Of Pools and Birds: Celebrating Motherhood in the First Millennium

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological remains of Schroda, a well known Iron Age settlement in the Limpopo valley, include one of the largest and best documented caches of figurine art in southern Africa (Hanisch 1980). These small prehistoric clay models of humans and animals, it has been proposed persuasively, formed part of the didactic equipment of an initiation school (Hanisch 2002). Surprisingly, in spite of the fact that images of birds distinctly outnumber most of the other figurine types, their particular symbolic meaning and function have remained unexplored. It is argued here that, during their rites of passage, nubile girls, or their mothers, modelled water birds in clay to mark and celebrate the close affinity between women, life giving potency and sacred pools.

Keywords: Schroda, figurine art, gender constructs, female empowerment, folklore, ritual pedagogy

Archaeologists and historians have generated an exciting narrative detailing the birth of a southern African civilization in the Limpopo valley (e.g. Hall 1987: 74-90; Huffman 1986; Huffman & Hanisch 1987; Mitchell 2002: 300-312). Based on the analysis of the material remains from a number of sites, they have reconstructed the process of socio-economic changes and political reshaping that culminated in the creation of the Great Zimbabwe State and its trading network. The subject matter of this article consists of small prehistoric bird statuettes (ill.1). They have been excavated at Schroda, an Iron Age town which has produced some of the evidence for the origins and growth of complex society in the Limpopo basin. Schroda is renowned for its large cache of human and animal shaped clay artefacts unearthed almost forty years ago (Mitchell 2002: 284).

The birds and other figurine types have been convincingly identified as didactic tools of rites of passage (Hanisch 2002; Huffman 2012: 129-132; Schoeman 2017: 129-147). It is argued here, in addition, that the bird models embodied women's constructs of the world. Informed by ethnographic analogy we propose tentatively that they provided young female novices of an initiation school with a symbolic means to represent and celebrate their reproductive powers. By the same token, the ceremonial handling of the avian symbols paid homage to the sacred pools from which their life giving potency was believed to have originated. In short: the artefacts were created to personify feminine identity and to mark, brace and celebrate women's symbolic strength.

The interpretive efforts which we present in the following pages combine the excavator's thoughtful and logical analysis of the form and placement of the figurines within the site (Hanisch 2002, Hanisch and Maumela 2002) with our own observations. We are informed mainly by published data on folklore and initiation in the wider region. We begin by describing the site and the clay artefacts.

1. THE FIGURINE HOARD AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The inhabitants of Schroda participated in organised trade with the East Coast as early as the first millennium (Hanisch 2002: 33). The discovery of ivory objects and imported glass beads as well as the presence of elite buildings, led the excavators to suggest that this community of agro-pastoral farmers represented a distinct political entity in the wider region of which Schroda constituted the capital (Hanisch 2002: 25, 38; Huffman 2002: 9-19).

Huffman (2012: 124) has categorized Schroda as a Central Cattle Pattern type settlement. The C.C.P. design characteristically displayed two spatial divisions. The centre – a public and male domain – comprised a cattle enclosure, high status burials, long-term storage grain pits and bins, a smithy and a courtyard where men settled disputes and political decisions were taken. The central assembly space was encircled by a more private zone where the wives' houses, kitchens and grain bins were located.

Settlement organization, it is generally accepted in archaeology, provides the physical backdrop for social behaviour and ideology. Careful spatial analysis therefore enables the archaeologist to acquire valuable insights into the world-view or cosmology of the people who inhabited or used particular settlement structures (Huffman 2012: 120, 122). The C.C.P. worldview is believed to have emphasized the symbolic value of cattle; a patrilineal ideology of procreation; patriarchal authority; a preference for cattle as bride-price; male hereditary leadership; a close ritual affinity or entanglement between men and their livestock; and the religious conviction that paternal ancestors influenced life (Huffman 2012: 124; Schoeman 2017: 141; Kuper 1982). Because the Schroda hoard was discovered in the proximity of two cattle enclosures and the cache included a number of miniature cattle models (ill. 2), Huffman

(2002: 15-18) felt confident to conclude that the figurine art on the site could be explained in terms of male political control in a patrilineally oriented society.

In addition, Summers (1957) - inspired by Richards's classic ethnographic study of Bemba girls' initiation (1945, 1956) - was the first to propose that the symbolic meaning of the prehistoric clay statuary of southern Africa revolved around the concept of human procreation. Edward Matenga (1993) explored this hypothesis further. Using a "folk model" approach he demonstrated that fertility related ideas and practices of contemporary Shona culture can be traced back into prehistoric times. The study draws heavily on the work of Jacobson-Widding and Van Beek (1984, 1991, 1992).

The Schroda ceramic models portray humans and animals in stylized forms. They have been divided in two groups: large, roughly shaped and coarse figurines and smaller ones in a finer type of clay. Our inquiry focuses on the bird statuary (ill. 1) which belongs to the first group and outnumbers all the other zoomorphic figurine categories. The avian artefacts are dark greyish in colour and the tallest specimen measures 260 mm. The smallest one is only 50 mm in height (Hanisch 2002: 30-32). Some of the birds have white and orange-yellow colouring applied to them. Hanisch identified split tailed, fan tailed and solid tailed variations (Hanisch and Maumela 2002: 62-63).

The Schroda figurines were discovered one foot below the surface, spread out on a living floor within a section of the site known as area six. The floor has been identified as an initiation space. Its ritual character, Hanisch noted keenly (2002: 26-29), is emphasized by its location nearby the "royal part" of the settlement where the ruler resided, and by the presence of "special" features such as stone lined pits some of which contained clay figures; pot burials of animal remains and stone walling.

