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The East African Neolithic: An Alternative View

Karega-Munene¹

The East African Neolithic has been attributed to the migration of food-producing populations from the Sudan and Ethiopia. The migrants are thought to have entered the region via northern Kenya. Attempts have been made not only to reconstruct the routes taken by those migrants, but also to establish their linguistic and/or ethnic identity. These attempts have treated Neolithic pottery "wares" as discrete cultural entities and correlated them with specific linguistic and/or ethnic groups. The main problem with this approach is that it minimizes the contribution that contact and exchange or trade may have made to culture change. It also denies the groups concerned the dynamism that appears to have characterized their relationships with each other and with their environment. The present paper offers an alternative interpretation of the Neolithic phenomenon. The similarities and differences in material culture, like the ones that have been used to define the pottery "wares" in question, are reflections of the dynamic relationships that existed between the people responsible for its production and consumption. Production and consumption of the "wares" could have taken place among individuals living in a given area or among different villages or communities living as far apart as the Central Rift and the Lake Victoria basin.

Le néolithique de l'Est de l'Afrique a été attribué à des migrations de populations productrices de nourriture en provenance du Soudan et d'Éthiopie. On pense que ces migrations ont pénétré dans la région via le Nord du Kenya. Des tentatives ont été faites, non seulement pour reconstruire les routes empruntées par ces migrants, mais aussi pour établir leur identité linguistique et/ou ethnique. Ces tentatives ont utilisé les différents groupes de poterie néolithiques comme autant d'entités culturelles discrètes et les ont mises en relation avec des groupes linguistiques ou ethniques spécifiques. Le problème principal avec cette approche est qu'elle minimise la contribution que les contacts, les échanges ou le commerce ont pu avoir sur le changement culturel. Elle ne prend pas non plus en compte le dynamisme qui semble avoir carac-

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térisé leurs relations entre elles et avec leur environnement. Le présent article tente d'offrir une interprétation alternative au phénomène néolithique. Ceci est réalisé en utilisant un modèle interprétatif que reconnaît que les humains ont des capacités intellectuelles et technologiques multiples et que les décisions et actions individuelles sont reflétées par les restes matériels des sociétés auxquels appartiennent les individus. Par conséquent, les similarités et les différences dans la culture matérielle comme celles qui ont été utilisées pour définir les groupes de poterie dont il est question sont le reflet de relations dynamiques qui existaient entre les peuples responsables de sa production et de sa consommation. La production et la consommation de ces groupes peuvent s'être produites parmi des individus vivant dans une région donnée ou parmi différents villages ou communautés vivant aussi éloignées l'une de l'autre que le Rift Central et le bassin du Lac Victoria.

KEY WORDS: Neolithic; pottery; food-producing populations; East Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge about the East African Neolithic dates back to the late 1920s, when the first systematic field research in the region was conducted in the Lakes Nakuru–Naivasha Basin. The principal aim of that research, however, was not to study the Neolithic *per se*, but to reconstruct the region's cultural sequence. In the course of that research, some of the sites that were investigated yielded polished stone artifacts, stone bowls, human burials, and pottery. These finds were taken to signify the existence of the Neolithic in the European sense. It was thought that the pottery, stone bowls, and polished artifacts were used for the preparation of domesticated cereals (Leakey, 1931, p. 1).

Mary Leakey (1943), however, suggested that direct evidence of food production was not an appropriate criterion for identification of Neolithic cultures in the region, especially because knowledge of the Neolithic here was extremely scanty at the time. Subsequently, however, stone bowls became the hallmarks of the Neolithic, hence the use of "Stone Bowl Cultures" for the cultures concerned (Bower, 1991). In the mid 1970s, the Stone Bowl Cultures were renamed the "Pastoral Neolithic" because of the apparent preponderance of domestic cattle and sheep/goat in faunal samples from the sites concerned (Bower *et al.*, 1977).

POTTERY

In an attempt to avoid throwing away the baby with the bath water, archaeologists seem to have replaced one *fossile directeur*, namely, stone

bowls, with another, pottery. The pottery itself has been classified into five “wares”—Remnant (Elmenteitan), Nderit, Narosura, Maringishu, and Akira (Wandibba, 1977, 1980). This has been done using attributes such as firing, decorative techniques and motifs, vessel shapes, and features such as lugs, handles, spouts, and knobs. Additionally, two chronological sequences have been devised for the wares. The first of these considers Nderit to be the oldest, followed by Narosura and Maringishu (both of which are considered to be contemporaneous), Remnant (Elmenteitan), and Akira, in that order (Wandibba, 1977, 1980). The second scheme also regards Nderit to be the oldest ware, followed by Kanyore and the other wares in the order cited above (Bower *et al.*, 1977).

