

Why Pots Are Decorated¹

by Nicholas David, Judy Sterner,
and Kodzo Gavua

The decoration of pottery is approached through analogy with adornment of the person, another transform of culture. Among the Mafa and Bulahay of northern Cameroon, pots are assimilated to persons and represent human and other spirits. Much decoration protects against fate and more generally serves as insulation against the dangers inherent in power, whether the source is exterior to the pot or emanates from a spirit held within it. Another theme celebrates success achieved by cultural means. Specific decorative motifs represent cosmological and religious concepts, and similar patterns of decoration on different pot types express coherent underlying perceptions, accounting for continuities in an "art" form in which no one is particularly interested. The inter-relatedness of pottery decoration and symbolic structures quite incidentally justifies widespread use of decoration as the prime index of ethnicity preserved in the archaeological record. Our results conform to expectations raised by Mary Douglas in *Natural Symbols*. This provides a framework for the relation of stylistic to sociological variety that has great potential in archaeological interpretation.

NICHOLAS DAVID is Professor and Head of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Calgary (Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4). Born in 1937, he was educated at the universities of Cambridge (B.A., 1960) and Harvard (Ph.D., 1966). His research interests are in style theory, ethnoarchaeology, African later prehistory and culture history, and the European Upper Palaeolithic. He di-

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rects the Mandara Archaeological Project in Cameroon and has also conducted fieldwork in the southern Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Nigeria, where he was for four years Professor of Archaeology at the University of Ibadan. He edited the *African Archaeological Review* from 1980 to 1985. His publications include, with Hilke Hennig, *The Ethnography of Pottery: A Fulani Case Seen in Archaeological Perspective* (Addison-Wesley Modular Publications 21, 1972); *Excavation of the Abri Pataud, Les Eyzies (Dordogne): The Noaillian (Level 4) Assemblages and the Noaillian Culture in Western Europe* (American School of Prehistoric Research Bulletin 37, 1985); and, with Steve Daniels, *The Archaeology Workbook* (Philadelphia, 1982).

JUDY STERNER is a Research Associate, Mandara Archaeology Project. Born in 1948, she holds a B.A. in Archaeology (1981) and an M.A. (1985), thesis entitled "Physiological and Cultural Adaptations to High Altitude," from the Committee on Resources and the Environment, University of Calgary. For this she conducted her own fieldwork in Ladakh, and she has also participated in archaeological and ethnoarchaeological projects in Peru, Ecuador, and Cameroon. Her research interests include high-altitude studies, community health, and ethnoarchaeology.

KODZO GAVUA is a Ph.D. candidate in the Archaeology Department, University of Calgary. Born in 1956, he obtained his B.A. in Archaeology and Philosophy from the University of Ghana (1980) and his M.A. in Archaeology from the University of Calgary (1985). His thesis is entitled "Daboya and the Kintampo Culture of Ghana." His current research interests include archaeological method and theory, ethnoarchaeology, and African prehistory.

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*He who can read the style of a culture can discover
its ultimate concern, its religious substance.*

PAUL TILLICH, *Theology of Culture*

Style may be defined as an aspect of form either adjunct to that required by utilitarian function or representing a choice, conscious or capable of being raised to the level of consciousness, between equally viable functional alternatives. The theories of style dominant in archaeology (Plog 1983) have in common the belief, implicit in the case of interaction theory, explicit in information exchange theory (Wobst 1977), that decoration and other aspects of artifact form can be cost-effective means of sending messages. We share this view. Argument centres on the questions of the content of the messages, how and in what aspects of the material the information is encoded, who is transmitting to whom, whether consciously or less consciously, and who is reading the messages (see, for example, the exchange between Sackett [1982, 1984] and Wiessner [1983, 1984, 1985]).

We hope to contribute to this debate in two ways. First, we pose the fundamental but rarely asked question, Why are pots decorated? Most workers take the fact of decoration as a given while conducting ever more sophisticated analyses of its expressions (see Hardin 1984) that lead in turn to inferences regarding a wide range of cultural behaviours. We shall argue that pots "are" persons and that concepts of the body are closely related to and partly determinative of decorative expression on pots (and sometimes other media also).

The equation of the pot with the person reminds us of

Douglas's paradox that the human body is a natural symbol. Her *Natural Symbols* (1973) has led us to extend the debate in a complementary direction by considering whether within cultures there are pervasive patterns of stylistic expression that covary with sociological factors in predictable ways. Were this to be so, new possibilities for the exploitation of stylistic variety in material culture studies and in archaeological interpretation, in particular, would open up. Ranges of types, motifs, and designs and their combinations and persistences through space and time might ultimately be decipherable as signatures of different types of society and contrasting patterns of change and development.

Braithwaite (1982), one of the few researchers to have tackled the basic question, has attempted a structuralist analysis of Azande pot decoration. While stimulating, her paper fails for lack of ethnographic depth, and for the same reason we have preferred a more narrowly semiotic approach. Our case is argued on the basis of material gathered in northern Cameroon among the Mafa and Bulahay, closely related groups formerly subsumed within the designation "Matakam" (Martin 1970). We use the term "decoration" in a broad sense, including various forms of surface treatment: burnishing, painting, impressing, and the like. We shall also discuss spikes and other appliques that an archaeologist would normally classify as features. We realise that decoration is merely a category of formal variation and that a complete account would also deal with choices between equivalent, or "isochrestic" (Sackett 1982), morphologies of vessels and other features such as handles and bases.

We begin by arguing that, as pots are widely assimilated to persons, comparative study of their decoration commends itself as an approach. After a brief introduction to Mafa and Bulahay societies and cultures, we describe pottery production, the pots, and their decoration. This is followed by an account of costume and bodily adornment. After showing that these peoples do indeed perceive a special relationship between pots and persons, we tease out the meaning of various techniques and motifs of decoration by comparative study of their expressions in various media and contexts throughout the culture.² Many are shown to refer to and materialize belief complexes that are basic to Mafa and Bulahay thought and society. Finally we reconsider our results and their applicability and implications for archaeology in the context of Douglas's theoretical insights.

Pots and Persons

Pots share with persons the characteristic of owing their existence to having been irreversibly transformed, by fire and by enculturation respectively, from a state of

nature into cultural entities. Pots were indeed the first, and in many parts of the world for millennia the only, artifacts to have been produced by transformation rather than mere modification of raw materials. We hypothesize that humans, recognizing the fundamental similarity with regard to transformation and other more obvious resemblances, therefore extended to pottery certain of the concepts regarding and treatments accorded to the person. (For examples drawn from four continents, see Miller [1985:132, 145] on pots' standing for and being decorated as people by Hindus in India, Barley [1983a:23; 1983b:130] on the pairing of designs on Dwayo pots and bodies in Cameroon, and Hardin's [in mid-conference discussion in van der Leeuw and Pritchard 1984:784] comment that "among the Zuni [of the American Southwest], pots are beings and not things: they are more like people . . ." and consider the sentence "This paper is written by an old crock, a weaker vessel, and a potty lad".)

We do not suggest that the only reason that pots are decorated is that they and human bodies are perceived as alike. However, comparison of decorative techniques and motifs is an effective initial tactic, allowing identification of analogous treatments and the discrimination of those that must be interpreted in other terms.

The body may obviously be decorated in a multitude of ways and for many reasons. The Shipibo-Conibo's stated aim (De Boer 1984:550) is explicitly "emblemic" (Wiessner 1983) of ethnicity and is backed by a unique mythical charter. We suspect that in the majority of cases native exegeses are of the form "It is the custom"—not explanations at all but rather invitations to anthropological enquiry. However, even where the motivation of decoration—the use of style—is made explicit and is informative, informants are very unlikely to be able to recognize certain motifs and design configurations, let alone explain why they carry the messages, the symbolic potency, that they do. This is scarcely surprising, since, in Douglas's (1966:90) words, "no one of us has time or inclination to work out a systematic metaphysics." We make effective use of non-verbal symbols, handshakes or wedding cakes (Charsley 1987), without disembedding their connotations and interrelationships, merely intuiting their rightness in context. Natives' acceptance or rejection of rationales for their symbolic behaviour constitutes neither proof nor disproof of analyses that must be judged on their ability to reveal meaningful patterning and coherence in superficially disparate observations. Neither can the observer normally hope to be able to explain the choice of particular motifs; however, it may be possible to determine something of the matrix of attitudes, values, and beliefs from which they spring and perhaps something of the rules by which they are generated and manipulated.

Mafa and Bulahay

The Mafa, numbering at least 115,000 in the early 1960s (Martin 1970:59), are the largest and the roughly 6,000

2. Our method is not dissimilar to that of Hodder (e.g., 1982:125–211), whose contribution and comments made during the course of a symposium on the uses of style held at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, in 1985 encouraged N. D. to consider this aspect of style in greater depth.

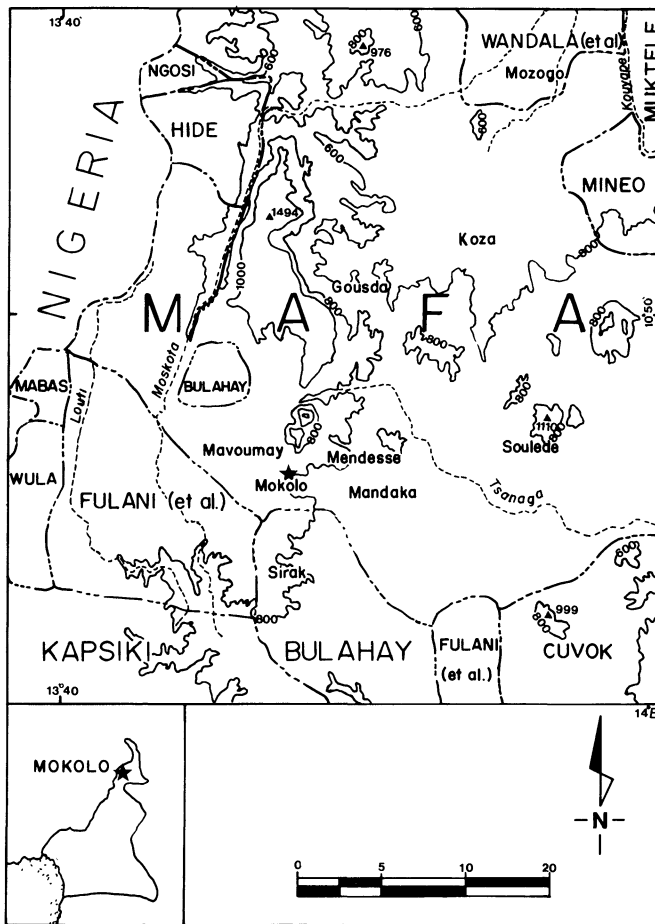


FIG. 1. Part of the Mandara highlands, showing ethnic territories and settlements mentioned in text.

Bulahay one of the smaller ethnic groups living in the Mandara highlands of northern Cameroon (Boutrais 1984). Our field data are drawn primarily from southern Mafa villages around Mokolo and the Bulahay village of Sirak (fig. 1).³ The Mafa and Bulahay speak closely related languages of the Chadic sub-family of Afro-Asiatic. In the country around Mokolo, the modern commercial and administrative centre, they practise very similar economies. A large majority of the nuclear, sometimes polygynous, families are engaged in the cultivation, often on terraces clinging to boulder-strewn hill- and mountainsides, of millets, groundnuts, and other crops and in small stock raising. There is a hierarchy of markets; cash is the accepted medium of exchange.

Mafa and Bulahay societies are characterized by ex-

ogamous named patrilineal clans (*gwalay*).⁴ Before the colonial period the largest political unit was the *dza*. The term refers both to a densely settled zone or village, usually located on and around a mountain or hill, and to the mountain itself. *Dza* comprise the compounds and fields of the members of several lineages and of at least two clans. On and to the *dza*, rites are carried out under the leadership of a ritual chief (*bi dza*). Mafa and Bulahay traditional religions are, again, very similar. Both groups believe in a creator god (*Zhikile*) who appears in numerous contexts and aspects (Hinderling 1984b:255–63). Both participate in the same supra-ethnic ceremonial cycle.

Much of the traditional economic, social, and political organization and ideology remain, though much is disappearing as the modern state and cash economy, Islam and Christian missions, and Western schooling and health care increasingly impinge upon daily life. As a result, even in the villages many of both sexes in their early twenties and younger are remarkably ignorant of traditional religion, and there appears to be little or no pressure on them to learn. Their values and beliefs differ from those of their elders, as is reflected in their attitudes to pottery decoration. A legacy from the recent past, in which intervillage communication was inhibited by often violent conflicts over land and women, is considerable small-scale, “dialectal” variation in material and other aspects of culture. The descriptive data on Mafa pottery given below apply especially to series studied by N.D. in the immediate vicinity of Mokolo. However, the overwhelming cultural similarities within and between the Mafa and Bulahay are underlain by the same symbolic themes (cf. Kuper 1978), justifying our application to the interpretation of these materials ideas and concepts developed from information gathered at Soulede and among the Sirak Bulahay.

Pottery Production, Classes, and Decoration

Pottery manufacture among the Mafa and Bulahay is the preserve of women of a caste named *ngwazla* that monopolizes several specialist activities. *Ngwazla* women are the midwives and may practise as curers, while the men are the ironworkers, morticians, and often also diviners and curers (Genest 1974). The *ngwazla* have important ritual responsibilities and powers but are regarded as unclean. They share clan affiliation and thus clan exogamy with ordinary people (*vavay*), but each caste is nonetheless endogamous. Partly for demographic and partly for socioeconomic reasons, *ngwazla* often marry outside their village, and they divorce and remarry often (Pod-

3. More specifically, from the southern Mafa villages of Soulede (where K. G. worked for 11 months), the Bulahay village of Sirak (on which J. S. concentrated for five months), and Mandaka, Mendesse, and Mavoumay and, to a lesser extent, other Mafa villages and the ethnically mixed (mainly Mafa and Fulani) town of Mokolo (included in a broader survey by N. D. over a similar period).

