

INTRA-SETTLEMENT COMMUNITY  
ORGANIZATION AT NDONDONDWANE:  
AN EARLY IRON AGE SETTLEMENT IN  
THE THUKELA VALLEY, SOUTH AFRICA

By

MATTHEW SINGER

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Anthropology  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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**MASTER OF ARTS**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will explore the question of how to determine whether sites represent homesteads or villages. It will examine the archaeological data from an EIA settlement Ndondondwane, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in light of the ethnographic literature on household structure, organization, and growth and decay cycles. The data from the site will be used to test various organizational models. Ndondondwane was chosen because it is the only archaeological site in southern Africa that has a sufficient quantity and diversity of spatial information available. Ndondondwane provides a unique opportunity to explore the development of the nature of the settlement, from its colonization to abandonment.

## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

### **I. Introduction to the problem**

What is the nature and number of domestic units in Early Iron Age (EIA) archaeological sites in southern Africa? Are sites inhabited by a single household (in which case it is a homestead) or by several households (in which case it is a village)? Does a household correspond to a house or is it a more complex affair? These are questions that have been a subject for investigation for at least the past twenty years. However, archaeological investigations that seek to identify the actual relations between domestic units at a site are extremely limited.

Most attempts at understanding the relationship between architectural units and their distribution at EIA sites have been based upon the Central Cattle Pattern (CCP) model (Huffman 1993; Lane 1998; Whitelaw 1994). These studies simply accept the physical distribution of features as a reflection of behavior – that where the archaeologist finds material is where it was made, used, and discarded. The researchers relied upon a presumed relationship between the spatial distribution of behavior observed in the ethnography of the region and intra-site spatial distribution of artifacts and features in sites (e.g. Huffman 1993; Lane 1998; 198-199; Whitelaw 1994; van Schalkwyk et al. 1997). Such a conclusion relies upon the assumption of cultural continuity between the present and past cultures. This assumption creates problems in the analysis of archaeological sites because it presumes relationships that can lead to misguided interpretations. But, it is also a flawed assumption since it ignores site formation processes (taphonomy). Only Greenfield and his team (Fowler et al. 2004; Greenfield and van Schalkwyk 2003) attempted to take into account the intimate relationship between



artifact and feature distribution, and the taphonomy of the site, as potential variables for reconstructing the spatial organization and structure of behavior.

The goal of this thesis is to determine the nature of domestic unit organization at Ndondondwane, an EIA site located in southern Africa. Most archaeological studies of EIA sites in the region either ignore the issue or assume that the settlement represents a village because it is relatively large (e.g. Huffman 1993, 2000: 17;Whitelaw1994). They do not distinguish between the concepts of household, compound, homestead and village. They simply assume that most EIA archaeological sites are villages.

This thesis will explore the question of how to determine whether sites represent homesteads or villages. It will examine the archaeological data from an EIA settlement Ndondondwane, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in light of the ethnographic literature on household structure, organization, and growth and decay cycles. The data from the site will be used to test various organizational models. Ndondondwane was chosen because it is the only archaeological site in southern Africa that has a sufficient quantity and diversity of spatial information available. Ndondondwane provides a unique opportunity to explore the development of the nature of the settlement, from its colonization to abandonment.

## **II. Nature of domestic units in southern Africa – ethnographic considerations**

The domestic unit is a complex social and economic affair, especially in terms of the general ethnographic domestic patterns in eastern and southern Africa (Oboler 1994: 342). Domestic units exist and operate on a number of levels.

Ethnographically, a homestead is organized around a single extended family within a single patrilocal compound (see Ruel 2000: 64-65). Homesteads have a single,

