

# **Women's Power, 1000 A.D.: Figurine Art and Gender Politics in Prehistoric Southern Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Archaeological excavations in southern Africa have yielded a wide variety of small clay figurines, the origins of which have been traced back to early farming communities. Whereas many of these artefacts are fairly naturalistic in appearance, others clearly are not. The purpose of this essay is to explore the social significance of one of the stylized figurine types, an intriguing phallic-shaped female representation.

Ever since Summers completed the first systematic figurine study in 1957, interpretive efforts of art historians, archaeologists and anthropologists have focused on the concept of fertility. This paper argues that the fertility paradigm, far from being irrelevant, has remained poorly defined. Moreover, it has produced an understanding that is tainted by a masculine bias, and does not do justice to the conceptual originality of the icon. An alternative reading of fertility is proposed, in which a symbolic war between the sexes features centrally.

*Keywords: fertility, figurine art, ritual pedagogy, gender opposition*

## **1. A DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT FIGURINE**

‘In all excavations and test trenches dug at Schroda, pieces and nearly complete figurines of a distinctly different type of female form were found. This form was elongated and stylized, with rudimentary facial features, slight protrusions where the shoulders and arms should be, female breasts and genitalia and steatopygic buttocks.’ (Hanisch 2002b: 51)

In this citation from *Sculptured in Clay* (Van Schalkwyk 2002), the archaeologist E.O.M. Hanisch defined the essential formal features of the peculiar clay figurine ‘Type H3’ (see Illustration 1). Its ambiguous dual sexuality has intrigued a number of researchers, from a variety of disciplines. H3 type figurines were discovered by Hanisch, almost thirty years ago, at Schroda, an archaeological site situated nearby the confluence of the Limpopo and the Shashe rivers. Schroda has produced an unusually large cache of clay figurines, representing humans and animals in realistic and stylized forms. Despite its limited stratigraphy, the site has offered invaluable contextual clues and insights into the social use of these small works of art. In fact, Schroda is probably one of the most informative figurine sites in Southern Africa. The H3 type, it will

become clear in the following pages, constituted an autonomous conceptual and functional category within the total figurine repertoire.

Iron Age farmers settled in this section of the Limpopo basin as early as 300 A.D., cultivating sorghum and millet. Palaeo-climatological data indicate that between 600 and 900 A.D. the region became depopulated because of recurrent droughts. It was only resettled around 900 A.D. by agro-pastoralists known as the Zhizo people. Based on the size, pattern and particular features of the settlement, it is assumed that Schroda was an important regional political centre, perhaps even a capital. It housed some 500 inhabitants and controlled an additional 1300 subjects in the surrounding agricultural homesteads. It was the first site to produce local ivory objects and imported glass beads, evidence of the Zhizo people's involvement in the networks of Swahili traders, operating from Sofala on the East Coast (Huffman 2002: 9–18).

## 2. A FIGURINE TRADITION

Small clay figurines, similar to the ones excavated at Schroda, have been collected from numerous sites north and south of the Limpopo. In the early 1990's, Edward Matenga took on the major challenge of meaningfully combining a sample of 1180 figurines from 124 sites in Zimbabwe, representing 1700 years of prehistory and almost a century of collecting. The results are presented in *Archaeological Figurines from Zimbabwe* (1993), a figurine study with a scope unique in its kind. Hanisch's peculiar H3 type appears in Matenga's classification under the label 'stylized female torso' or type Cat.1, Sub-class1b. The artefacts in this figurine category are described as having de-emphasized heads; a lack of facial features; a curved trunk tapering towards the neck; large buttocks; stylized legs taking the form of tapering stumps or cylinders without knees; protuberant breasts; private parts and varied body markings (1993: 26, 27, 33, 51).

Matenga calculated that human clay images constituted 52% of the total figurine sample. Amongst the representations of humans, an estimated two-thirds belonged to the female torso category (1993: 51). The same author established that the 'golden era' of clay figurine production coincided with the formation and growth of the Great Zimbabwe State (from 900 to 1500 A.D., this is deduced from associated ceramics). Soon after the demise of the Zimbabwe polity, figurines seemed to have lost their popularity, at least at elite sites. Some of the commoner sites continued to produce clay figurines after 1500 A.D., perhaps even as recent as the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1993: 89).

