

*Cultural Transmission  
and Material Culture*

**Breaking Down Boundaries**

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## *The Long Arm of the Mother-in-Law*

LEARNING, POSTMARITAL RESOCIALIZATION OF  
WOMEN, AND MATERIAL CULTURE STYLE

**Ingrid Herbich and Michael Dietler**

CONSIDERING THE CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE of the process of learning to the transmission of culture, it is curious that, aside from the domain of linguistic anthropology, this fundamental social phenomenon has received so little serious explicit primary research attention in anthropology. That is not to say that some anthropologists (e.g., evolutionary anthropologists) have not engaged in theoretical speculation about it or made indexical gestures in the direction of the issue. But conjectural modeling on the basis of theoretical principles, or mathematical correlations of secondary effects, or combing the HRAF files for statistical patterns is not the same thing as detailed primary observation of the process of learning cultural knowledge and practices in a specific social context—and relatively little of the latter kind of research has actually been undertaken to date. This lack of detailed primary research on learning is particularly glaring in the domain that is most crucial for archaeological interpretation: the realm of material culture production.

Archaeologists, for example, have long recognized that material culture is, in a broad sense, culturally and socially patterned, and that material style is the result of both culturally shared concepts and values and the social practices and processes through which these are embodied, transmitted, and transformed. But exactly how the elements underlying the production of style—that is, material culture design concepts, aesthetic dispositions, semiotic codes, technical knowledge, and bodily motor habits—are learned has, until recently, been envisaged by archaeologists largely in terms of rather vaguely understood and crudely simplified abstract mechanisms. This was one of the key problems that undermined the credibility of

innovative early ceramic sociology attempts to infer kinship from material culture (e.g., Deetz 1965; Longacre 1970), as well as the information exchange approach to material culture that was popular in American archaeology during the 1970s and 1980s (Plog 1978; Wobst 1977). Both were founded on assertions about learning that were grounded in implicit "common sense" assumptions rather than primary investigation of learning. These are, of course, only two of many perspectives where a detailed, empirically grounded theoretical understanding of learning is fundamentally important yet has remained underdeveloped.

To be sure, the process of learning is not one that can be studied directly in archaeological contexts. Rather, the very possibility of archaeological interpretation depends crucially on a theoretical understanding of the nature of learning and its role in the production of material culture that must be derived elsewhere. Specifically, that theoretical understanding must be developed in ethnographic contexts where such complex practices and processes actually can be observed by cultural anthropologists and ethnoarchaeologists. However, with a few significant exceptions (e.g., Bowser 2002; Coy 1989; Herbich 1987; Goody 1982; Lave 1977; Lave and Wenger 1991; Roux with Corbetta 1989; Wallaert-Pètre 1999b, 2001), little serious ethnographic research on this issue has been conducted until quite recently. Nor, with a few exceptions (e.g., Minar and Crown, eds. 2001), has the research that has been published received the attention it merits in the archaeological literature.

Much of the discussion of cultural transmission in neo-Darwinian archaeology and evolutionary anthropology suffers from identical problems (e.g., Boyd and Richerson 1985; Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1982; Shennan 2002b). Little, if any, of this work has actually engaged in detailed primary empirical observation of human learning, being content instead to generate mathematical modeling of broad correlations in which conjecture about intervening social processes substitutes for systematic ethnographic exploration of these crucial features. This is a bit like epidemiologists speculating about the cause of disease based on population statistics without laboratory medical research to observe the actions of bacteria, viruses, and toxins.

Hence, an urgent need exists for more ethnographic research focused on learning and material culture. This chapter is a brief contribution toward the stimulation of such research and the development of a theoretical understanding of the material ramifications of modes of learning.

It is an attempt to use comparative data from two ethnoarchaeological studies conducted in Africa to reflect on the relationship among learning, cultural transmission, and socialization; and to suggest some social factors that condition the creation of material culture style. These studies were originally designed with precisely this problem in mind, and they examined a broad range of kinds of cultural transmission and domains of learning, including many that were not directly related to material culture. This chapter focuses specifically on one aspect of that research: the role of postmarital resocialization of women in the perpetuation of local cultural traditions and the resultant influence on the production of stylistic variation in craft traditions. This is demonstrated first with data from a regional study of potters in an agrarian society: the Luo of western Kenya. The extent of the impact of this little-recognized phenomenon on the transmission of culture in general is further suggested on the basis of a comparative survey of ethnographic literature. Finally, contrasting data from a study of the Rendille pastoral nomads of northern Kenya suggest the limits of generalization of this phenomenon and emphasize the interplay of other significant variables.

### **Luo Pottery, the Mother-in-Law, and Postmarital Resocialization**

The Luo are a Nilotic-speaking people with an agrarian subsistence base, inhabiting a territory of approximately ten thousand square kilometers surrounding the Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria in western Kenya (see Herbich 2002). At the time of our study in the early 1980s (see this chapter's acknowledgments), the Luo population numbered about 2.5 million. Regional population density is relatively high, but the settlement pattern is one of discrete, polygynous, extended family homesteads dispersed over the landscape. Membership in agnatic lineages structures most features of social life, including personal identity, rights to land, and political alliances (Dietler and Herbich 1993; Evans-Pritchard 1949; Shipton 1989; Southall 1952). In addition to being patrilineal, the Luo have a strongly patrilocal system of postmarital residence in which brides come to live in the homestead of the husband's father. Given the prevalence of polygyny and the fact that Luo lineages are exogamous landholding units, this means that each homestead will normally contain various

women who came originally from other lineage areas, while the men of a neighborhood will have been raised locally (Herbich 1987).

