

Book Reviews

Boekresensies

“Figure-ing” it Out

E. Matenga, *Archaeological Figurines from Zimbabwe*

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J.A. van Schalkwyk and E.O.M. Hanisch, *Sculptured in Clay: Iron Age Figurines from Schroda, Limpopo Province, South Africa*

National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria, 2002

124 pp

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Clay, bone, ivory and stone figurines, constitute a much under-appreciated subject in History, Archaeology and Anthropology alike.¹ Seemingly, these artefacts are considered to be too small to be recognised as sculpture, or too trivial to be included in material culture studies. *Archaeological Figurines from Zimbabwe* and *Sculptured in Clay* are two distinctive attempts at redressing the imbalance. Matenga investigates the possible meanings of a tradition of miniature clay sculpture, the florescence of which coincided with the rise of the Zimbabwe polity (900-1500 AD). The Schroda monograph, on the other hand, reveals to the public an unusual large cache of clay figurines from the wider Mapungubwe region, excavated almost thirty years ago on a site adjacent to the confluence of the Limpopo and the Shashe rivers.

Two variations on the figurine theme

Archaeological Figurines from Zimbabwe is part of an exciting series, published by the Department of Archaeology at Uppsala University. At first, the monograph may seem rather technical and perhaps less suitable for a general readership. No less than a third of the volume is taken up by an extensive classificatory exercise, which makes for slow reading. The archaeological analysis of the figurines, its numerical tables, maps and distribution diagrams prove to be equally demanding to the reader. However, whilst battling with the descriptive detail, one grows to admire the ways in which the author has taken on the major challenge of meaningfully combining 1 180 figurines from 124 sites, representing 1 700 years of prehistory and a century of archaeological collecting.

1 P. Mitchell, *The Archaeology of Southern Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cape Town, 2002), is a case in point: the figurine tradition is neither illustrated, nor discussed systematically

The two introductory chapters define the subject matter, familiarise the reader with earlier figurine studies and sketch the three major objectives of the study, namely to design a typology; to induce from the data chronological and spatial trends; and to elucidate cultural meanings. The lengthy description and formal classification of the figurines in Chapter 3 include useful distribution-by-site tables. The section entitled “Six additional ways to classify the material” at the end of the chapter, is as unusual as it is refreshing. Here, the author rearranges the figurine types along user-based or emic, rather than strictly formal or etic criteria. Chapter 4, “Site Profiles”, discusses the particular context and circumstances of the discovery and excavation of figurines on twenty selected sites, some of which are well-documented.² In addition, Matenga defines the figurine tradition in terms of archaeological “cultures” (read: ceramic sequences). A similar search for contextual, chronological and spatial trends, typifies the analysis in Chapter 5, this time on a nationwide scale. The final chapter presents a synthesis of the history of Shona farming communities and a long ethnographic discussion of “fertility in the Shona world view”.³ Its scope covers a wide range of related subjects: the Mwari cult, naming ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, agricultural rituals, kingship, totemic laudatory poetry, domestic space, iron smelting symbolism and initiation. The study ends somewhat abruptly with short ethnographic notes on “living” figurine traditions.

Sculptured in Clay is an academic coffee-table book. The colour photographs of the artefacts and the presentation of the text, tables and diagrams are truly impressive. The nine essays follow a logical sequence and represent a variety of interests: Cultural History, Archaeology, History of Art, Museology and Anthropology. The introductory essay, compiled by Professor Tom Huffman (author of the monumental *Handbook to the Iron Age*⁴), situates Schroda within the wider history of the arrival of agro-pastoralism in Southern Africa. Early Iron Age farmers, he suggests, settled in this section of the Limpopo basin, between 350 and 450 AD, cultivating sorghum and millet. Between 600 and 900 AD, the region became too dry for farming. The area was resettled around 900 AD by farmers producing a ceramic style known as the Zhizo facies. Zhizo pottery has mainly been excavated in southwest Zimbabwe and north-eastern Botswana. Schroda is believed to be the first clear Zhizo site south of the Limpopo and, based on the size, the general pattern and particular features of the settlement, Huffman proposes that it must have been a regional political centre. The Schroda capital could have housed some 500 people and, in addition, controlled an estimated 1 300 subjects in the surrounding agricultural homesteads. It was also the first site to produce local ivory objects and imported glass beads – evidence, we are told, of a possible linkage to the networks of Swahili traders, who started operating from Sofala by the ninth century. Schroda was not the first site, however, to have produced a treasure of systematically excavated clay figurines. Huffman unearthed more than a hundred figurines at Leopards Kopje in the early 1970s. The findings of this project, regrettably, are not included in *Sculptured in Clay*.

