989a, 1989b; Hodder 1990b). Even critics of museum practice do not deny the educational potential and attraction of museums. This is so despite the fact that the history of museums as cultural and educational institutions places them within a Cartesian intellectual context, an elitist social context, and a political context of nineteenth century nationalism and colonialism. A key attitude at the time when museums were being established throughout the colonial world was the belief in control as a measure of progress.

We measured success by the extent to which we were able to subdue and dominate. In the museum, we depicted that domination . . . we depicted the past as a successful struggle in which reality in all its dimensions was being tamed (Hofmeyer 1987: 313).

Hofmeyer, commenting on the museum profession in South Africa, went on to suggest that by the end of the 1960s the 'motivating myth' that progress was achieved by control was no longer tenable but that many institutions of the West, including museums, were still motivated by this flawed conviction, even if they were not fully aware of it. He advocated that 'the will to control' as a motivating myth should be replaced by a new vision, one in which progress was seen as the outcome of negotiation and partnership rather than domination. In this process of changing attitudes museums may become communal assets of untapped potential. 'At the core of the museum tradition lies something of great value' but museums must break out of the mould of past practice (Hofmeyer 1987: 313). The perceived authority of museums must be replaced by a sense of participation in the benefits of museums as communal cultural resources. If culture is best regarded as a resource that is drawn on strategically in social interaction (see Thornton 1988a), so too are museums and heritage institutions resources that can be mobilized to social ends. Within the post-modern embrace of pastiche and depthlessness, the past has become a resource that 'can be plundered to construct an incoherent present', effacing both history and the future (Hodder 1990b: 13). In contrast to this now-centred sensibility, the late John Kinard (1985), was committed to the ideal that museums could be instruments of social change, they could promote a better future. He stressed that communities could affirm their sense of identity through museums, and attain practical benefit from museum programmes. Museums, Kinard argued, could also provide a context in which learning could be a positive way of bridging social and cultural differences. To do

this, however, required a departure from conventional museum practice, as his own museum in Anacostia demonstrated.

In my opinion, the ideal form of experience to engender in museums would be to stimulate knowledge through *re-creation*. This, of course, implies that both the institutional setting and the attitudes of visitors would be open to this possibility. I use the word 're-creation' deliberately to underline the recursive nature of social practice, which in this instance relates to the generation of knowledge by individuals. I assume that received meanings are re-created meanings stimulated by the responses of people to museum exhibits, as well as to the museum setting and the many social activities that take place in museums. In the creative and re-creative experience offered by museums lies a large part of their inspirational potential, which I maintain relates closely to their capacity for educational empowerment, as well as enjoyment.

Having proposed this as an ideal, it is important to recognize the existence of conditions that might constrain creative responses to museum displays, and to anthropology displays in particular. Perhaps the most important factors to consider in the South African context are the pervasiveness of an ideology of race and the deeply politicized nature of the education system. The relationship between knowledge and power, always implicated in the stratification of social classes, has been manipulated in South Africa to ensure the continued supremacy of the white minority. As Wilson & Ramphela (1989: 341) commented in the *Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in South Africa*,

... precisely because education was deliberately used by the Nationalist government as a means of imposing the policy of separate development, there is no possibility of de-politicizing the issue. Education is part and parcel of the liberation struggle ...

The state education system, which since 1976 has come increasingly under attack, is both discriminatory and authoritarian. This system which has operated specifically to maintain an established hierarchy of power relations did not encourage the questioning of authority nor did it assist learners to use educational resources creatively and independently. On the contrary, the minds of pupils were fettered with the pedagogy of 'Christian National Education' which continues to 'exert its baleful influence' on black and white school-goers alike (Wilson & Ramphela 1989: 297). In these circumstances, the possibility of children having an inquiring attitude to museum displays is much reduced. In many cases, museum visits are undertaken as part of the school curriculum, the visit is supervised by a teacher, and respect for the authority of school and text-book is almost automatically transferred to museum displays and texts. If museums were to start to fulfil a creative mediating role in education, a positive attempt to change this attitude would be required.

Mezirow (1981) has suggested, with regard to adult education, that a distinction should be made between the technical domain of learning in which skills and competency are the objectives, and the learning domains of social interaction and perspective transformation, which involve the experience of intersubjective interpretation and reflexive self-understanding. Museums provide learning environments well suited to the latter and, in many ways, they are uniquely placed to integrate the arts and the sciences, and to encourage creative rethinking about disciplinary boundaries. Arguing for an interdisciplinary approach to museum projects, aimed at exploring ecological relationships and the shifting form of the cultural landscape, Nilsson & Rosén (1988: 215-6) commented,

Museums are educational institutions, and we believe that their dynamism lies in their ability to promote adult education, especially concerning those questions which have the highest current relevance. . . . This presupposes among museum personnel a strongly developed sense of involvement in society, an ability to adapt the museum to society's needs . . .

This comment was made with reference to Swedish history museums and the advantages of integrating natural and cultural history, but it could well be applied in the South African context. However, for museums to play a significant social role, visitors must be open to creative learning. Most South Africans, schooled in empirical factual learning, and having grown up in a repressive society, are not socialized to think independently. School syllabuses provide relatively little opportunity for examining the theoretical basis of factual knowledge or the possible influence of different cultural perspectives on what is known. Here too the political system has actively limited cross-cultural communication.

Most schools and residential areas are still racially segregated,<sup>4</sup> and over decades of statutory segregation and discrimination few opportunities existed for people of different races and cultural backgrounds to interact socially without transgressing the law. In these circumstances, ideologies of immutable difference or alterity have gained undue rigidity. Indeed, in the South African context, ethnic diversity has been so manipulated to political ends that the possibility of museums being able to transcend the exploitation of cultural difference remains uncertain. Ultimately this process could only be realized when the country has been politically transformed but, in the interim, recognition of the need to reconcile racial, cultural or ethnic differences is widely acknowledged among all but extreme political groupings in South Africa. However, it will take time to establish a basis of common concern and trust on which to build new initiatives. The essential issue for museum anthropologists seems to hinge on the degree to which anthropological displays can evoke a sense of

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4. The Group Areas Act is still on the statute books, although there are indications that it may be repealed in the near future. However, the burden of apartheid will be borne for generations.

shared humanity, while at the same time promoting a respect for cultural diversity and an understanding of how cultural processes work. A way of doing the latter would be to use existing ethnographic collections to illustrate how material culture has been used historically in the construction of identity. By showing the active and changing use of cultural resources the notion of primordial cultural distinctiveness would be subverted. A project of this nature would also have the advantage of illustrating the inseparability of social and cultural relations.

If ethnographic displays in museums ideally are aimed at fostering inter-cultural understanding, there is very little evidence to show that they have been directed to this end in South Africa. However, there is equally little evidence to the contrary. It has been suggested that museums have such a low profile within the black community that, unlike schools, they have not become the direct target of hostility (Hofmeyer 1987). This might provide a possible space for museums to become instruments of mediation. On the other hand, cultural activists assume that all state-subsidized institutions serve to perpetuate the hegemony of the state. Critics of apartheid have tended to extend their criticism to all state education institutions, more on principle than on substantive research.<sup>5</sup> Ideological critique is often counter-productive in that it tends to operate at a level of rhetoric uninformed by actual museum practice and is therefore not taken seriously within the museum profession. An example of this is a comment by Smith (1987: 2) that 'a significant number of South African museologists' . . . 'still have the Victorian (colonial?) precepts that museums are places for the collection of artefacts, and curation is fundamental to a museum's existence.' While Smith's implication was that undue emphasis on these issues would be inappropriate, he provided no examples of museums that collect simply for the sake of collecting to support his assertion; and curation *is* fundamental to a museum's existence, although not its sole purpose. Moreover, it is widely recognized that Victorian museums were directed at *education* rather than mere collecting (see Chubb 1925; Stocking 1985, 1987), so the point of the statement loses credence.

Both locally and abroad, museums' representations of other cultures have been criticized in terms of Eurocentrism, but as Durrans (1988: 155) has noted,

. . . often the criticism is naive precisely because so little is known about how museums influence their public relative to people's prior assumptions and the impact of other media. Critics might therefore claim that a given exhibition 'represents' something unintended by the curator; but while this is probably true, it is hard to specify and substantiate and would remain a risk in any kind of exhibition.

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5. Since the unbanning of the ANC and the move towards negotiation this attitude has become a little less prevalent, as shown in a series of cultural debates hosted by the Community Arts Project which provided a shared platform for speakers from state-subsidized and democratic organizations.

While this is true in general, in the particular case of South Africa the presentation of African history has been so distorted that it is open to legitimate criticism. A specific study of the depiction of precolonial history in the museums of Natal and KwaZulu has demonstrated the ideological nature of museum interpretations that have tended to maintain ethnic separatism and the dominance of local elites (Wright & Mazel 1987). A recent critique by two members of the museum profession of an exhibition mounted by the Transvaal Provincial Museum Service showed that the archaeological evidence for early Iron Age settlement in the Transvaal had been ignored in favour of perpetuating the myth of the empty land prior to white settlement (Brown & Wanless 1990). Distortions of this kind, with a patent political agenda, have become increasingly transparent as the archaeological knowledge of early farming communities has become more widely disseminated. Indeed, there are indications of a growing awareness within the museum profession of the ideological nature of museum practice.<sup>6</sup> None the less, the large body of archaeological evidence on African settlement more than a thousand years before white colonization has not yet been communicated widely enough to counter existing misconceptions. One of the most tenacious misconceptions centres on the notion of static traditionalism in African communities prior to colonial contact.<sup>7</sup>

The term 'traditional' occurs frequently in museum discourse. Preserving a material record of the 'traditional way of life' of the Khoisan and Bantu-speaking people of South Africa has been one of the primary objectives of ethnographic collecting and research. Projects, such as the Bantu Crafts Project initiated in the 1960s at the SAM, were motivated by the perceived need to document cultural traditions before it was 'too late'. Implicit in this salvage ethnography was the assumption that formerly isolated and self-perpetuating traditions were under threat. In searching for elusive traditional artefacts, within academically defined ethnic units, the contemporary social context of these objects was less important than their place in a hypothetical 'traditional' past. Non-traditional objects were simply filtered out of the research lens, and no attempt was made to document the full assemblage of material culture in use at a particular time and place. Objects that were considered traditional were documented, photographed and collected as isolated examples of a disappearing category of objects. This process effectively suspended such objects from social and historical

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6. This was very apparent at the History Conference of the Southern African Museums Association in Pretoria at the end of February 1990. The changing political climate created a context for renegotiating the role of history in museums in the future.
  7. Fairly recently a number of books challenging this position have been published. Hall (1987) is a notable example.

context, and placed them in the timeless zone of a generalized past. Tellingly, these traditional artefacts, once in the museum, were usually annotated in the present tense, which evoked a flawed sense of unchanging continuity.

The descriptive convention of the ethnographic present is used extensively in the Ethnography Gallery of the South African Museum, which is devoted almost entirely to showing the 'traditional' material culture of the non-urbanized black population. Underlying this is a series of related conceptual oppositions that can be regarded as a sub-text of the displays. This cluster of oppositions includes traditional and modern, Them and Us, non-literate and literate, non-industrial and industrial, unchanging and dynamic, and non-rational or custom-bound as against rational or logical. In South Africa the term traditional has long been used in relation to black people as a euphemism for 'tribal' or 'primitive', while in relation to white people it simply has the connotation of long-established cultural practice, as in traditional wine-making techniques or traditional architecture. Spiegel & Boonzaier (1988) argue convincingly that in the South African context the term 'traditional' has been used politically to promote the notion that Africans are fundamentally different from, and inferior to, people of European descent. If this is so, the emphasis on traditional African ways of life in the ethnographic displays of the SAM could be seen as reinforcing a demeaning stereotype.