The typical Luo homestead (called *dala* or *pacho*, depending on the area) consists of a roughly circular enclosure surrounded by a tall euphorbia hedge fence with a central gate (*rangach*). Inside are arranged, in a highly structured pattern, the houses of a polygynous extended family (figs. 11.1a and 11.1b). Each woman has her own house (*ot*), and men alternate staying in the houses of their multiple wives. Traditionally these were wattle and daub structures on a post frame with a thatched roof, although the use of cement walls and corrugated iron roofs has been spreading (Herbich and Dietler 1993). The residents of a homestead consist of a man and his wives, and his sons and their wives. A man must marry from his father's (rather than his grandfather's) *dala*. Hence, when a grandson is ready to marry, his father must move out and found his own *dala* nearby with his wives and children. This produces a regular three-generation life cycle for homesteads, which are turned into agricultural land after the last resident has died. The houses of wives are placed in a symbolically charged pattern that emphasizes relations of seniority and authority: the powerful first wife's house is directly opposite the main gate, and the other co-wives follow in succession in descending order of seniority, alternating from side to side of the *dala* (see fig. 11.1a). The sons and their wives follow a similar pattern in the lower half of the homestead (see Dietler and Herbich 1998; Herbich and Dietler 1993).

Subsistence among the Luo is based on a combination of agriculture, livestock herding, and fishing. Agriculture is carried out, primarily by women, in small fields scattered around a homestead. At the time of our research, most Luo women worked from three to five fields, totaling 1.5 to 4.5 hectares, spread over a wide area (Pala 1983). Traditionally, land was corporately owned by patrilineages, and usufruct rights to exploit fields were obtained by male lineage membership. In other words, a woman gained access to land through her husband (who was a member of the local lineage, which she was not). However, it was usually the senior mother-in-law (the first wife of the head of the homestead) who actually assigned specific fields to the new brides of her sons and other women in the *dala*. Corporate ownership of land gradually has been transformed (at least legally) by government schemes to "rationalize" landholdings in a system of private ownership that the postcolonial Kenyan state took over from an earlier

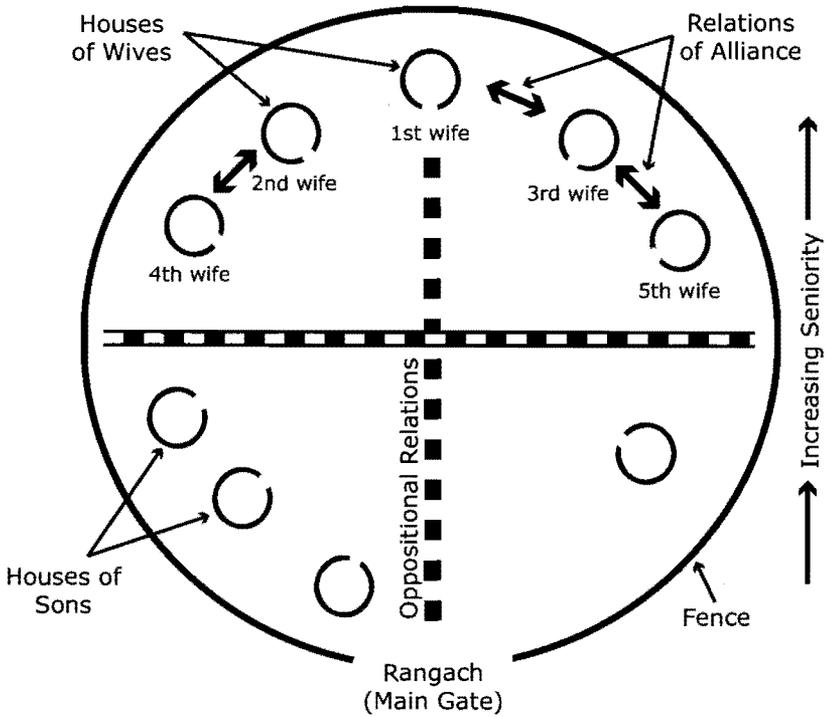


FIGURE II.1A A schematic representation of a “typical” Luo settlement (*dala*), showing the euphorbia fence and symbolically significant placement of houses.

colonial strategy. However, given that land was registered as the private property of men, women still obtain access to land through their husbands in the traditional pattern. The main effect of the privatization scheme on women has been to undercut the security of access through the lineage for widows or wives whose husbands or sons sell their land (see Pala 1983).

Primary agricultural production to feed her family is considered the duty of every rural Luo wife, and at the time of our research, there was little dependence on purchased food (aside from small-scale “target” selling and buying of foodstuffs at the local markets and the purchase of a few imported items such as tea, sugar, and salt). Hoe agriculture is predominant, but ox plows are increasingly found in some areas. The primary grain crops include sorghum, maize, and millet; and cassava and sweet potatoes are major root crops. Sorghum and cassava are especially valued for their resistance to drought. These starches are complemented

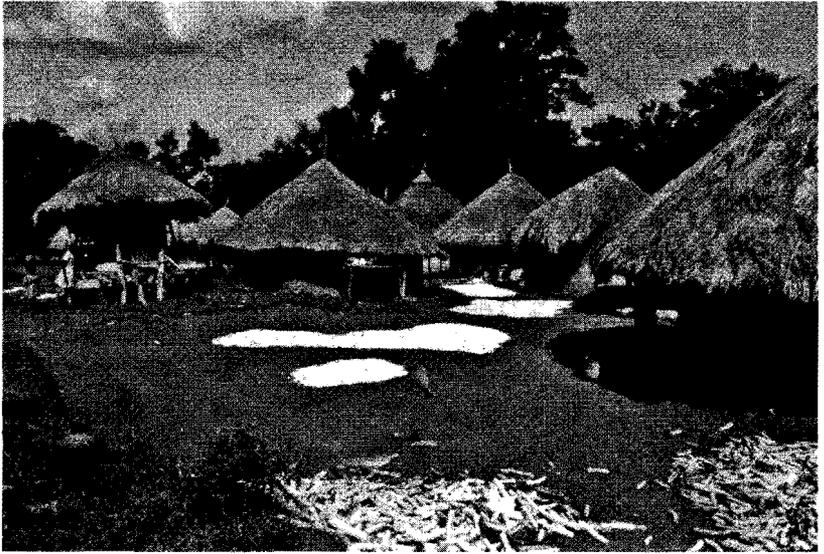


FIGURE 11.1B A Luo *dala*.