The role played by the wares and the chronological schemes into which they have been ordered in the interpretation of the Neolithic can hardly be overemphasized. For example, Maringishu, Remnant (Elmenteitan), Akira, and Narosura have been associated with food production, while Kanyore is associated with a hunting and fishing economy (Bower *et al.*, 1977). Attempts have also been made to associate the wares with specific linguistic or ethnic groups. Kanyore has been linked with ancestors of the Khoisan hunter-gatherers of southern Africa: Elmenteitan with Southern Nilotes (i.e., ancestors of modern Dadog and Kalenjin), and Akira, Narosura, Nderit, and Maringishu with Southern Cushites (i.e., ancestors of the Alagwa, Aramanik, Asa, Burungi, Dahalo, and Iraqw). Thus, the creators of Kanyore ware are thought to have been hunter-gatherers, whereas the makers of the other wares—Elmenteitan, Akira, Narosura, Nderit, and Maringishu—are regarded as the earliest food producers in the region (Ambrose, 1982, 1984).

These associations have, in turn, been used to reconstruct the physical movement of the populations in question, the occupation of a given site by any of these groups being inferred from the presence of the ware with which they have been associated (e.g., Ambrose, 1982, 1984; Robertshaw, 1991). As a result, we know very little about the interactions between the groups that occupied Neolithic East Africa. In contrast East African historians (e.g., Muriuki, 1974; Ogot, 1967; Were, 1967) have, to use Lonsdale's (1992, p. 266) words, “shown. . .that. . .[the region's] present-day cultural communities have been continually created by partial permutations from a common fund of diverse ethnic [and linguistic] strands, both before the British conquest and since.”

Close examination of the concerned archaeological literature strongly indicates that interpretation of the region's Neolithic was constructed in terms of precolonial ethnic histories that were reconstructed in the 1960s (e.g., Muriuki, 1974; Ogot, 1967; Were, 1967), when such undertakings were in vogue. These histories were built largely on oral traditions, although oc-

casional references were made to archaeological and/or linguistic "evidence" where this was available.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that neither the definitions nor the chronological schemes into which the wares have been ordered can be used to clarify the problem of chronology and spatial variation in Neolithic pottery. Two or more wares—besides the coeval Narosura and Maringishu wares (Wandibba, 1977, 1980)—are often found together in the same deposits. At Seronera in Tanzania, for example, Kansyore pottery was associated with Nderit ware (Bower, 1973), and at Gogo Falls in western Kenya, Kansyore pottery was found in the same deposits with Elmenteitan, Akira, and Iron Age Urewe wares (Karega-Munene, 1993; Robertshaw, 1991). In addition, there is considerable overlap in the chronometric dates that are currently available for the wares. Together these conditions could be indicative of one of three things: (1) contemporaneity between the wares concerned, (2) poor definition of the wares, or (3) stratigraphic mixing.

While investigation of these issues is encouraged, attempts should also be made to offer other possible interpretations of the Neolithic. This is especially important because present evidence suggests that the correlations that have been made between the wares and specific subsistence activities and linguistic/ethnic groups are inadequate. For example, they fail to recognize that the stylistic differences that have been used in defining the wares could be due to the function(s) of the vessels concerned or that they could have been caused by internal cultural diversity and/or exchange patterns between neighboring groups belonging to the same linguistic or ethnic group.

INTERPRETATION

The problem with the East African Neolithic lies in the manner in which the "wares" have been defined and the significance that some of us continue to attach to those definitions. As noted above, the wares have been defined by gross similarities in decorative style and form. The significance of these characteristics to the individuals who made and/or used the pottery that has been classified into the wares may have been radically different from what we read in them today. Thus, it is imperative that we distinguish between categorizations that are made to facilitate archaeological investigations from those that may have prevailed in the past. Equally important is the fact that the definitions and chronological schemes may not apply outside the southern part of the Kenya Rift, whence the samples that were employed in devising them were drawn.

We may thus make attempts to answer the following question: Are the wares merely tools of analysis for the archaeologist or are they an expression of some form of identity? If the former is the case, then it may be misleading to associate the wares with specific linguistic or ethnic groups, to use them as chronological markers, or to make inferences about past subsistence strategies from them.

If the wares were vehicles for expressing identity, whose identity did they express? Was it that of the individual potters, their families, clan, or ethnic and/or linguistic group? Or was it the identity of the intended consumers? Did all the human groups who occupied Neolithic East Africa make pots? If some of them did not, how could they have expressed their identity through pottery? If the pottery they used was specifically made for them by individuals from other groups, whose identity was expressed in it? Were the groups who made pottery self-sufficient in the production of that commodity or did they acquire some of their vessels from other potters through trade or exchange?

In addition to these questions, the roles played by the *individual* and the *community* or the corporate society must be accorded the emphasis they deserve. The individual potter, for instance, may have decided what decorative style or form a given pot should take. But the "norms" established by the community in which the potter operated must have determined whether the pot was acceptable to the intended consumers or not. This would, in turn, have determined whether or not more pots with the same style and form were made and for how long.