2 The two sites with the largest, best preserved and aesthetically most interesting assemblages are, sadly, undocumented (Everton Farm: 144 almost complete clay sculptures; and Mutare Altar: 136 soapstone figurines)

3 The narrative in Chapter 5 is mainly based on the cognitive anthropology of A Jacobson-Widding and W van Beek (eds), *The Creative Communion* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Upsala, 1990)

4 T N Huffman, *Handbook to the Iron Age. The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa* (University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2007)

The second essay provides a detailed physical description of the site and its environment, and an extensive overview of the different excavation areas and their individual findings. This is followed by an equally thorough and factual analysis of the ceramics, clay figurines, traces of metal working, and faunal remains. The author, E.O.M. Hanisch (Department of Archaeology, University of Venda) concludes his text with short notes on the economy and settlement pattern of Schroda, and some interesting data on the concepts of fertility and initiation. The next essay, written by a specialist from the McGregor Museum in Kimberley, aims at determining, through chemical analysis, whether the figurines were locally manufactured or not. In the absence of local clay samples, Schroda potsherds were used for comparison and a compositional fit between the potsherds and figurines could be established. Hanisch's second contribution (the fourth essay) is dedicated to the construction of a detailed typology of the clay figurines, in which he combines formal criteria such as size, shape, colour and quality/texture of the clay.

The classificatory exercise is followed by three analytical essays, concerned with the social meaning of the figurines and inspired by data sourced from "living cultures". The first one is entitled: "Metaphors and Meanings". Based mainly on a literature survey, and to a lesser degree on his own fieldwork amongst the Hananwa and Molepo communities, Van Schalkwyk (of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria) explores, in the most general terms, the concepts of ritual and rites-of-passage; the meanings of animal representations; and the symbolic use of colour in initiation ceremonies. The second essay, by Marilee Wood (Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand), revisits a fascinating hypothesis, formulated by the anthropologist Jacqueline Roumequere-Eberhardt and her husband in the late 1950s.⁵ During a visit to the Bulawayo Museum, Roumequere noticed some peculiar figurines on display in the archaeological gallery. These particular artefacts (Hanisch type H3 and Matenga Catalogue 1, subclass 1b) characteristically integrate the shape of a phallus with a female body, with stylised head and legs. Roumequere, intrigued by the bisexual features, consulted with a Lemba ritual specialist (*nanga*), who officiated in Venda initiation rituals at the time. The *nanga* explained to her that similar figurines were still used as "fertility dolls" in the Venda region (in the 1950s). Mothers prepared this type of clay object (called "child") for their daughters' puberty rites and marriage ceremonies. Roumequere concluded that the archaeological clay sculptures and the Venda "fertility dolls" originated from a single belief system. Marilee Wood supports this hypothesis with supplementary ethnographic data, including a Zulu and a South Sotho clay figurine. The third explanatory text (Essay 7), by Anitra Nettleton (Department of History of Art, University of the Witwatersrand) derives from extensive research on Venda and Shona woodcarving in the late 1970s.⁶ It details the use of initiatory statuary in a pre-marital Venda initiation known as the *domba*. Nettleton was fortunate to be able to buy a set of clay figurines and record their general use and meaning, after the conclusion of a particular *domba* session in 1978.⁷ This set provides the core data for the discussion. The book is concluded with a double anti-climax. In Essay 8, one of the field assistants who participated in the Schroda excavations, relates some of his

5 P Roumequere and J Roumequer-Eberhardt, "Poupees de fertilité et figurines d'argile Leur lois initiatique", *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 30, 2, 1960, pp 205-223

6 A Nettleton, "The Figurative Woodcarving of the Shona and Venda" PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1985

7 Clay initiation equipment is destroyed after the concluding rituals

personal recollections. Essay 9 presents a brief report on the conservation status of the artefacts by a Smithsonian Institute technician.