Moreover, having ethnographic displays of African artefacts in a museum that is widely perceived as a natural history museum gives rise to the obvious association of Africans with nature rather than culture. This is underlined by the Eurocentric emphasis of the South African Cultural History Museum (see Fig. 18). The issue of whether it is inappropriate for ethnographic displays to be situated in the same museum as natural history displays has caused some controversy, not only in the South African context. As noted in a previous chapter, the discipline of ethnology was founded in the nineteenth century as a field of natural science and it was, therefore, not surprising that ethnographic collections and exhibitions should be located in natural history museums. An implicit line was hereby drawn between those who were studied (Them) and those who carried out these studies (Us). However, the problematic issue in the spatial classification of cultural 'Others' with the realm of natural history is not that people and nature are grouped together but that only certain people are classified in this way. By implication, those who are not westernized are placed lower on an imagined evolutionary scale of progress - Other is also lesser. That this notion is fallacious has been proved beyond dispute (Ingold 1986) but the spatial association of anthropology and natural history in museums harks back to a long out-dated evolutionist paradigm. One of the issues that we hoped the survey results might illuminate was whether visitors to the SAM regarded the anthropology displays as being inappropriately grouped with natural history.

Although this issue has been debated to some extent among academics and museologists (Smith 1984; Yates 1988; Davison & Klinghardt 1989; Ritchie 1990), until very recently no attempt had been made by the museum to engage the visiting public in discussion or to raise awareness of the issue more widely. However, by default the exclusion of African cultural history from the South African Cultural History Museum has drawn attention to the ideology of segregation. This was made explicit when the South African Cultural History Museum was declared a 'White Own Affairs' institution, following the implementation of the Tricameral Constitution of 1983, whereas the SAM was grouped under General Affairs.<sup>8</sup> Since February 1990, however, the local political context has changed so markedly that there seems no doubt now that the present constitutional arrangements will be short-lived, and that the separation of cultural institutions into Own and General Affairs will be rescinded. However, when the two surveys discussed below were initiated in 1989 the outcome of this issue was less predictable.

#### **Visitor responses to the Ethnography Gallery at the South African Museum**

It must be acknowledged at the start that any survey undertaken within a museum can only evaluate the opinions of museum-goers, not the wider public. Although this is an obvious point, it is not always taken into account when assessing the success of museum programmes. It is often assumed that attendance figures provide a measure of success, while the factors that deter people from visiting and affect their attitude to museums remain uninvestigated. In a society such as South Africa, which is highly stratified on both class and racial criteria, large sections of the population may not be reached at all by the services that museums offer; they may perceive museums negatively and stay away, and those that do visit museums may find the displays less than enjoyable. Abdullah Ibrahim, a well-known jazz pianist who has recently returned to South Africa after many years of self-imposed exile, has memories of being disturbed as a child by the figures of black people 'displayed like animals in a glass case' in the South African Museum (cited in Durrans 1988: 154). It is not surprising that some politicized South Africans regard all museums as serving white

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8. Under the Constitution of 1983, museums have been classified as being of general interest or of special interest to a particular population group (Whites, Coloureds or Indians). General Affairs museums fall under the executive authority of the Department of National Education, while Own Affairs museums fall under one of the three houses in the Tricameral Parliament. There was a high degree of arbitrariness in the allocation of cultural institutions to 'General' or 'Own' affairs. Natural history museums and art galleries tend to be classed as General Affairs, while most cultural history museums tend to be Own Affairs. The absurdity of the arrangement is underlined by the fact that the Malay Museum, as a satellite of the S. A. Cultural History Museum, is included under 'White Own Affairs'. The system has been strongly opposed by the Southern African Museums Association.

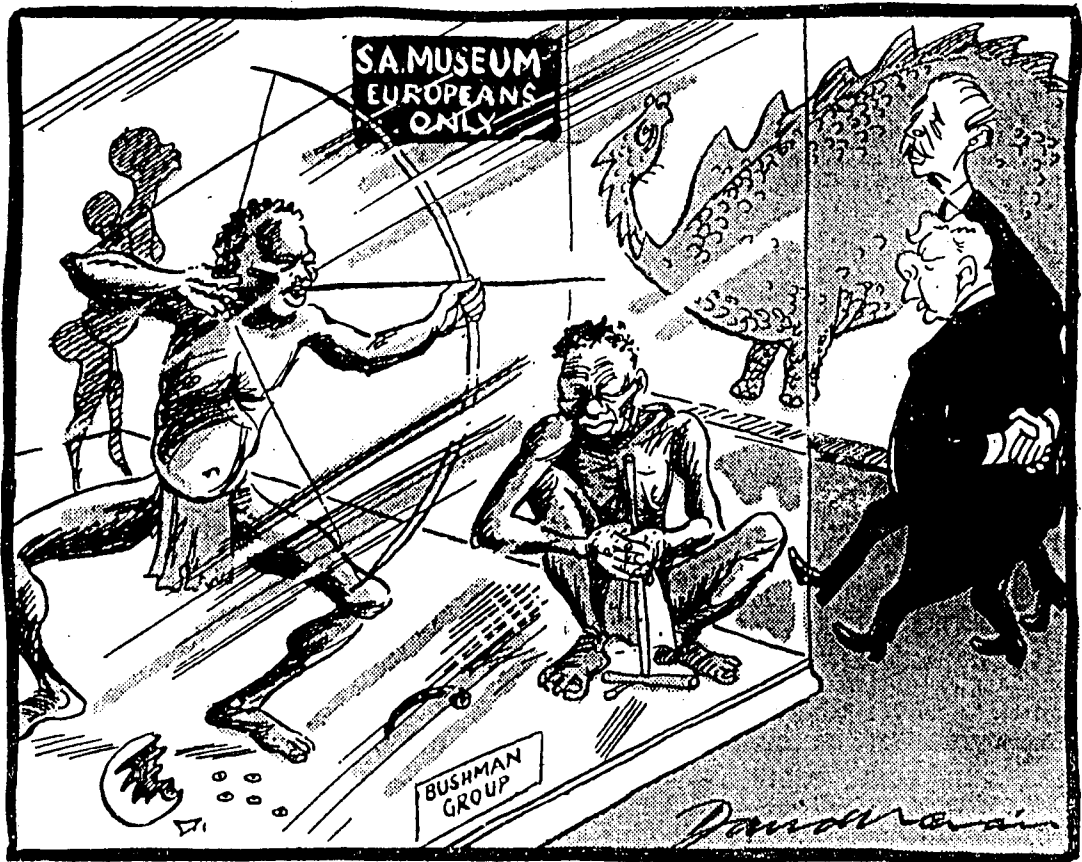
hegemonic interests irrespective of the fact that museums are accessible to all (see Ritchie 1990: 172-174). Despite the widespread implementation of the Separate Amenities Act of 1953, entrance to the SAM has never been restricted on the basis of race. However, public perceptions of the Museum did not necessarily coincide with that reality, as shown in a newspaper cartoon in 1960 that depicted the Museum as being for 'Europeans Only' (Fig. 31). Mistaken as this was, it none the less serves to underline the fact that the Museum was *perceived* at the time as being segregated.

From 1957 a factor that also affected accessibility and attendance was the levy of an entrance fee, for the first time in the history of the Museum. Adults were charged one shilling and children continued to be admitted free of charge. Despite the fact that Saturdays and Wednesdays remained free days, the attendance figures dropped markedly, particularly among 'non-European' visitors.<sup>9</sup> From 1964 onwards the published attendance records have not been differentiated according to race with the exception of the figures for school groups. It is noteworthy that the inclusive annual visitor attendance in 1988/89 was 361 406, only marginally higher than the attendance of 352 547 in 1956/57. This may be explained by the greater attraction of other leisure activities and the popularity of television, but it none the less shows that the museum was relatively less popular than it had been at certain times in the past. Taking into account the overall population increase, museum popularity had effectively declined. This was so despite the opening of a new exhibition wing and planetarium in 1987. At this time an active out-reach programme to attract visitors from black communities was promoted, but there are no records available to measure the success of this programme in qualitative or quantitative terms. While it is problematic in some respects to target black visitors for special attention, the educational imbalance of the past has to be redressed. The appointment in 1989 of a Xhosa-speaking education officer to facilitate programmes for black children was a positive affirmation of this initiative, which coincided with an increased awareness among the wider museum fraternity in southern Africa that museums were unavoidably implicated in the play of power surrounding educational resources.<sup>10</sup>

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9. The published attendance figures for the year before an entrance fee was charged are as follows: 221 911 'Europeans' and 130 636 'Non-Europeans'; the following year the figures were 169 562 and 91 297, and the year thereafter attendance dropped further to 103 048 and 35 558 for the respective groups. In the late 1950s the category 'Non-Europeans' replaced the former divisions of 'Natives' and 'Coloureds'.

10. At the 1987 Conference of the Southern African Museums Association (SAMA) in Pietermaritzburg, the late John Kinard of the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum in Washington DC, spoke out frankly against racism and elitism in museums. Francis Wilson spoke of the educational needs of the black community, and a number of other speakers confronted issues of Eurocentrism and racial bias. A result of this conference was a declaration of non-racialism by the Museums Association. A longer-term result is the continuing rethinking of museum practice in this country. At a more recent SAMA History Conference held in Pretoria at the end of February 1990 the thrust of the discussion was on how to redress the prevailing colonial interpretation of history.



★ “ Often maligned and misunderstood, South Africa's racial policies are actually designed for the *preservation* of each racial group as a separate entity, with its culture intact.”

Fig. 31. Cartoon by David Marais, Cape Times, 1960.

During the summer vacation of 1989, I undertook a series of interviews in the Ethnography Gallery as a preliminary study of visitor responses to the exhibitions. Later in the year a second survey was initiated, aimed specifically at responses to the Bushman Diorama. Both were aimed at qualitative evaluation of responses and were not directed at achieving results of quantitative statistical significance. It was hoped, however, that the questionnaires, together with interviews, would provide a fair indication of visitor perceptions.

*Survey 1: responses to the displays on African cultures.*

The aims of the first survey were as follows:

To gain some qualitative insight into how visitors perceived the Ethnography Gallery as a whole in relation to the rest of the Museum.

To ascertain whether viewers perceived certain displays as depicting a particular historical period, or whether the use of the ethnographic present conflated time into a generalized atemporality.

To gauge visitors' opinions about what was *not* shown in the Ethnography Gallery. This was assessed indirectly by asking interviewees to indicate their interest in a range of possible topics for new displays.

The survey was undertaken as a series of short interviews in the Ethnography Gallery. Each respondent completed a questionnaire (Appendix 2) after I had explained that we were trying to assess visitors responses to the existing gallery as part of an evaluation project that would have bearing on planning future displays. In most cases the interview lasted between 10 and 15 minutes, but in a few cases up to an hour. During January and February 1989, with the occasional help of an assistant, I conducted interviews for about an hour each morning. I spoke to people as they were leaving the Ethnography Gallery and, as I completed one interview I would ask the next person who was walking out of the gallery if she or he would be prepared to fill in the questionnaire and talk about the gallery. Only one person refused to comply and a total of 72 interviews were undertaken.<sup>11</sup>

The first five questions in the questionnaire were concerned with demographic variables - locality, age, sex, home language and occupation. Questions 6 and 7 were about the frequency and motivation of the visit; question 8 rated the adequacy of the information in the labels on San hunter-

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11. Survey results of this and the later survey are lodged in the Department of Ethnography at the South African Museum.

gatherers; questions 9 to 11 asked about the perceived time setting of three specific displays; question 12 invited a rating on eight themes that could become the subject of new displays; question 13 asked whether the gallery on African cultures fitted in with the rest of the Museum; and the final question was an opening for any other comments.

Of the total number of interviewees, 39% lived in the predominantly white residential areas of the western Cape, 19% lived on the Cape Flats which is zoned primarily for black occupation, 18% were visitors from other parts of South Africa, and 24% were visitors from abroad. Other demographic features of the sample are summarized in Table 4.