Some of the formal characteristics of the Schroda clay symbols, the excavator observed further, parallel those displayed by the clay and wooden sculptures that were used in the recent past by the instructors of initiation schools. Indeed, both the didactic models form prehistoric and more recent times have been coarsely modelled; they were designed to be portable; some were suspended or presented in pairs or groups as didactic tableaux; and they were discarded after use (Hanisch 2002: 34-37). The initiation hypothesis is perhaps best supported by the presence of those figurine types that manifest symbolic references to procreativity, the central theme of puberty ceremonies and marriage rites of passage. Three types seem particularly suited for this purpose, namely: the phallic figurine category P (ill. 3a); the human figurines of category H1 (ill. 3b) and the peculiar stylised female figurine type H3 (ill. 3c). The latter two types have been the object of a separate study (Dederen 2010).

Alex Schoeman (2017) has very recently published an appealing overview of the prehistoric figurine art studies of southern Africa. In her synthesis she suggests that all relevant sites date back to the first and second millennium A.D. and were inhabited by the Early and Late Farming Communities. She noted that the artefacts were mainly produced in clay, though small stone and ivory sculptures have occasionally been found (Schoeman 2017: 134, 135). It is proposed further that the art was primarily anthropomorphic and that it featured in the social and ritual context of initiation, or as she phrases it more originally, in "the transformation of children into sexed beings" (2017: 146). The unusual size of the Schroda figurine hoard and the quality of the site's systematic excavation and meticulous recording (Hanisch 1980, Hanisch 2002) are deemed by Schoeman (2017: 132, 134) to have enabled her to formulate fresh and more nuanced understandings of the whole southern African figurine corpus.

Because of Schoeman's special interest in gendered material culture production, her

discussion focuses for the most part on two very common figurine types, namely images of cattle (ill. 2) and stylised female clay sculptures (ill. 3c). Her reading of these artefacts echoes Huffman's assumption that the art must be understood in terms of the C.C.P. model. She proposes that both types primarily expressed patriarchal ideas about marriage and women's bodies in traditional farming communities. The cattle statuary, whether as toys or initiation sculpture, indicated a man's desire to own livestock and to use it in order to pay bride-price and gain access to and control over wives. The miniature cattle, it is concluded, represented ideas about maleness, fertility and procreation (Schoeman 2017: 141). Similarly, the stylised female clay images are declared to have portrayed women's bodies and their fecundity which were owned by their fathers and husbands (Schoeman 2017: 143, 145, 146; see also Wood 2002: 90). We will return to the patriarchal hypothesis later.

2. A TENTATIVE INTERPRETATION

Data relevant to the deciphering of the social meaning of bird symbolism is available from the didactic realms of indigenous education and storytelling. It reveals that the avian metaphor can be interpreted in terms of a dual conception of gender identity. In the indigenous cosmologies of the wider region mythical "Sky Birds" or "Birds-of-Heaven" signified the prowess and authority of hunters, warriors, rulers, fathers and husbands. "Birds-of-the-Water", on the other hand, were linked to the procreative powers of women. The Schroda clay bird models appear to belong to the latter kind. In spite of their stylized appearance and the lack of a well-defined typological uniformity, the long necks unambiguously portray an essential feature of birds associated with an aquatic environment. Some of the artefacts display long beaks as well (admittedly many bills are damaged and their exact shape cannot be ascertained). Perhaps the pedestals which elevate the birds' bodies were meant to depict their long legs. The variation in shape, we argue, indicates that they were not produced by a single artist but rather by several people, possibly the initiates themselves or, more likely, their mothers. Significantly, clay and pottery were traditionally linked to the realm of women throughout the wider region (Schoeman 2017: 146).

3. A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Our interpretation of the material remains in this Iron Age settlement depends substantially on ethnographic analogy, i.e. on the testing of contemporary, documented ways of life, cultural beliefs, values and behaviour against the prehistoric artefacts and structures which have been identified on site. The merits and deficiencies of this methodology have been and continue to be debated by archaeologists and anthropologists alike. The cultural conservatism that typifies technologically unsophisticated, pre-industrial communities is often mentioned as the main argument in favour or in support of the use of ethnographic analogy. Whilst some cultural elements are dynamic, radical and changing, it has been repeatedly established by anthropologists, others have been static.

Sahlins (1985) e.g. has suggested that cultures universally are made up of different aspects, traits or characteristics which he called 'sites'. Some of these sites he proposed are more vulnerable to change than others. Anthropologists are in agreement that ritual, myth and symbolism are the sites that are most resistant to change (Whitley 2010: 124-125, 127; Horton 1967; Lévi-Strauss and Eribon 1991). Victor Turner's distinction between dominant and instrumental symbols offers an additional insight into the concept of cultural continuity or conservatism (1967). The former type of symbolism, he proposed, was highly respected, long-term in nature and therefore

less prone to change. Instrumental symbols on the other hand were easily transformed. We would like to suggest here that the symbolism of gender and human fecundity, which is present on the site and forms the focus of our analysis, belongs to the dominant kind.

Moreover, we are well aware that, in spite of the unusual prospects which the Schroda figurine cache offers to the researchers (Mitchell 2002: 284; Schoeman 2017: 131-134), numerous questions concerning the site and its artefacts will remain unanswered. We do not necessarily mean to imply that direct continuity of meaning and function exists between the prehistoric bird figures and the contemporary social and cultural data that inspired their reconstruction. Similar objects, practices and beliefs can develop independently in different times and places.