In short: the stylized torso/H3 clay image was a common figurine type. Its use was remarkably widespread and persisted for a number of centuries. It belonged to, if not constituted, a figurine tradition. It was, truly, an icon.

### 3. A FERTILITY ICON

The archaeological evidence clearly indicates that the ambiguous H3 type has survived for many centuries, at least in its formal appearance. But what about the complex of cultural ideas and social practices within which it functioned? Both Hanisch and Matenga have suggested, in their respective monographs, that the concept of human fertility holds the key to un-riddle the mysterious artefact. This isn't really news, since the fertility paradigm was introduced by the archaeologist Summers as far back as 1957. Summers, in turn, was inspired by Audrey Richards's classic ethnography of girls' initiation among the Bemba (1945, 1956), and by Margaret Shaw's monograph on marriage dolls (1948).

Matenga proposed that the Shona conception of fertility could best be defined through the mediation of a 'folk model', i.e. 'a community's idealized image of itself and the world that surrounds it' (1993: 124–6). The Shona fertility folk model is subsequently introduced to the reader, in the form of a catalogue of religious beliefs and practices. Its discussion includes ancestor worship, agricultural rituals, the chieftainship, totemic laudatory poetry, the structural analysis of the Shona homestead and a synthesis of the symbolic meaning of traditional iron smelting. Unfortunately, it is largely left to the reader's imagination to figure out how all this wonderful ethnographic data applies to the archaeological figurine tradition.

During the distribution analysis of the Schroda artefacts, Hanisch made an important observation. Stylized female forms of the H3 type, he realized, had emerged almost exclusively amongst the remains of private homesteads. He felt justified to conclude, therefore, that the figurines must have belonged to the domestic realm of Zhizo women (2002: 51–2). In contrast, most of the other figurine types were excavated from area six, a public, male domain (this will be discussed later).

More significantly, Hanisch and co-authors suggested that the H3 clay images could very well have been archaeological counterparts of the beaded dolls that were commonly used, until recently, in the traditional marriage ceremonies of Southern Africa. These objects, known in the anthropological literature as 'fertility dolls' (see Illustrations 3–4), have been investigated thoroughly by the contributors to *Evocations of the Child* (Dell 1998). The functional and conceptual continuity between clay figurines and beaded dolls, or between prehistoric artefacts and present-day material culture, was first explored in depth by Jacqueline Roumequere, a French-speaking anthropologist who grew up in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. She articulated her fertility doll hypothesis in one of several essays on Venda cosmology (1962). The authors of the Schroda monograph have relied heavily on her work.

During a visit to the Bulawayo Museum (Zimbabwe), she had noticed the phallic-shaped female torsos on display. Fascinated by their bi-sexual features, she consulted with an unnamed *nanga*, a ritual healer who practised as a surgeon in circumcision rites of the Venda speaking region (Limpopo Province). The

healer informed her of the existence of similar clay figurines in Vendaland (in the 1950's). These objects were referred to, by their users and makers, as *vhana* (children). Venda mothers, he explained, prepared these clay dolls for their daughters' marriage ceremonies. Based on a careful analysis of further data provided by the *nanga*, Roumequere then concluded that the use and meaning of the Bulawayo prehistoric figurines, the Venda clay fertility dolls, and the beaded marriage dolls in Southern Africa, could be explained in terms of the procreative powers of women. Roumequere's suggestion, I feel, is exciting and plausible. The particular Venda data on which it was based, on closer scrutiny, appears to be a mix of facts and fiction. A detailed critique of her ethnography, however, is not relevant here.

#### 4. INTERMEZZO: A MARVELLOUS AMBIGUITY

The starting point of any interpretation of material culture, in my opinion, should be the object itself. Let us for a moment suspend all ethnographic analogy and focus on the peculiar female icon itself. What is it that can be logically concluded from a careful observation of its formal features?