by various kinds of beans, lentils, and greens. In the higher elevation zone, bananas are also grown. The early Luo settlers who moved into Kenya beginning in the sixteenth century had a pastoralist orientation, and cattle have remained very important as a symbol and unit of wealth. They have long been, for example, the central component of bridewealth exchanges (now augmented or partially replaced with cash). They are generally eaten only in the context of feasting rituals, but their milk forms an important part of the ordinary diet. Sheep, goats, and chickens are a less valuable and somewhat more commonly consumed source of meat. Fish of several types and sizes (tilapia, Nile perch, etc.) are also a much-appreciated source of protein. They are caught in the waters of the Winam Gulf and traded throughout the market system.

Luo artisans make a wide variety of crafts that are consumed locally rather than being directed toward a tourist market. These craft products, generally sold at local periodic markets, include pottery, baskets (for storage, food processing, eating, fishing, etc.), forged iron goods (agricultural tools, ornaments, etc.), and such things as ropes, brooms, reed mats, wooden tool handles, and oil lamps made from recycled cans.

Pottery is a thriving traditional craft that is produced almost entirely for Luo domestic consumption (with some trade to neighboring societies

in border regions) by a small body of women constituting less than 1 percent of the population. The vast majority of these women live clustered in proximate homesteads in a number of neighborhoods that we call "potter communities." In the region of approximately three thousand square kilometers that constituted the primary focus of our research, there were twenty-seven major clay sources, each with one or more potter communities clustered around it (see Dietler and Herbich 1989, 1994; Herbich 1987; Herbich and Dietler 1991).

In the sense of this highly uneven ratio of producers to consumers, Luo potters are practicing a specialized craft. However, this does not mean that the production of commodities forms the basis, or even a major part, of their livelihood. Far from it. These women share all the considerable agricultural and domestic responsibilities of other Luo women: essentially, a woman is responsible for growing and processing all the food for her family as well as taking care of the house, cooking, and looking after her children. Potting is simply an extra activity performed in the home, without specialized production facilities or storage areas, in order to earn a little cash for such things as school fees and commodities (such as clothing, matches, tobacco, tea, and sugar). In other words, it constitutes what Peacock (1982) has defined as a "household industry" mode of production (as opposed to either generalized "household production" or a "workshop industry"). Pots are distributed primarily through local markets, at which potters are also sellers (see Dietler and Herbich 1994, 1998; Herbich and Dietler 1991).

As noted above, most potters live in clusters of homesteads near clay sources. We refer to these clusters as potter communities because of the networks of personal interaction among the potters living in proximity. However, this does not in any sense imply that they live in bounded groups defined by craft production and isolated from nonpotters. We simply wish to focus analytically on the relationships among potters who are otherwise typical women with a normal range of other relationships and activities (see Dietler and Herbich 1998; Herbich 1987).

The Luo make and use a wide variety of pots that are employed for cooking and brewing, storage, service of food and drink, transport, and several ceremonial functions. Globally, the range of pots over the whole of the Luo region can be divided into thirteen analytical form categories (fig. 11.2). However, no area employs all thirteen forms. Rather, each

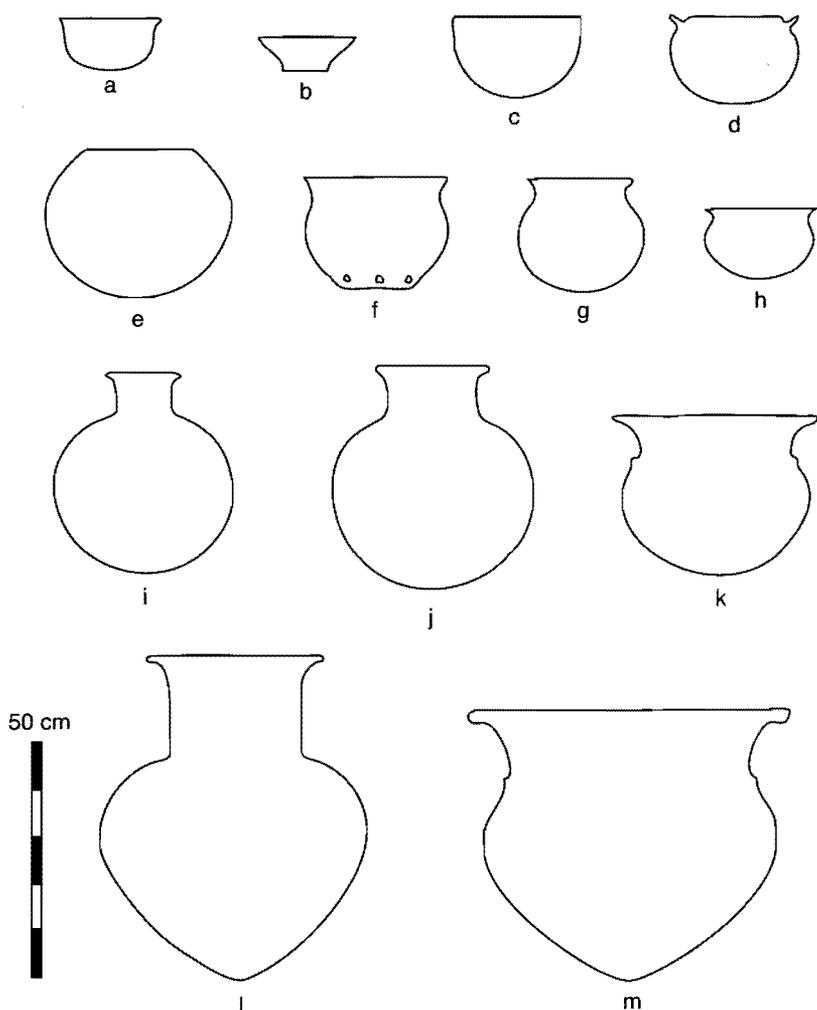


FIGURE 11.2 A schematic representation of the 13 major form categories (a to m) of Luo pottery.