The occupational status of respondents in both surveys, as shown in Table 5, was weighted in favour of students and professional people. However, in the first survey, in which people were interviewed in person, the spread of occupations was more even than in the second survey which was voluntary. The inflated percentage of students and professionals in the second sample will be discussed later in association with the results of the second survey.

Although the sample is not statistically representative of the visitor population as a whole, it does represent a range of different qualitative opinions. In discussing these qualitative responses, I shall focus on the questions that were directly related to the aims of the survey stated above. Responses to question 13 will be discussed first, followed by responses to question 12, and finally to questions 9 to 11.

The results for the sample as a whole indicated that 57% of respondents considered that the displays on African cultures fitted in well with the rest of the Museum, 32% were uncertain (some people had not yet seen the rest of the museum) and 11% considered that these displays should be in a different museum and not associated with natural history. Positive comments included those that pronounced the Museum was 'okay' just as it was and that nothing should be changed; another stated that the gallery dealing with African people 'had always been there' and should, therefore, remain unchanged, and a number that noted that cultural and natural history were linked - 'the natural world is the human environment' (Survey 1/23). Negative comments included those that simply stated that the gallery did not fit in with the rest of the museum, those that said a separate museum should be made to display African cultures, and those that emphasized that the rest of the Museum dealt with natural history. Only one of the black respondents felt that displays on African cultures should not be in a natural history museum. An Afrikaans-speaking 'coloured' labourer commented that 'man can't live without nature' (Survey 1/38); he also said that he would like to see the culture of white South Africans included in the exhibitions. In interviewing people, I got the

**Table 4**  
Demographic profile of interviewees (n = 72) in Survey 1, expressed as percentages.

Age	Total	Female	Male	English	Afrikaans	Other
14-19	9.7	6.9	2.8	2.8	6.9	0
20-29	25.0	9.7	15.3	9.7	6.9	8.3
30-39	19.4	8.3	11.1	13.9	5.6	0
40-49	18.1	12.5	5.6	12.5	4.2	1.4
50-59	11.1	6.9	4.2	11.1	0	0
60-69	13.9	4.2	9.7	9.7	4.2	0
>70	2.8	0	2.8	2.8	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>48.5</b>	<b>51.5</b>	<b>62.5</b>	<b>27.8</b>	<b>9.7</b>

**Table 5**  
Occupation of respondents in Surveys 1 and 2.

Occupation	Survey 1 % of total (n = 72)	Survey 2 % of total (n = 500)
Professional	17	32
Managerial	0	5
Clerical/Sales	11	2
Labour/Technical	10	2
Homemaker	10	4
Student/Pupil	19	40
Retired	10	3
Self-employed	8	5
Unemployed	7	3
No reply	n.a.	4

impression that although relatively few visitors were aware of the political issues surrounding ethnographic displays, most people wanted to see more an integrated interpretation of history in the Museum. This also came out in responses to question 12.

Visitors were asked to indicate their interest in a range of topics not currently addressed directly in the displays. These were as follows: history, African art, people and environment, political issues, white South African culture (integrated view of culture), crafts, township culture (contemporary, urban African culture), and how museums make exhibitions. The results for the total sample are summarized below:

Topic	Percentage positive	Percentage indifferent
History	64	36
African art	53	47
People and environment	47	53
Political issues	25	75
Integrated S. Afr. culture	58	42
Crafts	31	69
'Township' culture	69	31
About making displays	47	53

Ambivalent responses to the idea of including displays on political issues were frequent. A number of people, who were opposed to the idea of current political issues being addressed, were in favour of political history being interpreted and displayed in the Museum. Current political issues, which most people thought of as party politics, were generally considered too recent to be objectively presented. A strand that ran through the verbal responses was that people had not come to the Museum to be informed about political issues, as one person said 'you can read the newspaper to learn about politics'. The very word politics was offensive to some respondents who thought that this was a sphere of activity that museums should avoid. However, when political issues were defined more broadly to include the play of power in different social spheres, people were less negative. Awareness of the politics of representation was very limited, and most of the people interviewed assumed that museum displays were simply factual and accurate. The widespread illusion that 'scientific' knowledge is unmediated seemed to pertain here, and this was compounded by the conventional rhetoric of museum display.

To counter this tendency, Shanks & Tilley (1987a: 98) have recommended that political content should be introduced into conventional archaeological displays to 'show how the past may be

manipulated and misrepresented for present purposes', but this would surely be yet another representation open to the same critique. If the authority of professionalism is inherent to museum practice, which I maintain it is, the conventions themselves must be made more flexible and open. Here, in accord with the above writers, I would emphasize authorship and the process of producing meanings in displays. The practical challenge is to find new ways of displaying objects, a new display vocabulary, so that the visual rhetoric will encourage an awareness of multiple views and not reduce the complex presence of an artefact to a single, authoritative interpretation.

To return to the survey, the most affirmative rating was recorded for including contemporary urban black culture in future ethnographic displays. 'Township' culture was perceived as encompassing, among other things, African jazz, other vernacular forms of music, fashions in dress and hair-style, shebeens, informal trading-patterns, transport arrangements, and all manifestations of 'cross-over' culture. Both questionnaire results and interviews indicated that visitors would be far more interested in new displays on urban culture than on exhibitions of rural crafts such as pottery and basketry that are frequently seen in ethnographic displays. More than half of the respondents stated specifically that they would like to see the culture of all South Africans represented in the gallery, in an integrated manner. This response, which is in itself a political intervention, was amplified in the second survey.

It should be noted that the interviews were conducted a year before the release of Nelson Mandela, and before the ideal of a non-racial South Africa was backed by those in power. The affirmation by most interviewees of the desirability for exhibitions that showed an integrated view of South African culture and history seemed to reflect a more widespread shift in popular opinion towards 'Africanizing' local culture. From the early 1980s there had been a conspicuous tendency for increasing numbers of progressive white South Africans to respond positively to African culture as expressed in art, music and dance.<sup>12</sup> The motivation for this may have been ambivalent, including insecurity about the future, but it also seemed to express an aspiration to identify with what was perceived as being rooted in Africa. I have suggested elsewhere that this appropriation of African culture represented a symbolic claim to a shared heritage (Davison 1987). In talking to visitors it was clear that the recognition of, and interest in, ethnic diversity did not preclude an interest in

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12. Geometric design motifs derived from vernacular beadwork and mural design have been so widely reproduced in fashion accessories that they have been virtually reduced to clichés. The success of Paul Simons' recording of 'Gracelands', and Johnny Clegg's group 'Juluka' were also part of this popular embrace of African culture. A Democratic Party speaker in a parliamentary debate on the Cultural Affairs Bill in 1989 claimed that township art and Johnny Clegg's music represented an inclusive 'South African culture' (Argus 18 May 1989).

cross-cultural displays that would draw attention to human similarities. Indeed, a number of respondents pointed out that the Museum already emphasized ethnicity, and what was needed was a counter-balance in the form of new displays showing cultural interaction.

With regard to the other suggested display themes - people and environment, African art, and displays about exhibition-making - ratings were fairly evenly divided. Although people were interested in these topics, they were not rated as highly as the other topics. Those who did express interest in 'displays about displays' were more interested in the technical than the conceptual aspects. An exception was a German anthropology student who was critical of the use of sophisticated, modern display techniques, which she felt lent undue credibility to museum interpretations of other cultures. This raised complex issues of aesthetic rhetoric and of the 'hidden persuaders' that influence perception. I would argue, however, that the inherent contradiction in the use of modern technology to represent, for example, a scene from the last century is also a subtle reminder that knowledge of the past has been constructed in the present. The use of modern enlarged photographs in displays depicting the past could be regarded as a form of anachronism, but the display itself is an artefact of the present, even though the content represents the past. The issue of how viewers perceived the temporality of museum representations was specifically addressed in the questionnaire in relation to three particular displays, the Bushman diorama, the Nama camp scene and the Lobedu domestic scene.

With regard to each of these three displays, questions 9 to 11 asked, 'In what time period is the display set?' At the time of conducting the survey the label of the diorama indicated that the scene depicted an early nineteenth-century encampment, and the label of the more recently constructed display of a Nama herder's camp clearly stated that it represented a late nineteenth-century settlement. The Lobedu display was labelled predominantly in the ethnographic present, although it was stated that the material on display had been collected in the 1930s. Respondents had a choice of placing these displays in one of four time periods - last century, 1900 to 1950, 1950 to the present or no specific time. The results are summarized in the Figure 32.

The question at issue was whether the displays were perceived as being ahistorical or whether they were seen as representing a historical period. Underlying this question was the wish to assess if the diorama perpetuated the widely held misconception that Bushmen still live today as pristine hunter-gatherers. As Biesele (1990: 5) has recently remarked,

One of many pernicious myths about Bushman people, exacerbated by films like 'The Gods Must Be Crazy', is that they still live in a never-never land without unfulfilled desires. The reality is that all but 3% of the Bushmen people in Namibia are completely dispossessed and must struggle unremittingly to survive.

It had been suggested in informal discussion among colleagues that if the diorama were interpreted by visitors as showing the way of life of contemporary hunter-gatherers it would be giving credence to this myth (A. B. Smith pers. comm. 1989). However, the survey indicated that relatively few viewers regarded the scene as being contemporary. Only 8% of respondents placed the diorama in the time period 1950 to the present; 50% placed it in the last century, 15% early this century, and 26% were uncertain or considered that there was no specific intended time setting for the diorama. However, although few viewers thought that the display depicted the contemporary situation of hunter-gatherers, there was a fairly high degree of uncertainty and only half of the respondents interpreted the historical setting as intended. Subsequently a head-line label stating that the display represents an early nineteenth-century scene was installed.

Responses to the display of the Nama encampment showed that 38% placed the display in the last century; a further 26% placed it in the early twentieth century, 12% in the period 1950 to the present, and 24% were uncertain. Thus, despite an explicit label, there was no consensus with regard to perceived time-setting. With regard to the Lobedu domestic scene, 33% of respondents placed the display between 1950 and the present, 28% early this century, 19% in the last century, and 19% were uncertain. This display was correctly perceived as representing a more recent period than the other two displays but there was still a high degree of uncertainty. In the interviews many people commented that they themselves had seen African villages such as the one depicted and it was therefore likely to be fairly recent. By contrast, with regard to the hunter-gatherer scene, a number of people commented that the diorama provided them with the only opportunity of getting some idea of a past way of life.

In general, visitor responses to the questions about the depicted scenes seemed to be based as much on prior knowledge or experience as on reading museum labels. The degree of variation in responses would seem to negate the notion that visitors to exhibitions are passive recipients of museum-generated knowledge, and to confirm that displays are read subjectively. Jordanova (1989: 33) and others have suggested that certain representational conventions, such as dioramas - which strive to be 'literal, life-like, exact, telling it as it was' - tend to be less encouraging of alternative readings than conventions that draw attention reflexively to the means of representation, but the Bushman diorama seemed to retain a degree of ambiguity for viewers despite its realism. However, as the survey did not address responses to the diorama specifically, it was decided to follow this up with a second survey, which would be focused directly on the diorama. A small display about the production of the diorama was also planned to provide viewers with a wider frame of reference, and to draw attention to current debates about ethnographic representation.