The type H3 (Hanisch) or Cat.1, sub-class 1b (Matenga) figurine clearly combines two forms: a female human body and a male sexual organ. The human shape is rendered naked and in an upright body posture, displaying a head, a torso and legs. Some samples depict arms as well. Its female identity is evidenced by the presence of breasts, external genitalia, a widened pelvic region and a large posterior. The phallus, which comprises the upper section of the figurine, is depicted as a straight shaft, narrowing down towards the head. In some samples (e.g. Summers 1957: 66, no.4) the phallic shape is portrayed rather graphically.

The peculiar female figurine is 'stylized', in that its natural appearance has been modified. Some body parts have been emphasized or exaggerated, whilst others have been made less visible or even removed. Arms are either absent or they have been thoroughly miniaturised. Anatomical details of legs and feet have been treated in similar fashion. Facial features are entirely missing. The breasts are small. The navel region is positively out of proportion. The thin and narrow torso has been elongated.

The ambiguity, with which the viewer is inevitably confronted, relates to the dual sexuality of the object. Therefore, it seems relevant to try and determine the exact nature of the relationship between the male and female components. Three options avail themselves to the analyst: (i) the male form dominates; (ii) both elements are depicted as complementary; (iii) the female form governs. I will explore these three options in the remaining sections of the essay. Before discussing the ethnographic data, I would like to add four more observations.

One. The female body represents the 'total' figurine, whereas the phallus is only a 'part' of it. Second observation, the absence of arms and facial features,

as well as the elongation of the torso render the phallus more visible. Thirdly, the shape of the lower extremities is not conducive to support or balance the figurine in a vertical position. (The other human figurine types have solid, pedestal-like feet.) Lastly, the erect shape of the phallus or torso, and the protuberance around the navel, which coincides with the area of the womb, are suggestive of the notion of sexual potency.

## 5. THE UBIQUITOUS PATRIARCHY

Huffman, in *Sculptured in Clay*, has tried to determine the essential features of Schroda's political system, through a reconstruction of its spatial organisation. The Zhizo political centre, he observed, revealed some of the main characteristics of a socio-cultural entity known as the 'Central Cattle Pattern'.<sup>1</sup> In the C.C.P. settlement structure, the cattle enclosure featured as a central, public (and male) domain. It was here that ancestors were appeased, chiefs were buried, disputes were resolved and important decisions were made. On this public space bordered the female or domestic domain, which consisted of the individual wives' kitchens, sleeping houses and grainbins (2002: 14–5).

In Huffman's understanding, particular forms of archaeological settlement have been generated by specific world-views. The C.C.P. expressed the world-view of the 'Eastern Bantu' peoples, which is said to include a patrilineal ideology about procreation; exchange of women for cattle; and male hereditary leadership. Because of the fact that the lay-out of Schroda generally corresponded with the C.C.P. settlement structure, Huffman felt confident to conclude that the Zhizo people must have practised some form of male hereditary leadership. For the same reason he proposed that the clay figurines from area six (near the cattle enclosures), must have been expressive of male political control in a patrilineally oriented society. They could only be explained in terms of male chiefly powers, he insisted (2002: 15–8).

Admittedly, many pastoralist societies articulate masculine interests. Absolute forms of unilineal descent, however, generally exist as textbook ideal-types only. In the real social world, female and male organising principles co-exist as competing forces. Social tension between the male and female principles featured in traditional southern African societies too. According to Hammond-Tooke, 'pure' patrilineal descent groups were only found among the Nguni-speaking peoples. The Sotho, Venda and Tsonga, on the other hand, exhibited a marked bilaterality (1998: 9). Social discontent between the two sexes, I would like to suggest, holds the key to a broader and more profound understanding of the concept of fertility and of the ambiguous female icon.

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<sup>1</sup> Huffman's C.C.P. model draws heavily from Kuper's classic *Wives for Cattle* (1982).