A second look at *Archaeological Figurines from Zimbabwe*

Matenga's literature review, I must say, is short, detailed and sharp. The classification of the figurines comprises the core of the study. It is based on a comparative, systematic and detailed analysis of the formal characteristics of the figurines. His taxonomy, inspired by the Life Sciences, includes the use of categories, classes and sub-classes, arranged in a tree-like constellation. The author cautiously separates interpretation from description. Armed with an "objective and empirical" methodology, he confronts the "impressionistic" attempts of his predecessors. Any archaeological classification of this kind remains, of course, arbitrary. It reflects the view from without (or the researcher's perspective), rather than the mindset of the people who created and used these artefacts. Matenga is well-aware of this shortcoming and has added a second, alternative classification to the discussion, based on criteria which are more likely to be emic. In addition, the author avails to the reader detailed tables, describing distribution by site, locality (region) and cultural association (tradition) of all figurine types. This allows any researcher to revisit the material and construct an own typology.

In Chapter 4, "Site Profiles", the Wazi Hill site depicts what Matenga believes to be a common archaeological context for the figurines, namely: an occupation deposit suggesting a village, with figurines being mixed up with household refuse, throughout the settlement (p 75). Matenga reiterates this finding in Chapter 5. Clay figurines, we are told, were collected (though rarely excavated) as "randomly deposited artefacts" from household refuse at residential sites. Ambiguous female torso's, domestic animals and conical human figurines are the most commonly found types (p 84). It becomes clear from the analysis of the ceramics associated with the clay sculptures, that the figurine tradition peaked between 900 and 1500 AD (p 89). Soon after the demise of the Zimbabwe polity, they seem to have lost their popularity. The elite sites have produced specimens in ivory and soapstone. Commoner sites continued to fashion clay figurines after 1500 AD, possibly even as recent as the early nineteenth century. Representations of humans make up 52 per cent of the total sample. The so-called ambiguous female torsos (Category 1, subclass 1b) represent no less than 60 per cent of the human figurines.⁸ This particular type has a wide temporal distribution in the South Central and South Western regions, where it is most commonly found. Cattle figurines (and to a lesser degree goats and sheep) occur in a "cattle belt" stretching from Bulawayo to Great Zimbabwe. This "belt" roughly coincides with the same South Central and South Western regions. In fact, Category 1, subclass 1b types and cattle figurines are often found together. Conical type human figurines (Class 3) are also said to be widely represented spatially and temporally. In my opinion, however, Class 3 is poorly defined and includes too many subtypes to be of much diagnostic value. Some types occur only at a single site and others have a very limited spatial distribution. Matenga also seems to ignore the fact that evidence for the oldest sites (which belong to the Gokomere and Ziwa archaeological "cultures") is very limited and sporadic. Not much, in other words, can be said for certain about the origins of the tradition.

8 Thus if most of the broken pieces are identified as Category 1, subclass 1b, as is suggested by the author on p 51

In the final chapter, “The Postulated Meaning”, the author links up artefacts with their underlying ideology, and ancient cultural remains with contemporary ideas and values. He uses the first few pages to try and convince the reader that modern-day Shona cultural identity, and more particularly Shona ideas about fertility, can be traced back to the archaeological remains produced by the Great Zimbabwe polity in the eleventh century, and perhaps even to the earliest Gokomere and Ziwa farming communities. Unfortunately, his efforts are severely crippled by the fact that the figurine tradition came to an end in the early nineteenth century. Also, there is no historical or ethnographic evidence for Shona initiation in the colonial era. Nonetheless, the author diligently dedicates the remaining pages of the chapter to the presentation of a catalogue of religious beliefs and practices relevant to the definition and the illustration of a so-called “Shona fertility folk model”. Matenga defines a folk model as “a community’s idealized image of itself and the world that surrounds it” (p 125). This concept, and most of the subject matter that is used to explore it, is borrowed from the earlier mentioned study by Jacobson-Widding and Van Beek, *The Creative Communion*.