Fig. 23. Group of /Xam 'Bushmen', Prieska, 1911. (Photograph: D. Bleek, South African Museum Photographic Collection)



Fig. 24. Casts on display in the South African Museum, c. 1930. (South African Museum Photographic Collection)

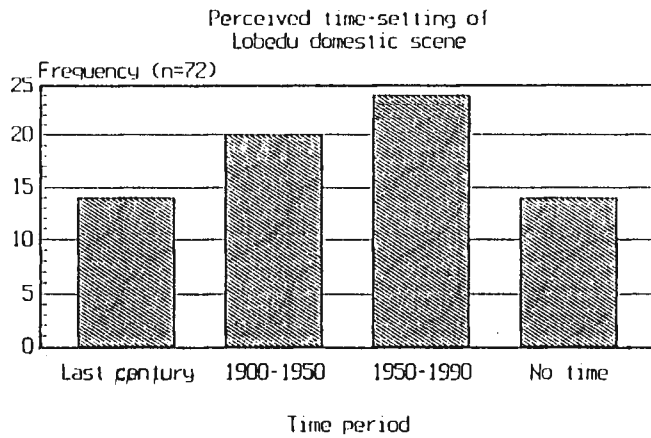
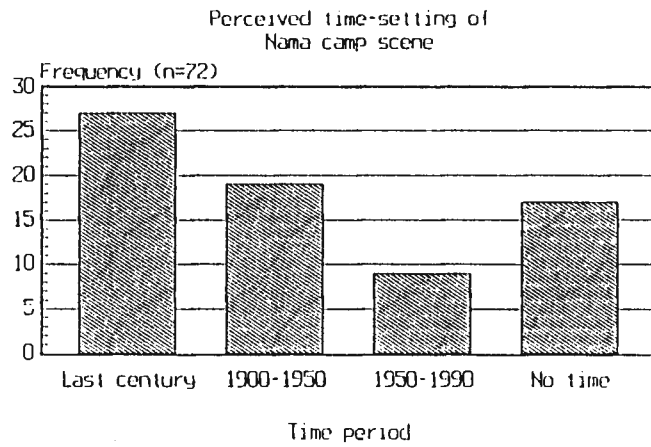
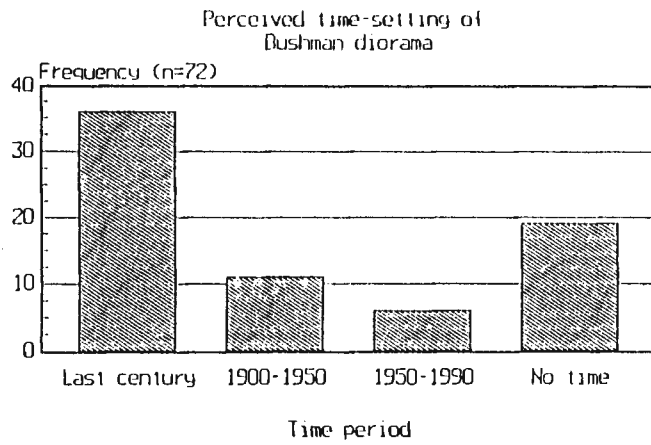


Fig. 32. Perceived time-periods of displays in the Ethnography Gallery.

Thus the display, *About the diorama*, described in the previous chapter, was mounted to tell the story behind the story of the diorama. It was undertaken as part of this thesis project, and as part of a wider project aimed at raising awareness of museum practice. In this sense, the display is an attempt to counter the illusion of unmediated truth that the diorama might otherwise have fostered. Viewers, however, were not presumed to be unduly gullible. As Saumarez Smith (1989: 18) has recently remarked:

Museum visitors are probably much more sophisticated than is generally recognised in comprehending the boundary between what is being represented as real and what is being shown as convenient fiction; . . .

The documentary display was completed in October 1989, and the second survey of visitor responses was started in the same month. The broad objective was to gain some specific insight into viewers' perceptions of the Bushman diorama, which for many Capetonians has become synonymous with the South African Museum. The survey continued until mid-January 1991. Below I present results received up to October 1990.

*Survey 2: Visitor responses to the Bushman Diorama.*

These life casts have been in the museum for so long that the museum is famous for them. Imagine the disappointment and frustration of tourists coming here expecting to see the famous casts and finding they had been moved . . . Keep the San figures here. It's their traditional home. (Survey 2/249)

It has imbued me with a sense of disinheritance . . . I think we forget that the diorama is about real people and not casts. (Survey 2/328)

The second survey was more narrowly focused than the previous survey in being directed specifically at the Bushman diorama and the display 'About the diorama'. It also differed in that respondents were not interviewed or asked in person to complete the questionnaire. A small desk with posting-slot was positioned adjacent to the diorama, and visitors were invited to complete a short questionnaire (Appendix 3). The questionnaire was deliberately kept to a single page, and only one question required a discursive reply. The introductory label, written in English, Xhosa and Afrikaans, reads as follows:

What is your response?

Since the 1970s the diorama has increasingly become the focus of critical attention. We would like to know what you think about the diorama and the special exhibition on the right. Please fill in the form provided and post it in the slot.

No attempt was made to sample opinion randomly among all the visitors to the gallery over a certain period of time. The survey was voluntary and the results represent only the very small number of viewers who elected to respond. The long duration of the survey, however, meant that it sampled visitors throughout the year and not only at peak holiday season, as in the previous survey. It was estimated that fewer than 5% of viewers completed the questionnaire. Although the survey only represents the views of people who choose to respond to the questionnaire, it was anticipated that visitors holding strong opinions, either positive or negative, would be likely to respond.<sup>13</sup> By the nature of the survey people who could not read or write were precluded. The questionnaire was presented only in English, although people replied in Afrikaans as well as English.

The questionnaire related primarily to the diorama but it was assumed that respondents would have also looked at the adjacent display 'About the diorama'. It was felt that by drawing attention to some of the more controversial and critical responses in the press, and by showing images relating to the construction of the diorama, viewers might be prompted to reconsider the display. Critical response was invited. The questions were formulated to allow positive and negative responses to be fairly easily assessed but space was also provided to record open-ended comments on the display. As in the previous survey, questions 1 to 6 dealt with demographic variables;<sup>14</sup> in question 7 visitors were asked what message the diorama conveyed to them; a further question then invited a yes/no rating on a number of suggestions relating to the diorama; and the final question was an opening for other comments.

Questionnaires were available for completion every day of the week, and they were retrieved each weekday and numbered consecutively. The original intention was to analyse the content of the first 500 replies but 61 of these were excluded as spoilt papers.<sup>15</sup> To bring the sample up to 500, the following 61 usable replies were included. Of the total sample, 47% lived in the mainly white residential areas of the Cape, 8% lived in areas reserved for black and coloured people, 27% were from other parts of South Africa, and 17% were visitors from overseas (1% did not reply). Other

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13. The experience of the Opinion Survey Centre of the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria has shown that voluntary questionnaires tend to be ignored but that those people interested in the topic respond (Schnetler 1989; Dixon 1989). This was confirmed in this survey.
  14. Racial classification, if relevant, can be inferred from residential locality.
  15. Those forms that were predominantly blank or abused were regarded as spoilt papers. However, the number of spoilt papers may be an indication that the questions were not clearly understood by some people who wished to respond.

demographic data are presented below in Table 6. Status was assessed on the basis of occupation as previously shown in Table 3.

It is not surprising that those who responded were primarily students or of professional status. People who were accustomed to expressing themselves in writing and were confident of their views were most likely to respond, and this was the case. Comparison with the more evenly distributed occupation profile of the sample in the previous survey suggests, however, that there is a possibility that the professional category was inflated by respondents who aspired to this status. A factor that may have bearing on the high percentage of students in the survey is that, during 1990, a number of University of Cape Town undergraduates undertook critical analyses of museum discourse. Without data on the visiting population as a whole it is impossible to compare the demographic profile of respondents with that of visitors to the Museum in general.

Studies from other parts of the world have indicated that museums attract the better educated and upwardly mobile sector of society (Merriman 1989b). This may well apply here too, as suggested by the present survey sample, but one cannot generalize from so specific a study. The limited data available from other surveys indicate that the majority of museum visitors have secondary school education or higher.<sup>16</sup> However, unlike in Britain, South Africa is not experiencing a museum and heritage boom. On the contrary there are competing claims to the symbolic domain known as 'the cultural heritage' and museums are in a process of redefining their identities and roles in relation to a turbulent social context. Prevailing uncertainty, however, favours a conservative mobilization of symbols of identity and solidarity. Some museums and monuments, such as the Voortrekker Monument, have been an overt part of this process, while others have fewer emotive nationalistic associations.<sup>17</sup> The SAM has never been associated with sectarian nationalistic values but it is, none the less, a national, state-subsidized museum, and as such it may evoke negative associations for certain people.

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16. Results of a survey in 1962 indicated that 17% of visitors had a university education, 69% had been to secondary school or technical college, and 14% were outside of these categories (Lotter & Botha 1962). In a more recent survey undertaken by a post-graduate student investigating public responses to displays dealing with evolution, 34% of the SAM sample had tertiary education (degree or diploma), and 49% had secondary schooling (Mathers 1990).

17. A recent example of emotive reaction to a museum was the bombing of Melrose House in Pretoria by a right-wing extremist. This was intended to destroy the place where the Treaty that marked the surrender by the Boers in the South African War (1899-1902) had been signed.

The issue of status may be indirectly related to attitudes to the SAM in that many of those people who perceive museums negatively, and stay away, might also be socially and educationally disadvantaged. While this may not be so in all cases, especially with regard to politicized non-visitors, there is convincing evidence from studies undertaken in Europe that museums are perceived negatively by people who have not been socialized into regarding museum-going as a possible leisure or learning activity. Merriman (1989b, 1989c), drawing on Bourdieu's earlier work, has noted that people who are not socialized into museum 'competence' will tend to exclude themselves from this possibility by projecting a negative stereotype on to museums. To return to the survey under discussion, it is clear from the very low response that, irrespective of status, most visitors chose not to respond to the questionnaire; but most of those who did respond were from the better-educated sector of the population. This must be borne in mind when considering the results of the survey. However, the fact that those who did respond were mainly from the professional and student sector gives the sample a more equal balance with curatorial professionalism and authority. Simply stated, the sample can be taken to reflect mainly the opinions of an informed minority within the visiting population.

In order to systematize the qualitative responses to the diorama, a number of themes were identified and coded. The main divisions were: positive, negative, indifferent and ambivalent. The positive and negative responses were then more finely subdivided to indicate the reason for the particular response. The qualitative responses to the question, 'What message does the diorama convey to you?', were coded from 1 to 9 and the results are shown in Figure 33.

The overall responses in the four main divisions were as follows: positive responses were received from 76% of all respondents, 7% were negative, 7% were indifferent, and 14% were ambivalent. The more nuanced responses will be discussed in conjunction with the following question, which asked respondents to express an affirmative or negative response to the following suggestions: leave the diorama as it is; dismantle it completely; change the scenario; add more written information; add a video of present-day Kalahari San. Responses to these questions frequently provided confirmation of the more open-ended comments but in some cases they also indicated ambiguities or contradictions. The results are presented below:

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No reply (%)
Retain	76	12	12
Dismantle	10	58	32
Change	16	48	36
Amplify	62	17	21
Add video	74	9	17

Table 6  
Demographic profile of sample in Survey 2 (n = 500).

Age	Percentage				English	Percentage	
	Total	Female	Male	N.R.		Afrikaans	Other
14-19	35.0	20.2	12.2	2.6	22.2	10.2	2.6
20-29	25.2	11.6	11.2	2.4	16.4	5.4	3.4
30-39	15.2	6.4	7.2	1.6	10.4	3.0	1.8
40-49	11.4	5.8	5.4	0.2	8.8	1.0	1.6
50-59	6.8	3.4	3.2	0.2	5.2	0.6	1.0
60-69	5.0	1.6	2.2	1.2	3.0	1.0	1.0
>70	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
No reply	1.4	0.8	0.0	0.6	1.4	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	49.8	41.4	8.8	67.4	21.2	11.4

On the basis of responses to the above questions, it can be concluded that most respondents received the diorama positively, they were impressed by the technical excellence, and found the scene convincing. It seems that the diorama confirmed viewers expectations regarding the hunter-gatherer way of life. However, the majority of viewers also wanted additional information, in written form and on video, about the social history of the people who were represented in the diorama, as well as information on contemporary hunter-gatherers. My attempt to raise awareness of museum practice and to stimulate critical responses to the diorama through the display about the diorama seems to have been largely, although not entirely, unsuccessful.