4. For brevity's sake, only Mafa terms are given below. The transcription is simplified (avoiding diacritics and special characters) from that developed by Barreteau and Le Bléis (1984), whose invaluable draft “Lexique mafa” (Le Bléis and Barreteau n.d.) and much other advice Y. Le Bléis kindly made available to us. Terms are given in the singular form only.

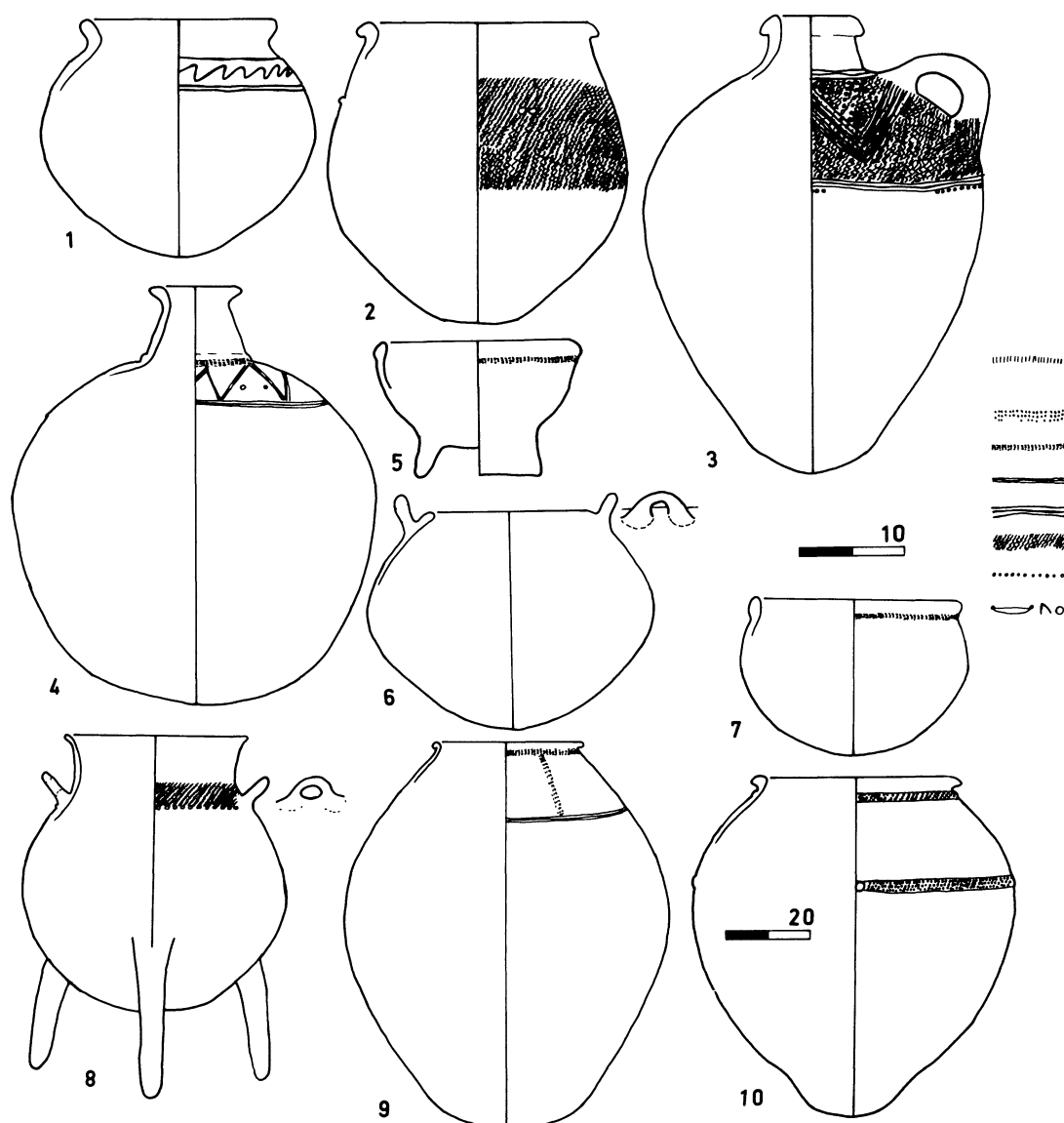


FIG. 2. Mafa pottery (all buff except for 5 and 7, which are black): 1, sauce cookpot (shidef lak); 2, staple (grits) cookpot (shidef daf); 3, water jar (duwzlak yam); 4, beer jar (duwzlak zom); 5, man's serving bowl (kizluwttere); 6, flour storage pot (shidef gufa); 7, serving bowl (gandaf); 8, man's tripod meat cookpot (nnshengelek); 9, grease storage pot (hurdada); 10, water/beer vat (kore bulom) (note different [centimetre] scale). Key to decorations (right), from top, incisions, punctations, fingertip impressions, comb stamping, grooves, rouletting, appliqué pellets, appliqué features.

lewski 1966). There is considerable intermarriage within the *ngwazla* between the Mafa and Bulahay, seemingly more than among *vavay*.

Specialization in pottery production is one factor contributing towards the maintenance of a southern Mafa school of pottery and a related Bulahay counterpart. The movement of *ngwazla* women between villages occasioned by marriage, divorce, or widowhood is another. Variation between villages is to some extent still maintained by village loyalties and reticence vis-à-vis neighbouring settlements, the potters tending to make pots that they believe will be locally acceptable. *Vavay* are

also occasionally asked to specify the characteristics especially of the ritual pots that are ordered individually from the potter. There are, however, more fundamental causes of spatial and temporal continuities in the decoration of pottery.

Ceramics, with over 40 named vessel types, is a prime focus of cultural elaboration in this area (figs. 2 and 3). Pots may be grouped into a much larger buff and a smaller black burnished class and placed on a scale that ranges from complete commoditization (see Kopytoff 1986) of pots produced for the market to singularization of certain sacred pots that are never bought or ex-

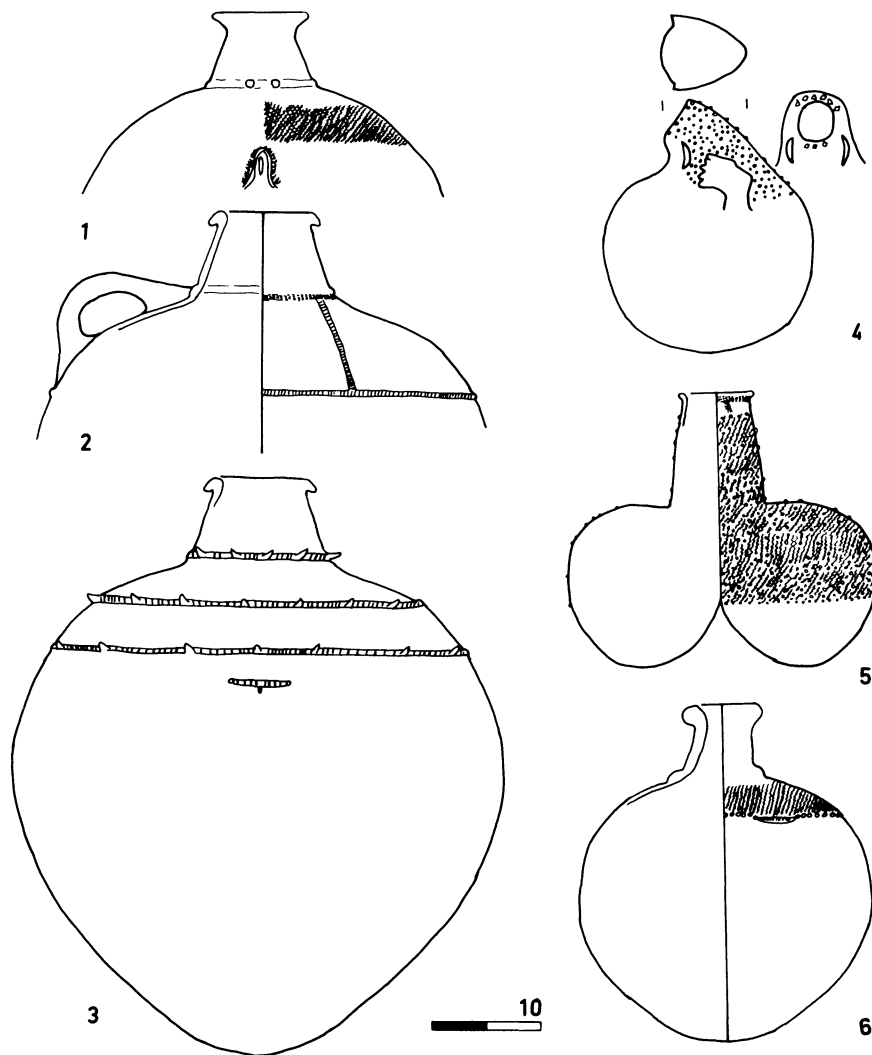


FIG. 3. Mafa pottery: 1, deceased mother's soul pot (mama); 2, jar used for carrying beer to in-laws (zakaya); 3, deceased father's soul pot (baba); 4, God pot (Zhikile); 5, twins' spirit pot (tsakaliy); 6, man's personal soul pot (gid pats).

changed. Events may move individual pots up and down the scale during their lifetimes; types similarly change through time their mean positions on the scale. With these provisos, buff pottery may for convenience be classed in Binford's (1962) technomic, sociotechnic, and ideotechnic categories, i.e., pertaining primarily to the utilitarian, social, or ideological spheres. The first includes domestic pottery used in the cooking of vegetable foods (*shidef*), the fetching, serving, and storage of water and beer (*duwzlak*), and brewing (*tete* and *kore bulom*). These are the most common types manufactured regularly by potters for sale either from the compound or at a market. Sociotechnic pots have functions that are especially associated with male heads of families or with wives. *Nnshengelek*, with or without tripod feet, are used in the preparation of meat, eggs, and fish, ideally at least the prerogative of male heads of households. *Hurdada* containing beef drippings are stored in the head's granary loft. Men use the *zakaya* to offer beer to their in-

laws. Wives are especially associated with the *shidef* *gufa* or flour storage pot. These vessels are generally ordered individually from the potter, as are pots of the ideotechnic class. This last is made up of pots that either represent or are believed actually to contain spirits (*mezheb*) to which sacrifices are made. The term *veray*, with the primary meaning "sacrifice," is commonly applied to members of the class, and it is the elaboration of this complex that is the most remarkable characteristic of the ceramics of the Mafa, Bulahay, and several neighbouring groups. There are various *veray* subclasses including Zhikile pots and a series that represent both living and dead members of the minimal lineage (*gid bulom*). The highly burnished black pottery consists almost entirely of food bowls (*gandaf*) of various sizes. These operate in all three of the Binfordian domains.

Besides the blackening of bowls in a special firing and burnishing, which if present at all is light and casual on buff pottery, pots are decorated mainly by impression—

rouletting, grooving/incision, comb stamping, and light comb grooving—and by application of thin clay bands, pellets, and spikes, the latter, as noted above, being rather features than decoration.

Decoration is considered an essential and integral attribute of almost all pots. It is carried out as part of the craft rather than as an art, generally quite neatly but without either much imagination or care. Ideotechnic pots are made without particular respect. Neither are purchasers overly concerned with seeking out elegantly or especially well-decorated pots. Sensitivity to aesthetics is more likely to be expressed in a Mafa's seeking out a nicely burnished Bulahay or Cuvok beer pot rather than one made by a Mafa potter. A relationship, formerly often clanic, with a potter is as likely to determine which pot is purchased as even the desire to find a sound example. When asked about decoration, for which there is no general term in Mafa, most informants give answers that are variants of "That is the Mafa way." Only modernizing Mafa, mainly townsfolk, are normally willing to purchase undecorated pottery.

In summary, to adapt the words of Douglas (1973:9, 42), the pattern of pot types is symbolic in itself and serves to transmit culture. It encodes, mediates, and reinforces the pattern of social relations. Thus, for example, the principle of filiation is embodied in the pots that represent members of the lineage. However, this is not an adequate explanation of pottery *decoration*, which expresses not the structure but principles on which the structure is based.

The Body and Its Adornment

Mafa costume of the 1950s is described by Hinderling (1984b:217–19, 224–27). Gardi's (1954) *Der schwarze Hephästus* and several other works offer superb photographs of Mafa costume in the same period. Until 1962, when nudity was proscribed by prefectural order, Mafa men normally wore no clothes save perhaps a head covering, a goathide worn on the back, or a cloak, traditionally of locally woven cloth strips, thrown over the shoulders. Bulahay men wore loinskins. Mafa head coverings included hide hats, red caps whose colour indicated that the wearer was a freeholder of the village, and cloth strips. Women and girls wore belts and varieties of pubic apron or shield. These were emblematic of marital status and varied over Mafa territory probably by clusters of allied, intermarrying villages. Goatskins were also worn in various ways. Traditional near nudity simplifies our task; we may reasonably consider, as would an archaeologist dealing with prehistoric materials, everything else applied to or worn on the body as decoration.

Under the decorative category of surface treatment we include the oiling of the body on public occasions, such as going to market. The oil, made from *Khaya senegalensis* seeds, imparts a rich gloss. It may be mixed with red ochre and worn as "beauty dots" or similar designs by the young of both sexes or as a hair dressing

for women, but this mixture (*mber mbesak*) is not nowadays applied all over the body except in the last toilet of a (most commonly woman's) corpse. Hinderling (1984b:219, 225 and personal communication, January 6, 1987) states that women did formerly anoint themselves all over with *mber mbesak* and that, "in 1964, when they wore clothes, I was told that Mafa women still applied [it] to a small spot below their clothes, for magical protection." A bride entering her husband's (often also her father-in-law's) compound may also smear red on her forehead, wrists, and elsewhere to protect against possible ill will, whether of humans or spirits. Several sources confirmed the efficacy of the colour red, worn in various forms and especially in public, exposed contexts, as protection against sorcery, witchcraft, or like evils.