The “folk model” approach, trademark of cognitive anthropologists in the 1980s, essentially revives a much older “world-view” approach to the study of culture. The cultural catalogue presented by Matenga is impressive. It includes amongst others a discussion of the close affinity between human fertility on the one side and ancestor worship, agricultural rituals and political power on the other. Further, because symbols are said to be the building blocks of the folk model (p 125), the author explores extensively, though not systematically, symbolic representations of fertility. Of particular interest is the discussion of totemic laudatory poetry, the structural analysis of the Shona homestead and the symbolic meaning of traditional iron smelting. Occasionally, all this fascinating data is applied directly to the archaeological figurine tradition. We are told that “some of the animal species identified among the figurines are in fact totem animals” (p 133); that the cattle-type figurines might have been made by boys during initiation (p 138); that the stylised female torso figurines (Category 1, subclass 1b) could be idealised portrayals of femininity (p 144); that some of the Class 3 conical figurines “may in fact be stylized human males and phallus” (p 146); and that the discovery of figurines at elite sites may reflect how “Shona kings, and chiefs patronized the fertility ideology” for national purposes (p 147). Apart from these cursory references, it is largely left to the reader to decide how the fertility folk model could be applied to the figurine tradition. The book ends somewhat unceremoniously with short notes on “contemporary” initiation. Whatever is being suggested in terms of a meaningful understanding of the figurine tradition, the reader is told, remains speculative. Any form of conclusion is said to be open-ended (p 7).

A second reading of *Sculptured in Clay*

Huffman’s essay initiates the reader into the wider historical context of Schroda, and by the same token into the methodology of the “Science of the Artefact”. Archaeologists have been concerned since the early days of Culture History with the origins, diffusion and evolution of cultural (arte)facts and their creators, through the identification of spatial-temporal units. Particular groupings of artefacts (usually stone tools or pottery) have been used by pre-historians worldwide to identify such units, create temporal sequences and trace their geographical distribution.

Professor Tom Huffman has applied this methodology to his search for a general outline of the pre-colonial history of Iron Age farmers in Southern Africa. The process is fairly simple. Firstly: identify particular ceramic units – known as facies – by means of the tedious comparison of features such as vessel shape and decoration. Next, arrange these facies into time segments (phases) and bigger units (sub-branches, branches, traditions and complexes).⁹ But what exactly are these facies or units? Are they expressive of cultural identity? Huffman believes they are. In the case of Schroda, he identifies the remains of recurved jars with bands of oblique incision and comb stamping on the lower rim, and stamped triangles on the upper shoulder, as characteristic for the Zhizo facies. This particular facies, he explains to the reader, can be grouped with other similar facies (Ziwa, Gokomere and Toutswe) into a wider cultural entity (a branch) known as Nkope. Nkope and related branches make up the Urewe tradition. Urewe, in turn, is one of several traditions within the Chifumbaze complex. This is where, for many archaeologists, the diachronic archaeological narrative ends. In fact, some are even sceptical about the association between ceramic units and cultural identity. In Huffman’s understanding, however, particular pottery traditions or cultures can also be linked to specific languages. Better still, the analysis of pottery can be used to reconstruct the movements or migrations of prehistoric nations and cultures. Language, we are told, is the principle vehicle for thinking about the world and for communicating those thoughts to others. Phrased differently, language defines and delineates culture. Moreover, the transmission of style depends on patterned, learned behaviour (or culture). Consequently, style can be said to represent group identity (p 10).

The notion that particular cultural identities and their “world-views” can be traced through the formal analysis of items of material culture, is certainly not new. It is also not straightforward, or a simple “matter of convention”, as Huffman wants us to believe. In fact, it has been and it continues to be the subject of a never-ending debate amongst art historians, anthropologists and archaeologists. Personally, I have never had much interest in the (re)construction of cultural catalogues or the diffusion of artefacts. For the purpose of a meaningful analysis of the figurine tradition, I would like to state, the search for particular cultural identities seems somewhat of a trivial pursuit. The realm of ritual pedagogy is essentially *transcultural*. Its didactic processes and practices involve healers and ritual specialists, whose trade and esoteric knowledge cut across ethnic boundaries.

If the figurines were used in a social context of initiation, as Huffman himself suggests, their ethnic origins would simply be too complex to be traced back archaeologically.