polygynous homestead head. The husband controls the means of production (e.g. livestock). Women store grain from their fields close to their abodes (in pits), while the settlements headman's grain storage occurs in the center of the compound (Whitelaw 2005: 2). Since modern Nguni cultures of the region are polygynous, a patrilocal unit may have more than one wife. A homestead may at times contain more than one physical house building, depending upon the number of wives and activities within the homestead. Each wife will have her own house and associated household items, which in effect represents a matrifocal unit. As a result, a homestead may have several matrifocal units, each with their own houses (i.e. the wife's huts). These are in effect constituent households of the larger patrilocal homestead. Each of these structures contains the household, its social manifestation of the wife and her offspring. There is a certain degree of economic autonomy within each matrifocal unit. Each matrifocal unit is in charge of agricultural production, crop storage, and daily consumption for its own members and is assigned a portion of the herd for its domestic and social needs. In cases with multiple wives, the wives are ranked in order of seniority. There is also a certain degree of sharing between matrifocal units since they share the same husband, who retains control of certain resources (e.g. livestock). Herds are usually kept within an enclosure surrounded by the houses of the various wives. The homestead head will often have control over a residual herd, which he can allocate for his own marriages and for those of any sons for whom the household allotment may not be sufficient, and sometimes for sisters' sons. In a homestead, there is spatial duplication of female-related activity areas, but not in male-related ones (Oboler 1994: 342-344).

A village occurs when two or more unrelated patrilocal domestic units come

together. These can become very large and organizationally complex, depending upon their size and position within a regional hierarchy. In essence, however, the patrilocal compound as described for the homestead continues to exist within villages. Instead of individual patrilocal homesteads, a village is composed of many such clusters of social units living in close proximity. As a result, there is duplication of both male- and female-related activities in a village (e.g. there may be several livestock enclosures). In a village, some resources are shared (e.g. labour for herding of cattle), but all other resources are separately allocated. There are several husbands with their multiple wives, each husband has his own compound and each wife has her own house. Between them, they control the resources for the extended family unit. (Oboler 1994: 342). In a village, there is more degree of independence, not the same economic integration as a homestead. If there are married sons, each son will gather their wives into their own economic structure (and hence clustering occurs). Most studies that are interested in social aspects of EIA villages have been undertaken on large settlements. The immediate implication is that the researchers are dealing with villages (Huffman 1993; Whitelaw 1994; van Schalkwyk 1994a, 1994b;). However, there is an abundance of smaller settlements. These are largely ignored in the literature, although occasionally excavated (see van Schalkwyk 1991). The implication is that the small sites represent homesteads. This dichotomy also exists in the modern ethnography from the region, where villages are large settlements composed of several unrelated patrilocal polygynous families, while homesteads are small and correspond to a single patrilocal polygynous family (the husband) and one or more matrifocal units (the wife or wives) (Kuper 1982; Oboler 1994).

However, one cannot simply assume that small sites represent homesteads and

large sites represent villages. The best example is Ndongondwane where recent studies have downgraded it from a large to a medium-sized site (from c. 10 ha to c. 4 ha during its largest phase of occupation (see differences in size estimates from Loubser 1993; van Schalkwyk 1995; van Schalkwyk et al. 1997 against Fowler et al. 2005; Greenfield and van Schalkwyk 2003). Is it a homestead or a village? It would appear spatially to be in that grey area.

### **III. Data**

Ndongondwane was the first site to be excavated and investigated spatially (detailed recording of three dimensional provenances) during the fieldwork phase with spatial issues in mind (van Schalkwyk et al. 1997). The social composition of domestic units cannot be easily mapped by a simple comparison of the distribution of physical structures. Identifying the social composition also requires consideration of artifacts and ecofacts. Other frequently cited nearby sites, such as KwaGandaganda and Broederstroom (see appendix) are not as useful for the proceeding investigation because of the lack of detailed provenance of the artifacts.

Ndongondwane is the ceramic type-site for the Ndongondwane sub-phase (700-900 AD, uncalibrated radiocarbon date taken from a sample from Horizon 2) of the Early Iron Age (EIA) sequence of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, located in South Africa (Figure 1). It is the middle and fluorescent phase of the EIA for the region. The site of Ndongondwane is found on the flood plain of the Lower Thukela River valley adjacent to the left bank of the river. This flood plain consists of highly fertile soils, ideal for the cultivation of crops and the feeding of domesticated animals. Both cultivated food-plants and animal remains have been excavated at several EIA archaeological sites.