Quite common is the scarification of the body, usually for medicinal purposes, more rarely for beauty's sake. For curing, the skin near the affected part is lightly incised and an appropriate medicine, usually of plant origin, rubbed in. While medicinal incisions may leave no mark or merely a faint scar, cosmetic scars generally take the form of small keloid bumps. They are made either by cutting with a razor or by drilling a hole through the skin with a straw (*sambak*) to produce a sore that is prevented from healing and finally rubbed with heated earth peas to produce, painfully, the desired effect. These scars are worn most commonly in small clusters on the shoulders but also on the temples, belly, forearm, calf, or small of the back. The general term for raised scars is *wudah*, but patterned bumps in the last-mentioned position are called *daw* (millet) by the people of Gousda and no doubt certain other villages.

A third category of decoration involves piercing holes to receive various ornaments. Until the present generation every Mafa female had a hole just below her lower lip into which a thin rod of one of various materials could be inserted. This hole was emblematic of her gender; if absent at death, it was pierced before burial. Some women wear rods in holes pierced also through their upper lips or the wings of their nostrils. Women's earlobes, and in some villages also men's, may be pierced and various metal and tooth earrings and ornaments worn. Apart from the one emblematic aspect, these forms of decoration show regional and local variation; while practised for beauty's sake, it is probable that they also express a concern to protect bodily orifices (Douglas 1966:121). This may help to explain why, while this category of decoration has no specific ceramic equivalent, special treatment of the rims and lips of pots is so widespread and such a preoccupation of typologists.

Cutting and shaving the hair in various styles constitutes a fourth decorative category, of which we know very little. Shaving of the head can have ritual and assertive connotations, and shaven heads are common among both sexes and at all ages. Short-back-and-sides is a popular male cut, and while the more traditional women prefer simple pudding-bowl styles, others, generally the young, have adopted plaited coiffures from the Muslims. Boisseau and Soula (1974, vol. 2:298–99) illustrate a

number of hairstyles that are no longer seen. They involve pattern shaving and have generally descriptive names. One of these, in which rows of small tufts are left unshaved, we have seen among a neighbour group, the Wula, at a ceremony. The millet-grain motif is the same as in patterned bump scarification and application of pellets on pots.

In all the remaining forms of decoration, some part of the body is banded. The band takes numerous forms: necklaces with or without pendants, waistbands, armlets, bracelets, anklets, and rings. Materials include metal, especially iron, and skin and various plant fibres. Necklaces and belts quite frequently have pendants hanging from them; indeed, the pubic apron may be considered a pendant complex. Many, perhaps most, pendants and some decorative bands have expressly protective functions. For example, according to Hinderling (1984b:266), special armlets are worn by women for protection against epilepsy. While the popularity of amulets may have increased as a result of exposure to Muslim practices, the protective and curative value of pendants and other "jewellery" certainly precedes the Fulani period. They are among the items prescribed and not coincidentally often made by *ngwazla* for a variety of ills.

Comparative Decoration: Percepts and Patterns

In attempting to demonstrate that there are similarities in the treatment of pots and bodies and that these express important cultural percepts, we face two sorts of problems. The first is minor, because of differences between the media, effects considered similar may be achieved by different techniques. For example, small, round raised scars are analogous to appliqué pellets, and necklaces and other encircling ornaments correspond to bands of decoration on pots. As noted above, not all techniques have parallels in the other medium, and there exists no comprehensive set of equivalences. Our second problem is that any attempt to understand pottery decoration leads inevitably into Mafa and Bulahay theories of cosmology and religious philosophy that previous research (Martin 1970:185–93; Boisseau and Soula 1974; Hinderling 1984a, b) has not treated in depth and with which we are ill-equipped to deal. Nonetheless, we hope to demonstrate that our limited and imperfect understanding is sufficient for a preliminary exploration.

POTS AND PERSONS: A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

The contrasting cultural and natural statuses of pots and gourds, the other traditional form of rigid, portable container, are clearly expressed in differing treatments. "Because they are fruit," we were told,⁵ the latter are not

decorated. Neither are the woven baskets of the Bulahay. While Mafa spiral-sewn baskets may have some horizontal banding and special treatment of the rim, both produced by using different fibres in the sewing, these effects are quite unlike any realised in ceramics or on the human body. Rare vertical decoration on these baskets explicitly mimics the withies that frame woven basketry.

"Pourquoi Dieu a fait l'homme? Sans grand intérêt. Comment? Avec l'argile à potières." These notes on Mafa cosmology made by a Catholic missionary and quoted by Hinderling (1984b:260) concisely express the Mafa perception. Along with many, if not all, peoples, the Mafa and Bulahay extend to the parts of pots terms applied to animal bodies. Pots are described as having mouths, necks, bodies, bellies, navels, lower parts (*vuzi*, i.e., bases), and arms (*ray*, i.e., handles). Further testimony that Mafa and Bulahay see a special equivalence between pots and persons is their choice of pots to represent God (*Zhikile*) and living and dead members of the family in various, typically sacrificial, contexts. God pots are equipped with a head and a left arm and hand and may, as do those representing males, have a stylized bearded chin and moustache. Occasionally a stylized penis appears on male ancestor pots; female ones have breasts and a vulva. The Mafa pot representing twins (*tsakaliy*)⁶ has two bodies joined in one mouth, corresponding to the belief that twins' souls or spirits are indissolubly linked. (The Bulahay make two identical sets of bowls and small jars for the same purpose.) During sacrifices to the spirits of *tsakaliy* both the parents and the pots wear necklaces of Bermuda grass and strips of *Borassus* palm leaves. Here at least the pots and people, the parents of the twins and the twins themselves, are being adorned in exactly the same way—but not inevitably for the same reason.

SURFACE TREATMENTS: BLACK AND RED

The black burnish characteristic of the *gandaf* bowl series not only gives the pots a sheen similar to that produced by oiling the body on festive occasions but is produced using the same oil. Black is beautiful and especially attractive to the ancestors, who are in this way being invited to partake not only of the sacrifices specially offered them but also of their descendants' everyday meals.

Mafa pots, especially the larger vessels, are sometimes given a partial red wash, especially on the base, which is let into the ground and thus penetrates the realm of the ancestors. This is again explained as protective in intent or, more precisely, as apotropaic in that it wards off fate. Pots are, however, given an overall ochre wash only on one occasion. In the course of a funeral, the personal

5. While we should have made more efforts to record texts in Mafa and Bulahay, it would be merely pretentious to give informants' statements here in the Franco-Chadic idiolects that were our main field languages.

6. *Tsakaliy* as a general term refers to children born abnormally, especially multiple births and breech presentations. Twins are, of course, given exceptional treatment in many parts of Africa and elsewhere. An extraordinary parallel to Mafa *tsakaliy* is the Inca *huaca* as described by Garcilaso de la Vega (Purchas 1906:325–26).

spirit pot (*gid pats*) of the deceased is reddened, and the pot, now renamed *sagam*, represents him or her in the period between burial and the manufacture of the pot to the spirit within which his or her children will offer sacrifice.

Red, the colour of power, also offers protection against its dangers. The weaker the person or the pot and the more exposed to sorcery or other supernatural risk, the more red is needed as protection. Thus, while children are not yet fully persons and as such beneath notice, it is or was appropriate that women, very much the weaker sex in Mafa estimation, be anointed over much of their bodies with ochreous oil when they appeared on public occasions. Similarly, the newly dead require all the protection they can get in their passage to the spirit world, as do the pots that hold their spirits.

Many Mafa and Bulahay, when questioned on these similarities in the surface treatment of the human body and of pottery, replied that they were coincidental. We argue that they reflect comparable perceptions of the two media. In the following sections we will be dealing with a number of well-differentiated motifs; their specificity reduces the likelihood of chance convergence.

THE SPIRAL, COIL, OR TWIST

Let us proceed to cases, starting with an example already cited, in which the parents of twins wear necklaces of grass and palm fronds. Bermuda grass is an extensively creeping perennial, the stems of which root from the nodes. It is indeed (though we have not heard this explicitly stated by the Mafa) a perfect vegetable metaphor for a successful clan, sending out colonizing offshoots in all directions that put down deep roots and become themselves points of origin for further expansion. A family that produces many sets of twins has the potential for exponential expansion. Mafa restriction of the ritual use of the plant to *tsakaliy* ceremonies may reflect the extraordinary concern that Mafa, Bulahay, and their neighbours show regarding abnormal births in general and twins in particular. *Tsakaliy* are unnaturally powerful and dangerous; they are *mide* (a term connoting both sorcerer and witch), but at the same time they are fragile and can be easily, even inadvertently, hurt.

We do not pretend to understand fully the Mafa concept of power. The term *nyi* is derived from a verb meaning "to give birth to, to beget," and, we would suggest, more generally "to create." It is a cosmic potency inherent to vastly differing degrees in certain individuals, in nature (in the spirits of mountain and rainbow, for example), and preeminently in Zhikile. Power is ambivalent, neither good nor evil in itself, but always and inherently dangerous—rather as a nuclear power station is dangerous. Thus for a person to be powerful carries with it the risk of self-destruction besides that of danger to others. Culture provides some insurance against this risk and the means for manipulating this power for the benefit of the family, the crops, or the village or against sorcery and enemies.

Tsakaliy are a focus of power and form part of a critical symbolic nexus in Mafa and Bulahay cosmology. They possess a wild, elemental force that, in the form of multiple births, springs directly from nature's infinite fecundity. Power, and especially the power of *tsakaliy*, is symbolized in the spiral (*ntetirde*) motif, which elsewhere in Africa often has similar associations (e.g., B. DeMott in Fraser 1974:13–17).⁷ The association of twins with spirals is dramatically manifested visually in a double sickle from Soulede, an exceptional piece with two tangs twisted together for insertion into a single haft. While this may be a unique artifact, twisted iron bracelets are generally worn for protection by parents of *tsakaliy* (and by certain *tsakaliy* themselves). The many forms of these bracelets specify different kinds of births in the *tsakaliy* category (fig. 4).

Stories express the same *tsakaliy*-spiral relationship. The small white toads said to appear always in pairs on the leaves of the custard apple, *Annona senegalensis*, are believed to be the souls of twins waiting to choose the woman through whom they will be reborn. The souls of twins do not depart like those of other people to a shadowy world beneath the earth but are reincarnated. Nature is cyclic. *Annona* is an appropriate bush for them to frequent because women strip its bark to sew their spiral baskets. A second, similar belief allows us to make the connection to pottery. When a twin dies, his or her soul will wait behind a *Borassus* palm for the other. Not only are necklaces made of this palm for the *tsakaliy* ceremony, but strips of *Borassus* frond are the preferred material for making the twisted strip roulettes (Soper 1985) that decorate the majority of pots.⁸ These roulettes not only are manufactured by twisting and, when tightly made, show an overall spiral twist but also tend to leave a spiral impression on the pot (fig. 5). The band of rouletted decoration on the pot can thus be seen to share with the *tsakaliy* bracelets both the spiral motif and, by extension, its protective function.

The combination of spirals and banding is of special potency. The significance of the band or circle around something is evident in the archetypal ritual gesture of turning an offering or object around the head. Just as prayer and sacrificial offering ward off supernatural attack, so many bracelets, necklaces, and the like provide day-to-day prophylaxis against the dangers of power, and much decoration on pottery serves a comparable function.

The use of spirals as protection against power is not uniquely associated with the power of *tsakaliy*. It is simply that *tsakaliy* possess to an exceptional degree a dangerous force that is inherent in all powerful persons. Mafa and Bulahay society being strongly patriarchal, this

7. The Mafa apply the same term, *ntetirde*, to an open spiral or coil, as seen in their basketry, and a closed spiral such as is produced by twisting a bar of red-hot metal.

8. Other technically suitable materials are sometimes used today, including plastic baling tape.

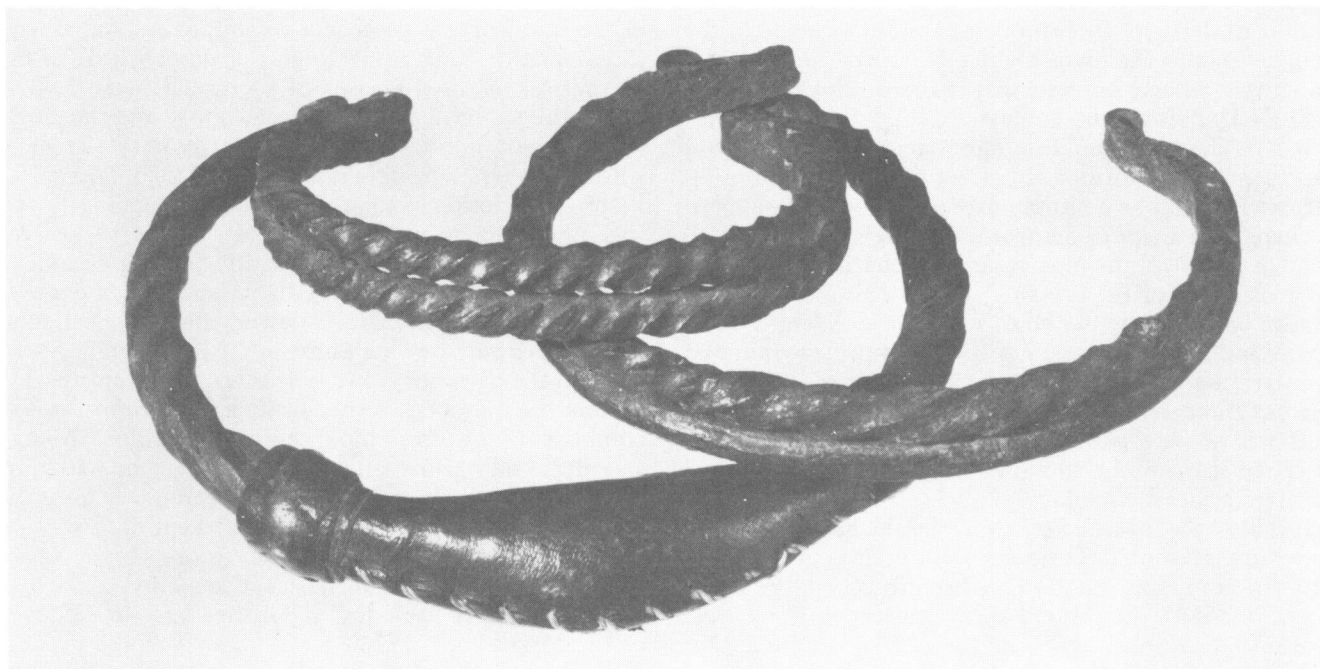


FIG. 4. Iron bracelets: top, for parents of boy twins; middle, for parents of girl twins; bottom, man's medicine bracelet with spiral ends.

means power associated with men⁹ and especially with the chiefs (*bay*), including rain chiefs (*bi yam*) and chiefs of villages (*bi dza*), of the smiths (*bi ngwazla*), and others. It is therefore appropriate for such persons to wear twisted metal bracelets or rings to protect themselves against their own only partially controllable power. They wear them as reminders, "so that they don't get upset," as one informant put it, to help prevent the power on the inside from breaking out. Men lucky (i.e., creatively powerful) enough to have begotten male firstborn buy sickles with spirally twisted hafts.