A number of respondents reacted to critical accounts of the diorama by suggesting that displays showing the culture of *all* South Africans should be included in the same gallery, as the following exemplify:

My response would be to establish a broad collection that indicates the cultural developments and contributions of *all* the peoples of our country *together*. (Survey 2/32)

Where there is no problem someone must create one - if critics feel happy, put a display of white people here too. We are all part of mankind and history of mankind for goodness sake! (Survey 2/268)

Appreciate the 'objections' but feel they are invalid. Museum could set up similar displays depicting other 'groups' - may defuse situation. (Survey 2/457)

Other respondents were less tolerant and suggested that the critics simply be ignored, or told to 'shut up'. (Survey 2/153)

A recurring sub-theme within the positive responses to the 'message' of the diorama was that the Bushmen lived in harmony with their environment.

[the diorama conveys] a picture of the life of the Bushmen as it was - simple, with its own dignity - a folk who had their own ways of surviving despite the vicissitudes of the terrain and the attacks they endured at the hands of others. The diorama has its own integrity. To change it would be to impose transitory viewpoints/issues which seek to rewrite history in the image of current ideologies. By all means show the present life of the Bushmen but do *not* interfere with an exceptional depiction. (Survey 2/266)

... we ought to re-learn the unity with nature that other peoples have. (Survey 2/227)

Possibly influenced by the media coverage of Kalahari hunter-gatherers in films such as those by Laurens van der Post, many viewers had idealized views about the Bushmen, and expressed sadness that their former way of life was no longer viable. Some respondents felt that the diorama conveyed dignity, suffering, hardship and frugality; others emphasized the educational value of the diorama.

I feel it gives a very realistic impression of how these people lived, providing an excellent educational opportunity for children of all ages and adults. (Survey 2/355)

Extremely informative display of what life was like for the now vanished Bushmen.  
Thank goodness it has been captured for posterity (Survey 2/218)

The use here of the word 'captured' unwittingly suggests cultural appropriation, despite the overtly positive comment. From a different perspective a student, who considered that the diorama should be retained, said:

It tells me what my ancestors looked like (Survey 2/428).

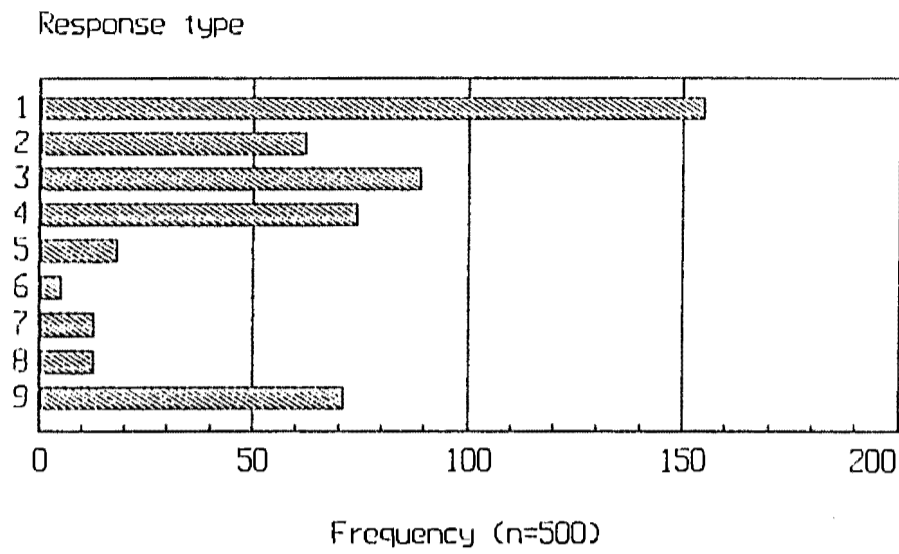
In the same vein a young professional man living in Athlone commented:

I find the diorama very interesting and reminds me of the ancestors of the early age. And how we were brought up by our parents; that this was nothing such as living rich. . . . excellent work keep it up like that (Survey 2/47).

The predominantly favourable interaction with the diorama, as expressed in the survey, confirms that the display is successful in attracting attention and stimulating a range of mainly positive responses. It could be argued that the perception of respondents was ideologically conditioned by the museum setting to start with and, therefore, the result was to be expected. However, this would imply that viewers did not think for themselves even when presented with a range of possible alternative views. It would deny viewers the possibility of creative thought and reduce them to passive recipients of authoritative knowledge. The subjective variation among responses suggests that this was not the case. The overall positive response does, however, indicate that the picture of hunter-gatherer life represented in the diorama accorded with the preconceptions of most respondents. By the late nineteenth century southern African hunter-gatherers had become marginalized as a social and political constituency, and by the second half of the twentieth century they had been romanticized as an 'endangered' and fragile reminder of a mode of subsistence that all humanity once practised. Many respondents regarded the museum as preserving a record of this past way of life. This, of course, is consistent with the popular idea of what museums do - they preserve the past. The fact that preservation is selective and the past mediated tends to be overlooked or eclipsed by the association of museums with authenticity.

However, the survey shows that many positive respondents also wanted to know about the contemporary social and political conditions of the Kalahari San. A labourer from Mitchell's Plain commented ambiguously that the diorama 'shows the ways of the Bushmen but tells us very little about them' (Survey 2/310). Sensitivity to the critical issues surrounding museum practice and the representation of Others was not completely lacking. Awareness of the implicit ideology in the spatial grouping of anthropology with natural history was shown in the response of a professional art-historian:

Visitors' perceptions of the  
Bushman diorama



*Key to response types*

- 1 - positive, without further qualification
- 2 - positive, accuracy, realism or technical excellence
- 3 - positive, survival in harsh conditions, ecological balance
- 4 - positive, of educational, historical value; empowering
- 5 - negative, without further qualification
- 6 - negative, inappropriate association with natural history
- 7 - negative, racist, Eurocentric, static, paternalistic
- 8 - indifferent
- 9 - ambivalent

Fig. 33. Qualitative visitor responses to the diorama.

Confusion generated . . . engaging excellence of display but discomfort at presentation of people in this fashion. Case detailing history and controversy goes some way towards contextualizing issues but insufficient . . . I find the juxtaposition of displays of dinosaurs and *some* people alarming and irresponsible as regards the dangers of entrenching problems of attitude such as paternalism, racial superiority and discrimination (Survey 2/6).

A number of respondents found the display historically inadequate, by omitting to show contact between Khoisan people and white settlers. A Xhosa-speaking man studying in Cape Town remarked on the static nature of the display:

It represents the old way of life of these people [San hunter-gatherers] without showing any change. The transition from that kind of tradition/culture should be displayed. . . . The Dutch must also be shown here to show how change occurred . . . (Survey 2/274).

An extremely negative response came from a young woman student, who felt that the display expressed 'cultural colonialism' and should be dismantled completely:

Why do whites first exterminate indigenous populations and animals and then afterwards try to 'preserve' them behind glass cases . . . . Why don't you say that people were *exterminated* / and their resistance? (Survey 2/300)

Attention was also drawn to the flaw of only asking the opinion of those who came to the Museum. A student from England suggested that the debate should be extended to include non-visitors and more black people:

It is important that this issue is not reduced to the intellectualizing of white middle class citizens (Survey 2/455).

This is an especially pertinent comment considering the occupational profile of those that responded to the questionnaire. It is also important to acknowledge that the results of a survey of this kind cannot fully convey visitor responses. Written comments do not necessarily capture the emotive, non-discursive dimension of viewing the diorama. Moreover, in reducing responses to a set number of concerns, inevitably nuance is lost. What then can be concluded from the survey and what are the implications for future museum practice?

#### **Conclusions and implications for future practice**

Both of the surveys represent a departure from past practice at the SAM. No previous evaluation of visitor responses had been undertaken by a curator, or anyone responsible for producing exhibitions. Although a large body of museological literature on evaluation exists (see Loomis 1987), at the SAM evaluating the responses of visitors has not been given priority attention. This implies a relative lack of concern with whether the services offered by the Museum are successful in

enlightening visitors. It is symptomatic of the tendency among many museum scientists to assume that their responsibility is less to the public than to research and their own professional advancement. Wright (1989: 138), discussing art museums in England, has suggested that relatively few curators are concerned with enabling visitors to share specialized knowledge by 'providing them with the tools to "empower" them to make independent judgements about what they see, learn and experience'. He also questioned whether curators had a sound basis for assessing the experience of museum visitors, while another writer questioned whether curators were genuinely concerned about visitors responses (Hooper-Greenhill 1988). These questions are pertinent here too.

The surveys described in this chapter were undertaken in part for academic purposes, and in part as an attempt to gain insight into visitors perceptions as a basis for changing museum practice in the future. The results lend support to the position that received meanings do not necessarily coincide with intended meanings. In accord with Giddens's (1987) observations on communication through written texts and other cultural objects, it seems that in museum discourse the receiver becomes the more important partner in the communicative process. Because the production of a display takes place at a different time from the moment of reception there is no mutual construction of meaning as would be the case in a conversation, which would be reflexively monitored by both parties. Separated from the immediacy of mutual social interaction, the signifier of a cultural object (a composite artefact in the case of a display) becomes particularly important and the interpretative process is more demanding of the receiver. As Giddens (1987: 102) has noted,

Communication is no longer more or less taken for granted as a result of the methodological processes involved in the sustaining of conversations. More defined and explicit hermeneutic tasks have to be undertaken in order to forge the communicative link between the cultural object and its interpreter.

At one level the museum context and spatial organization provide important cues or reference points for decoding meaning in displays - knowledge produced by curators is legitimized by the museum setting and presumed to be authentic. At another level, however, the museum itself is a cultural artefact that is open to different readings. To generalize about museum hegemony is to reduce the range of contextual meanings that museums may evoke. With the exception of school groups, people come willingly to museums and it can be assumed that they choose to visit because they have a positive image of the experiences that museums offer. They bring with them a range of expectations, preconceptions and a stock of existing knowledge. For museum communication to work effectively this knowledge must be brought into relation with the knowledge generated by the museum. There must be a some common ground for communication to take place. In the case of the Bushman diorama most viewers seem to be in accord with the idealized representation of the hunter-gatherer past. This, I suggest, accounts for the positive reception of the display. But does

this positive response mean that the Museum has no further responsibility than to leave the diorama as it is? I suggest not, but nor does this mean that the diorama should be dismantled.

The survey results show clearly that visitors want more information about hunter-gatherers, past and present, as well as integrated accounts of South African social history and culture. In this the results provide support for redefining ethnography to include all people not only non-western Others. By amplifying the conventional displays to include a range of other topics, including Khoisan history and the impact of colonialism, the idealized view presented in the diorama would be better balanced. Moreover, different display techniques involving audio-visual communication could be used to counter-balance the visual impact of the diorama. The display 'About the diorama', as it stands, is largely eclipsed by the visual appeal of the diorama and thus other ways of presenting this kind of information should be explored. This process need not take place strictly within the confines of museum professionalism.

Participatory projects with interested members of the public could generate new ideas and programmes. If museum practice is to become more sensitive to the public it serves, co-operative projects would be a way of bridging differences, building understanding and of getting the work done (see Durrans 1988). There is no doubt that museum professionals would continue to exert a powerful influence over what is represented, even if there were wider negotiation and more 'emancipatory practices' (Jenkinson 1989: 147), but a positive move could be made towards broadening the decision-making process in planning new exhibitions. The first survey was a preliminary step in this direction.

One of the underlying intentions of the display 'About the diorama' and the second survey was to raise critical awareness of museum practice. The results, however, showed that relatively few viewers saw the diorama more critically in the light of the display. A factor that must be considered here is that most visitors spend only between three and five minutes looking at the display. None the less, for those who are interested, the display serves to underline the constructed nature of the diorama and it provides a wider frame of reference for the diorama, albeit in a documentary convention that is less visually compelling than the diorama itself. If the method is part of the message, the diorama method, which is pure artifice, communicates far more effectively than labelled artefacts and photographs. But does the realism of the diorama blur the distinction between reality and representation? A respondent who commented that the diorama was 'a very realistic replica' seemed to grasp the contradiction without difficulty.