Equally counter-productive, in my opinion, is the way in which the author defines settlement organisation and the nature of political authority on Zhizho sites, including Schroda. The relevant pattern or model, we are told, is known as C.C.P., the Central Cattle Pattern. It is derived from the ethnographic present, with the help of Adam Kuper’s structuralist classic, *Wives for Cattle*.¹⁰ Huffman believes that specific world-views always generate particular forms of settlement organisation. In fact, world-view, social and settlement organisation are, in his understanding, more or

9 Huffman, *Handbook to the Iron Age*, p 117

10 A Kuper, *Wives for Cattle, Bridewealth and Marriage in Southern Africa* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982)

less interchangeable concepts (p 14). The C.C.P., it is said, features a central, male domain: the cattle enclosure(s) where men resolve disputes and make political decisions, dignitaries are buried and food is stored. It is surrounded by a female zone, the residential area comprising kitchens, sleeping houses, grain bins and graves. In the orientation of the different components of the settlement (front, back, centre, left, right) are inscribed symbolical references to life forces, status and security. This particular pattern, we learn, is restricted to Eastern Bantu-speaking peoples. This “Eastern Bantu culture” features (i) a patrilineal ideology about procreation; (ii) a preference for cattle as bridewealth; (iii) male hereditary leadership; and (iv) beliefs about the role of the ancestors in daily life. Schroda displays a C.C.P. pattern. Therefore, its early farming community must have been dominated by male hereditary leadership and its caches of figurines – which were found near a symbolically masculine cattle enclosure – are further evidence of the existence of male control in a patrilineally oriented society (p 15). The basis for authority in Schroda society, Huffman sums up, was located in this central male domain, where the senior male ruled over the court. Based on its size, the settlement was probably a level three capital (in a five-tier model). Schroda’s “chief” controlled access to the resources of the “chiefdom”, including ivory and other trade commodities. His capital was the focus of agricultural rituals, such as the first fruit (or harvest) festival, and, more importantly, of puberty initiations in which clay images were used (pp 15-18).

Kuper’s original version of the social significance and structural features of the C.C.P. (or rather of the Cattle Cult, of which the settlement pattern is only one expression), was an admirable and exciting proposition ... three decades ago. There is no need, here, to explore its conceptual limitations. These have been highlighted by the post-modernist critique of structuralist anthropology. My major problem with the C.C.P. concept, as outlined by Huffman, relates to its association with “the patrilineal society”. Purely unilateral (patrilineal or matrilineal) societies are essentially stereotypical textbook fantasies. In the real world, there is always a mix, or at best a predominant emphasis on one of the two kinship paradigms. As a matter of fact, Sotho, Venda and Tsonga societies, in varying degrees of complexity, exhibit *bilateral* kinship features, in other words, they combine both descent systems! Regrettably, no intellectual space will become available for a gender-balanced understanding of the figurine tradition, as long as its research remains dominated by a patrilineal bias.

Huffman’s discussion of the wider cultural context of Schroda, is followed by a meticulous description and classification of its archaeological data (Essays 2 and 4). The bulk of the figurines were procured from excavation area 6, situated nearby a cattle dung deposit. Across this area, Hanisch discovered a dividing line of charred posts. A gap in the middle displayed a red gravel floor. The excavator interprets this feature as a fence with a doorway. The spatial division, he suggests, seems to be articulated by the features of the figurines that were found on either side of the fence. On the eastern side emerged large clay images made of coarse, gritty clay, representing wild animals, cattle and sheep, birds, humans (often depicted with genitals), phallic objects and some pieces of tuyere pipes used for iron smelting. On the western side of the fence, in contrast, he excavated much smaller objects, made in fine clay and representing domesticates (cattle, sheep, goats and dogs) and a few other unusual shaped figurines, resembling miniature phalli. Hanisch proposes that the physical division of the objects in area six could represent a conceptual division

(“natural/cultural” versus “domesticated”) in the minds of the users of the objects. This is simply mentioned, but not explored further (p 29)¹¹. Many of the coarse figurines have moulded bases or pedestal-like feet. Some display punctuates on the back or have a pierced thorax or abdomen (the holes run from front to back or side to side – p 35). Hanisch also notes that the larger clay figurines are found in clusters, unlike the small sculptures on the other side of the dividing line, which are scattered over the living floor (p 31). Incidentally, all other areas of the excavation did generate figurines too, mainly of the H3 type: representations of the female body, with pronounced navels, stylised arms and heads and legs ending in a small pedestal base. Their overall shape, we are told, is phallic.