potter community, and each consumer area served by that community, operates with a specific local subset of those forms to serve an identical set of functions. Moreover, local classificatory vocabularies for vessel types are also regionally distinctive (with the same name used for different forms in different areas, and different names applied to similar forms). In this sense, the concept of “Luo pottery” is a convenient “etic” collective analytical construct meaning simply all of the pottery produced by

Luo potters, without implying any essentialized aesthetic quality, stylistic unity, or “emic” sense of ethnic indexicality. Hence, meaningful discussion of style and function must always be grounded at the level of individual potter communities and local communities of consumption.

The production of different potter communities can be distinguished not only by the specific limited range of form classes they produce but also by characteristic distinctive combinations of technical, formal, and decorative features that we call “microstyles.” To briefly illustrate the nature of these microstyles, which are described more fully elsewhere (Dietler and Herbich 1989; Herbich 1987; Herbich and Dietler 2007), examples from two form categories are used: the water storage pot (*dapi* or *mbiru*, depending on location) and the pot for cooking meat or vegetables (*ralung’* or *aguch ring’o/aguch alot*, depending on location and function). It is important to emphasize that style cannot be reduced to decoration. Nor are these microstyles equivalent to what is often called technological style. Rather, they must be understood as characteristic permutations of decorative, formal, and technical aspects (Dietler and Herbich 1998). The high degree of decorative elaboration on water pots makes such stylistic differences more easily communicable in brief graphic shorthand, but the stylistic differences are equally evident in other forms that are often less elaborately decorated.

The water pots are usually decorated with bands of burnished red ocher (on the rim and body), as well as with incised and impressed patterns of various kinds (fig. 11.3). The water pots of each potter community share a limited range of associated decorative motifs and organizational schema that is distinctive from those of all other communities, even if certain traits overlap. The vessel form of the water pot characteristic of each community, although sharing certain general attributes of the class, is also subtly, but distinctively, different. It should also be emphasized that each community has a range of internal variation and cannot be characterized by any single trait. The microstyles are a relational phenomenon: a characteristic set of relationships between decorative motifs and organizational schema, form variations, and techniques.

The meat and vegetable pots are usually splashed with a bark infusion while still hot from firing. This turns the surface a dark color ranging from uniform shiny black to mottled brown, depending on the type of plant used in each community, the color of the local clay, and the amount

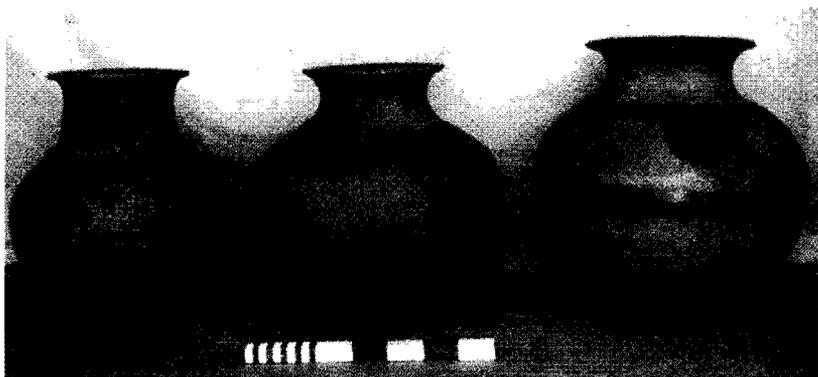


FIGURE 11.3 Selected examples of Luo water storage pots (sing. *dapi*, pl. *depige*), showing stylistic differences characteristic of three different potter communities (from left to right: Boro, Aram, Pap Nyadiel). Scale is in centimeters.

of coverage that is characteristic (ranging from complete in some communities to a few perfunctory splashes in others). Characteristic repertoires of incised and impressed decorations may also distinguish the meat pots of some communities, but variations in form and color are often more salient.

Although complex, subtle, and not easily conveyed in such a brief presentation, these microstyles are readily discernible to potters and anthropologist alike. More important than their description, however, is an understanding of the reasons for their existence. They are the product of local traditions of manufacture, which are conditioned by patterns of learning and the social context of the potter in Luo society.

Contrary to the case widely assumed in many archaeological models, the vast majority of Luo potters learn to pot not from their mothers but *after* marriage, from the mother-in-law or senior co-wives in the husband's homestead. Young children often help their potter mothers to burnish pots or gather and mix clay, but they do not really learn to form pots. Teenage daughters of potters, who would have the strength and abilities to learn the craft in earnest, are dissuaded from doing so by social pressures. While potting is not exactly looked down upon, it is considered hard, dirty work, and it is decidedly not the sort of activity in which a young girl in the process of trying to attract a husband would wish to be seen engaged. Moreover, potters find it more practical to have

their daughters relieve them of taking care of young children and various other domestic tasks, which compete for their time, than to invest the effort in teaching them a craft that will soon be abandoned unless they marry into another community of potters; and this is not a probable eventuality given the limited distribution of clay sources.