We would not like to create the impression that the ethnography pertaining to initiation is fully known or understood either. As a matter of fact, it is generally ambiguous, fragmentary and, at times, even contradictory. Encouragingly, a few discerning, exceptionally detailed studies avail themselves, such as Blacking's extensive survey of Venda girls' rites of passage (1969). Folklore data is equally amorphous or fluid and its symbolism is multi-vocal and therefore open to a variety of interpretive windows. In short, the particular reading of the bird metaphor that is proposed in this article, does not exhaust the exegesis of the rituals and stories that will be examined next.

4. "BIRDS-OF-HEAVEN"

The behaviour of dangerous and aggressive birds provided the creative minds in traditional African society with a perfect metaphor to personify the prowess of the hunter and the warrior. The affinity between avian predators and virility also characterised the conception of a creator god, a powerful male deity who inhabited the sky, like Raluvhimba and iNkosi yezulu (Eiselen 1937: 262-269; Berglund 1976; Jacobson-Widding 1992: 15-16).

The eight magnificent prehistoric bird sculptures, carved in soft green-gray soapstone, which have been excavated at Great Zimbabwe, exemplify the icon of an avian deity or its messenger (ill.4). The birds are perching on pillars measuring three to five times their body height. The exact age of the artefacts is not known. Seemingly they were left behind when the site was partly deserted in the 15th century. Garlake (1973) was the first researcher to define their anthropomorphic features and thereby confirm that they were metaphorical in nature. Huffman (1985, 1986) proposed that the bird shrine in the king's personal quarters was meant to safeguard the ruler's individual welfare. Another shrine with six bird sculptures is said to have been used in national rain rituals. The eight bird statue is believed to have protected the procreative powers of the king's main wife.

Sky birds appeared in traditional storytelling too. In one of the adventures of Tortoise (a trickster commonly encountered in the folklore of southern Africa) a mighty sky being is outwitted by his little opponent (Keyser 1949: 9-18). The account of *The woman and the mighty bird* (Jordan 1973: 226-235), on the other hand, illustrates another familiar category of tales in which women and girls are cautioned not to defy their husbands or fathers (see also Lemekoana and Masola 1988: 12; Tauatsoala 2006: 8). Here the bird metaphor is used by the narrator to underscore masculine authority.

Equally obvious as metaphors of virility and male identity are the birds that featured in the Ambo hunting songs (Stefaniszyn 1951) and in the heroic poetry of the Basotho (Kunene 1971). The Ambo songs emphasized the hardships of life that young hunters experienced in the veldt, as well as the many dangers to which they were exposed during hunting expeditions. Heroic poets praised the bravery of warriors. They used avian predators and scavengers (hawks, eagles, vultures, yellow kites and crows) as metaphors to pay

tribute to the valour of worthy combatants.

The discourse of rites of passage too illustrates the use of ferocious birds as emblems of male identity. In the *Chisungu* girls' initiation of the Bemba the instructors handled ritual clay models called *mbusa*. Two of these models - *Mwansa cembe*, the white eagle, and *cembe*, the eagle - portrayed the male feathered hats that were owned by young husbands and valiant warriors. In addition to defining and praising the ideal husband, the female instructors used the clay symbols to caution the young girls against the sexual aggression of men, their pride and self-indulgence (Corbeil 1982: 31, 36-37, 46; Richards 1956: 104, 203). A similar type of bird image warned Venda female novices in the *Domba* initiation against the sexual advances of men (Blacking 1969: 26, 77, 163, 221). In one of the lessons, the girls were told not to listen to the cry of the kori bustard (*dandila*). This particular species was also referred to as the puff-adder and the male sexual organ. Another bird that featured as a representation of male sexual aggression was the vulture (*danga*).

The symbolic association between the sky, authority, mythical birds and the prowess of hunters and warriors lives on in contemporary expressive culture. It inspired a wood carving by Jackson Hlungwani depicting the Bird-of-Heaven ruling over a three-tiered cosmos (ill. 5 & 6). David Rossouw's drawing, on the other hand, portrays a sky god seated on his heavenly bird (ill 7). Having briefly introduced the close affinity between avian raptors and masculinity we proceed to examine their feminine counterparts.

5. "BIRDS-OF-THE-WATER"

Mythical birds appeared routinely in the rites-of-passage and traditional folklore of southern Africa as expressions of women's gender identity. In the Bemba girls' initiation, the *Chisungu*, several *mbusa* represented the young women for whom the rites were performed. They included two bird types, namely guinea fowls (*makanga*) and the white egret (*nkoba*). The guinea fowl articulated the industriousness of women, the main food producers in this matrilineal farming society. It was said that women, like guinea fowls, 'scratched' the land (Richards 1956: 70, 191; Corbeil 1982: 104).

The white egret model on the other hand, depicted the novices after they had been white-washed during the closing rituals by the river (Richards 1956: 89-90; Corbeil 1982: 108-109). We argue that the egret metaphor signified more than just a physical resemblance between the bird and the painted bodies of the novices. Because of its association with water, this particular species could have been selected to underscore the fact that the ceremonies, to which it was metaphorically linked, needed to be performed at the river and, more importantly, that both the bird and the river symbolized motherhood.