Several teams of investigators collected data from the site over almost 20 years of research (Maggs 1984b; Loubser 1993, Greenfield and van Schalkwyk 2003; van Schalkwyk et al. 1997). The data are contained in a variety of different formats. Information was recorded in both a paper and digital format (spreadsheets). The digital data include the types and locations of all the artifacts recovered at the site, while the maps indicate the location and extent of features. Some of the maps also indicate the distribution of artifacts, since, in the last season, artifact distributions were plotted. In addition, there are notes, soil types, stratigraphic analysis, and feature information. The artifacts and feature distributions of the above data will be described, and analyzed in a GIS framework to provide an indication of the type and number of domestic units present in an EIA settlement.

#### **IV. Research Hypothesis (model)**

The issue that needs to be investigated is whether Ndongondwane was a homestead or a village. The following hypotheses are set up to organize the investigation of this question. There are large concentrations of remains distributed in an arc around the periphery of the settlement, and are distinguished from the features and artifacts found in the center of the settlement. Two basic hypotheses can be proposed:

1. If the archaeological data shows that there is no repetition of male-related activities and repetition of female-related activities across the site, then this would suggest that the site is integrated into a single domestic unit. Hence, the site is a homestead.
2. If the archaeological data shows that there is repetition of male-related activities and repetition of female-related activities across the site, then this would suggest that there are multiple compounds present. Hence, the site is a village.

The identification of a homestead as proposed in hypothesis 1 is based on the fact that resources of several inhabitants (e.g. related households, that is to say a husband and his wives) are pooled. This results in an uneven distribution of food production, specialty tools and modified material residue (i.e. debitage) viewed in the archaeological record (see Huffman 1993; Whitelaw 1994). If the early farming communities in southern Africa are organized according to the Village model, then there should be repetition of activity areas (see Huffman 1993; Whitelaw 1994). Each hypothesis presented above for EIA social organization will leave different archaeological residues assuming that there has been little spatial movement of remains from their original use context.

## **V. Methodology**

### **A. Method**

The method used in this investigation, to investigate where features and objects are located in the site, is spatial analysis. Spatial analysis is an analytical methodology for studying the spatial distribution of archaeological remains both within and between sites. It is most commonly used on a regional level for estimating and predicting the locations of archaeological sites, and on an intra-site level for interpreting and understanding the location and distribution of archaeological features and materials. The spatial structure of a site may be identified through study of the artifact and feature locations. From this, the social, economic and/or political structure of the society may be inferred (Beals et al. 1977).

### **B. Technique**

A variety of techniques were used in the analysis. These included both qualitative and quantitative spatial techniques.

The first problem was to make the data from a variety of specialist analyses

compatible. Because each excavator collected and recorded their information in a different manner, all the data had to be made comparable. This required combining numerous files and making data entries, similar. These Excel spread sheets contained over thirty thousand lines of data. Each artifact or ecofacts required its own spatial coordinate to allow them to be analysed in terms of spatial context. This is the first step towards incorporating the data into a Geographic Information System (GIS) environment, a necessary precondition for evaluating the depositional context of the data.

The next problem to solve was to create standardized maps of the features found on the site. Various techniques were used to digitize maps from field notes and to plot the spatial distributions of remains. This was essential to identify spatial relationships between artifacts and activity areas.

### **C. Technology**

The artifact data were manipulated in Excel spreadsheets. The maps were created using ArcView 3.2. It is a GIS software technology that is very appropriate for archaeological questions, such as intra-site analysis, because it has the capability to both digitize and analyze the data. ArcView provides all the requirements to accomplish an intra-site spatial analysis of archaeological data.

## **IV. Conclusion**

Was the settlement of Ndongdwane, an EIA farming site, comprised of a single patrilineal polygynous family, and therefore should be termed a homestead, or were they occupied by several patrilineal polygynous families, and hence should be termed a village? This question has yet to be answered for EIA farming communities. Through the analysis of ceramics, settlement patterns, and other archaeological remains, archaeologists have attempted to identify the nature of the relationship between the modern and ancient

inhabitants of the region (Whitelaw 1994/5; Greenfield and van Schalkwyk 2003). Previous research on EIA settlements have not attempted to determine relationship between the inhabitants of the settlement. The present investigation provides archaeological evidence that better identifies if the settlement was a homestead or a village of one EIA farming community in southern Africa.