Viewed critically, the Bushman diorama reveals its own artifice. As shown in the previous chapter, the accurately depicted sun-tan on the casts shows that the /Xam women, who were cast and

displayed in simulated hunter-gatherer attire, were fully clothed in real life. In this small detail the Bushman diorama reveals itself as an artefact of museum practice. At present few viewers notice the anomaly but a commentary on the display could draw viewers' attention to it. Ideally the diorama could provide insight into a past way of life, and simultaneously into the way this version of the past has been shaped by museum practice. It would communicate as a representation that revealed its constructed nature. As Myers (1988: 610) has commented on ethnographic representations in general,

The problem may not be with the attempt to describe, but with descriptions that . . . foster the illusion of perceiving reality without intervention.

Of course, with regard to museum practice, this means finding practical and pleasing ways of achieving this. This remains work in progress.

## CHAPTER 9

### MATERIAL CULTURE, CONTEXT AND MEANING

*Every act of recognition alters survivals from the past. Simply to appreciate or protect a relic, let alone to embellish or imitate it, affects its form or our impressions. Just as selective recall skews memory and subjectivity shapes historical insight, so manipulating antiquities refashions their appearance and meaning. Interaction with a heritage continually alters its nature and context, whether by choice or by chance (Lowenthal 1985: 263).*

*Even to adopt the stance of a neutral observer is to adopt a point of view. The fact is that, however 'scientific' it may purport to be, the language of empiricism remains metaphorical (Carter 1987: 30).*

In this concluding chapter I shall attempt to draw together the diverse strands of the thesis and clarify the common ground within what might seem like a disparate series of case studies. The most important common element throughout is a concern with material culture in relation to social context. Closely related to this is a concern with integrating cultural objects and social subjects, thus avoiding an emphasis on objects *per se*, to which both archaeology and museum studies are prone. Leading from this is a concern with the mediating role of material culture in social life.

The thesis as a whole is an investigation of the relationship between the material and social dimensions of cultural artefacts with reference to museum practice. The case studies focus on material culture in two of the broad contextual domains that constitute museum practice - fieldwork and exhibition. The field studies are concerned with material culture 'in action' as interpreted in ethnographic field research, while the museum studies are concerned with artefacts as represented in museum displays. In museums, artefacts that have been collected and interpreted in one context are recontextualized within another context, which is in itself a complex artefact. My intention in the case studies was to elucidate this process by uncovering some of the layers of interpretation that are implicit in museum practice. Considering that museums form one of the main channels for the communication of archaeological knowledge to the general public, a more detailed and critical understanding of museum practice is assumed to be of relevance to archaeological practice.

A key conceptual concern is with the linked processes of appropriation and recontextualization that occur when artefacts become specimens. Although my focus has been primarily on ethnographic artefacts, these processes are also intrinsic to archaeological practice. Excavation is simultaneously

a process of discovery and disturbance, an appropriation of material from the past for academic or other purposes in the present. Recontextualization operates at both physical and conceptual levels in the relocation and interpretation of artefacts for scientific or museum purposes. Indeed, as the above quote from Lowenthal (1985) suggests, interaction with artefacts from the past inevitably alters them.

The recurring argument of the thesis is that museum practice changes the contextual relationships of artefacts, thereby changing the subject-object relationship and the range of meanings or symbolic associations that an artefact might evoke. Underpinning this argument is the assumption that symbolic communication through material culture does not operate through the fixed pairing of coded meanings but through evocation that involves contextual cues and draws on the indeterminate nature of material symbols. Communication through material culture is thus not directly analogous to language; in practice the material dimension of social life is often implicated in expressing what cannot be expressed in words. Meanings evoked by objects are always socially constituted and context-related. Following from this I suggest that a greater awareness of social relations and contextual meanings should be built into both museum practice and archaeology.

Below I shall briefly review the salient points of the case studies and consider the implications for future practice.

#### **From field case to show case**

At a conceptual level the field studies are directed towards elucidating the relationship between the tangible and intangible dimensions of material culture. Although ethno-archaeological in intent, these studies were undertaken from an inclusive anthropological perspective rather than reducing the inquiry in advance by adopting a fictive 'as if it were a site' approach. Following Miller (1983), it was assumed that an anthropological understanding of material culture always concerns *relationships* between people and their culturally mediated environment.

Both studies affirm that artefacts, although inanimate in themselves, are animated by the roles they play in the reproduction of social life. Even the most mundane utensil, such as a grinding-stone, was shown to be invested with social meaning and relevance in the reproduction of relationships within households. Indeed, in the spatial patterning and recursive use of everyday things, material culture plays a part in the 'structuring of structure'. Giddens's theory of the duality of structure (structure being both medium and outcome of social practices, amenable to analysis through the interplay of rules and resources) proved a useful model for the interpretation of material culture,

which similarly can be regarded as being both medium and product of social practices. This approach provided a conceptual solution to the problem of separating material culture from social practice, and affirmed the heuristic value of Giddens's work.

The conceptualization of material culture and social relations as being mutually constitutive implies a rejection of the notion that the material world 'reflects' the social world. In concept, material culture cannot be a 'reflection' of social relations if it is a constituent part of those relations. The mirror metaphor implies a separation of subject and object, and over-simplifies the relationship between the social and material dimensions of experience by suggesting that the latter is a mere reflection of the former, whereas in practice material culture is a medium as well as an outcome of social practices. Through the control of resources, including cultural resources, human agents construct their social world, and yet their control is constrained by the very world of their creation. Thus the relationship between people and things, between social subjects and cultural objects, can be regarded as a form of *mediation* rather than reflection.

In the Pondoland field study the concept of tradition was reconsidered in terms of Giddens's concept of strategic conduct, as outlined in Chapter 2. Instead of viewing continuity of practice as a passive retention of custom, I suggest that the household in question embraced what could be called 'active conservatism'. The perpetuation of conventional practices was by no means backward-looking but was related to current concerns and interests. Moreover, I argue that the retention of a seemingly traditional settlement layout was in itself a form of resistance to government-imposed changes in settlement pattern that have been implemented in other areas. The resources that have allowed this household to negotiate their independence and project a traditional image in the face of outside pressure are derived from the illegal production of cannabis. However, it is of interest that they chose to invest these resources in cattle and the perpetuation of a household that alludes materially to the past, while at the same time being engaged in economic activities that would allow them 'modern' alternatives. This, too, I interpret as a form of strategic action that provides both ontological security and avoids an unseemly and conspicuous show of material goods. Wealth in cattle, on the other hand, is a means of securing social ties and of maintaining links with the ancestors.

In the Transvaal case study I argue that the material setting of Modjadji's court was not merely a passive background to court proceedings but implicated in consolidating the network of social ties on which the political organization was based. Prior to the 1960s, court cases were heard in the *kgôrô*, an enclosure surrounded by a palisade of poles that were carved and brought to the capital by men from all the districts under Modjadji's rule. Most of these poles were simply carved to a point

at the top-end but some were more distinctive, representing implements or human figures. Of the figurative poles, those representing women or women's work were interpreted as giving visual recognition, within the exclusively male arena of the court, to the importance of women in Lobedu social organization. At another level, the poles of the *kgōrō* collectively embodied the relationship between ruler and subject and, in the context of court proceedings, served to give visual reinforcement to the recognition of this relationship. The practice of renewing the court palisade at the chief's request was simultaneously a practical building project and a symbolic construction of political allegiance. However, after the court proceedings had been shifted from the *kgōrō* to a modern court-house in the 1960s and the political system undermined by the 'Bantustan' policy, the pole figures had undergone a related loss of symbolic value. Many of the pole figures were later removed by a private collector of 'African art'. This focuses attention on the shifting status of these objects and the process of recontextualization.

In different ways, both field cases draw attention to a degree of indeterminacy in the meaning of cultural objects, and an openness to continual recontextualization and re-appropriation. Both affirm that material culture and social relations are mutually constitutive. The Pondoland study shows that the perception of spatial patterning varied with gender, status and kinship affiliation. For example, a young wife was required to observe certain rules of conduct in her marital home that she would not observe in her parental home. Meanings evoked by spatial arrangements changed in relation to individual perceptions and social occasion. The seemingly obvious point that artefacts have no inherent or fixed meaning raises questions about the validity of museum practice that tends to privilege one particular meaning of an artefact. Most commonly, but not always, what is believed to be the original meaning is given preference to later meanings that an object might have acquired through its life-cycle. However, it is the history of an object, its patina of social use, that gives it human significance. The significant attributes of objects are both extremely visible and extremely invisible (Miller 1987), but this is often overlooked in material culture studies. The physical form of a specimen tends to appear the same irrespective of its role in social interaction but, in practice, the meanings of an artefact vary with social context. It follows that objects in a museum collection acquire meaning from that context as much as from their original contexts prior to being collected.

#### *Museums, material culture and archaeology*

Museums and material culture are inescapably interlinked, so too are archaeology and material culture. Collections of artefacts<sup>1</sup> form the core of museums, their *sine qua non*, and material

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1. Even natural history specimens can be regarded as artefacts once they have been accessioned and preserved in a museum collection (see Pearce 1989a)

culture constitutes a primary source of data in archaeology. In both museums and the discipline of archaeology, access to the social past is mediated by inferences based on material evidence. However, until fairly recently the interpretive dimensions of this process of mediation were largely obscured by an objectivism which assumed that unmediated access to the past was possible. One of the aims of the thesis is to show that this is illusory. Critical investigation of museum practice at the South African Museum affirmed that the ideal of objectivity is unattainable and that museum representations are always interpretive. The museum case studies, which focus on the processes of collecting, classifying and exhibiting anthropological artefacts in the SAM, demonstrate that museum representations are essentially composite artefacts of museum practice rather than objective reflections of reality.

Similarly, archaeological interpretations and texts are artefacts of professional practice. This view accords with the recognition among post-positivist archaeologists (Hodder 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989; Miller & Tilley 1984; Shanks & Tilley 1987a, 1987b) that knowledge of the past is socially and historically constructed. Moreover, this is confirmed if one views archaeological discourse in historical perspective (see Trigger 1989). For example, 'post-processual' archaeology, in its varied forms, can be regarded as a construct that builds on post-structuralism and critical theory in the generation of archaeological knowledge (Patterson 1989). Built into this approach is a reflexive consciousness of the constructed nature of interpretations, and an increased awareness of rhetoric in the presentation of archaeological knowledge to the public. Consequently, museums have become a focus of archaeological concern because they are 'probably the main institutional connection between archaeology as a profession and discipline, and wider society' (Shanks & Tilley 1987a: 68). The museum studies presented in Chapters 5 to 8, although not related to the presentation of excavated artefacts, are relevant to this concern.

As cultural institutions, museums in themselves are artefacts of the power structures and practices that sustain them. Museums are not only associated with artefacts, but with authentic artefacts - 'real things'. Similarly they are associated with authentic, objective knowledge, the scientific 'truth'. Indeed, the museum context confers authenticity on the knowledge that it conveys, and as such it has symbolic power, the authority to elevate by inclusion, or reduce by exclusion, the status of both objects and information. Bourdieu (1990: 138) has noted in relation to the formation of social classes: 'The power of imposing a vision of divisions, that is, the power of making visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is the political power *par excellence* . . .'. Although the authority of classification and discernment is inherent to museum practice, this authority tends not to be openly acknowledged.