Based on general ethnographic data, Hanisch interprets the coarse figurines as didactic tools from an initiation school. The phallic objects and the human figurines with genitals, are obvious references to the themes of fertility and procreation. The tuyere pipes, the author adds, could have been used to teach the same kind of subject matter. Indeed, the symbolic association between iron smelting and human fertility is well-documented in the ethnographic literature. The larger images were probably used individually or combined on planks, to illustrate a “single explanatory tale”. Some of the figurines could have been hung from sticks or branches, or suspended on sinews. The punctuates on some of their backs may have been used to attach feathers, grass or sticks. And the traces of ochre and other “paints”, applied as lines and dots, can be interpreted as yet another symbolic reference to the fertility theme. All of the above features, the reader is reminded, are characteristic for initiation equipment used in present-day Venda girls’ rites-of-passage (p 35). The meaning of the smaller figurines (domesticates) is said to be less obvious. The images of cattle strongly resemble contemporary clay toys made by herd boys. The same images, on the other hand, could also have functioned to inculcate the great responsibility that is required from those entrusted with looking after the herd (p 35). The material remains of area 6 then, the author concludes, suggest an initiation area for girls and boys, divided by a fence (p 36). In terms of the C.C.P. hypothesis, the Cattle Cult or Cattle Complex paradigm, and the patriarchal beliefs concerning female ritual pollution, it is highly unlikely that girls would be initiated anywhere nearby the cattle enclosure. I will suggest an alternative interpretation shortly.

Hanisch’s classification of the clay images is thorough. Its analysis is disappointing. The typology is very detailed indeed; perhaps, at times, a little too much so. The “bear-like” figurines, really, do not substantially differ from some of the images of humans. The “mythological giraffe” looks like all the other giraffes. And I see no reason for a separate H2a category, which closely resembles H1. More disturbing is the fact that the author has not mentioned the numerical strength of the different types. Also, the photographs do not indicate the types which they represent. Lastly, the division between coarse and fine figurines is not followed up in the discussion of the typology. The description of type H3 is given special attention. Hanisch notes how these stylised female torsos were found throughout the excavation, and suggests that they, therefore, must have been “common household items”. It is proposed that they were probably used as “fertility dolls” to ensure “female fertility in the households to which they belonged” (pp 51-52). For further details on the fertility doll hypothesis, the author refers the reader to the contribution by Marilee Wood.

11 Combining “natural” and “cultural” in one category seems, in any case, somewhat unusual!

So far, the authors of *Sculptured in Clay* seem to support a “snapshot approach” to the meaningful combination of archaeology and anthropology. They match artefacts with ethnographic data; or try and fit archaeological data into anthropological theory (in this case, into the “fertility model”). Artefacts should be treated as an autonomous form of evidence (their objectivity is one of the greatest assets of prehistoric archaeology). Personally, I have never quite grasped why some archaeologists, in the face of Anthropology, give up what they do best, namely: interrogate the formal features and the context of the objects or monuments which they have excavated on the site. The formulation of artefact-based questions, in combination with the analysis of factual evidence on the site, are the safest ways to construct an interpretive scenario (or scenarios). When ethnographic analogy is called in, *after* logical analysis, it ceases to be a simple means of confirmation, and the artefacts are no longer mere illustrations of anthropological wisdom. I would like to illustrate this approach and by, the same token, propose an alternative understanding of area six.