In the typical strongly patrilineal-patrilocal Luo homestead, a son and his wives will live with the father until his own children are ready to marry. A new wife who comes to live with her husband will be under the close supervision of her mother-in-law for a number of years. At first she will not even cook in her own house or farm her own fields but will perform these tasks with the mother-in-law until she is judged ready to be the mistress of her own house. If she is not the first wife, she will also have to contend with other co-wives, at least one of whom will have greater seniority. The land she will depend on to provide food for her children belongs to her husband's lineage, and usufruct rights to this land are allocated by the mother-in-law. Hence, the new wife will be in competition with other wives, and the mother-in-law will be the decisive agent in granting access to good land and land near the homestead.

Obviously, there are considerable pressures for a new wife to adapt to the expectations of senior women in her husband's home. Luo girls usually marry young (until quite recently, this was generally before sixteen years old), and they are expected to quickly begin bearing children. During this time, they undergo a long process of resocialization that often involves "unlearning" things learned in the parental home and adapting to new practices and concepts in the realm of food preparation, agriculture, taxonomy, and other such things. For example, although the range of standard food dishes is roughly similar throughout Luoland, a wife will be expected to learn the particular recipe for each dish preferred in her husband's homestead. Similarly, she will come to adopt the local greetings and terms for things rather than continue using the words she learned as a child.

Potting is one of the practices a wife will be expected to learn if she marries into a homestead of potters, in order to demonstrate her willingness to take up her responsibilities by working hard to provide for her family. As one potter put it, "I never thought I would do such a thing, but my mother-in-law was a potter, and I knew it was fate." As another stated, "If you marry in a place where there are nightrunners [i.e., a kind

of witch], you have to become one. If there are potters, you become a potter." Learning to pot in this context, of course, also means learning to pot the *local way*. Potters initially learn the craft from a mother-in-law or senior co-wife, gathering clay and temper from the same sources and learning to use the same techniques in constructing a range of locally acceptable forms and decorations through a common *chaîne opératoire* of production (see Dietler and Herbich 1989, 1998). The process of apprenticeship is one of watching and imitating until the proper motor habits and aesthetic dispositions have become embodied directly without passing through a discursive translation. Instruction is usually confined to comments such as "No, that is not right—watch me." Through this process, women gradually acquire a new technical and aesthetic habitus that generates a set of dispositions that seem "natural" (see Dietler and Herbich 1998).

Significantly, even those women whose mothers were potters almost always conform to the local pattern, both because they did not really learn the craft in earnest from their mothers and because they are profoundly influenced by the women working around them in their community. It is important to emphasize that learning is not an event: it is a process (Herbich 1987). Moreover, it is a social process that is embedded in the routines of daily life and in personal relationships. Women do not simply learn once and for all from the mother-in-law. Potting is a social activity conducted with friends and co-wives, and women are influenced by the specific networks of associates that they construct over time within the community. These networks have a subtle influence on the generation of internal stylistic variations within the potter community, through various means (see Herbich 1987). For example, personal relationships of friendship or animosity may result in decorative divergences, although these will be expressed within a common range of possibilities generated by shared dispositions. However, the significance of these stylistic differences is entirely confined to the community of production: they have no meaning in the eventual context of consumption that will extend across important social boundaries (Dietler and Herbich 1994).

It may seem curiously counter-intuitive that a group of women, all of whom came originally from outside the community, should be the perpetrators of a distinctive local ceramic tradition, but the mechanism described

here does continually produce this result. This clearly contradicts the pattern predicted by the well-known Deetz-Longacre hypothesis, whereby local microstyles were assumed necessarily to be the product of matrilocal residence. Only by staying in place after marriage, it was reasoned, could locally distinctive design concepts be maintained; under a patrilocal system, women would carry their stylistic concepts with them and produce a regionally mixed pattern. Unfortunately, a very important variable—what we may somewhat facetiously call the mother-in-law factor (that is, the possibility of significant resocialization after marriage)—was overlooked in these and most later formulations of stylistic interpretations. This was not a failing specific to these models, however; it was merely a reflection of an assumption widespread within the discipline stemming from an imperfect understanding of the process of cultural transmission.

The process of postmarital resocialization, as represented among the Luo, actually appears to be quite common in patrilocal societies rather than being an isolated or aberrant case. While its influence on material culture patterns has rarely been documented elsewhere and has never been systematically analyzed, hints of this kind of resocialization under the mother-in-law are found in many ethnographic accounts, often in brief parenthetical asides. Quite common are long periods of subservience, instruction, apprenticeship, and even residence with the mother-in-law, during which the new bride may for a considerable period of probation be prevented from cooking at her own hearth, brewing her own beer, working her own fields, having her own granary, or even owning her own pot. Often the mother-in-law has more authority over the new wife than does the husband, and the wife acts for a time as a kind of servant (see e.g., Bohannan and Bohannan 1968; Colson 1949; Junod 1927; Moore 1986; Wagner 1939). This is perhaps most graphically exemplified by the symbolic practice among the peasants of Orissa, where a new wife before her first meal of the day must drink a bowl of water in which the mother-in-law has dipped her right toe.

Moreover, references from many societies suggest, without exploring the stylistic implications in depth, that a great deal of learning in the domain of material practices (including craft production) takes place after marriage rather than before. For example, Spindel noted that, among the Kpeenbele Senufo, "Although they [women] watch the pottery making process all their lives and know it intimately, they are not allowed

to become true apprentices until they marry. . . . During this time, the young wife is dependent upon her husband's family. If she has been married to a man in a Kpeenbele community in another village, her female in-laws teach her pottery skills" (1989:71).