During the ritual activities at the river the affinity between water, birds and the fecundity of women was evidenced in a number of ways. Firstly, the cleansing in the river was said to confirm the girls' nubile status and to prepare them ritually for "being a woman". In fact, the white body paint and the river water were believed to activate their procreative potency. Phrased differently, these ceremonies did not simply enunciate the fact that the young participants had attained the status of womanhood. The river itself – which was believed to be a source of spiritual power – enabled the transformation of girls into women. Significantly, the ritual teaching of girls in and nearby the river, we established during the literature review, constituted a common practice in rites of passage throughout southern African (e.g. Blacking 1969: 15, 17, 87; Van Warmelo 1932: 41, 75; Bernard 2010).

Further, the girls were instructed to swing their upper bodies over the water, whilst balancing themselves on their elbows. This performance was called "giving birth" and "making the initiates mothers". Finally,

in one of the rites which was acted out at the river, the instructors pronounced the *Chisungu* institution to be like a "womb that gives birth" to the successive generations of young nubile women.

Looking at the *Byali* initiation school of the Lovedu reveals that women were similarly linked to the life generating powers of the water through the mediation of a mystical bird. Indeed, the core activities of these rites of passage revolved around a bird cult, the details of which have been reported by the Kriges in their classic monograph *The Realm of the Rain Queen* (Krige and Krige 1980). The sudden appearance of the mysterious bird Khiudogane (Davison 1984; the Kriges used the older Khiudogani) coincided with the staging of the main *Byali* ceremonies. The dancing and singing started in December and the Great Bird, the central feature of the school, arrived in April. The wonderful bird, it was believed, originated from a sacred pool.

Khiudogane (a male elder dressed up in an elaborate bird costume) showed itself in dim moonlight and communicated with the girls by means of a reed whistle. A special enclosure had been built to house the honoured visitor during the months leading up to its arrival. Senior men stayed with it and enjoyed the beer and the food that was brought by female youths. Every morning and evening some of the women who participated in the ceremonies conversed with Khiudogane using a special, sacred language and the initiates, dressed in reed skirts and grass bandoliers, danced ecstatically. The mighty bird occasionally joined in the dancing. Young men from the local male circumcision lodge stayed in a small camp next to its enclosure. They occupied themselves with the crafting of the exquisite reed and palm leave costumes which were used during the dancing (ill. 8). The headgear of the male dancers included bird heads and wings (Davison 1984: 97, fig.43).

At first sight the bird cult of the Lovedu seems to connect with the realm of men rather than align itself with women. The intricate costume of the bird creature and as well as its living quarters were built by men and only senior men were allowed to stay with it. Further, the bird monster's ritual performance was acted out by men assisted by youths of the male circumcision school. The whistle language of the cult, performed by men, resembled a similar mode of communication in the *gomana* cult, run by men. Finally, the honorific titles which participants used to address the bird emphasized its masculine identity. It is no wonder then that the Kriges referred to the bird as "the mystery of the old men" (Krige and Krige 1980: 130, 232, 140). Yet, the *Byali* initiation, which coincided with the bird's visit, was plainly organised for the benefit of young nubile girls. Its rites celebrated the institution of motherhood. Also, women supervised its pedagogic process, though presumably not as tight as was the case with the Bemba *Chisungu* where they assumed full control. We will revisit the ambiguous gender association of Khiudogane shortly.

Meaningfully, all metaphorical objects and structures indirectly or directly expressive of the *Byali* bird cult were said to have been generated by a pool in which the mighty bird itself had taken residence (Krige and Krige 1980: 135, 140). Moreover, the crafting of the sacred teaching aids (*digoma*), the *vahwera* dancing costumes and the uniforms of the female initiates; as well as the building of the bird's residence and the production of the sacred flutes required materials associated with the river, the pool and its immediate surroundings: bark, reeds, leaves and grass (Davison 1984: 95). Last but not least, the fact that the great bird arrived after the conclusion of the first fruit ceremonies, when food was being harvested, evidences that fecundity constituted the central concern of the *Byali* institution. The theme of fertility is equally well manifested and expressed by the belief that the *Byali* songs ensured that rains would soon replenish the rivers and regenerate nature (Krige and Krige 1980: 128, 132, 139).

The bird cult of the *Sungwi*, one of the Venda girls' rites of passage, closely resembled the *Byali*. It featured a bird 'monster' called Nonyana as well as young male dancers called *vhahwira*. The head gear of the dancers' reed attire was decorated with body parts of birds, as was the case with the *Byali* costumes. They invariably included those of the water bird *Scopus umbretta* (Van Warmelo 1932: 87). Nonyana's enclosure was located next to a river from which the bird monster observed some of the ceremonies whilst seated inside a hole in the riverbed. Both the sacred songs and aphorisms of the *Sungwi* initiation discourse described Nonyana's residence as a deep, black pool (Van Warmelo 1932: 83-85, 98). The same symbolic association between the cosmological pool and womanhood comprised an essential educational theme in the teaching of the different initiation schools for Venda girls (Blacking 1969: 87-89; Nettleton 1989).

We recorded obvious references to the affinity between birds, pools and women in folklore as well. The confluence of myth and ritual should not come as a surprise since the discourse of ritual pedagogy and storytelling promoted the inculcation of similar beliefs and values. Admittedly, many narratives in which girls or women interacted with birds were not intended to state anything in particular about the birds themselves, or their gender, let alone mark their possible association with the realm of women. However, elsewhere the narrators seem to have consciously selected small magical birds in order to portray young women, as is the case in the Zulu folktale of *The bird maidens* (Hertslet 1946: 42-51).