We know that there are large, coarse images on one side of the fence and smaller, fine clay figurines on the other. The former have been disposed of in caches; the latter are randomly scattered over the floor. Phrased differently, area 6 exemplifies two modes of disposal; two main types of clay sculptures and two different zones of disposal. The caches of larger figurines were found in neatly lined pits. Clearly, more effort and thought was spent to dispose of the larger figurines. The same artefacts are also more detailed in nature (piercing, punctuates), and treated with ochre. The smaller images of domesticates are not given this attention. The two types of figurines were not buried together, logically, because they were valued differently. On the other hand, initiation involves teachers and students, masters and novices. Is it not possible that the two categories of sculpture also represent two types of users? We could even go further and propose that the two zones in which they were found, similarly, indicate differences in ritual importance. The more sacred artefacts (used by the masters) were buried in the area where they were manipulated as didactic means; in other words where the novices were called for instruction. The domesticates and other smaller figurines were discarded in the area where the novices produced and/or handled their artefacts. The fence marks the separation and the ochred gateway the transition between the two divisions of area 6. The ethnography of initiation, seems to support these suggestions, and makes them more probable. Novices have been reported to make their own figurines. Ochre marks ritually important objects, areas (and people). Didactic equipment is often “burnt” or destroyed with the school. Some of the ritual objects of the initiation school are invested with supernatural powers or thought of as “too hot to handle” by unqualified users. Initiation areas are hierarchically or ritually divided in less and more important subsections. Lastly, novices are called or taken to a subdivision of the initiation in order to be shown the “mysteries” of the school.

The essays by Van Schalkwyk, Wood and Nettleton continue Hanisch’s and Huffman’s initial efforts to explore the social meanings of the figurines through ethnographic analogy. The first author opens the discussion with a rather general attempt at defining ritual and rites-of-passage. The remainder of the essay is dedicated to some interesting ethnographic data on animal and colour symbolism. Seemingly, it is largely left to the reader to guess how this data is relevant to the analysis of the archaeological remains at Schroda. The classification of the Schroda

figurines presented here (p 71), does not relate to Hanisch's typology, although the author maintains it does. Worse still, it is contradicted by a second typology, further on in the text.

Marilee Wood's contribution to *Sculptured in Clay*, I mentioned earlier, re-examines the Roumequere hypothesis. It is suggested, both by Roumequere and Wood, that the function and meaning of some of the archaeological figurines¹² can be explained with the help of fertility dolls in the Venda-speaking region in the 1950s. It is my contention that the Roumequere hypothesis is very poorly substantiated. The narrative of the so-called Venda fertility doll or "clay child", on closer scrutiny, proves to be a mixture of fact and fiction.¹³ Surely, clay figurines did feature (and continue to be used) in Venda girls' initiation. They are discussed in detail by Nettleton in the next essay. However, Venda initiation statuary does not include the particular archaeological shape observed by Roumequere in the Bulawayo Museum. The fact that Roumequere has failed to produce images of this object, seems to have gone unnoticed by Wood. Roumequere did provide photographs of clay figurines and beaded dolls from a variety of other cultural groups. It seems strange, to say the least, that no reason is provided for the omission of the Venda fertility doll from the illustrations (more so when it is the actual focus of her discussion!). Also, it is highly unlikely that distinguished authors such as Blacking and Van Warmelo, who have produced extensive and intimate studies on the subjects of Venda initiation and marriage, would have overlooked them. More intriguing still: how did the existence of this fertility doll escape the author, a graduate of the Venda *domba* initiation school, who was ritually prepared for marriage? These dolls could not have been rare, since we are told that they were made by Venda mothers for their daughters. At the time of Roumequere's research, their sacred meaning should have been privy to many "traditionally wed" wives and husbands. Their secret "laws" or *milayo* were allegedly taught during some form of puberty ritual. The only relevant Venda female puberty rites recorded in the literature, are those of the *vhusha* initiation. They have been described, most extensively, by a number of anthropologists, all of whom, once more, are silent on the existence of the doll. Lastly, some of the "laws" of the doll, as cited by Roumequere, certainly do not resemble the standard format of *milayo* (question-and-answer). The first "law" listed in the narrative of Roumequere (on which most of the interpretive efforts of Wood are based), does not fit the context of ritual pedagogy at all. It is a principle of indigenous law, commonly heard in the practice of traditional courts. On a final note: most of the data provided by Roumequere, closely resembles what I was told during my own research on the Tsonga/Changana beaded marriage/fertility doll!¹⁴

"Venda initiation", of course, is a misnomer. There are several initiations, Nettleton reminds the reader, both for male and female youths. Primary rites-of-passage coincide with the physical signs of puberty. Subsequent ceremonies prepare the youths for marriage. More significantly, some of the initiations seem to have originated within "indigenous" clans and chiefdoms; others can be associated with the more "recent" Singo immigrants, the ancestors of the present day rulers. The Singo are believed to have moved into the Venda region in the early eighteenth century and