This investigation performs an intra-site spatial analysis on Ndondondwane an EIA village in South Africa to identify the village's internal structure (i.e. a homestead or a village). Ndondondwane will be used to test if the settlement is a homestead or village by analysis of the site spatial distribution of remains. Each of these forms of social organization has different archaeological implications and will present themselves differently in the archaeological record.



## CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL SYSTEMS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

“(the village) is merely an enlarged family: the headman and the old people who have fallen to his charge, his wives, his younger brothers and their wives, his married sons, his unmarried sons and daughter. All these people form a community whose life it is most interesting to study” (Junod 1962: 310).

### **I. Introduction**

In order to reconstruct social organization from the spatial arrangement of archaeological data (features and artifacts) the difference between social organization, social structures and spatial structures must be understood (Huffman 2000; 15). All of these can be encompassed by the concept of social system. Since archaeological data cannot directly identify these theories, a review of each and its importance to the underlying nature of the thesis (social systems), will be discussed.

Social systems are composed of social organization and structure. The occupants of any community of agro-pastoralists are part of a complex social system. A system maybe defined as, “a complex set of interrelated parts, surrounded by a boundary, and existing in an environment” (Turner 1972: 3). In order to be part of a system, the parts must be interrelated. For example, changes in the status of a male will have repercussions for other members of the family.

Systems may also be bounded. That means they can be isolated from other systems. Yet, these boundaries may be permeable by other people or environments (e.g. Barth 1972). A social system is the continual replacement and maintenance of elements and components of a society (Goody 1969: 1). This process is achieved through the

continual processes of life and death. A person becomes part of the social system through their education of their culture, which in turn is passed on to future generations.

Social systems can be viewed structurally, through relationships or principles within the society, and processually through the actions, which maintain the organization.

Beals et al. (1977: 423) write

“thus a kin group such as a patrilineal clan can be viewed structurally, in terms of the relationships of descent which define each member’s position within the clan, or it can be viewed processually, in terms of the behaviors expected from and/or exhibited by its membership”.

Organization implies action/process, while structure implies form.

Shaw (1974: 85) identifies three types of domestic settlements found among the Bantu-speaking peoples in South Africa. These are the individual homestead, the village, and the town. The individual homestead is defined as at a distance from other homesteads, a village is a group of homesteads, and a town has greater complexity and size than a village. A homestead is a settlement occupied by a single patrilocal polygynous family (O’Leary 1983: 67). Villages are composed of several unrelated patrilocal polygynous families and are larger and more complex than homesteads. In this thesis, given the absence of towns in the EIA (Junod 1962; 126) our purpose is to try to distinguish between homestead and village. Essentially, is Ndongondwane a homestead or a village?

In order to determine if Ndongondwane was composed of one or more households, it would be beneficial to describe the relevant aspects of cultural systems in southern African societies.

## **II. Social organization of households in southern Africa**

### **A. The domestic unit**

The domestic unit is the basic building block of society. In southern African ethnography, the basic domestic unit is the patrilocal polygynous family (See Preston-Whyte 1974; Crandall 1996: 331-332). The patrilocal polygynous family is composed of a man and his wives. The wives and their children represent matrifocal units within the settlement. A domestic unit, in a worldly context, is defined as a unit within which daily activities are jointly (with other members of the community) carried out (Goody 1973: 251). The basic composition of this unit is a man and his wife (or wives) and their children. The patrilocal polygynous family is responsible for social reproduction. Because the patrilocal polygynous family goes through many temporal phases, it has been traditionally useful to describe it at various points in time. This provides a snapshot of the settlement's composition which otherwise a fluid process of changing roles and statuses (Goody 1973: 251). There also may be movement between settlements. This may be a function of, different variables, such as kinship, residence, etc. The social organization of households in ethnographic societies can be discussed in terms of their developmental cycle, kinship (descent), marriage, rank, and inheritance (Lowie 1948: 3).