The cosmological pool constitutes a principal image in the enchanting narrative of the *Blue Crane and the waterhole* (Hewitt 2008: 169ff; Bennun 2004: 110-112).The mythical bird in this particular tale was resurrected by the powers of the water after she had been killed by a pair of lions. Of additional interest is the narrator's use of the pool image to represent the rites of passage of young women. Like the young participant in the initiation school the Blue Crane has been temporarily removed and isolated from society. The bird's regeneration by the pool echoes the traditional perception that initiation facilitated the rebirth of the novice. The new garments which the bird received from her brother at the end of the story correspond with the ceremonial clothing that was customarily given to a graduate by her relatives on completion of the rites.

Likewise, in a delightful Valenge story entitled *The doll* (Earthy 1968: 232-234) the pool image serves as a metaphor for the womb and for the initiation of young women. Nsatimuni, the young heroine of the story, descends into the depths of a river in search of her doll-child. Here she encounters Hippo and Crocodile, the guardians of the sacred pool. She is allowed to proceed further into the magical underwater realm where she is trained and tested by the Lady of the House of Mysteries. Eventually she is released from the pool and her exemplary display of patience, respect and obedience are rewarded with a real child. Her sister who disrespects the Lady, the House and its laws is punished and remains childless.

6. BIRD SYMBOLISM, THE PATRIARCHY AND GENDER TENSION

Huffman (2002, 2012), Wood (2002) and Schoeman (2017) assume that the Schroda clay symbols exemplified the socio-political importance of a ruling patriarchy. If analogy with historical cattle-owning cultures in Africa is anything to go by, the cosmology of this agro-pastoral prehistoric society may very well have been shaped substantially by masculine interests. However, it is equally true that no traditional African society was either fully matrilineal or patrilineal in matters of descent, inheritance, succession and authority (Richards 1950: 297). To be sure, this observation applies particularly well to the very same Sotho, Venda and Tsonga speaking

communities from which the cultural data in support of the patriarchal hypothesis has been obtained! In fact,

> *"Although, among these peoples [Sotho, Venda and Tsonga], the patrilineal principle was indeed fundamental, lineages were either absent or of very shallow depth, or the wider group also contained other, non-agnatic, kin, thus 'contaminating' an exclusively patrilineal recruitment." (Hammond-Tooke 1998: 9).*

These three groups practiced some form of double descent. Much of their social interaction and rapport was grounded in a combination of matrilineal and patrilineal relatedness. As a result women occupied privileged social positions which allowed them, amongst other things, to own cattle.

More importantly, we believe, even if Schroda society was generally patriarchal in nature, it would be unfair, if not inaccurate to assume that women would have been mere observers or passive consumers of a male-dominated or oriented social order. World-wide studies of traditional small-scale societies have evidenced that women opposed the patriarchy. The female-male dialectic was routinely expressed by a variety of symbolic means, including body posture, clothing, dance, visual art, ritual and myth (Dederen 2011). Further, human fecundity emerged from our analysis of rites of passage and storytelling as a pre-eminent theme. Because of its social, symbolic and ideological significance the notion of human procreativity was held in high esteem equally amongst women and men (Herbert 1993: 237-238). Unsurprisingly therefore, it played an important part in the symbolic battle of the sexes (e.g. Solomon 1992; Biesele 1993).

We contend that at Schroda sexual opposition constituted an important aspect of gender identity construction. In our understanding gender rivalry is evidently expressed in the metaphorical discourse of folklore and ritual pedagogy which portrays women and men competing for the powers of the mystical pool. The clay bird models, it will be demonstrated shortly in the final section of this essay, support our premise. The Schroda bird models embodied a female cosmological construct that was deployed by women to balance or oppose the ideological realm of men.

7. A PREHISTORIC EMBLEM OF WOMEN'S POTENCY

Our analysis of rites of passage and storytelling suggests that two gendered, mythical bird types expressed some of the main traditional concerns around which the social identities of women and men have been constructed. Indeed, the bird metaphor betokened both sexes. Avian predators signified the virility of warriors, male sexual and hunting prowess or the authority of fathers, husbands and political rulers. The magical potency from which the sky birds derived their esteem originated in the heavenly residence of a masculine sky deity whose powers were manifested in storms, lightning and thunder. The symbolic alliance between water birds and women, on the other hand, emphasized and strengthened the fecundity of mothers, a key dimension of feminine identity. The source of procreative potency or life generating powers was located in the sacred, cosmological pool which was believed to grant life and restore it.

Heintze (1967) was the first to systematically explore the pool nexus of beliefs and ritual practices. Her comprehensive essay, which highlights the ontological significance of water, sustains the conceptual affinity between women, life giving potency and sacred pools that is proposed in this article. Certainly, the recurrent references to von Sicard and Frobenius in her analysis betray the author's intellectual allegiance with the German Cultural History tradition,

which was an outdated anthropological paradigm even in the 1960s. Nevertheless, her pioneering work, on account of the opulence of ethnographic data on which the discussion is based, continues to make for a worthwhile read. Mention should be made of two more exciting discussions of the pool nexus by Kriel (1971) and Aschwanden (1989). These authors recorded numerous stories in which the pool was defined as a supernatural locus in which the protagonists descended in search of power and good fortune. Lastly, we noted how the anthropological interest in the cultural beliefs associated with the water realm has recently been reanimated by Bernard (2010).