Not all rouletting occurs in bands; the undersides of appliqué chins are decorated with rouletting that explicitly represents their spirally twisted hair. Differentiation is at the level of the design.

APPLIQUÉ PELLETS

The same proviso affects the interpretation of appliqué pellets. These may be considered "mere decoration" (Mafa use the Fulfulde *faune meere* to express this) when they appear in small panels or short linear patterns. The pellets that appear one on each side of bearded appliqué chins represent a traditional, now rarely seen, type of moustache with a tuft just above each corner of the



FIG. 5. A pot in the making, showing the spirally twisted strip roulette and its impression.

9. Do women have another, perhaps more harmonious, kind of power? They after all make the pots and bear the children. It is not unlikely that we have failed to pick up a contrasting thread in Mafa thought. On the other hand, we do not see that a claim that the women decorate the pots as a covert expression of their power or, conversely, of the pots' need for protection can be sustained.

mouth. These same moustache pellets may well occur next to a band of objectively indistinguishable appliqués that are regularly identified as millet grains (*daw*). On pots anthropomorphically representing Zhikile, God's hair is represented not by rouletting but by pellets, and there is some uncertainty among informants about

whether these can be described as *daw*. The point surely is that millet is of such fundamental importance to the peoples of the Mandara highlands, famine or feast depending upon the harvest, that it is entirely appropriate that God's hair should consist of it.

It would seem, therefore, quite reasonable to expect representation of millet as pottery decoration and to interpret it either as a simple expression of well-being or perhaps as a form of sympathetic magic. However, although Mafa youths may wear love charms, this is the *only* example of the wearing of something to attract a person or magically to obtain anything else. This and an examination of the contexts in which millet-grain and similar raised, pellet-like motifs appear suggest that neither interpretation is adequate, even though the occurrence of a few pellets on pottery, as indeed of a patch of raised scars on the shoulder, may be attributed to *joie de vivre* or aesthetic play.

It is only the threshed grains, never the heads, of millet that are represented. Furthermore, millet is not allowed into the compound until it has been threshed, the heads being stored for the time being in a nearby hut. Practical reasons for this are always put forward and might appear justified except that, while the plan of the traditional Mafa compound is regularly explained as minimizing the threat of theft of small stock (kept in a centrally located hut or huts) and of threshed grain (stored in granaries difficult of access), both are not uncommonly stolen. Before the harvest it is no offense to take, without asking permission, a snack of a head of millet from another's field. At this stage, and until the threshing, the millet is still considered a wild, natural product and thus less controllable or at risk than the processed grains, whose entry into fully cultural space and status is accompanied by various rituals.

Millet is a powerful spirit, capable, for example, of hiding grain from sorcerers by sticking the seed heads in the ground, indeed of killing them by exposure to this magical spectacle, and presumably no less able to deal with ordinary thieves. Millet can also migrate from one farmer's fields to another's if its good disposition is not ensured by appropriately respectful behaviour and can punish those who displease it, for example, by breaking taboos. Punishments range from back pain to blindness and sterility. The pellet motif represents, we contend, millet that has been tamed by culture; somewhat like a vaccine, it offers protection against the darker side of a potent spirit of nature that is at the same time the staff of life.

The apotropaic function of the motif is explicit in the raised scars worn on the lower back against pain and actually called *daw* by some. The motif also appears on rawhide war shields, where it is produced by pushing out small bumps from inside the shield while it is being shaped by soaking, moulding, and drying. These bumps are said to have an objective protective function in deflecting arrows, but this appears quite unlikely to be the case; the protection they offer is rather magical.

Millet grains do not appear in bands on everyday, technical pots but may well be used to decorate men's meat

pots and are common, perhaps standard, on the soul pots of the living. They also occur in abundance and always in association with rouletting as a required part of the decoration of three classes of sacrificial pots. Two of these, the *tsakaliy* group discussed above and the single *nngerzla* pot, are kept under the family head's granary. The spirit of the *nngerzla* is an avatar of the millet spirit; its prime function is to protect the stored grain, though its power reaches out into the fields. The third pot type is the *luwdara*, a large jar used for pouring sacrificial beer. *Luwdara* are now rare, many households possessing none. It is significant, however, that the ideal compound has a *pair*, one kept next to the head's granary, the other in the entrance court. One role of these spirits is to protect the members of the family against *mbot*, sins of commission or omission requiring penance through sacrifice, and against intrafamilial sorcery or witching. They are said to draw their power in some way from the stones associated with a *Zhikile* pot kept on a shelf at the compound entrance. (These stones, often upper grindstones of a pre-Mafa phase of occupation of the area and occasionally including a polished axe, are believed by the Mafa to be "Zhikile-facts.") *Luwdara* and *tsakaliy* pots obviously have much in common besides their decoration.

The at first sight puzzling association of twins with millet and the exuberant occurrence of millet grains and rouletting on the *tsakaliy* and *nngerzla* pots are both explicable in terms of Mafa cosmology. Twins represent fertility superabundant; there is every reason, therefore, to invoke this force alongside that of the millet spirit to ensure a good harvest. Indeed, in the *tsakaliy* ceremonies, twins' parents celebrate on behalf of other villagers. Second, twins and millet are powerful *nature* spirits; those who handle the pots that contain them require *cultural* protection. It should be remarked that both Mafa and Bulahay believe that pots can be used to trap spirits or, ritually closed, to hold them. Both peoples make pots with bars across the mouths for this purpose. Other pots, including the Bulahay equivalent of the *nngerzla*, are kept sealed.

We are now in a position to reassess the function of decoration. It does not merely protect the pot and its contents from external dangers associated with power, since certain ideotechnic pots that contain especially powerful spirits are themselves heavily decorated. A more accurate formulation is that much of what we observers term decoration, whether of the body or the pot, sets up a ritual boundary that serves to protect the weaker from the stronger—whether the danger emanates from the inside out or from the outside in.¹⁰ Furthermore, decoration acts, sometimes explicitly and sometimes not, as a mnemonic, reminding of symbolic

10. Hodder (1982:70), in a typically perceptive but perhaps mistaken passage, suggests that the banded decoration on the gourds of Lake Baringo pastoralists protects "by surrounding what is seen as impure." Alternatively, we propose, the decoration may protect the container and its contents. Among these peoples gourds are used in the process of *transforming* milk into butter and "yoghurt."

structures and themes that are the premises on which the culture is built.

It would add considerably to the strength of our argument if it could satisfactorily explain the absence as well as the presence of certain motifs on various types or classes of pots. In this connection, we note that neither pots representing male ancestors nor those portraying aspects of Zhikile are decorated either with bands of rouletting or with appliqué pellets. (It is surely indicative of the status of women that pots representing female ancestors *are* rouletted.) Neither Zhikile nor male ancestors are deemed to require protection, and, in contrast to pots like *tsakaliy* that contain untamed spirits, the lineage pots hold those of members of the group who, even if they punish, will do so according to socially accepted norms. Zhikile pots are placed in and around the compound to protect it and its members from natural and supernatural attack. Power, we suggest, must be able to flow through them; insulating decoration would be counterproductive if not futile. A fuller explanation requires more data and should also make clear why in certain circumstances, for example, in a newly founded compound, stones can stand for Zhikile and lineage, and only these, pots.

OTHER IMPRESSED DECORATION

The black food bowls almost inevitably carry a band of comb stamping just below the rim. This same motif may be found on but is not prescribed for other pots, especially, it seems, some associated particularly with men, for example, the neckless jar used to store grease. We have also seen it on beer pots and on God pots but not on cooking pots. This design, called *sambak* after the straw used to form the "teeth" of the comb, tends to be associated with sociotechnic and ideotechnic pottery. Unlike spirals and pellets, it has no obvious equivalent in bodily adornment. A possible clue to its symbolic significance comes in the verb root *tsasl-* that describes the wrist motion used (a) in comb stamping, (b) in impressing a pot with a fragment of calabash or piece of millet stalk (the effect might well be described by an archaeologist as incision or even punctuation), (c) in impressing appliqué bands or belts on the huge beer vats with fingertip impressions, (d) in impressing an appliqué strip across the front of certain iron smelting furnaces in a similar manner and probably also (e) in similarly decorating granaries, and (f) in making a libation by spilling beer from a calabash in the course of a sacrifice.¹¹

We were never able to elicit explanations for the stamped decoration on bowls other than those of the "Custom requires it" variety; nonetheless the virtues of bands associated with fingertip impressions are quite generally recognized. The appliqué bands just below the rims and around the shoulders of beer vats are even said to reinforce these vessels physically, although they are too thin to add structural strength. The band once deco-

rated enables the pot to resist cracking brought about by thunder and lightning or loud noises from any nearby forge.

While the same motifs have not been identified in personal adornment, in their occurrence as bands and their apotropaic function these various types of impressions are indeed similar to decoration applied to the human body. It might be suggested that in the ceramic medium such decoration represents fixed, materialized prayer—possibly that pots are similar to humans even to the extent of praying. But this is to force the evidence; an argument from semantics is quite different to and less compelling than those developed above, in which the treatments of contrasting media are interrelated both conceptually and by the specific motifs employed in their decoration.

Appliqué bands with fingertip impressions are applied only to the largest, most expensive pots, whose breakage in use normally results in substantial loss, to the all-important granaries, and to certain iron-smelting furnaces, again representing substantial and risky investments (David n.d.). It would not therefore be unreasonable to search for an equivalent in bodily adornment worn only by important people on special occasions. As to the pottery-decorating comb, improvised of straws set in unfired clay, we may note that these same straws are symbolically charged. A *sambak* broom is used to keep flies away from corpses, and for this reason care is taken to avoid touching the living with them. *Sambak* is also used in ceremonies connected with threshing and, as mentioned above, in scarification.

Other forms of impressed decoration include light grooving using combs, sticks, or pieces of millet stalk. The comb is lightly dragged over the pot surface, sometimes to produce bands of checkerboard design. The stick is used to define bands of decoration and to inscribe chevrons and other simple geometric motifs such as occur, for example, on Bulahay loinskins and on the handles of sheath knives of "Muslim" type. None of these motifs appear to have close analogues in bodily adornment or to be of any special apotropaic or symbolic significance.

SPIKES AND INCISED BANDS

In the town of Mokolo, daub spikes set along the tops of the walls of recently completed, more prosperous compounds serve no obvious function and barely last a rainy season. The same motif occurs on pottery, on the walls of threshing floors, and on the furnace mentioned above (fig. 6). In the latter case the spikes represent the many descendants of the iron master's ancestors. The odd number running up each side of the shield that protects the bellows team indicates that many of the firstborn in successive generations were males (see Vincent 1978). The spikes are called *ntsulokwokwa*, a term which combines the ideas of pointed and converging and is applied to the horns of cattle. A Zhikile pot that guarded the furnace and to which sacrifice was made on the day of the smelt had a series of 11 spikes around the shoulder,

11. We thank Y. LeBléis for pointing out this semantic relationship.

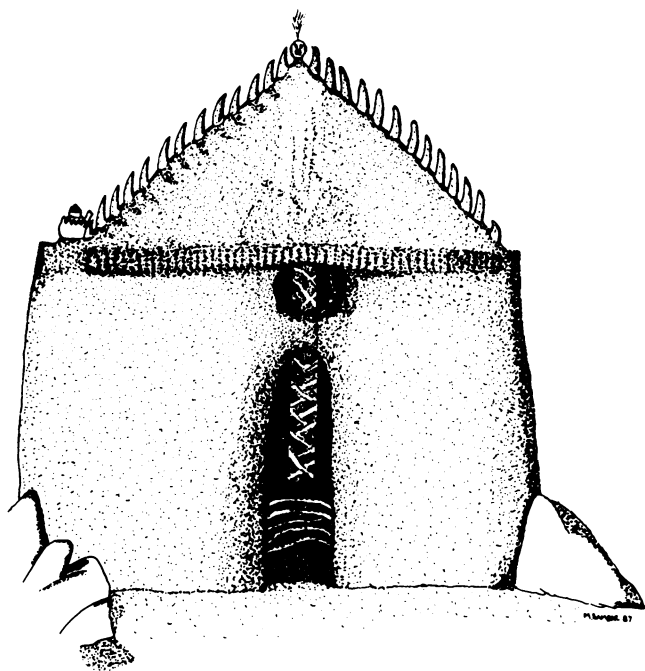


FIG. 6. A Mafa iron-smelting furnace (height 2.70 m), with Zhikile pot (upper left).



FIG. 7. Zhikile pot protecting furnace and smelt.

representing God's millet and flocks and other multitudinous possessions (fig. 7). Spikes are a diagnostic feature of two of the lineage pots, a large jar representing the deceased father (*baba*) and a smaller one for the grandfather (*babbaba*). They are set on thin appliqué bands decorated with short incisions.

The single analogy to spikes in Mafa costume is seen only at the funerals of certain very successful male Mafa. The horns of the bull that has been killed to provide the hide in which the body is clad for burial are set to protrude through the goatskin that shrouds the head of the corpse. The reference here is to the bi- or triennial *maray* feast.¹² The high point of *maray* is the episode when the *bi dza's* bull is released from the stall in which it has been confined and recaptured and returned in part by main male strength and in part through the agency of priestly *zugula*, who tame the beast by means of a sacred cord (Hinderling 1984b:342, 385). There are striking parallels between this segment of the *maray* feast and, on the one hand, the release and recapture of spirits in pots by means of ritual and, on the other, the sequence of removal of the corpse from the hut in which it has been laid out, promenade around the compound area on the shoulders of the officiating *ngwazla*, and interment.