This does not mean that women may be considered a *tabula rasa* at marriage. It is simply that much of their early education as children centers around learning (and embodying) social categories and role expectations (including such things as proper modes of sexuality, obedience, and responsibilities), ethics and morality, and the genealogical structuring of their world. In contrast, after marriage Luo wives must learn the cultural specifics necessary to navigate the new social and natural landscape of the husband's group. The range of these specifics includes things such as local food recipes; local plants, water sources, and other resources; knowledge of local soil and weather conditions for agriculture; local terms for objects and concepts; variations in the components of rituals and myths and their sequences; a new kinship context; local boundaries and landmarks; and, of course, local aesthetic tastes and stylistic dispositions. For example, Netting noted that among the Kofyar of Nigeria, "Women marrying into a village where beer is brewed more weakly adopt the local pattern regardless of their previous method" (1964:357). Upon detailed investigation, it is, in fact, quite astonishing how varied and important (both practically and symbolically) these social and cultural specifics are within a single society (Herbich and Dietler 2007).

We are decidedly not proposing the Luo as a general model for the interpretation of style or trying to suggest that one can infer postmarital residence patterns from ceramic style by substituting a revised "Luoized" version of the flawed Deetz-Longacre model. In fact, it should now be clear that ceramic microstyles may result from either patrilocal or matrilocal systems (or neolocal systems) due to a great variety of other interacting variables (see table 11.1); and they do not necessarily yield any direct clue about social organization.

Our intention in exploring this issue is simply to emphasize that, given the young age of marriage for women common in most small-scale societies, postmarital resocialization (the metaphorical long arm of the mother-in-law) is likely to have been a very significant factor in the transmission of culture and the reproduction of material culture in patrilocal societies throughout prehistory. However, this insight in itself does not

TABLE II.1 Schematic representation of different permutations of several factors (learning and marriage patterns) involved in the production of stylistic patterns in material culture

Gender of maker	Marital residence	Learns from	When learns	Stylistic pattern
Female	Patrilocal	Mother	Before marriage	Regional "homogeneity"
Female	Patrilocal	Mother-in-law	After marriage	Local microstyles
Female	Matrilocal	Mother	Before or after marriage	Local microstyles
Male	Patrilocal	Father	Before or after marriage	Local microstyles
Male	Matrilocal	Father	Before marriage	Regional "homogeneity"
Male	Matrilocal	Father-in-law	After marriage	Local microstyles

*Note:* This is a highly simplified representation of relationships among a few salient factors that is intended to suggest the complexity of social forces and practices underlying material patterns.

allow us to correlate neatly stylistic patterns and high-level abstract phenomena such as social organization without an understanding of more basic processes conditioning the creation of material culture, as the contrasting case of the Rendille clearly demonstrates.

### Rendille Pastoralists: A Counter Example

The Rendille are a society of nomadic camel pastoralists living in the region of the Kaisut desert and Hedad of northern Kenya, to the west of Marsabit. At the time of our study in the late 1970s (see acknowledgments), they numbered about ten thousand people, although today the population is estimated to have grown to approximately thirty thousand. The Rendille speak an Eastern Cushitic language closely related to Somali. Their livelihood derives from the husbandry of camels, considered the main source of wealth, and small stock (sheep and goats). The diet is based on the consumption of milk, blood, and, occasionally, meat. The Rendille live in fairly large multiple-family settlements (called *gob*; fig. II.4a) that can be one to two hectares in size (see Grum 1976). A *gob* is composed of portable houses (*min*), each made of woven mats

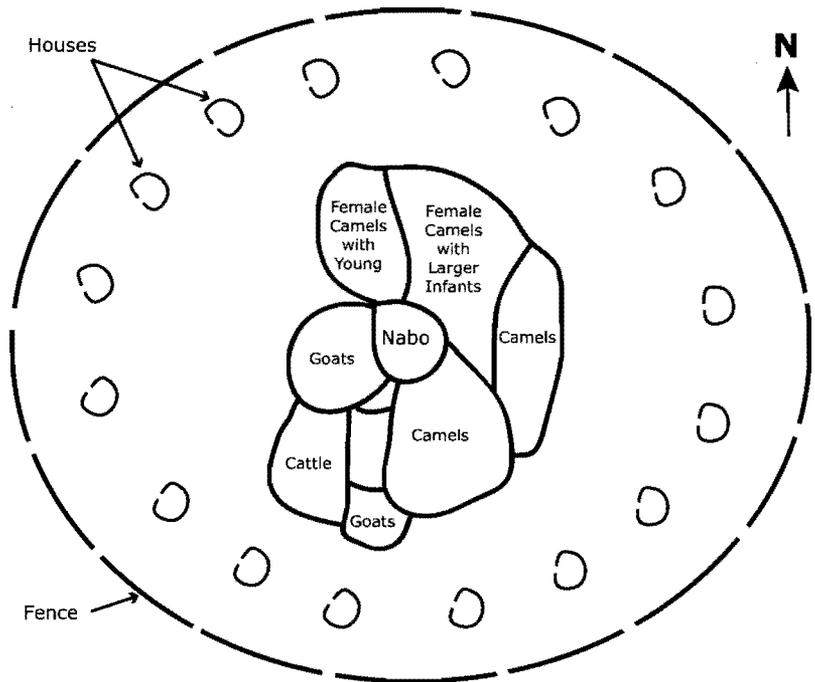


FIGURE 11.4A A schematic representation of a Rendille settlement.

and cow hides on a pole frame, that can be dismantled and transported on the back of a camel (fig. 11.4b). Each wife or widow must have her own house, which she is responsible for dismantling for transport. The settlements are of irregular form (but very roughly circular or elliptical), and they are surrounded by a low brush fence (*tikhorat*), with separate entrances for each house. The main gate is considered to be the one on the western end of the settlement. The center of the gob contains internal stock enclosures (*summ*) and a meeting place (*nabo*) for the senior men. The choice of settlement location is made collectively by senior men, with the primary criterion for the movement and placement of a new settlement being grazing for the camels. For reasons of security, several settlements usually move together. There are also temporary satellite camel camps (called *for*) occupied by young men guarding the herds.