What is more, we suggest that a simple dualistic gendering of the bird metaphor into masculine sky birds and feminine water birds fails to tell the whole story. We noted that, in terms of their manifestation, their actions or the particular symbolical role they played during the ritual performance or in the plot of the narrative in which they occurred, the mystical water birds can essentially be divided into two groups. On the one hand mighty, masculine birds like Khiudogane and Nonyana were perceived (at least by men, but not necessarily by women) to be the patrons or guardians of the pool. Their appearance and behaviour betrayed male authority. Rather than mediating the life-giving potency of the water, they seem to control it. Perhaps the bird monster Khiudogane represents an attempt on behalf of men to manipulate or influence the procreative symbolism of female rites-of-passage? Equally feasible, in our opinion, is the suggestion that the bird embodied the appropriation of a masculine icon by women. Either way, Khiudogane illustrates how the bird metaphor in ritual and myth transpires the oppositional and competitive nature of gender relations in traditional society which was proposed in the previous section. Incidentally, the image of the masculine water bird appeared in folklore too, e.g. in the Xhosa story entitled *The girl who defeated the drought* (Scheub 1975: 406-411).

The egret and the blue crane on the other hand constituted a different category all together. These birds introduced young girls, who participated in rites of passage, to the magical source of female potency: the cosmological pool. In doing so, the birds identified with or personified the female novices. As companions of the pool, they marked its powers and confirmed its concern with the social destiny of women. Women, of course, were closely tied to water in real life too, since the river and the pool comprised a space for women's daily chores and interaction.

The logic underlying the homoeopathic use of the stork by Northern Sotho speakers matches our proposed conceptual association between water birds and women's life-giving faculty. Until recently, we were told, it was common practice to burn certain parts of this species (called *lentlopodi*) and mix the ashes into an ointment base. The medicine was then applied to small incisions on the baby's forehead and upper parts of the neck. This mixture was believed to facilitate the fusion of the cranial bones and to protect the infant against *thema,* a dreaded disease. Meaningfully, several informants referred to *thema* metaphorically as a bird of prey thereby further illustrating the dialectic nature of the opposition between gendered water and sky birds (interviews at Ga-Ramokgopa, 2015).

The stork's symbolic alliance with female fecundity could have been inspired by its seasonal migration. Every year water birds returned to their habitat: pools, wetlands and rivers, i.e. places filled with life potency. Migration occurred during spring, the season of nature's rebirth, when rains rejuvenated the earth and plant life. Moreover, water birds generally produce more eggs than other bird species (Engelbrecht, Zoology Department, University of Limpopo, 2016, personal communication). Perhaps they could have been traditionally perceived as being 'more fertile'? The python, another mystical water creature, customarily played an important role in the protection of newborn babies too.

Python fat constituted the main ingredient in rain making medicines and python skin was traditionally wrapped around the waist of women who experienced problems in giving birth: two observations which further support the animal's association with fecundity (interviews at Pile, Vhembe District, 2015).

The Schroda bird models clearly do not depict avian predators. They resemble water birds. Moreover, there is nothing obviously virile or threatening about them. They therefore, we argue, belong to the same category as the egret and the blue crane. They represent an ideological construct of supernatural birds that where believed to be truly concerned with the world of women. The fact that they are so numerous and display stylistic variation increases the likelihood that they have been produced by different women. It was suggested earlier on that mothers possibly created the clay models for the coming of age ceremonies of their daughters. The bird emblems embodied life potency, the procreative power of the water and the womb. They functioned in didactic displays and ritual activities as markers of young women's nubile status.

In short: rather than being expressions of the ruling patriarchy, the prehistoric Schroda bird emblems mediated nubile girls' ritual journey from childhood to sexual maturity, marriage and motherhood. They signified, acknowledged and above all celebrated young women's procreative powers.

The authors wish to dedicate this article to the memory of E.O.M. Hanisch, inspiring colleague and mentor, and excavator of the Schroda figurine cache.