The wearing of horns by the deceased assimilates him to the *maray* bull, which is also mourned. Spikes, sym-

bolic horns, appear only in male contexts and particularly those associated with wealth or success. The spikes on the wall of the threshing floor are actually called *maray*, and those on compound walls, on pots representing male ancestors¹³ and Zhikile pots, and on furnaces all fall within this category. This association also helps to explain why tripod pots are reserved for the cooking of expensive, protein-rich foods and are the prerogative of the compound head. The feet are *ntsulokwokwa* spikes, and although practical reasons can be and are adduced for them, three stones would do the job as well.

Provisionally, then, spikes can be read as a symbol of cultural abundance, of social and economic success achieved through socially acceptable and in part magical means. The symbolic domain from which this motif emerges, to be expressed regularly on pots but only in one very significant context of bodily adornment, is that of the *maray* feast. The motivation of the spike feature thus appears to be quite different from that of the decorated band; the former celebrates, the latter protects.

The narrow, incised appliqué bands on which the spikes on lineage pots are set also occur without the spikes on the *zakaya*, a jar used by men for transporting beer to their in-laws. We find no parallel in bodily adornment but note that such narrow incised bands designate

12. *Maray* was not held in 1986 and has never been analysed in depth. Von Graffenried's (1982) monograph on the related *via zla* feast among the Zulgo and Gemjek makes clear that it is indeed a "phénomène social total" and a "sommet de la vie religieuse" (Martin 1970:193), but it would be unwise to interpret Mafa symbols from a Zulgo-Gemjek perspective.

13. On Mafa *veray* only; the spikes on the Bulahay equivalents have holes in their tips and must surely be penises (or both, as indeed in some sense may be the Mafa ones). A line from a Mafa smelting song, "My penis crops the grass," bundles together man and bull, horn and penis.

pots that are used to maintain kinship relations, both agnatic diachronic and affinal synchronic. Although we have not heard the incisions described as mouths, they might be such, since comparable sets of short incisions on the rim of an otherwise undecorated pot used at a Bulahay man's funeral were explained as representing the former communication between wife and husband.

"Decoration Is Like Prayer"

For the Mafa and Bulahay, most pots and their contents, on the one hand, and all humans, on the other, share as cultural entities either in the important quality of being at risk from cosmic power or in themselves exercising such power or, in differing circumstances, both. This leads to the decoration of pots in ways analogous to some used on the human form.

Not all types of pottery decoration have such analogies—and vice versa. Given the obvious differences in the media, this is perhaps not surprising, and we do not suggest that there exist or once existed perfectly equivalent sets of motifs. Our failure to identify a corporeal equivalent of comb stamping, combined with the symbolic charge of *sambak* straw, suggests that while the metaphor of the body and its adornment is the original and most fertile source of inspiration for pottery decoration, it is not the only one. Indeed, it is from the *maray* ceremony, surely an institution fundamental to Mafa symbolism, that the horn/spike/penis motif is extracted and applied both to pots and to adornment of the body. Black burnishing more generally celebrates the similarity between human bodies oiled for special occasions and pots used in a variety of more formal contexts.

Thus while we are far from suggesting that all decoration is protective in intent, much is demonstrably apotropaic. Such decoration may invoke specific spirits and serves as insulation against the dangers inherent in power, whether this is exerted from the outside towards the pot and its contents or, in the case of pots that contain spirits, from the inside against those who make use of the pots. The basic motivation is likely to be widely shared.

Some decoration is surely rather aesthetic play having other, assertive purposes. Moreover, decoration with apotropaic value can still be applied with an eye to beauty. Decoration has multiple functions. It should be noted that the majority of informants, while well aware that pots are in some ways like humans and accepting that much bodily adornment is protective in nature, are unwilling to concede that this motivation can be extended to pottery. Cognizant of the role of the spiral bracelet, they never volunteered to us the comparable significance of the twisted *Borassus* strip roulette. Few were prepared to entertain our interpretation. Nevertheless, there is a logic to pottery decoration, seen for example in the similar treatment of the conceptually and functionally related *tsakaliy*, *nngerzla*, and *luw-dara*, that demands a coherent explanation. A strong cultural force such as the one proposed must be invoked

to account for the spatial and temporal (David and MacEachern n.d.) continuities in regional pottery decoration. It is, however, immensely satisfying when an exceptional informant such as the Bulahay Kodje Dadai delivers himself of a statement such as the one that heads this section, "Decoration is like prayer," that, though it cannot confirm, elegantly encapsulates the main thrust of our theory.

The treatment of the human body has already helped explain why certain surface treatments or types of decoration are *not* applied to pottery. We can, however, go farther with regard to the presence or absence of decoration itself. Although this is not expressed in their vocabulary, the Mafa differentiate between decoration, such as bands of rouletting or millet grains, that has an insulating function and other forms of decoration (some of which we would regard, like the spikes, as "features" but which also include raised and incised bands) that represent concepts such as culturally achieved abundance or communication between kin. Decoration of the first kind is generally not associated with the dead. The power of male persons is such that almost all pots involved in social life—but not animal troughs—do require this kind of decoration unless men will never come in contact with them. An old or barren women living by herself may, and it seems should, use an undecorated food bowl. (Among the neighbouring Wula, a Kapsiki-speaking group, men's food bowls are decorated while women's are not.) A pot kept by Bulahay children in a field for cooking snacks was also, appropriately, since children are powerless, undecorated.¹⁴

Decoration or the lack of it loses significance when pots and other artifacts cross ethnic boundaries. The Cuvok are neighbours of both the Mafa and Bulahay. Their smiths must decorate their hoes with white paint before selling them in Cuvok market, since otherwise the *dza* (mountain/settlement) spirit might cause them to turn on and cut their purchasers. Mafa hoes, on the other hand, are freely imported into Cuvok and sold undecorated. Bulahay potters likewise make plain food bowls and cook pots for sale to Fulani in a border market, and Cuvok potters sometimes bring their wares to sell in Mokolo. These include burnished but otherwise undecorated food bowls that are nevertheless acceptable to traditionalist Mafa and Bulahay because they come from outside the system and are defined as spiritually inert. It would seem to be precisely for this reason that, in explaining why they sometimes purchase these pots, Mafa emphasize their polish and other aesthetic qualities, something they never do when talking about Mafa wares. This is of interest with regard to trade generally.

In late June 1986 a new pot type made by Mafa potters appeared in Mokolo market. Its form is halfway between a traditional sauce cook pot and a food bowl, and it is designed for frying meat and other ingredients in oil, a

14. Among the Azande, where men are the potters, only the man's private water pot is undecorated—according to Braithwaite (1982:84) because it is not involved in potentially compromising, ambiguous male:female interactions.

new culinary technique. It is also entirely plain, being neither burnished, blackened, nor impressed. Just as undecorated or inappropriately decorated Cuvok pots can be used by traditionalist Mafa and Bulahay because they come from beyond the range of their ideological systems, so, conversely, undecorated Mafa pots can be used by Muslim, Christian, and other Mafa "évolués" because they have abandoned their former religious philosophy and are no longer enmeshed in its system of symbols.

Concluding Remarks

Our initial hypothesis of a partial conceptual identification of pots with persons has been supported by the data. Pottery decoration among the Mafa and Bulahay consists in large part of condensed symbols that express the cosmological assumptions that underpin social action. Our understanding of their cosmologies is inadequate to penetrate deeper into the sources of decorative expression or to develop the unified theory that might potentially interrelate religious philosophy, iconography, and colour symbolism. Nonetheless, it suffices to explain the appearance of the same or closely related motifs in differing but conceptually related contexts and, significantly, is of value in interpreting not only the presence but also the absence of decoration and surface treatment.

Pottery decoration may here be described as a restricted code, characterized by a small number of motifs arranged in a limited and rigidly organized set of designs and affirming the social order. The ethnographies (Martin 1970; Boisseau and Soula 1974; Hinderling 1984a, b) make it clear that Mafa society is characterized by a high degree of order in social relations and by considerable social pressure exercised on the individual by the group. Expectably (see Douglas 1973:49–51) we find that respect for roles is the cardinal virtue; the body is assimilated to the social body; transgression against the social structure, the cardinal sin, is magically expiated by the performance of ritual. In such societies, we contend, decoration and the persistence of designs through social time and space are to be explained by their mnemonic visual expression of the underlying structures of belief and thought that most distinctively constitute the societies' unique identities. This being the case (and given that they manufacture their own pottery), pottery decoration and, indeed, the structured system of ceramic types are likely to offer not only good but the best evidence of "ethnicity" generally preserved in the archaeological record.

It must, however, be emphasized that "more messages are read than sent" (J. R. Sackett, personal communication) and that what the outsider reads as "ethnicity" is the incidental by-product of the interplay of Mafa and Bulahay cognition and society. Neither Mafa nor Bulahay recognize a tribal identity. If by ethnicity we mean membership in a group defined by a shared cul-

tural heritage that significantly structures intra- (e.g., endogamy) versus intergroup (e.g., warfare) behaviour, then the *dza* was traditionally the critical unit. Mafa villages were about as likely to use deadly force between themselves, for example, and to make alliances with Hide or Bulahay settlements as to fight others assigned to different tribes by French administrators. Further north in the Mandara, where multilinguality negates many barriers to social interaction, the territorial lineage group is often the most significant unit, though various levels of organization are mobilized for different purposes (MacEachern 1987). These complex relationships are indeed expressed in artifact typology and distributions, but any attempt to interpret them in terms of a monolithic model of ethnicity is bound to mislead. While under ideal conditions archaeologists might reasonably expect to distinguish Mafa from Kapsiki series and would recognize marked cultural continuities in the Mafa-Bulahay-Cuvok zone, they could not reliably distinguish Mafa from Bulahay assemblages. Far from being the product of intentional messaging directed at outsiders, Mafa and Bulahay engage in pottery decoration as they do in ritual (Leach 1976:45), in order to transmit collective messages to themselves.

Douglas (1973) reminds us that multiple channels of communication tend to coherence. As noted in the introduction, it would be of immense value to archaeologists were it to be demonstrated both that cultures are characterized by pervasive patternings of stylistic expression and that these, because they covary with sociological factors, take predictable forms. We cannot here test such propositions cross-culturally but will comment on the pervasiveness of patterning in the Mafa case.

We have already shown that Mafa styles of pottery and bodily adornment show great similarities and that several decorative motifs extend across artifact classes. While we can do no more here than exemplify, Mafa architecture and ironwork both show patterning similar to that exhibited in pottery. Architecture provides the clearest example. The primordial theme of the traditional Mafa compound is a series of interconnected, functionally distinct huts that are penetrable only in fixed sequence and arranged in a tightening arc (Seignobos 1982:38–42). Standardized hut functions and sequencing realise the rigid differentiation of roles that characterizes the social order, while the overall layout evokes, and surely invokes, the spiral. It is this symbolic artery linking the individual buildings that first breaks down when a compound head abandons the traditional way of life. Such stylistic coherence argues that Douglas's insights are well worth pursuing in archaeological interpretation.

Let us recapitulate. We contend that (a) not only is the human body an especially important medium of expression, (b) concepts of the body being partly determinative of much decorative expression, but (c) the culturally logical assimilation of pot to person makes decoration on pottery a favoured place to observe this both ethno-

graphically and archaeologically and finally (d) while pottery may be invested with explicit messages, the decorative techniques, motifs, and designs also embody a potent implicit component that realizes the society's "ultimate concern, its religious substance." This, for the moment, is as close to a general answer to our initial question as we can come. Designs on pottery, far from being "mere decoration," art for art's sake, or messages consciously emblematic of ethnicity, are low-technology channels through which society implants its values in the individual—every day at mealtimes.

Comments

NIGEL BARLEY

*Museum of Mankind, 6 Burlington Gardens, London
W1X 2EX, England.* 5 XI 87

This is an interesting paper, adding to our knowledge of the "potting model" of West Africa. It shows that certain classes of pot are associated with specific forms of decoration and that certain classes of people are associated with specific forms of bodily decoration. The weakest part of the argument is the link between the groups of people and the groups of pots. Only in the case of twin pots is the link really convincing. The probable reason for this is given by the authors themselves when they point out that there may be sources of pot decoration other than the human body—the designs derived from the *maray* festival, for example, have iconographic depth.

There is a good deal of very loose use of language in this paper where notions such as "representation," "spirit," "power," and "meaning" are concerned. It is precisely in these areas that further research is needed. A very basic point is that designs that link pots and human bodies do not have to "mean" anything. The mere fact that they are shared can serve as a conceptual binder.

It seems to be assumed here that it is notions of the body that determine the decoration of pots. It is quite unclear that the arrows of metaphor have to be viewed as flowing in one direction only. In much of West Africa, indeed, it is the transformative power of the potter that seems to provide a useful way of thinking about the body rather than vice versa.

The generalising ambition of this paper to link forms of social structure and pot decoration is not realised. In itself, this is not surprising. Even Douglas, after all, has had to abandon attempts to correlate forms of social and symbolic structure by introducing hazy middle terms such as *grid* and *group* to fudge the basic lack of predictivity. A universal determinism is therefore not to be expected. The "potting model" seems to be something of a West African obsession (Barley 1982) of limited applicability to other parts of the world.

R. M. A. BEDAUX

*Institute of Human Biology, State University of
Utrecht, Jutfaseweg 7, 3522 HA Utrecht, The
Netherlands.* 15 XII 87

David's earlier articles on Ful pottery (1971, 1972) have enormously stimulated my own research, and the subject treated here is, once again, highly interesting. In my opinion, however, the authors have gone a little too far with their "textual" approach. To argue that all artefacts are symbols and direct semiotic evidence is no real help in archaeological interpretation. Binford (1987) has correctly challenged this view, and I will demonstrate that pottery decoration and the structured system of ceramic types are not always an expression of a society's "unique identity." Pottery may have symbolic functions, but these functions depend on the context of use and are generally polysemic. A pot and its decoration may have different symbolic meanings depending on the situation in which it is used.