While in Britain there are claims that a reflexive 'new museology' is emerging in response to a growing dissatisfaction with the conventional museological emphasis on how, rather than why, things are done (Vergo 1989), in South Africa no such claim could be supported. However, from the mid-1980s, there has been an increased awareness of the role of culture in the political struggle for a non-racial, democratic society and this has resulted in some critical attention being focused on state-subsidized museums.<sup>2</sup> Within the local museum profession relatively few people have actively entered this debate, although, particularly within art galleries, there are notable exceptions.<sup>3</sup> At the South African Museum (SAM), devoted to natural history and anthropology, the prevailing stance is that of scientific neutrality, an adherence to the positivist ideal of objectivity. Archaeology as practised at the Museum, is aligned with the natural sciences rather than the human sciences, and addresses questions relating to palaeo-environments more than the social past. Archaeological knowledge of early southern African farming communities that challenges the claim that south-east Africa was unpopulated at the time of white settlement, is not communicated at the Museum - with the notable exception of a small display of the Lydenburg Heads<sup>4</sup> (dated to c. 500 AD). The significance of this date, and of the many other sites pre-dating 1 000 AD (Maggs 1984), is not spelt out at the SAM.<sup>5</sup> This absence is a statement in itself.

Collectively, the processes of collection, classification and exhibition (keeping, sorting and showing) constitute museum practice, but museum discourse involves another dimension: that of viewing or receiving museum-generated knowledge. This was taken into account in the present project but it remains an aspect of museum communication that requires further investigation. The lack of data in this area is in itself suggestive of a degree of complacency among museum professionals with regard to the effectiveness of exhibitions in communicating an intended message. However, the gap between intended and received meanings, while disconcerting in terms of a museum's commitment

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2. See Tomaselli (1988), and Tomaselli & Ramgobin (1988). At the 1987 'Culture in Another South Africa' Conference in Amsterdam, however, museums did not receive direct attention, and in the published proceedings they are not even included in the index (Campschreur & Divendal 1989).
  3. These include the Director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Christopher Till, who is also the present President of the Southern African Museums Association, and Marilyn Martin, Director of the South African National Gallery.
  4. The Lydenburg Heads are on long-term loan to the Museum from the University of Cape Town. The display gives very little contextual information about the Lydenburg site, and no attempt has been made to draw attention to the aesthetic or historical importance of the Heads.
  5. While it is true that no active research on early farmers has been undertaken by the archaeologists presently working at the Museum, there is a large body of published work that could be drawn on (see Hall 1987), and collections could be borrowed from other institutions for display purposes.

to didacticism, also suggests creative possibilities for a subjective re-appropriation of exhibited objects. Specimens that have been alienated from their former fields of social discourse could, in principle, be revitalized through the creative responses of viewers. Although, in one sense, museums are enclaved environments in which objects take on enhanced value and acquire classificatory meaning, museums also constitute a field of social discourse and, as such, the collections and exhibitions they house are open to continual re-interpretation, both by the viewing public and from within the institution.<sup>6</sup> A display, like other artefacts, is open to many readings, although there are always certain constraining factors to be taken into account.

One of the main conclusions to be drawn from the responses to the visitor survey described in the previous chapter is that, although respondents were not passive recipients of museum representations, they responded particularly positively to an exhibition that confirmed their existing preconceptions. Thus the idealized view of the hunter-gatherer past depicted in the 'Bushman Diorama' was received with overwhelming accord. The absence of a less-picturesque, but well-documented, history of colonial violence and San resistance did not appear to be a cause of concern to visitors. It seems that the display is successful in perpetuating a romantic image of hunter-gatherers as 'children of nature', because this stereotype already has currency among many viewers. The diorama in itself is open to other readings, but the idealized view prevails as this fulfills viewers' expectations. As Lowenthal (1985) has demonstrated so lucidly in his book, *The past is a foreign country*, people tend to imbue the past with contemporary intention. A form of cultural amnesia allows certain aspects of the past to be forgotten at certain times, and then later to be rediscovered and remoulded in terms of current interests. My own interest in the social history of the people who were cast by Drury early this century is an example of this process. Péringuey and Drury were oblivious to the social dimensions of the casting project, which have become of primary interest to me. My interest in turn has been stimulated by a changing intellectual climate within the fields of anthropology and museology.

I suggest in Chapter 5 that systematic classification of collections tends to reduce the former ambiguity of objects in social circulation. By ordering and naming objects their range of meanings is restricted - naming and knowing become synonymous. In the case of ethnographic classification at the South African Museum, I argue that classificatory categories tend to be conflated with social groups so that in practice such groups are reified and given a more real existence in the Museum than they had in actual life. This is exemplified by the category 'Nguni' (more correctly Nguni-

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6. Saumarez Smith (1989) has cautioned against assuming that once an object enters a museum it enters neutral territory, in which meanings are unchanging and uncontested.

speaking), which - although only a classificatory construct - has been given the connotation of a social group in an exhibition titled 'The Nguni'. The result is that an arbitrary category has been given the status of a group of people, and the display gives substance to this illusion.

On exhibition, objects become annotated artefacts and the process of annotation tends to circumscribe their meaning. Once an object has been classified and labelled for museum purposes it is difficult to transcend the authority of the written text, usually presented as if coming from an anonymous source, legitimized by the authority of the institution. As in academic discourse, the anonymity of the third person in most museum labelling implies both objectivity and veracity. The information presented in an exhibition is further validated by the museum context - it is presumed to be both authentic and authenticated. Thus the use of the ethnographic present in labelling 'traditional' artefacts from cultural others not only gives the impression of timeless, passive conservatism but adds authority to this misconception. This is exemplified by the exhibition on 'The Lobedu' discussed in Chapter 6.

In my analysis of 'The Lobedu' exhibition I argue that it is an artefact both of museum practice and the collectors' vision of what constituted Lobedu material culture in the late 1930s. I suggest that the functionalist concept of wholeness led to an exclusion of artefacts perceived to be non-traditional, and also accounts for the lack of specific documentation on the provenance of individual items, in that the collection as a whole was taken to represent 'the Lobedu' as a whole. At the simplest level, the display is an interpretation of an interpretation, telling as much about the interpreters as the material that is interpreted. In practice, levels of intervention and mediation are inevitably involved in the shaping of collections and exhibitions but they tend to be implicit. The museum case studies set out make these tacit processes explicit.

If museum practice inevitably involves some degree of alienation in removing objects from the context of social life, the casting project described in Chapter 7 provides an extreme example of alienation. In the course of a project, undertaken in the early decades of this century to make a physical record of people believed to be 'pure Bushmen', human subjects were reduced to museum objects in the form of life-casts. The project epitomizes the de-socializing aspect of museum practice. The people who were cast became mere specimens, stripped of their identity, their apparel and their historical context. The specimens (objectivized others) were then used to illustrate anthropological theories current at the time. Moreover, the realism of the casts created an illusion of objectivity that lent credibility to these theories in the Museum long after they had been discredited elsewhere. Only in 1960 were the casts re-displayed within a different context, that of a diorama depicting hunter-gatherers in their 'natural' setting. My analysis of this diorama draws

attention both to the ideas that informed it, and to the irony that apparent realism in display involves extreme artifice in production. Leading from this I suggest that by making visitors aware of the history of the casts and the exhibition processes, a more critical and creative response to the display might be encouraged. This is the intention of the documentary display 'About the Diorama', which constitutes a point of articulation between the theoretical and practical aspects of the project.

#### **Towards an integration of theory and practice**

My argument throughout has been for an integration of cultural objects and social subjects, that is for artefacts to be viewed simultaneously in their tangible and intangible dimensions. In both museum practice and archaeological practice this implies an approach to artefacts that would include an awareness of social context and human agency. It also implies building into professional practice an introspective awareness of itself as an artefact in a social and political context. I suggest that greater reflexive awareness within archaeology would lead to a more sensitive form of practice that would acknowledge human agency, both in the archaeological past and in the academic present. While it is important to acknowledge the difficulties in gaining access to the social past, archaeological theory should not be limited in advance by failing to take cognizance of intentionality in human conduct. This does not mean that human conduct is free of structural constraints but that people, past and present, act in accord with perceived intentions and interests.

With regard to museum practice, I suggest that the social role of museums as mediators of knowledge should be openly acknowledged. Although museums are often described as places of discovery, very often what the visitor discovers has been presented in such a way as to discourage creative interaction. The rhetoric of professionalism imbues many museum exhibitions with an authority that prevents other possible interpretations and obscures the route of discovery. However, there are ways of reducing this effect. By allowing the interpretive nature of museum practice to show, by retaining sensitivity to the possibility of multiple meanings, and by taking care not to conflate genre with lived experience. As Ardener (1989) has argued, the creative part of anthropology consists of transforming a certain kind of experience into a certain kind of text. 'For a time only the actual or a similar experience can produce such texts. Later, however, people become skilled in imitating the texts themselves. What was once *life* became *genre*' (Ardener 1989: 196). Within genre, texts create other texts. Although museums undoubtedly convert experience to text, and text into genre, I would argue that an awareness of these processes allows the traces of human experience to be recovered. In a metaphorical sense, and in the spirit of Foucault (1972), this would be an archaeology of museum practice, uncovering the strata of interpretation and re-interpretation that are implicit in representations of the past.

The project as a whole was undertaken with both theoretical and practical intent. It was premised on the assumption that museum practice is a form of social practice that is open to re-evaluation and change. Indeed, I would argue that museums, like other artefacts, are made meaningful through practice rather than having inherent meaning. It follows that my investigation of museum practice, undertaken as an insider, is already a part of that practice and therefore implicated to some extent in reconceptualizing and reshaping it. In contemporary South Africa the role of museums in society is in a process of renegotiation. Hofmeyer (1987, 1988) has suggested that there is a need to create a new 'motivating myth' that will revitalize museum discourse, and give museums relevance as instruments of mediation. This implies fully acknowledging the social and political context in which museums operate, and recognizing that the knowledge generated in museums is essentially human knowledge and open to re-interpretation.

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## UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

### **South African Museum Letterbooks**

November 1905 to December 1908

December 1908 to March 1910

March 1910 to March 1911

### **South African Museum Correspondence files**

From 1911 (current reference code E6)

### **Field records, Department of Ethnography, South African Museum**

Field notes, photographs and interviews from research in Transkei (1984 to 1986) and Transvaal Lowveld (1973 to 1990)

### **South African Museum Photographic Collection**

#### **Visitor Survey 1**

Responses to the displays on African cultures (January to February 1989). (Records in Ethnography Department, South African Museum.)

#### **Visitor Survey 2**

Responses to the Bushman Diorama (October 1989 to January 1991). (Records in Ethnography Department, South African Museum.)

### **Recorded interviews, Ethnography Department, South African Museum**

Miss E. M. Shaw, interviewed by P. Davison, 21 October 1987; Cape Town

Professor E. J. Krige, interviewed by P. Davison, 4 December 1990; Durban

## APPENDIX 1

### THE KRIGE COLLECTION: MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE LOBEDU, 1936-1938

#### I. UTENSILS, TOOLS AND OTHER OBJECTS CONNECTED WITH COOKING, DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES AND HOMESTEAD (Krige nos 1-81)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9671	Lefielo	Broom
9672	Lefielo	Broom
9673	Khirudwana	Serving basket and lid
9674	Deló	Wooden plate
9675	Deló	Wooden plate
9676	Deló	Wooden plate
9677	Khirudwana	Serving basket
9678	Tsaana	Shallow wooden basket
9679	Leséló	Winnowing fan
9680	Khehó	Calabash
9681	Khehó	Calabash
9682	Khehó	Calabash
9683	Khehó	Calabash
9684	Khehó	Calabash
9685	Khehó	Calabash
9686	Khethéba	Calabash
9687	Khethéba	Calabash
9688	Khethéba/phafa/phafaana	Goblet for beer
9689	Khethéba/Phafa	Container for serving food or beer
9690	Khethéba/Phafa	Container for serving food or beer
9691	Khethéba Khakhepye	Calabash
9692	Khethéba	Calabash
9693	Khethéba	Drinking cup
9694	Khehó Khameezi	Water dipper or ladle
9695	Khethéba Khathata	Wooden dish
9696	Khehó Khamabudo	Calabash
9697	Khehó	Ladle or dipper
9698	Lefhéthó	Porridge twirler
9699	Lefhéthó	Porridge twirler
9700	Lefhéthó la darada	Porridge twirler
9701	Lefó	Spoon
9702	Lefó	Spoon
9703	Lefó	Spoon
9704	Lefó	Spoon
9705	Lefó	Spoon
9706	Bidzha ya khelaléló	Cooking pot
	Morifhí	Lid
9707	Tsana	Shallow basket
9708	Tsana	Shallow basket
9709	Tsana	Shallow basket
9710	Khefhahó	Scoop
9711	Khefhahó	Scoop