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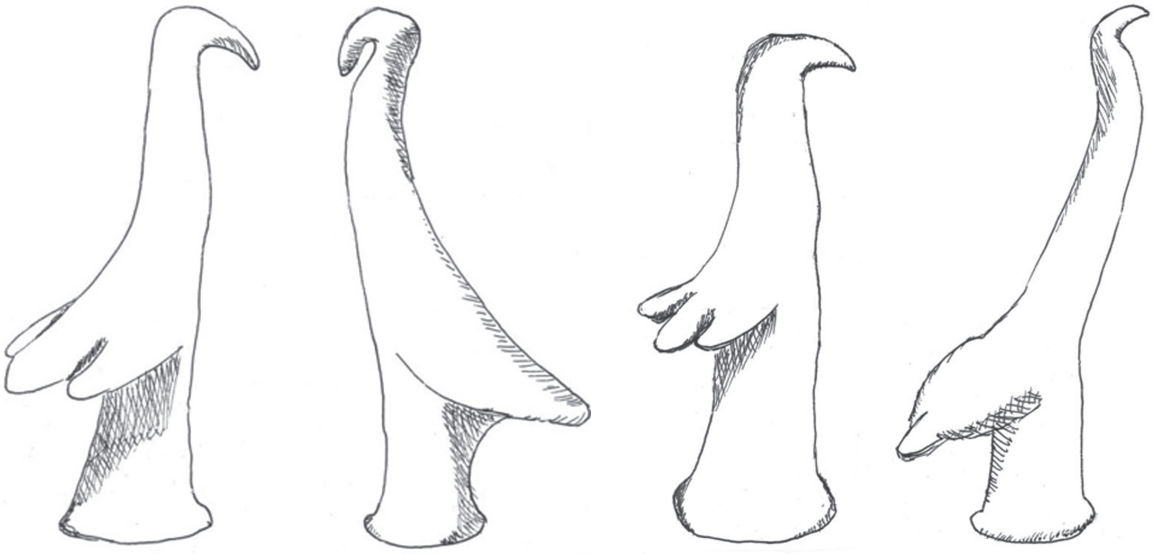
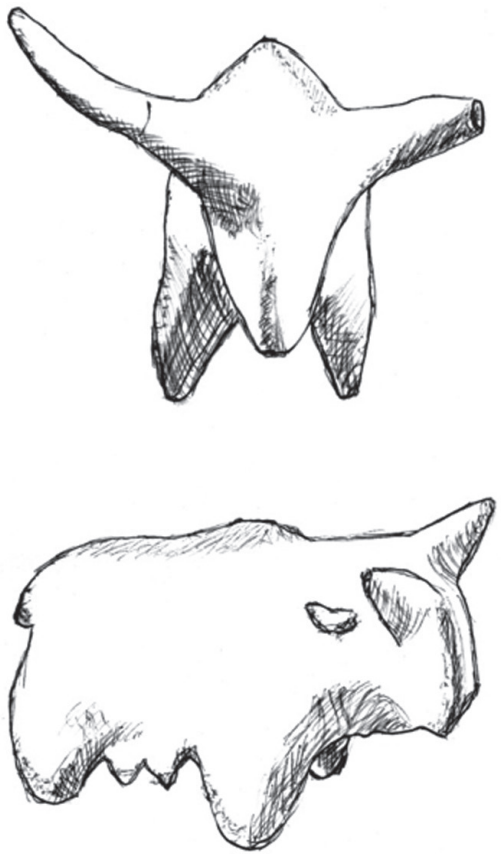
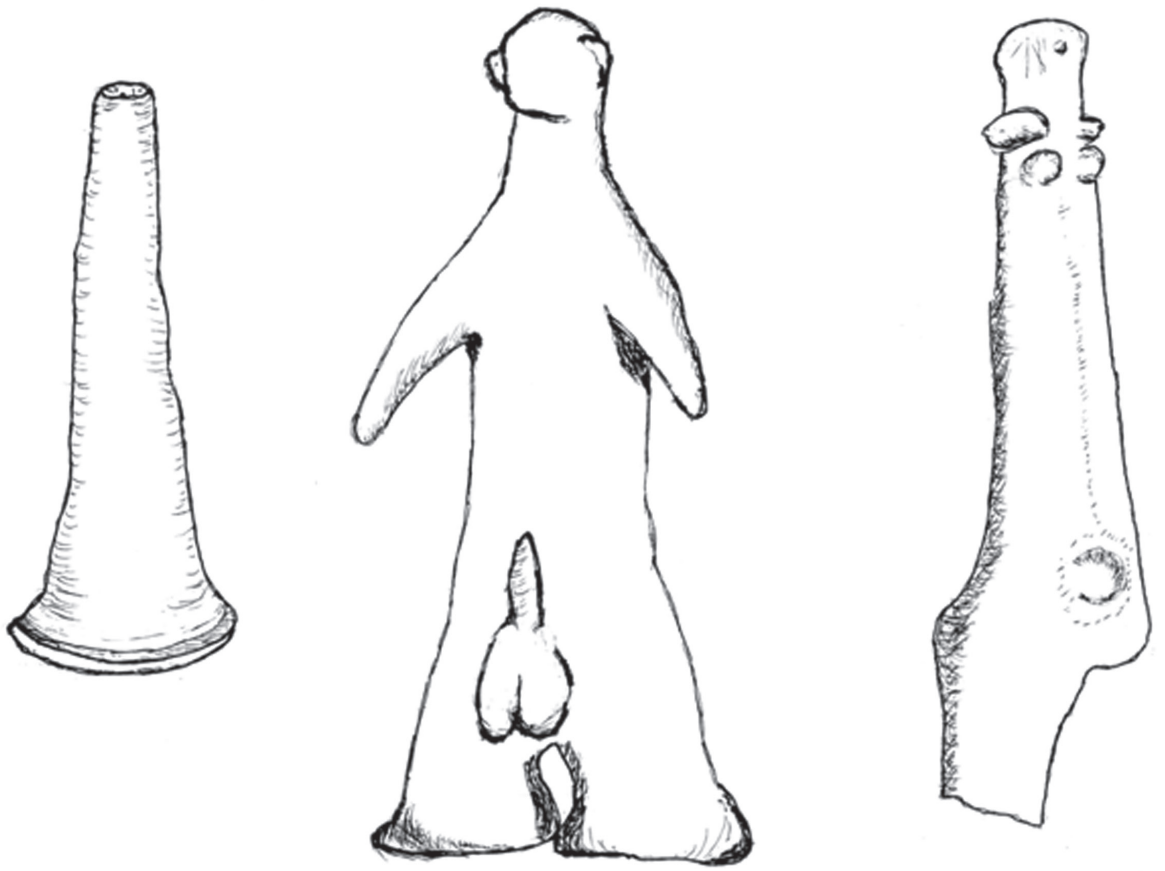
Illustrations



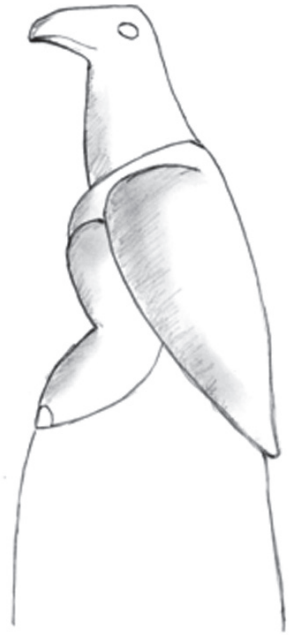
Ill.1
Prehistoric clay bird figurines from Schroda. Fired clay, 20cm (appr.). Authors' sketches based on Hanisch E.O.M. (2002: 63-4).