For example, although Dogon pots may symbolize the uterus, a head, the sun, or the moon, according to the occasion (Griaule 1966[1948]:83), their decoration and their types are purely functional (Bedaux 1986). Dogon pottery can be partitioned into 18 types in terms of three measurements (height, circumference, and diameter of the opening), irrespective of its decoration. These types coincide with the Dogon emic classification of their pottery. The measurements for each type are fairly constant. This demonstrates that the types are functional and that no mythological concepts are at the basis of this typology.

Decoration on pottery need not always have symbolic implications. The apparent decoration with mat impressions on Dogon pots is in fact a result of the hammer-and-anvil modeling technique. The mat prevents the clay from expanding too much and from sticking to the stone anvil. Sometimes, especially when the pot is to be used for ritual purposes, the mat impressions are burnished away. The appliqué bands just below the rim and around the shoulder of the pot reinforce and blur the junction between the body, made by the hammer-and-anvil technique from rather dry clay, and the rim, for which very wet clay is used and which is added later. Twisted cord roulettes are also used to blur this junction. Further, mat impressions and rouletting increase the cooling capacity of vessels and render their surface rough, facilitating their handling. Short incised horizontal or vertical bands, short incisions on the mouth, and appliqué pellets are used as potters' marks, making it possible to distinguish the vessels of different potters when they are baked together in one hole.

To account for the spatial and temporal continuity in pottery decoration, technique, and typology in the Dogon area, it is unnecessary to invoke a strong cultural force, the society's "ultimate concern." Ecological factors and the reluctance of potters to change a reliable pottery technique are more appropriate in this case. I am certain that the authors will eventually give us more

convincing details. But even if the Mafa and Bulahay do lay bare their ultimate concern in their pottery decoration and typology, it is too early to generalise such observations, however badly generalisations are needed.

WHITNEY DAVIS

*Department of Art History, Northwestern University,
Evanston, Ill. 60208, U.S.A. 23 XII 87*

This paper is best read as an empirical application of the suggestive—but I suspect partial and somewhat misleading—claim that the styles of artifacts “can be cost-effective means of sending messages.” “Can be,” certainly, but not always. In art-historical language, a style sometimes has an iconographical or more broadly a denotational dimension. Not only is some part of the morphology of an artifact an index of certain states of affairs (e.g., of a maker’s intention) but further some (sometimes the same) morphology *denotes*, *refers*, or *symbolizes* in the strict sense. It stands for something else.

In offering an iconographical decipherment of a decorative program in Mafa and Bulahay pottery, David et al. touch on three basic questions. First, what is the nature of the “message”? They argue that the decoration in question symbolically equates pots and persons. As an outsider, I must leave it to expert iconographers of these societies to decide whether this convincing decipherment can be fully accepted at an empirical level.

Second, what is the function of the “message”? David et al. accept a view rooted in functionalist (not to say Durkheimian) anthropology. At least some part of symbolic morphology “communicates,” “validates,” or otherwise “imprints” social insights—the “religious substance” of culture—to, for, or on those who view it. The empirical sociological analysis of this process is tricky. As David et al. rightly say, who is “communicating” what to whom, when, where, and why, how “cost-effectively,” and so on, is not always clear. Moreover, in a *general theory* of artifactual symbolism, communication of *any* kind would be only one, not necessarily the most important, function of the language(s) as such. (Chomsky [1975:56–77] has persuasively refuted Grice’s [1957] famous effort to reduce linguistic meaning to the necessarily social intention to produce a response in a hearer or viewer, i.e., to communicate.) At the limit, part of style is quite literally audienceless; the history of production is not entirely a social history. Despite appearances, all cultural roads therefore do not lead to social communication or, at least, to the reproduction of a social solidarity. In turn, then, writing a “social” history of meaning becomes a *specific kind* of archaeology or historicization—not appropriate a priori for *all* histories of production. However, this general consideration, depending on a different conception of style than the authors’ (see below), need not conflict with their empirical results.

Third, what is the source of the “message”? Whence do the techniques and motifs, the morphologies as such, derive? Here David et al. are cautious. Pottery decora-

tion may be “inspired” by modes of conceiving the body, but we are also warned that this is not the whole story. Indeed, both pottery decoration and other cultural forms, including body ornament, ironworking, and architecture, may express or derive from—it is not quite clear—some common “cultural pattern.” The origins of morphology are always diverse; what really counts in decipherment is rather the role a given form comes to play in the network of structural relations. I am uncomfortable with the way this functionalist-structuralist approach tends to evade the very real questions of history—of genesis and change. Moreover, in principle a history of the generation and replication of a symbol need not assume either sources in or a final place for the form in a network or matrix of other or preexisting forms: although all “structures” of meaning have history, not all history of meaning has “structure” (see further Davis n.d.).

David et al.’s identification of the nature, function, and source of an iconography seems empirically persuasive within the domain of larger possibilities I have sketched. Still, since they hope to contribute to the general debate on style—and therefore necessarily also on meaning—one further puzzle for them is worth considering briefly.

All symbols have style, for, crudely put, (1) among other conditions, *reference* requires the repetition or *replication* of a materially or “literally” nonreferential morphology (see variously Kripke 1979; Devitt 1982; Davis 1987, n.d.), and (2) replication in turn necessarily generates *style*—in the definition I would prefer over the authors’, a polythetic set of similar but varying attributes in a group of artifacts the presence of which is explained by the history of the artifacts, specifically, common descent from an artifact production system (not limited to a “linguistic” system) in a particular state (Davis 1988a). However, the converse does *not* hold: not all replication (2) is referential or even (1) *becomes* referential in being “seen as” such-and-such by someone in processes of “baptism” (Kripke 1979) or “origins” (e.g., Davis 1986). In art history, the very meaninglessness or nonsymbolic (if still indexical) status of some (although not all) stylistic variability was precisely what enabled historians like Berenson (e.g., 1952) and Beazley (e.g., 1956) to attribute thousands of separate works of early Italian painting or Greek painted pottery to individual masters. Although all symbols have style, not all style is symbolic.

The implications of this general statement for David et al.’s account are hard to pin down. A fraction of stylistic variability is not a consequence of symbolism and/or has no content, structure, function, or source in that symbolism. Nonetheless, it is stylistic; we can describe it as “a polythetic set . . . of attributes . . . of common descent (etc.).” But what fraction? How do we determine whether a particular motif *in fact* symbolizes in the way other similar motifs are believed to do? Are there indigenous “rules” of well-formedness or of tolerances of variability for both symbolic and nonsymbolic form, either explicit or unconscious? The authors hint at several pos-

sibilities. Understandably, their preliminary archaeology of the production and use of symbolic form does not yet quite permit the distinctions we would finally need to make (e.g., how does humorous or ironical quotation of a form differ from a mechanical imitation of it?).

I suspect that *no* amount of subtle empirical study of *artifactual morphology as such*—the work of “style criticism,” “morphological grammar,” “systematics,” “formal analysis,” and the like—can determine whether a form is or is not symbolic and in what mode or mood it is or is not. We always require a psychological analysis of or hypothesis about how a morphology is *in fact* cognitively represented (“thought,” “computed”) by someone—as denoting or not in this or that way (Davis 1988b, and see Sperber 1985, 1987). As direct information is lacking, should we search for materially detectable differences in the context, use, or replication of morphologies made referentially and made nonreferentially? I would found an “archaeopsychology” or “archaeosemantics” on this possibility rather than on the structuralists’ faith that if meaning “is not everywhere it is nowhere” (Lévi-Strauss 1962:91). The “everywhereness” of some meanings is a product not of a common cultural (let alone human) mentality or mind—whether *la pensée sauvage* or “rationality”—but of a “chain of replications” (Davis 1987) or “epidemiology of representations” (Sperber 1985).

Further, even when we do somehow determine that *a*, *b*, or *c* features of stylistic variability are symbolic while *x*, *y*, and *z* are not, how then do we account for *x*, *y*, and *z*? David et al.’s way of explaining “why pots are decorated” does not apply to decoration without a symbolic status.

All of this has implications, in turn, for a project cautiously broached in the paper, namely, the identification of “ethnicity” on the basis of style. By interpretation in the decipherment, style is due to the place of artifacts in a common if admittedly complex semantic network (in this case, the “language” of pots as persons). If a “strong cultural force” is required for this symbolism to be socially shared, then pots in the relevant style(s) must be an archaeological index of ethnicity (defined, of course, as shared meaning or collective representation). Since we already have other information about the pots—e.g., about who made them, when, and where—we therefore apparently discover such facts as the spatiotemporal extent and history of ethnicity. Stylistic analysis thus shows itself to be an “indispensable historical tool” (Ackerman 1963:164–65). But, of course, the decipherment has had to call upon quite detailed information about ethnicity in order to decode the content, structure, function, and source of the “message” of style in the first place. The pots could not so much help us “identify” an unknown ethnicity as supplement what we already fundamentally have to know, or assume, about shared meaning with further “archaeological” information about its distribution or history.

To avoid a fatal circularity, we must establish on independent grounds or by very plausible hypothesis that style is *caused* by the “strong cultural force” of a shared

semantic network. The causal relation can be bought cheaply: we can merely *define* style as generated by, and as being the index of, shared meanings. But in principle style is just as good as index of what is not shared or indeed not “cultural” as it is of shared culture. Therefore we must establish the relation through an ethnography and archaeology of production. Styles caused by shared meaning, by unreflective copying, by common descent (with no contemporary causal interrelations), or by random convergence, by quoting, parodying, rendering homage, subverting, and so on, are very different sorts of effects—although often morphologically indiscernible in a formal analysis. Only some could be indices of “ethnicity” although all are indices of phenomena of production.

All of this is meant not as a criticism of the authors’ conclusions but as an attempt to see their empirical account in the wider context of the problem of style as such. For myself, I suspect that rather than style’s being the result of shared meaning, shared meaning is ultimately the result of style—in fact, of only some rather specialized and not well-understood stylistic phenomena. However, this is an argument for another place. An empirical archaeology of production does not immediately depend upon resolving it.

WARREN DEBOER

*Department of Anthropology, Queens College,
Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A. 9 XI 87*

David, Sterner, and Gavua present a preliminary but nonetheless convincing argument that among the Mafa and Bulahay of northern Cameroon “pots are people.” That this is so should hardly be surprising to archaeologists, who regularly use the anthropomorphic terminology of “mouth,” “lip,” “neck,” “shoulder,” “body,” “leg,” and “foot” in describing ceramic vessels (see Thass-Thienemann 1973 for a psychoanalytically oriented review of pot-body imagery). Like the authors, I suspect that all potters liken their creations, at least at some level, to human form and activity.

Although the basic premise of the article is totally credible, David et al. do not adequately situate their important work in the contemporary archaeological landscape. They claim that their study is housed comfortably within the confines of so-called interaction and information-exchange theories as these schemas have been brought to bear on artifact style. Neither of these theoretical postures, however, has much to say about style proper; rather, both deal with the function of style. Stylistic content or *meaning* is not even considered. In contrast, David et al. show that meaning matters—that it is subtly encoded in the artifactual environment and can be decoded to reveal general cultural themes.

A similar problem arises with the use of Binford’s terms “technomic,” “sociotechnic,” and “ideotechnic”; designed for different purposes, they do not advance the authors’ argument. All artifacts participate simultaneously in these domains; the domain is an analytical

context, not a material property. As David et al. show, all pots, however undecorated or "utilitarian," participate at some level in the same symbolic field. I do not think that their fresh and exciting observations can be accommodated to an archaeological research agenda that is indifferent if not hostile to their approach. Rather, I would situate their work in the "rethinking" exercise most forcefully expressed by Ian Hodder and his students. With Hodder (1986), they argue that culture is meaningful and that cultural meanings are accessible to the archaeologist through a careful contextual study of material remains.

Some specific ethnographic matters are raised but not elaborated in the analysis. Potters are restricted to the *ngwazla* "caste," an endogamous grouping that cross-cuts the system of patrilineal clans. Other activities assigned to the *ngwazla* include midwifery, curing, burying the dead, and ironworking. Ironworking, like potting, transforms natural materials to cultural form. David et al. describe all of these *ngwazla*-associated activities as "unclean" and potentially dangerous. To what extent do the recurrent themes of power, pollution, and protection as expressed in body and pottery decoration reflect the contaminated source of pottery, namely, the *ngwazla*, and perhaps the contaminated source of all bodies, namely, women? To pursue this and other interesting questions, the authors will have to cast a wider ethnographic net. This matter is important in a comparative sense, for systems in which pottery production is restricted to a specialized social segment are likely to work quite differently from systems in which all women produce pottery. Among the Shipibo-Conibo, pottery is made by all women and valued and admired by all. The highly elaborate polychrome decorative style serves not only as an internal cultural code (as among the Mafa and Bulahay) but also as a dramatic emblem of ethnicity. That it does so much is hardly surprising; it is far more complex and elaborate than the decorative repertoire described here for the Mafa and Bulahay. The interesting question is why and when certain cultural domains become foci of elaboration.

Finally, I think that the careful reader will appreciate the resistance of Mafa and Bulahay symbolism to summary in terms of a simple series of Lévi-Straussian oppositions. On my second reading, I tabulated the following possibilities; life is to death as female is to male as rouletting is to spikes as insulation is to communication. On my third reading, however, this series of proportionalities seemed forced and unconvincing, while the color symbolism of red and black remained recalcitrant to reduction. Either too much of the ethnographic context is lacking or, alternatively, the idiom of binary contrasts is foreign to the case in point. In either case, we are prompted also to consider the possibility that there is no singular and coherent cultural code—that cultural codes and structures, however deep-seated and historically generated, always allow individuals and groups a certain degree of situational or strategic "freedom." How this culturally conditioned freedom is expressed and mobilized will have to be considered by archaeologists, who,

more than anyone else, are the custodians of cultural origins and change. David et al. provide a stimulating example of the awesome task ahead.