Enemies of the Rendille include their neighbors to the north and west: the Gabra, Boran, Somali, and Turkana, who sometimes engage in stock raiding. Traditional Rendille allies are primarily the Samburu

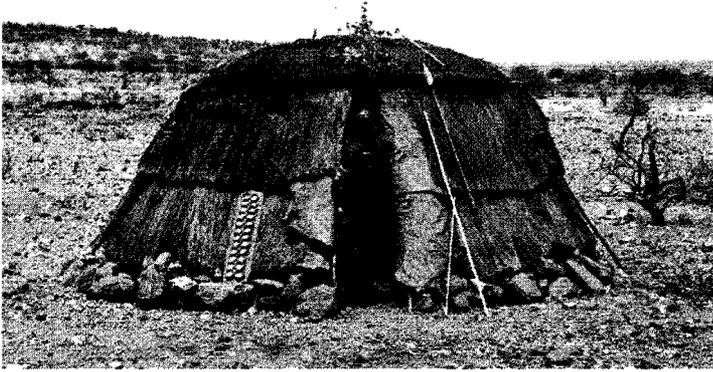


FIGURE II.4B A Rendille house (*min*).

cattle pastoralists to the south. A hybrid group called the Aarial lives in the zone between the Samburu and the Rendille proper. The Aarial have adopted the Samburu language and clan names and herd some cattle, but still live in Rendille-style settlements and use much Rendille material culture (see Spencer 1973).

Rendille social organization is based on membership in two moieties divided into exogamous patrilineal clans, and a gob is a clan-based settlement (and is named after the clan). However, few clans live entirely in only one settlement. Grum noted that of the fifty settlements he recorded (constituting 82 percent of the Rendille), the average gob had twenty-three houses and a population of approximately 125, although settlements of up to sixty-five houses and 350 people have been recorded (Grum 1976:22). Gob Esimgalgedele, where our study was conducted, was slightly smaller than average, with sixteen houses. The Rendille aspire to the principle of polygyny, but in practice, the majority of men can afford only one wife. The Rendille also have a system of age sets that operate on an eleven-year cycle: that is, with initiation ceremonies held at eleven-year intervals.

Like the Luo, the Rendille have a patrilocal postmarital residence pattern with significant postmarital resocialization of women. However, if we take the same functional class of material culture as was examined for the Luo—that is, containers—Rendille examples do not exhibit at all the

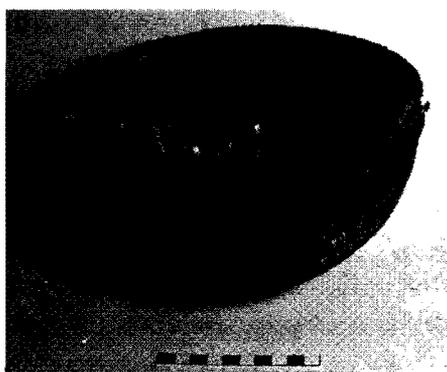
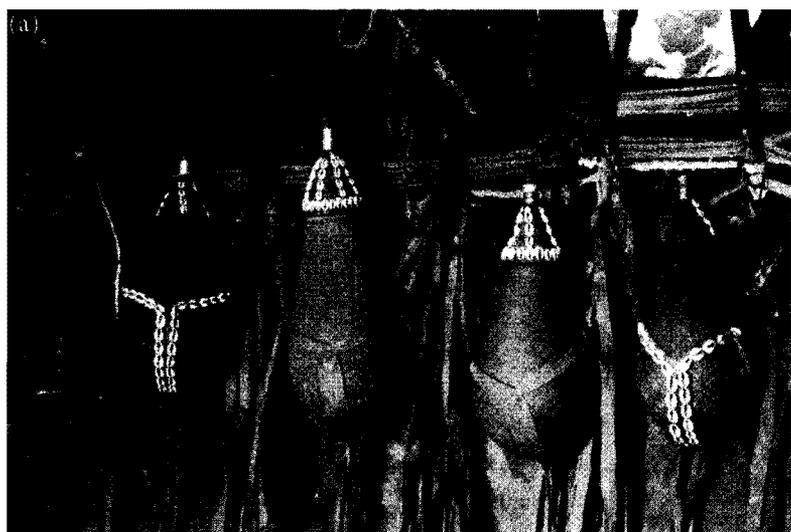


FIGURE 11.5 Selected examples of Rendille containers: (a) *djidjo* (left and right) and *madal* (center); (b) *murub*; (c) *oror*. Scale is in centimeters.

same local microstyle patterning. Rather, one finds a regionally homogeneous pattern approaching that predicted for patrilocal societies by the famous Deetz-Longacre model. Before explaining why, it is necessary to at least briefly describe the nature of Rendille containers and the practices of postmarital residence.

Every Rendille woman's home contains an impressive array of containers that have highly specific functions and a consistent placement

within the house. These include twelve kinds of closed containers with a lid and nine open-form vessels without a lid. Among the former are the *han* (a large jar-shaped water container) and a variety of milk containers, including the *djidjo* (fig. 11.5a), *madal* (fig. 11.5a), and *kuni* (all closed jar forms). Among the open forms are the *murub* (a bowl-shaped camel-milking vessel; fig. 11.5b) and the *khure* (a ceremonial milk bowl). All of the above are woven vessels decorated with such things as cowrie shells, copper rings, and straps that convey a specific meaning about the status and role of the owner. Closed vessels from other materials include the wooden *dibeso*, *imbarbará*, *oror* (all used to store meat or fat; fig. 11.5c), *kul* (for storing milk or oil), *sroror* (for milking goats and cows, or for carrying water), and *banchach* (for storing camel or goat milk); the leather *udam* (made from oryx, camel, or giraffe hide and used to store fat); and the *ororo* (made from calabash and used to store fat). Other open forms include the wooden *on-kor* (for bleeding goats), the leather *okole* (for milking cows and watering animals), the wooden *nya-tuba* (a serving vessel), and a ceramic meat-cooking pot called *diri*, which is made by the neighboring Dorobo people.