12 The stylised female torso: Category H3 in Hanisch and Matenga's Category 1, subclass 1b

13 Fiction is a standard feature in her controversial publications on Venda cosmology

14 The fact that Roumequere compiled her research on "Venda cosmology" in a mixed Venda-Tsonga/Changana area, may explain some of the ambiguous nature of her narrative

they have subjugated the earlier groups.¹⁵ As such, the realm of initiation should be understood as a political battlefield between rulers and ruled. In the not so distant past, Nettleton discovered, the ruling clans monopolised the use of wooden initiatory statuary. In doing so, the initiation sculptures became a political means of control over the conquered chiefdoms (pp 95-97). Nettleton continues to emphasise the complex and dynamic nature of the realm of initiation, when she draws attention to a second kind of power relations, of which the division between wooden and clay figurines seems to be expressive. She suggests that the wooden images, because they are more permanent in nature and exclusively produced by men, allow male initiators to control the realm of female initiation (p 98). Clay initiation sculpture, on the other hand, on account of its fragile and impermanent nature (it is destroyed after use), never receives the kind of aesthetic attention which is invested in the wooden counterparts. For the same reasons, it is said, clay figurines also tend to be less naturalistic. However, during instruction, both kinds of images serve the same purpose, feature in the same manner, and basically tell the same story. A figurine is manipulated by an instructor, on its own or juxtaposed to others, in order to instruct the initiates on the subjects of “Venda mores and political and social power relations” (p 101). The verbal accompaniments consist mainly of riddle-like aphorisms, presented in question and answer form (the *milayo*), and general narratives, describing the characters and their actions. The ritual context in which they are displayed to the initiates is referred to as *matano* (literally exhibits or shows). Some *matano*, the author suggests, seem to have a long and general history, others appear to be “composed as responses to particular social circumstances at particular times”. Similarly, some images are concerned with historical and mythological constructs, and others with contemporary and political issues. Some themes are common to all figurines (pp 101, 107, 108). The *domba* lessons which Nettleton observed during her research, centred on the themes of seduction, adultery and good wifely behaviour. They appeared mundane on the surface, but a closer look at verbal, colour and formal symbolism, revealed their complex ontological grounding. Red, white and black are used in the *domba* as references to three major modes of ritual being: “hot”, “cold” and “neutral”; as well as to the social categories “female” and “male”. The social context of the manipulation of animal figurines was found not to differ radically from that of the human representations. The Schroda clay images, it is concluded, should be interpreted in terms of these ethnographic facts.

All authors are in agreement about the general meaning of the figurine tradition. The clay artefacts, it has been stated time and again, are expressive of fertility, and most probably functioned as symbolic means during the initiation lessons that prepared youths for marriage. One particular figurine type (the ambiguous female torso) might have been used to induct young women into their roles as wives and mothers. Huffman explained fertility in terms of the pastoral economy of the Zhizo people. Matenga explored the importance and the different shades of meaning of “fertility” in Shona culture further. Van Schalkwyk offered some general notes on rites of passage amongst Northern Sotho speakers. Nettleton demonstrated how clay images are still being used in Venda-speaking communities. Wood revives a fifty-year-old hypothesis about the continuity of thought between archaeological artefacts on the one side and “modern” marriage and fertility dolls on the other. In the final

15 The coexistence of circumcision-based and non-circumcision-based initiation schools in the Venda-speaking region and elsewhere, increases the complexity and, in addition, illustrates the interethnic or transcultural nature of the phenomenon of rites-of-passage

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analysis, little novel was added to the basic ideas put forward by Brian Fagan, half a century ago.¹⁶ Incidentally, the credit for the fertility/initiation hypothesis goes to Summers,¹⁷ or better still, to the anthropologist Audrey Richards, whose study of Bemba girls' initiation seemed to have inspired everybody else, directly or indirectly.¹⁸ Nettleton is, in my opinion, the most substantial and authentic of all contributors. Her account of the use and meaning of Venda initiation statuary highlights three essential, analytical beacons, namely: variation, dynamic change and human conflict. Without these, any effort at making sense out of the figurine tradition, or any other historical phenomenon for that matter, is doomed to produce stereotypical results.

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