IAN HODDER

*Archaeology Department, University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3DZ, England. 4 xi 87*

The article by David, Sterner, and Gavua represents a new departure in ethnoarchaeological studies with results that have far-reaching implications. Rather than seeing pots simply as indicators of technological, economic, or social organization, they are concerned to immerse themselves in the systems of values in which the pots are themselves embedded. They show that to talk adequately of the function of pottery decoration involves talking also of its symbolic meanings. Thus, in certain respects, the contribution differs radically from the information-exchange theory of Wobst and Wiessner to which they refer. The information-exchange theory views symbols as information resources that may be studied in terms of organizational efficiency. In contrast, David et al. discuss the meaning content of symbols; for example, black is described as beautiful, red as the colour of power, and pots as people. The spiral motif symbolises power, especially the power of the parents of twins, and appliqué pellets can be compared to millet. To get at such meaning archaeologically involves an interpretive enterprise which is not provided for within information-exchange theory.

The idea that pots represent people in some sense has also been demonstrated for East Africa by Welbourn (1984). There is good archaeological evidence for an equivalent connection in European prehistory. For example, in the Neolithic of southeastern Europe, pots occur with breasts, arms, and feet, and there are similarities in the decoration used on pots and on female figurines. The significance of these data has not been realised by archaeologists, and so the paper under discussion allows a re-evaluation of Neolithic and other pots which show clear links to human bodies. There is also the exciting possibility that a new way has been found to look at pottery decoration more generally.

As David et al. note, the idea that pottery decoration might have a protective function was originally suggested by Braithwaite (1982). They argue that a more narrowly semiotic approach is preferable and produce a functionalist argument that the pot as a human body acts to order the social body. A rather different approach, critical of the Douglas position, is taken by archaeologists Shanks and Tilley (1982) in their analysis of burial ritual in Neolithic Sweden and England. They show that in the Neolithic tombs there is a great concern with ordering the bones of the body into symmetrical oppositions, but they also note that the relations of power involved in constructing the large megalithic tombs must have been asymmetrical. Rather than expressing an ordered social life, the human body is here being used to misrepresent the asymmetries in the social body.

Braithwaite, too, takes a more active view of material symbolism. She notes that decoration can be seen as a silent ritual discourse which both allows women to draw attention to their ambiguous power and protects men from that power. Thus, once again, material symbolism plays a role in relations of dominance. It does not simply express a balanced social order.

There are hints of the same scheme in the account of David et al. For example, the pots are made by women in a powerful caste regarded as unclean. Older women living away from men may use undecorated food bowls, and in a neighbouring group women's food bowls are not decorated. It seems, as in Braithwaite's case, that decoration may be particularly involved in transfers (of pots and food, for example) between men and women. It would be of interest to know more about the role of women and their attempts to draw attention to and play on their ambiguous powers. The very silence of informants on the meanings of the decoration is informative. It is as if the decoration plays a role in the area of the undiscussed, "saying" things which cannot be said openly, silently creating yet limiting the power of subordinate social groups.

There is, then, an opportunity for introducing more discussion of social action in relation to pottery decoration. Nevertheless, the authors have identified a possibly widespread phenomenon of great significance. Their overall view of decoration as implanting basic taken-for-granted values is important, as are the notions of decoration as protective and pots as bodies. A new language for discussing pottery is being created here. I would hope that this new language will also come to include a more developed social theory.

ROSEMARY A. JOYCE

Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 02138, U.S.A. 10 XII 87

With the relatively rich ethnographic data available to them, the authors explore a number of issues that are fundamental to the interpretation of ceramics although, as they note, most analyses ignore them. The identification between person and pot and the rationale it provides for parallel structure in decoration is convincing, but the authors' interpretation of this parallel structure as serving a protective function raises the issue of the ultimate verification of anthropological analyses. If the members of the culture do not find an interpretation compelling, how should we in turn interpret this reaction?

The identification of pots with persons is suggested by terms for parts of vessels in many languages, including English. The authors use the Mafa data to demonstrate that the identification is pursued in the provision of a number of pots which represent specific persons (deceased ancestors and supernatural beings among them) or which encode distinctions of social role. The universe of pots provides a model of the universe of social relations which furthers the specific argument for analogous decoration of the human body and the pottery body. The

idea that pots are likened to persons because they are products of a process of transformation (supported by the Mafa observation that people were made from potter's clay) may equally well apply to the similarly decorated iron furnace, in which a process of transformation takes place. Analogous decoration would seem to mark transformation.

The Mafa interpretation of the relationship between pots and people agrees to this point with that of the authors. What credence should be given to their disagreement with the interpretation of decoration as protective? Mafa, according to the authors, accept that body decoration is often protective. Why do they reject this function in the case of ceramics? Does their rejection of the interpretation indicate the need for a reassessment?

While the authors identify four major kinds of decoration as analogous between pots and persons, only three of these are explained as having a protective function. Furthermore, the argument for protective function is of unequal quality for these three kinds of decoration. While red-washed pots may be like red-painted bodies and similarly in need of protection from powerful spirits, the major solid decoration of pots is black burnishing, which is said to be attractive to ancestral spirits. The roulette decoration of pots is only weakly and indirectly related to the twisted spiral necklace worn as protection by parents of twins. While roulette decoration is very common, it seems arbitrary to describe it as protective when, in fact, the twins' representative pot itself wears a twisted necklace specifically for protection. Why would this duplication be necessary?

The identification of appliqué pellets with sets of scars, both referred to at least in some instances as "millet," is the single clearest example of Mafa equation of the decoration of pots and the decoration of people. The argument for interpreting millet grains as a protective motif is at the same time perhaps the least convincing. Only culturally transformed millet is allowed in the house compound, and it is the culturally transformed millet which is depicted by the motif. The motif is found on the pots made for twin births, on the pot of a grain spirit, and on the sacrificial beer pot. The motif also forms the hair of the main god pot, a circumstance related by the authors to fertility and prosperity rather than protection.

While the kinds of decoration are convincing analogues, the explanation of these motifs as uniformly protective strains. An alternative basis for analogous decoration is the identification between pots and people based on their status as transformed from nature to culture. The millet motif itself depicts the transformed grain. A concern with transformation between different states is clearly part of Mafa culture, as both the elaboration of the iron furnace and the brief descriptions of *maray* and funerals indicate. That this transformation is, in general, from the less controlled state of nature to the more organized state of culture is indicated by practices regarding millet and the organization of the house compound. Spike appliqué decoration, considered anomalous because it celebrates success of males achieved

through cultural means, would be consistent with the other forms of decoration. Spikes decorate the edges of things (the house compound and threshing floor); they mark places where the transformation to cultural status takes place (the furnace and threshing floor) as well as points in ritual cycles where transformation is taking place (the *maray* ceremony and funerals). In the same vein, the concentration in the caste of potters of other specializations concerned with transformation—midwives and morticians, ironworkers, and perhaps curers—seems significant.

The verification of the authors' interpretation is important, since on it hinges the support they derive for Douglas's model of social types and the hope that these types may be expressed in material form visible in archaeological sites.

GERHARD MÜLLER-KOSACK AND GODULA KOSACK
Hauptstr. 151, 6344 Dietzhölztal 1, Federal Republic of
Germany. 23 XII 87

During our research in 1985–86 on settlement and social structure in five Mafa villages (Guzda and environs), we collected a number of sacred Mafa pots for the Frobenius Institute at Frankfurt University (Müller-Kosack 1987, 1988).¹ We distinguish between religious, magico-religious, and magical pottery, although the Mafa use the term *vrai* for all pots other than magical ones. In the religious category are personal spirit pots (*ged-pats*), pots representing ancestors, the pots at earth-ritual sites, and pots representing gods (*zhiglè*). These pots are sacrificed to individually, in groups, or all together when required by an oracle and, above all, at all the obligatory rituals that mark the Mafa's annual cycle. Magical pots are simply matters of magical imagination. Thus a sacrifice is made to the *shedèf fakalau* by a person who is possessed by a *fakalau* in order to free himself from this evil. Beyond this, many pots lie on the borderline between the magical and the religious and cannot be clearly classified as one or the other. This applies to the pots representing twins. On the one hand, the birth of twins is taken as the gift of a god; on the other hand, the numinous power of twins is recognized by the existence of pots representing them whose function it is to protect their relatives from possible harm. A distinction has to be made between biological twins (*tsakalai*) and psychological twins, persons born in an abnormal way (for example, feet first), who are supposed to dispose of the same special power as biological ones. For the former there is the *halalai*, with two bodies joined in one mouth, for the latter the *halalai-sak*, with a single body and a mouth divided in two by a bar.

Halalai is also the term for the very ancient ancestors and for the shrines of the clan quarter. This combination corresponds to a cosmogonic concept that is underlined by the fact that *halalai* or *halalai-sak* are often buried beneath clan shrines. Twins are associated with the endogamous blacksmiths (*ngwosla*), who sacrifice to their ancestors in the month dedicated to twins (*malama*) while the peasants (*vavai*) must not do so. The twins' and the blacksmiths' special power is called *nyi*, "thus born." Another magico-religious pot is the pot of the magical wild cat *mbulom*. A person who is "called" by the wild cat has to put up such a pot in order to ward off danger to the whole village quarter. *Mbulom* is also the term for a mythological ancestor. For the neighbouring Zulgo and Gemjèk, *mbulom* means "high" and is identified with heaven, thus corresponding to the Mafa *zhiglè* (von Graffenried 1984:92). It is certainly no coincidence that the Mafa *mbulom* pot looks very much like the *zhiglè* representations. Here it is apparent that the distinction between religious and magico-religious pottery is problematic, for the Mafa *zhiglè* pots have, among others, protective functions. Nevertheless, this categorization is meaningful in certain respects, for example, from the point of view of decoration.

We concentrated on the religious pots, which, in being sacrificed to in ancestor and earth rituals, have, apart from their protective functions for descendants, a ritual-spatial dimension. Thus, for the sacrifice to the pot of a deceased father (*baba*) all his sons and their nuclear families come together; the sacrifice to the pot of a deceased father's father (*bababa*) assembles all his sons and grandsons with their families; and for the sacrifice in the forecourt of the compound of the eldest of a minimal lineage (*ged-bulom*) all the common ancestor's male descendants and their wives and children meet. For the duration of this latter ritual the Mafa identify the forecourt with a pot. The spatial effect of these ancestor rituals is expressed by the fact that each compound owner (*bab-gai*) of the sacrificing local group has to take millet beer to the genealogically next elder until it arrives at the compound of the eldest, who is responsible for the sacrifice. *Ged-bulom* means "the head of the yam," but by this, *contra* Martin (1970:72), the Mafa mean not the minimal lineage's common ancestor but its eldest, who leads the ritual (see Müller-Kosack 1987).

All male ancestor pots, the ceremonial pot at the earth-ritual site (*di-wof*), and the pot for killed enemies or ten sacrificed bulls (*matsagai*) have spikes that stand out at the height of the neck or the shoulders and that the Mafa explain as extremities. These pots differ among themselves in ritual-spatial reach. *Baba* and *bababa* pots structure the minimal lineages within a lineage quarter internally. As representations of concrete ancestors, they even show genitals. The *di-wof* pot unites for its ritual all the minimal lineages of a clan quarter within a village. The *matsagai* pot either is placed at a lineage shrine and brings together one or more lineages as a ritual-spatial unit or an individual *bab-gai* will keep one near his compound if he has sacrificed a bull at the bull

1. Our findings are valid only for the Mafa, but Mafa and Bulahay cultures may be regarded as alike in most respects.

festival (*marai*) ten consecutive times. It may well be that spikes symbolize the bull's horns, since the *marai* ritual is closely linked to ancestor and earth rituals. Pots with spikes are the only ones to have a ritual-spatial dimension.

As a rule, rouletted bands occur on religious pots only when these lack genitals; only pots representing female ancestors (*mama* and *babmama*) show both. Rouletted bands do occur on religious pots with sexual characteristics other than genitals (i.e., beard and nipples or breasts), for example, *ged-pats*. Many magico-religious pots have both rouletted bands and appliqué pellets. The large ceremonial jars (*ludar gala* and *ludar gejëk*) that serve to protect the ancestor pots—above all the male ones—within the compound, which have sexual characteristics other than genitals, have appliqué pellets symmetrically arranged on top of rouletted bands. The pot of the millet spirit *shëkwetëv*, which has beard and nipples, is also scattered with appliqué pellets on top of a rouletted band. Twin pots have no rouletted bands, but they do have appliqué pellets around their necks. The rouletted band may be absent in the case of the twin pot because the father of twins has to wear the spiral bracelets that David et al. describe. Religious pots, as a rule, do not have appliqué pellets at the height of the shoulders; these appear only on the heads of *zhiglë* pots as hair. The vulva of the goddess of women (*zhiglë-ngwoz*) is surrounded by rouletted decoration, and the appliqué pellets on her head are underlain by it. The vulvas of the female ancestor pots, too, are surrounded by rouletted decoration, whereas this is absent on pots with male genitals. It seems likely that the rouletted decoration, especially the rouletted band, is related to the spiral, as David et al. suggest, and that it serves an apotropaic function. The rope (*teba*) with which rouletting is performed is also a sacred object and plays an important part in the *marai*. The sacred rope is a black cord 30–40 cm long and 5 cm in diameter into which a red thread is interwoven. It is one of the most significant symbols of village unity and is carried by special officials (*bi-gola-teba*) at the head of the procession which in a specific order ritually releases all the bulls to be sacrificed at the *marai*. When the *bi-gola-teba* pause for the night at a compound, it is put into a stone mortar outside the compound to ward off evil spirits. The apotropaic character of the appliqué pellets is underlined by the fact that no one is allowed to apply pellets to any pot during a smallpox epidemic in order not to bring on the disease. We conclude that the *teba*, although doubtless an apotropaic symbol, is more deeply religious than the pellets, since the most powerful *teba* are those of the clans that first settled the territory. This is underlined by the fact that no appliqué pellets appear on religious pots, whereas the rouletted band (made with the rope) does.