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9712	Thala ya meezi	Water pot
9713	Khare	Grass ring
9714	Kheseho	Grain basket
9715	Delô	Wooden plate
9716	Khamêlô	Milk pail
9717	Khamêlô	Milk pail
9718	Khamêlô	Milk pail
9719	Khamêlô	Milk pail
9720	Mohuto	Sandstone
9721	Mohuto	Sandstone
9722	Lehôrô	Tool
9723	Lehôrô	Tool
9724	Bêdwana	Adze
9725	Morogola	Poker for burning
9726	Khebato	Trowel
9727	Lemao	Thatching needle
9728	Lefho	Wooden spoon
9729	Mofhenye wa ledjêpe	Hoe handle
9730	Moseamêlô	Head rest
9731	Moseamêlô	Head rest
9732	Khikhôbô (or lehaba)	Calabash
9733	Khidulo	Seat or chair
9734	Lefudu	Stamping
9735	Lefudu	Stamping
9736	Mose	Pestle
9737	Khizwalabatimana	Reed kitchen-door
9738	Mothatha	Large basket
9739	Khethathana	Basket
9741	Khethathana	Basket
9742	Morogolo	Awl
9743	Lôgwa	Incomplete string bag
9744	Pate	Sleeping mat
9745	Khigôyô	Mat
9746	Lefhódô	Bone
9747	Lethódô	Beer-strainer
9748	Lethódô	Beer-strainer
9749	Lethódô	Beer-strainer
9750	Lethódô	Beer-strainer
9751	Lebala la khoro ya khosi	Carved poles
9752		Carving of a muhwera
9753	Khiuga khi ledzwai	Lump of salt
9754		Specimens
9754		Sample of salt-bearing soil
9755		Salt-encrusted pebbles
9756		Salt-encrusted pebbles
9757		Salt left in pots

II. DRESS AND ORNAMENTATION  
(Krieger nos 82-103)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9758	Zwiêta zwa mphashane	Hide sandals
9759	Zwiêta zwa mphashane	Sandals from motor-car tyres
9760	Thari	Skin
9761	Leôme	Bulb
9762	Matshi	Girl's or woman's skirt
9763	Matshi	Woman's skin skirt
9764	Mosêdo	Tool
9765	Mosêdo	Tool
9766	Mothaga	Ostrich egg-shell
9767	Mothaga	Ostrich egg-shell
9768	Khembebedana	Bead waist-band
9769	Dithotho	Brass beads
9770	Letshida	Necklace
9771	Letshida	Necklace
9772	Kheritswana	Spindle
9773		Specimen of wild cotton
9774	Lesêga la dinôga	Wire waist-band
9775	Lesêga la dinôga	Wire waist-band
9776	Thitho	Girl's frontal covering
9777	Dijôbô	Skin ornament
9778	Dijôbô	Ornament
9779	Dithsêhêla	Cowrie shells worn by children
9780	Ledabara la dithsêhêla	Cowrie neck-ornament
9781	Khekhadwa	Necklace
9782	Zwifhôdô	Pair of armllets
9783	Khifhôdô	Armllet

III. VARIOUS TYPES OF POT, OTHER UTENSILS MADE OF CLAY AND TOOLS USED IN MOULDING POTS  
(Krieger nos 104-126b)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9784	Khelalêlô	Large cooking pot
9785	Bidzha	Small pot
9786	Morifhi	Wide shallow pot
9787	Ledêda	Wide mouthed pot
9788	Kheritswana	Bowl
9789	Kheritswana	Bowl
9790	Kheritswana	Bowl
9791	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer
9792	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer
9793	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer
9794	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer
9795	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer
9795	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer
9797	Thukwana	Pot for serving beer

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9798	Ledjômêla	Goblet
9799	Ledjômêla	Goblet
9800	Ledjômêla	Goblet
9801	Ledjômêla	Goblet
9802	Khitsikhiyo	Serrated pot
9803	Khirégêlê	Stick
9804	Lesabêlo	Wash basin
9805	Lesabêlo	Wash basin
9806	Thema	Implement for smoothing pots
9807	Thedêlo	Pebble

IV. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND OBJECTS USED IN DANCING  
(Kriye nos 127-148)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9808	Gôma	Round drum
9809	Gaediso	Long drum
9810	Thudumetjô	Long drum
9811	Thudumetjô	Long drum
9812	Mothaba	Set of reed
9813	Mothaba	Skin bag
9814	Ketholigo	Herd-boy's flute
9815	Rodigô	Flute
9816	Lengwale	Wooden flute
9817	Naga	Whistle
9818	Naga	Whistel
1819	Khijôlô	Violin-type instrument
9820	Khedôlôdôlô	Stringed instrument
9821	Khedôlôdôlô	Stringed instrument
9822	Phalafhala	Horn
9823	Mantsaakhôda	Ritual instrument
9824	Mantsaakhôda	Ritual instrument
9825	Zaga	Fancy battle-axe
9826	Khiêpe kha gosha	Fancy chopper

Used in Possessed Dancing - Tambourines and Rattles (Malopo cult)

9827	Thadada	Tambourine
9828	Thadala	Tambourine
9829	Tshele	Rattle
9830	Tshêlê	Rattle
9831	Mathodzi	Anklets/rattles
9832	Mathodzi	Anklets/rattles

V. WEAPONS  
(Krieger nos 149-163)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9833	Zaga	Lobed battle-axe
9834	Zaga	Battle-axe
9835	Bora	Bow
9836	Bora	Bow
9837	Mosevhe wa phagane	Feathered arrow
9838	Mosevhe wa phagane	Arrow
9839	Mosevhe wa phagane	Arrow
9840	Mosevhe wa digôbe	Barbed arrow
9841	Mosevhe wa digôbe	Barbed arrow
9842	Mosevhe wa digôbe	Barbed arrow
9843	Lerumo	Spear
9844	Lerumo	Spear
9845	Lerumo	Spear
9846	Khôdôbô	Quiver
9847	Khekhobo	Calabash
9848	Khelado	Knife

VI. SMOKING AND SNUFF-TAKING  
(Krieger nos 165-171)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9849	Gagana	Dagga pipe
9850	Thekhwe	Snuff-box
9851	Thekhwe	Snuff-box
9852	Thekhwe	Snuff-box
9853	Thekhwe	Snuff-box
9854	Moséha	Skin snuff container
9855	Thekhwe	Snuff-box

VII. GIRLS' INITIATION  
(Krieger nos 172-175)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9856	Letate	Bandoliers
9857		Wooden comb
9858	Mewasa	Pair of clappers
9859	Thebolo	Knob-headed arrow
9860	Thebolo	Knob-headed arrow
9861	Thebolo	Knob-headed arrow
9862	Mothema	Trap for magwelele
9863	Khithédélê	Trap
9864	Gadiba	Hat
9865	Gadiba	Hat

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9866	Képsi ya bosikidjane	Cap
9867	Khithunya kha dinonyana	Toy airgun
9868	Mankhonyane	Humming-top
9869	Khomo	Herboy's toy cow
9870	Khomo	Herboy's clay ox
9871	Khamélo	Toy milk pail

Play Activities and Toys of small girls and boys:

9872	Bora le mesébé	Toy bow
9873	Maséga a bósikidjane	Grass bangles
9874	Maséga a bósikidjane	Grass bangles
9875	Khefhodo	Arm-band
9876	Lebanta	Grass arm-band
9877	Khiho kha mapoto	Calabash

IX. IRONWORK AND OBJECTS MADE OF NATIVE IRON  
(Krige nos 193-222b)

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
Hoes, Weapons, etc.		
9878	Lezhébé	Hoe
9879	Lezhébé	Hoe
9880	Lezhébé	Hoe
9881	Lezhébé	Hoe
9882	Lezhébé	Hoe
9883	Lezhébé	Hoe
9884	Zaga	Battle-axe
9885	Zaga	Battle-axe
9886	Mosébé	Arrow-head
9882	Le hébé	Sweat-wiper
9888	Le hébé	Sweat-wiper

Material and Tools of the smith

9889	Gwedzi	Iron ore
9890	Gwedzi	Iron ore
9891		Iron ball
9892		Iron slag
9893		Piece of native-worked metal
9894	Lomanó	Iron tongs
9895	Nódó	Hammer
9896	Légokhó	Implement with holes
9897	Légokhó	Implement with holes
9898	Bakó	Implement for drawing wire
9899	Bakó	Vice
9900	Lekatea	Ingot

## Ornaments made of metal

## (a) Wire bangles and leg-rings and tools for making them

SAM Cat. no.	Venacular term	Object
9901	Khehotho	Instrument
9902	Masega	Wire leg-rings
9903	Masega	Wire leg-rings
9904	Masega	Wire bangles
9905	Mesaga	Copper wire bangles
9906	Leséga	Leg-ring

## (b) Neckrings, bracelets and metal beads

9907	Mphiri pl. mefhiri	Neck-ring
9908	Mphiri	Brass ring on wrist or leg
9909	Mphiri	Old bracelet
9910	Khirogaana	Ancient copper
9911	Dithóthó	Imported substitute for Khirogaana
9912	Dithóthó	Old metal beads
9913	Dithóthó	Portion of a string of metal beads

## Other

9914	Móthoho	Cupping horn
9915	Dithago	Divining bones
9916	Khisigo	Snakeskin bag
9916	Khifharata	Splints
9917	Thébélè	Medicine bag
9918		Doctor's medicine container
9919	Thito	Girl's apron

APPENDIX 2

SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM  
VISITOR SURVEY : GALLERY ON AFRICAN CULTURES

1. Where do you live?

Town: \_\_\_\_\_

Province: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code : \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your age?

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14 - 19 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 - 59 yrs       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20 - 29 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> 60 - 69 yrs       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 30 - 39 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> 70 - 79 yrs       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 40 - 49 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> 80 yrs and older. |

3. What is your sex?

- Female  Male

4. What is your home language?

- |                                  |                                    |                                |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> Afrikaans | <input type="checkbox"/> Xhosa |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sotho   | <input type="checkbox"/> Zulu      | Other _____                    |

5. What is your occupation? : \_\_\_\_\_

Tick the category that best fits your current employment.

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Professional     | <input type="checkbox"/> Managerial    | <input type="checkbox"/> Clerical/Sales |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Labour/Technical | <input type="checkbox"/> Homemaker     | <input type="checkbox"/> Student        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Retired          | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed     |

6. Is this your first visit to the SA Museum?

- Yes  No If no, when was your last visit? : \_\_\_\_\_

7. Have you come to see a particular exhibition or activity?

- Yes  No

If yes, please specify which exhibition or activity :  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. How helpful are the labels on the San (Bushmen) in telling you about the hunting and gathering way of life?

Very helpful       Average       Not helpful       Did not notice

Do you think that labels on other topics relating to the San should be included ?

Please specify : \_\_\_\_\_

9. In what time period is the display of Karoo hunter/gatherers set?

1950 - present       Early this century

No specific time       Last century

10. In what time period is the camp scene of Nama herders set?

1950 - present       Early this century

No specific time       Last century

11. In what time period is the Lobedu display set?

1950 - present       Early this century

No specific time       Last century

12. To help us plan new exhibitions, what would you suggest be included in this gallery?

(Tick as many of the boxes as you like.)

History       White South African culture

African art       Crafts eg. pottery, basketry

People and environment       Township culture

Political issues       How museums make exhibitions

Other \_\_\_\_\_

13. Does the section on African Cultures relate to the other sections of the Museum?

Yes       No       Don't know

Please explain \_\_\_\_\_

14. Any other comments? : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Thank you