#### ***1. The domestic cycle of the EIA in southern Africa***

The development cycle is intrinsic to the social organization of the household. Residence patterns provide a basic outline of the boundaries of the internal structure of domestic groups (Fortes 1969: 3). They are, however, not a determining role in social

structure, rather a product of economic, affective and jural relations that spring from other factors in society. Forte (1969: 4) identifies several phases in the developmental cycle of domestic groups. The phases are not discrete, since some overlap can take place.

- The first phase is expansion, the period from the marriage to the end of the wife's childbearing years (c. 25-30 years).
- The second phase is dispersion. This phase begins with the marriage of the first-born and continues until all the children are married. This is a lengthy period of time, especially in a polygynous society, and can last for as long as forty years.
- The third phase is replacement. This phase begins with the death of the father and his replacement in the social structure by his son/s.

Fortes' model of household expansion, dispersion and replacement has been applied to a southern African context by Preston-Whyte (1974). In the initial phase (expansion), there is the public validation of the marriage by the passing of bride wealth and birth of the first child (Preston-Whyte 1974: 183). During this phase, the family may be independent but remains part of a previous generation's household. The new couple continues to be economically and physically dependent upon the husband's parents.

In the second phase, dispersion, the children are married off. Children are married off at a young age when women are able to begin to bear children. Women move to their husband's settlements, and therefore, the sons remain in their own settlement with their new wives. With patrilocality, the son's family remains part of his parental household. In this phase, the homestead begins to grow because it contains multiple patrilocal polygynous families. The sons continue to contribute to the parental patrilocal polygynous family as long as the patriarch is living (Preston-Whyte 1978: 184), while daughters from

other households are added as new brides to unmarried sons. This creates a numerous related (hence not a village) patrilocal polygynous families.

The last phase, replacement, begins with the patriarch's death; the sons are finally able to begin to move out and establish their own homesteads (Preston-Whyte 1978: 184). The eldest son may start his own homestead or become the new homestead or village leader. The cycle is repeated in each household and has consequence for the establishment of new settlements in southern Africa

## ***2. Descent***

All southern African tribes are patrilineal, and emphasize male authority (Hammond-Tooke 1974: 360). The patriline of genealogical seniority define the inheritance of property and succession to office. Individuals reckon descent lines through a male forbearer.

## ***3. Marriage***

Marriage is a formally expressed relationship between the husband and wife and introduces many legal responsibilities with little attention paid to the wife's emotional well being (Kuper 1960: 91). Although marriage based on communal interests does occur, there is a preference for marriage with matrilateral cross-cousins (Preston-Whyte 1974: 178). Brides leave their settlements to move in with their husbands, while the bride wealth brought in for the marriage is used to facilitate the marriage of males in the bride's family (Kuper 1982: 26).

4. Residence patterns

Residence patterns are shaped by the internal structure of domestic groups in terms of kinship, descent, and marriage (Goody 1969a: 3). After the marriage ceremony, the wife moves to the husband's village. If the marriage is to the village head, then

applications of the house-property system are implemented, which is discussed in greater detail below. If it is a son getting married, the wife moves to the male's home and becomes part of the homestead. If the husband's parents are alive, the newlyweds may build their hut within close vicinity to the other inhabitants of the settlement. If the husband already has multiple wives, the tendency is to subdivide the settlement into units of mothers and sons, as women always move with their sons (Kuper, H 1960: 90).

When other families not related to the headman move to the settlement, the homestead becomes a village. Or when the headman dies and the sons and their wives inherit the homestead.

### ***5. Rank and inheritance***

The house-property system, first identified by Gluckman (1950), involves " a system of property holding and inheritance in which all property held by a polygynous family is divided and held separately by the nuclear family, or 'house', of each wife" (Oboler 1994: 432). Customary law states that, the first-married wife ranks first (Kuper 1982: 29). It is assumed that the father provides the bride wealth for the son's first wife, who becomes the 'great wife' upon the son taking over his father's settlement or establishing his own.

Wives are ranked in order of seniority, with the great wife in control of the 'great house' and secondary wives receiving lesser houses. In many cases, only the initial two or three wives are established as household heads and the other wives are placed under their control (Kuper 1982: 29-31). Only upon the establishment of a new settlement or demise of the settlement head will the eldest son's wives become household heads. The ranking of wives affects the inheritance rights and shares of the property among their