In our collection of 71 Mafa tales (Kosack 1986), though pottery is not much of an issue, the special equivalence between pots and persons does appear in one instance: A witch pretends to be pregnant by means

of a pot in her belly in order to entice her husband to follow her into the bush, ostensibly to collect wood for the birth, so that she can eat him. Elsewhere a jar is one of three magical objects that help to get field work accomplished all by itself. Decoration plays a greater part. Splendid bracelets for arms and legs make a girl the most beautiful of all, and an especially skillful hairdressing qualifies a girl to become the bride of the chief's son. In one tale a girl is given a necklace made of goat dung by her stepmother before she joins her friends to collect herbs in the bush. The necklace makes her the most beautiful of all. While she is bathing in the river, the necklace dissolves, and she does not dare return home for fear that her stepmother will beat her. In her vain search for the necklace she meets all kinds of strange things and, since she proves modest, finds her fortune. The protective function of the necklace seems obvious; goat dung can hardly be regarded as a precious material like iron or cowry shells. Deprived of the security conferred on her by her stepmother, the girl has to stand the test as an independent person. It is interesting that goat dung plays a part in the inauguration of the village chief: the number of pellets a goat excretes at this ceremony indicates the length of the chief's life. Contrary to what David et al. found, decorated fruit containers do seem to exist. In one of the tales a decorated calabash, normally offered only to guests, determines a girl's fate. The girl secretly takes this calabash, which belongs to her stepmother, to draw water with it from the river. A rich man asks all the girls to give him a drink of water. He drains the decorated calabash to the dregs and keeps it. The girl is beaten severely by her stepmother with a thorny stick. When she is well again, she leaves home and comes to wealth abroad. The authors' assertion about the ambivalence of *zhiglë*'s power is often confirmed in the tales. Any living being may ask for a god's advice, for good aims as well as for bad ones, the precondition for the efficiency of such advice being the observance of certain prohibitions, most frequently food taboos. Thus, for example, a panther wants to deceive a girl inside a hut by imitating the voice of the sister for whom alone she will open the door. He goes to the supreme god and has his voice smoothed. He is ordered not to eat the tiniest bit on his way, but he cannot control his greed and the charm is ineffective. Once again he has his voice smoothed, and this time he succeeds in deceiving the girl, whom he devours. The villagers, however, compel him to release her, and afterwards he is killed.

It is evident that, as David et al. emphasize, the Mafa only rarely offer interpretations for the messages encoded in their styles. Yet pots are not decorated for aesthetic reasons alone. Specific decoration corresponds to specific socio-religious contexts that also find expression in other aspects of the culture such as oral literature. David et al. offer an approach to the ethnoarchaeological interpretation of stylistic elements of material culture as indicators of ethnicity. Our own research on the spatial contexts of religious pottery may be a useful complement to the interpretation of decoration.

Reply

NICHOLAS DAVID, JUDY STERNER, AND
KODZO GAVUA
Calgary, Alta., Canada. 28 1 88

Replying to the thoughtful, generally favorable but varied views of the commentators has been a stimulating experience. Our response deals in turn with methodology and our control of the data, our interpretation, and certain of the theoretical issues raised. First, though, we note that Müller-Kosack's (1987) thesis, which was not available to us at the time of writing, is the most fine-grained piece of Mafa ethnography to date, a meticulous account of the creation and justification in ceremonial of the history of settlement and of social relations. We thank him and Godula Kosack for the amplification and complement to our data they provide (using H. and G. Eichenberger's Mafa transcription) and for their exemplification of dialectal variety in Mafa culture, here between Gousda (Guzda) and the Mokolo region only 15 km to the south. We have not seen a *teba*, the sacred rope to which they refer, and cannot comment upon its relationship to the spiral motif. (We can, however, state categorically that we have never seen a pot decorated by *teba* impression or by anything so long and thick.)

Methodology and data control. DeBoer chides us for not setting our paper in an adequate theoretical context. Luckily, Hodder does so. Barley complains of our loose use of terms and implicitly and rightly raises the question of the ethnographic depth that we as nonspecialists were able to plumb in a relatively short period while lacking the guidance of a study, such as his (1983a) on the Dowayo, that focussed on Mafa symbolic structures. We are very conscious that even if we have not made outright mistakes, we are surely guilty of false emphases and omissions. Müller-Kosack and Kosack, for example, refer to a connection between smallpox and the millet-grain motif that escaped us. We are unrepentant. Trespassing is fun, and not entirely useless.

Joyce again raises the question of the ultimate verification of anthropological analyses, "If the members of the culture do not find an interpretation compelling, how should we interpret this phenomenon?" We should emphasize that although, as we argued in our introduction, native rejection does not constitute disproof of the analysis or vice versa, some more intellectual Mafa and Bulahay with whom we discussed our findings were prepared to accept them. We refer once more to Charsley's (1987) instructive paper on wedding cakes—how many brides would accept that in cutting the cake they are acquiescing in their public defloration? More generally, a refusal to recognize the obvious, often castigated as hypocrisy by others, is surely prerequisite to much social functioning.

Our interpretation. We have claimed not that concepts of the human body determine the decoration of

pottery but rather that since, as Douglas has emphasized, the body is a natural source of symbols and bodies and pots are commonly seen as sharing some fundamental qualities, it becomes efficient and productive to study the decorative treatment of the latter in the light of that of the former. There certainly are, as we have shown, other sources of inspiration. The "arrows of metaphor" do not, as Barley puts it in his mixed one, "flow in one direction only."

According to Bedaux, Dogon pots' symbolic functions are generally polysemic and dependent upon the context of use. We have no difficulty in accepting polysemy but are not persuaded by the reductionist argument that Dogon types and decoration are purely functional. Neither the evidence adduced nor the typological partitioning nor the logic of his argument convinces. Are Dogon potters really so unobservant that they cannot recognize each others' pots unless they are differentially decorated? Among the Dogon of all people there must be more to pottery decoration. Bedaux cites with approval a paper by Binford (1987) in which the ethnographer is most unrealistically characterized as the passive recipient of informants' ideas. Might Bedaux not discover more if he allowed himself to be guided rather by the fieldwork methods of his illustrious forebear, Marcel Griaule (Clifford 1983:131–39)?

DeBoer asks to what extent the themes of power, pollution, and protection reflect the contaminated source of the pottery and perhaps the contaminated source of all bodies, namely, women. It is doubtful that all *ngwazla* activities are unclean. Clean and unclean as social categorizations are not necessarily associated with any particular activity. (Why should sheep rather than goats be unclean and associated with *ngwazla*?—largely because there are sheep and goats and there are *vavay* and *ngwazla*.) Inasmuch as any one activity is responsible for pollution, it is disposal of the dead. Native exegesis sees this as contaminating the *ngwazla* and all he comes in intimate contact with, including his children. Thus the children of a *ngwazla* who does not practice undertaking, while remaining *ngwazla*, are less unclean and can share food with *vavay*. Although it is difficult to know how much "modernisation" has influenced attitudes, it seems probable that even before the colonial period *ngwazla* could over a number of generations become *vavay* and that *vavay* by accepting and demonstrating intimate association with *ngwazla* could take on their status. Such mechanisms are required in the last resort to maintain the right ratio of *ngwazla* in society. We do not think, therefore, that there is an especially close link between the themes of power, pollution, and protection and the contaminated producers of the pottery (much less of women in general). The relationship embraces all society.

Davis points out that our explanation of why pots are decorated does not apply to decoration that has no symbolic status. Fair criticism. If such decoration exists, and we agree that it does, the next step in its definition and explanation might well be a study of whether rules of

representation require the presence of certain "iconogrammatical" elements even though these are themselves devoid of symbolic meaning. Do we then "search," as he suggests, "for materially detectable differences in the context, use, or replication of morphologies . . . and found an 'archaeopsychology' or 'archaeosemantics' on this possibility"? Our substantive point is that the major elements in Mafa and Bulahay decoration of pottery *are* symbolically charged and that it appears most unlikely that this is true only of a small subset of human societies.

This leads us into Davis's next point, that the pots could not really help us identify an unknown ethnicity as such but only supplement what we already assume about shared meaning by providing further information about its distribution or history. Here we must distinguish between the aims of wishing to translate and comprehend the shared meaning and of recognizing that such exists or existed. If we could reliably understand the content of Harappan texts we might expect to learn much about that society of which we are at present ignorant. In the meantime we can infer a great deal about structures and networks of various kinds from a contextual study of the distribution of Indus seals and other documents in space and time. So with pottery decoration: once it is accepted that this is undetermined by the strong cultural force of a shared semantic network rather than by some vaguer and undefined urge to adorn, we have provisional justification for the identification of previously unknown ethnicities at various levels of inclusiveness. And that, for several archaeological purposes, ain't bad.

Davis is also concerned with distinguishing stylistic similarity resulting from shared semantic networks (i.e., ethnicity) from that produced by unreflective copying, random convergence, parody, and so on. He argues that this requires demonstration that the production systems responsible for the making of the items compared are themselves "genetically," in the linguistic sense, linked. Thus the concern for pedigrees at Sotheby's. The advantage that archaeologists have here over art historians is that our artifacts are for the most part obtained in bulk, as assemblages (components) from contexts that can be distinguished from each other on natural scientific rather than cultural grounds. Thus when we analyse an artifact it is usually as a member of a class from an assemblage and is studied simultaneously with and in the context of all the other classes of artifacts associated in the same set of contexts. The probability of mistaking random or mechanical convergence of an artifact type for ethnic similarity becomes vanishingly small. This is the sense in which we should take Sackett's (1977) claim that style "is always peculiar to a specific time and place."

More theoretical issues. DeBoer suggests that perhaps "there is no singular and coherent cultural code, that cultural codes and structures, however deep-seated and historically generated, always allow individuals and groups a certain degree of situational or strategic 'free-

dom.'" The two clauses that make up this statement are best taken separately. With regard to the first, we interpret a cultural code as comprising both structure and content. Is there not then a close analogy to language? Although there may within any one culture be numerous competing dialects, and although individuals and groups may master these to different levels of competence, basic elements must be shared unless and perhaps even if mutual unintelligibility is sought. On the other hand, there are, especially in the northernmost Mandara, many societies whose members, almost all bi- or multilingual, appear to operate comfortably and competently in several cultural contexts, each of which is seemingly perceived as different but none as *other*. What happens to symbolic codes in such environments? We presume that they would tend to coherence of sememes and rules for their combination and manipulation.

As to the second part of the statement, yes indeed there is considerable freedom for the situational and strategic manipulation of codes, but content is far more susceptible to this than structure. Social groups send messages to themselves that are little or no different in structure from normal discourse but may involve an eclectic choice of symbolic content, in the case of Freemasons, for example, part culled from the distant past. The distribution of such motifs regularly supplies archaeologists with important data on societal patterns, since the symbols wielded are intentionally restricted and rarely achieve wide currency (the Cyclopean pyramid on the U.S. dollar bill probes the rule!). However, since similar structures may be expressed through different content elements and vice versa, it is hard for an outsider to decide what is going on in particular instances. This is all the more so since before the era of the "world village" the vocabulary of motifs and images even in complex societies was vastly smaller. A striking but not unexpected feature of the Mandara societies with which we have some familiarity is that many motifs and designs cross ethnic boundaries but occur in different contexts and with different meanings. The Bulahay have a pot called *shetene* that looks very like the Mafa Zhikile god pot. Sacrifices are made to its spirit for "someone who was dead and is again alive" (probably referring to epilepsy). *Shetene* is of course cognate with *shaitan/satan*, but it is not clear whether the Bulahay have voluntarily and antagonistically inverted the Mafa concept or borrowed it while mistaking its meaning and misapplying an Islamic label and/or whether an anthropomorphic pot holding a powerful spirit was inherited from an as yet hypothetical Mafa-Bulahay-Cuvok protoculture. The taphonomic processes of discard and entry into the archaeological record must generally garble such subtle stylistic messages, while facilitating recognition of close cultural similarities at the (sub)regional scale.

Even in the ethnographic present there is plenty of room for argument. Joyce and Hodder both take issue with aspects of our interpretation. The former's insistence on the importance of the Mafa concern for trans-

formation usefully complements our reading. We must refrain from further discussion of their thought-provoking suggestions; to do so adequately would require further fieldwork. Development of an interpretation of the Mafa symbolic code is an essential part of our endeavour, but the rightness or wrongness of its specifics will not confirm or disconfirm the validity of our attempt to make a statement about the nature of decoration that is of general predictive value. We doubt whether archaeologists will be able to provide utterly convincing, or often perhaps even convincing, interpretations of the emics of prehistoric cosmogonies, any more than critics can deliver genuinely definitive studies of artists. This is not to deny the value of attempts at contextual analysis of prehistoric data (or the unique thrill of those rare insights across the centuries as to how other peoples tick) but rather to suggest that such research can lead to generalizations of value even in the scientific programmes of objective archaeologists (Binford 1987).

Finally, we are disappointed that beyond Barley's dismissal of Douglas's attempt to correlate social and symbolic structures, our invocation of her work has excited no archaeological commentary. Is it not of relevance to DeBoer's question "why and when certain cultural domains become foci of elaboration"? Cost and the requirement for the medium to be capable of emitting the message over the required range are limiting factors, but beyond this Douglas's ideas are surely of use and can be exploited at least to define the arena within which the choices of elaborative domain are made. In a type of small-scale society that contrasts markedly with the Mafa—the Anuak may serve as an example—social classification is much weaker but group pressure remains strong (Douglas 1973:150–51, 169). Here the body is a subject of anxiety. Individuals are subjected to unresolvable conflicts, played out in the idiom of witchcraft. Accusations and therapy continually define the social boundaries. In such societies pottery would hardly be elaborated in such a way as to reinforce principles of social structure, and we would expect less homogeneity and standardization at the levels of motif and design. Where would we find elaboration?

As Barley says, our generalizing ambition to link forms of social structure and pot decoration is still far from realization. While Douglas is probably right that cultures exhibit pervasive patterns of stylistic expression, it is less certain that these covary predictably with sociological factors, and it seems too good to be true that the factors can be reduced to two axes of variation only. We find her writings enormously stimulating but also profoundly sibylline. Nonetheless, the prospect of unlocking the core of societies past and present with the key of style is exhilarating and worth much effort in the attempt.

We look forward to tests of our ideas in other arenas. It remains to be seen whether the Barley's "potting model" is merely a West African obsession and to what extent it is applicable to other parts of the world.

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