Ill.2
Schroda cattle figurines. Fired clay, 10cm (appr.). Authors' sketches based on Hanisch E.O.M. (2002: 57).

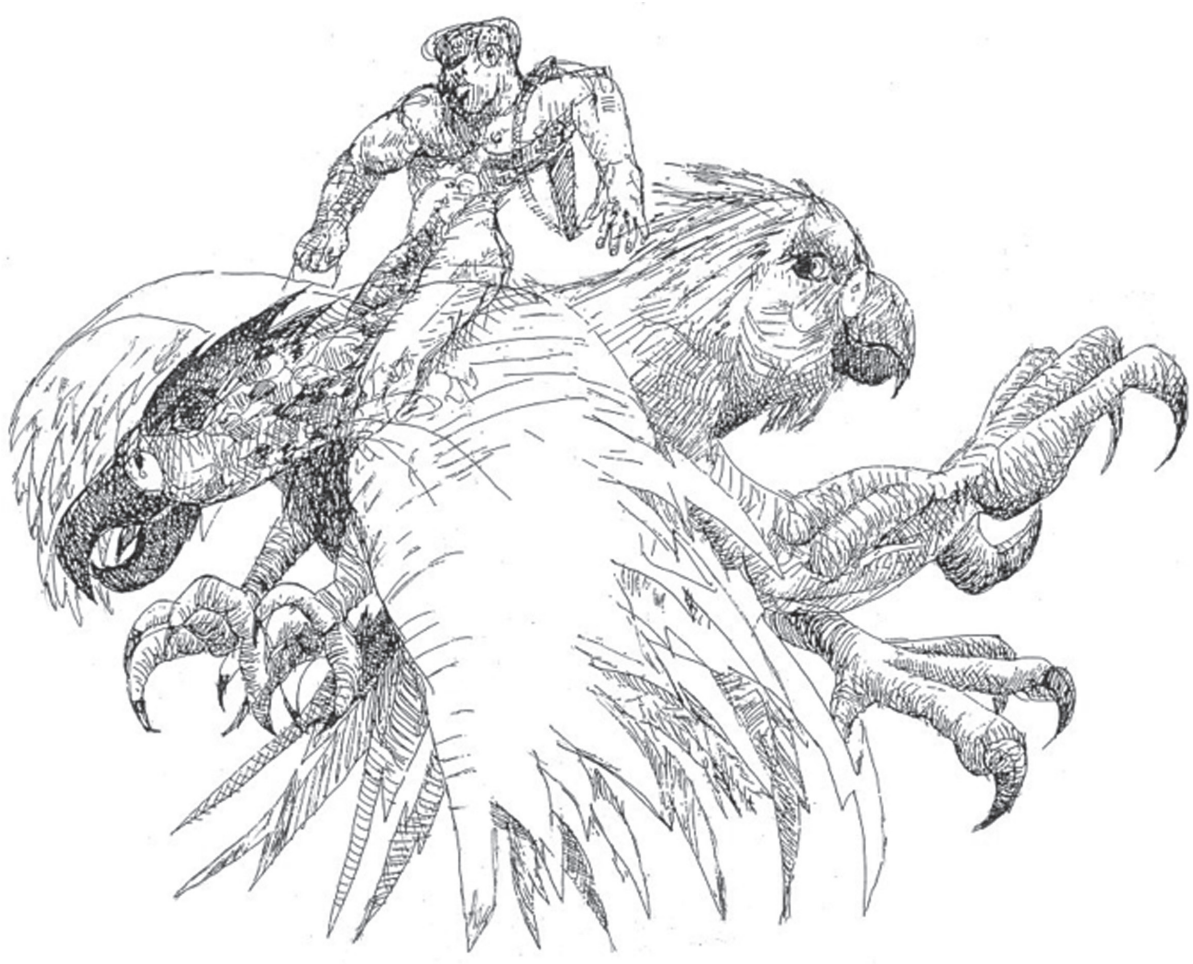


Ill.3a,b,c
Schroda figurine types P, H1 and H3. Fired clay. Authors' sketches based on Hanisch E.O.M. (2002: 20, 66, 80).



Ill.4
Great Zimbabwe bird sculpture. Authors' sketch.

Ill.5 and 6
J. Hlungwani, Untitled image (1996) of Sky Bird ruling the three-tiered cosmos (heaven-earth-netherworld). Xifiringoma tree. 108cm. Private collection. Photograph: M. Sandrock.



Ill.7
D. Rossouw, Untitled image of Sky being on his heavenly bird (1988). Ink, A3. Private collection.

Ill.8
Costume of mohwera dancer from the Lovedu byali initiation school (Duiwelskloof area 2006). Reeds, palm leaves, ostrich feathers, welded steel mannequin, 170cm. Private collection. Photograph: M. Sandrock.