In comparison with the rather banal character of most pots in Luo society, most Rendille vessels are highly charged symbolically, and there are many restrictions on who can make them, who can use them, what rituals require their use, where they must be kept in the house, and so forth. Indeed, the very existence of such a large and complex repertoire of vessel types to serve a relatively small range of utilitarian functions (e.g., there are five different types of vessel used for storing milk and five others for storing fat) is a salient indication that a lot of symbolic work is being performed by a heavy load of categorical distinctions.

Among the Luo, decoration has almost no overt symbolic, indexical, or iconic significance—there is no referential meaning attached to motifs or design configurations (Dietler and Herbich 1989). For Rendille containers, on the other hand, such details as the arrangement of cowrie shells and straps are often explicitly indexical signs of the status, role, and life stage of the owner, for example, whether a woman is married, is a mother, is a widow, and even the number of children she has produced. The woven vessels can be made only by women (in some cases, only by married women), but a few of the other types are made by men (e.g., the *oror* and *imbarbará*), and some jointly by men and women (e.g., the

soror). A few types are made by specialists (okole and nya-tuba), and the one ceramic pot (diri) is made by a neighboring people and obtained by exchange. Use is often similarly restricted. For example, the djidjo, which is kept between the woman's and man's sides of the house, can be used only by the husband. The murub cannot be used by a first-born child until after marriage. Only a warrior can drink out of the lid of his kul. Within the containers, there is a hierarchy of value between the woven vessels and those made from other materials. For example, the former are hung in special places on the wall of the house, whereas the latter are often set on the floor. Several wooden and leather vessel forms are reputed by the Rendille to have a foreign origin. For example, the oror is of Turkana style, the okole is a Boran form (with a Boran name), and the kul is a Samburu form. The range of uses for these also appears to be less restricted than for the woven containers thought to be "purely Rendille." Among the Luo, pots in general are made and used by women. Only eating bowls and beer-drinking pots are commonly used by men, and the latter are the only types that play any role in the categorical marking of status (through the ritual of feasting; see Dietler 2001; Dietler and Herbich 2006).

The reasons for the striking differences between Rendille and Luo stylistic patterns are several. Space precludes more than a brief discussion here, but among the most significant factors are, first, the fact that Rendille containers have a very long use-life. As noted above, the most important of them are of woven fiber construction. Unlike the ceramic containers of the Luo, they do not break and generally are expected to last for the lifetime of the owner. This means that most women will produce only one object of each type during her lifetime (rather than, for example, the need to constantly replace cooking pots every couple of years among the Luo). In fact, the household inventories collected from Gob Esimgalgedele showed that some Rendille containers (especially the dibeso) were actually produced by mothers for their daughters before marriage, and the objects themselves, rather than just design concepts, are carried to the new settlement and remain in use there throughout the woman's life. Hence, in the case of some objects, a woman may make only one for her daughter (rather than for herself), and she will base it on the model of the one her mother made for her. Second, most Rendille containers are produced individually by every

Rendille household rather than obtained through exchange from nucleated centers of specialists (with the exception of the two wooden vessels made by specialists and the *diri* ceramic pot). In other words, whereas Luo pots are a “commodity by destination” (in the terms of Appadurai 1986), most Rendille containers almost never enter the commodity state. Finally, the Rendille settlement pattern is much more fluid than that of the sedentary Luo.

## **Postmarital Resocialization and Material Consequences**

These factors combine to produce a contrasting pattern of craft production such that, among the Rendille, a more or less continuous network of contact exists between craft producers, and there is a very slow rate of reproducing objects. Moreover, objects themselves travel over great distances with their owners, as women marry into patrilocal homesteads and subsequently move around the landscape. Consequently, there is less possibility for the kind of “allopatric” formation of local traditions of practice that occur with Luo pottery. Although Luo potter communities are certainly not isolated from nonpotters, in relative terms, there is limited communication with other potter communities. Moreover, there is a much faster rate of production than with Rendille objects—thus leading to the possibility for the rapid formation and transformation of distinctive local styles.

The lesson to be gleaned from all of this is that postmarital resocialization must be recognized as a very significant factor in the transmission of culture and the reproduction of material culture style; but the material expression of its influence is not uniform and may vary from craft to craft even within the same society. Factors such as the degree of specialization in production of particular kinds of objects, the spatial location of producers, the links between the contexts of production and consumption, the nature of the craft medium, the use-life and replacement rate of objects, and the overall settlement and demographic pattern all have a significant role in shaping different material culture patterns. Further empirical investigation and comparative analysis of processes of learning in different contexts are essential for understanding the permutations of these factors to a degree that will be useful for archaeological interpretation, and it is

heartening to see research attention finally being directed in a more systematic way toward this issue.

### **Acknowledgments**

This chapter is a slightly revised version of a paper presented in 1989 at a symposium of the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association chaired by Carol Kramer, who expressed considerable enthusiasm for it. This was the first meeting in what became a longstanding professional friendship. Hence, we take particular pleasure in being able to dedicate the chapter to her memory, and we thank the editors for the invitation to contribute it to the volume. The chapter is essentially the same as the one Carol heard except for parts of the introduction and the addition of a bit more background information on the Luo and Rendille.

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