I illustrate this argument by reading my prehistory backward. That is because, unlike that of historians, who normally read their history from past to present (Lonsdale, 1992, p. 29), the "text" I am dealing with can only be read backward, that is, from the present to the past. The example I employ here is of an ethnoarchaeological study of Luo potters in western Kenya (Herbich, 1987). The study indicates that potters—all of whom are women—form a very small proportion (about 1%) of the population in that community and that they tend to live close to sources of clay. While some of them learn the craft before marriage, the majority come from families without a potting background.

Largely, however, *a priori* knowledge about the craft is irrelevant since the potters have to conform to the taste of the communities into which they marry. This means that women who originally came from different parts of Luoland may end up perpetuating a ceramic "tradition" that was, until their marriage, alien. The tradition itself bears the "imprint" of the community concerned—where the community is the village or a group of households, and not the entire Luo ethnic group—as well as that of the individual potters. It may also bear a "foreign" imprint, resulting from in-

teraction with other Luo potters and/or non-Luo potters. Although such influence “always occur[s] within the context of the tradition into which the potter has been indoctrinated” (Herbich, 1987, p. 201), when combined with individual creativity, it often leads to the adaptation of new vessel forms and decoration.

Some potters are, however, able to express their individual identity more strongly than others because of their character. This may, in turn, influence the styles adopted by other potters and/or the tastes of their community. Thus, the fact that the Luo are a single ethnic group seems to be largely inconsequential to the potters (Herbich, 1987).

The pottery made by a given group of Luo potters is consumed not only by their immediate community, but also by other Luo and by various other ethnic groups. In a few instances, however, some potters might make distinct pottery for trade with a specific ethnic group such as the Gusii of western Kenya (Herbich, 1987). Thus, while the latter type of pottery may not be found in Luoland, pottery that belongs to various Luo traditions occurs both in Luoland and in other parts of Kenya settled by different ethnic and linguistic groups.

These observations raise several questions that are central to the interpretation of ceramic patterning. For instance, do we assign the pottery made by Luo potters specifically for trade with a given ethnic group to the Luo or to the “foreign” consumers? How do we explain the presence of a ceramic tradition that is created by a given Luo community in most of Luoland and even beyond—through the migration of the potting community or through trade? Can we really draw ethnic or linguistic boundaries with regard to the spatial distribution of the pottery, let alone its presence, say, in central Kenya to Luo migrants?

In short, diversity may have been the norm rather than the exception in past societies, as Herbich’s (1987) work suggests. It is not inconceivable that one or more of the wares represented at Neolithic sites could have been produced by individuals who lived there, while others could have been obtained from elsewhere through trade or exchange. In fact, the occupants of a site such as Gogo Falls may not have manufactured any of the wares represented there. Rather, they could have obtained all the pottery from elsewhere, say, the Central Rift, through exchange. As a matter of fact, such cases are not unfamiliar in East Africa today. The Tugen of Baringo District in Kenya, for example, have not made pots in living memory; but they used and still use pots. In the past they obtained their pottery from the Keiyo and Marakwet through exchange, and at present they obtain it from the Keiyo and Ilchamus who are their neighbors and from the Luo and Abaluhya who live in western Kenya. The Pokot also never made pots; rather, they bought them from the Marakwet (Hivernel, 1978). Similarly,

the Maasai have rarely produced their own pots in historic times, but acquire them from the Pokot and Okeik [A. H. Jacobs, personal communication to Gramly (1975, p. 175)].

East African communities such as the Ilchamus, Luhya, Luo, and Gikuyu make pots for their own use and also for the market. They also buy pots from other communities. The Ilchamus, for instance, make their own pottery and sell some of it to the Tugen (Hivernel, 1978). The Luo also make their own pottery and sell large quantities of it to communities such as the Tugen, Gusii, and Gikuyu who live in different parts of Kenya (Wandibba, 1990; personal observation). If such communities existed in Neolithic East Africa, and there is hardly any reason to assume otherwise, then it is arguable that some of the wares in the region could have been accumulated by people who made pots but who also exchanged some of their vessels with pottery made by other individuals, households, villages, clans, or communities. Such transactions could have taken place within short and/or long distances from the occupied sites.

In sum, the presence of certain pottery wares at a given site may not necessarily indicate that the site was occupied by the peoples who created them. Similarly, the occurrence of such wares at sites located far apart does not necessarily mean that the sites were occupied by the same linguistic or ethnic group or that the people who made them migrated from one site to the other. This suggestion is supported by the fact that obsidian found on Neolithic sites in southwestern and western Kenya, for example, has been sourced to the Lakes Nakuru–Naivasha Basin in the Central Rift, a distance of about 100 km and over 150 km, respectively (Merrick and Brown, 1984; Merrick *et al.*, 1990).

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