## 6. A DUAL VISION OF FERTILITY

Two ‘contemporary’ fertility icons symbolically combine male and female sexuality, like the H3 figurine does. I will demonstrate, shortly, that they are expressive of two opposing and gender-specific views of fertility. One was the marriage doll which accompanied a young bride to her new home (see 3 and 4). This object, often called the ‘child’, expressed its owner’s readiness for matrimony and childbirth. I will refer to it, simply, as ‘the Doll’. A combination of two wooden carvings, representing both sexes (see Illustration 2), functioned as a second fertility icon in a number of traditional societies in southern Africa. I label these carvings ‘the Pair’. They were used as a didactic means in boys’ initiation. Both the Doll and the Pair functioned in rites of passage. Surprisingly, their close conceptual affinity has been largely overlooked by art historians and anthropologists alike.<sup>2</sup>

### 6.1 THE PAIR

In spite of the fact that it falls outside the so-called core area of African sculpture, South Africa has produced some very fine woodcarving. In addition to functional objects such as the magnificent Tsonga headrests or Zulu ceremonial staffs and maces, master carvers have also created free-standing sculpture. Anitra Nettleton was the first researcher to promote the aesthetic worth, and to attempt a systematic analysis, of the paired human figurines. Any discussion of these artefacts must start with a brief consideration of her work (1988, 1989, 1991).

Nettleton identified male initiation as the ceremonial and institutional context for the use of figurative woodcarving. This is not surprising, since male artisans monopolised the craft of woodwork, as well as its tools. Most of the pairs in museums worldwide, date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are of Venda and Tsonga provenance. The paired humans obtained from northern Sotho initiation schools are of more recent origin. The Pairs that have been identified as belonging to the realm of Zulu sculpture, were most probably carved by Tsonga carvers, since male initiation was abolished in Zululand in 1820.

As an art historian, Nettleton’s concern was predominantly one of classification and formal stylistic analysis. She identified a number of aesthetic approaches: naturalist, tempered naturalist, attenuated, rotund and elongated. These different styles or modes of representation formed the basis for a tentative regional and ethnic classification. The same author did not dwell much on the social meaning of the carvings. Other than that they were used as ‘direct sexual

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<sup>2</sup> A neatly buried Pair was excavated by Hanisch in area six at Schroda, indicating that the H3 and the Pair icons coexisted also in prehistoric times.

signs' to teach the young initiates 'social and sexual mores', the particular meaning of these wooden figures, she presumed, has remained largely unknown.

Nettleton, nonetheless, has made an important observation. The use of wooden figurines in the context of Venda girls' initiation, we are told, is anomalous. Among the Venda, a male instructor manipulated a variety of wooden, painted and unpainted, human and animal models in the *domba* school.<sup>3</sup> The carvings were used as *matano* (lit. 'shows'), i.e. objects presented by the instructor to the novices when teaching the secret/sacred *milayo* (aphorisms or 'laws') of the school. Nettleton has suggested, quite astutely, that the presence of wooden statuary in the *domba* could be explained in terms of social power relations. The use of the Pair and other carvings, she proposed, probably ensured male control of female initiation (2002: 98).

When Nettleton decided that not much could be said about the Pair, she overlooked an important *domba* ritual known as *Nyalilo* ('she who weeps'). John Blacking described the *Nyalilo* 'lesson' as a mime in which two adults would pretend copulation under a blanket. More commonly, the master would use the carved male and female figures to 'demonstrate' the sacred act of sexual unison (under the cover of a blanket!). Afterwards, he poured a mix of maize flour and water (*mutuku*) to simulate the traces of semen on a sleeping mat (1969: 165–6).

Thirty years earlier, during Van Warmelo's research on Venda history and religion, *Nyalilo* was held in far greater esteem. It was called 'the greatest secret; a great *mulayo*; an indispensable rite; the *Mudzimu* (God) of the *domba*' (1932: 70–1). The mime was enacted on a lion skin and under a kaross by two elders, by the master and one of the girls, or by two of the initiates. The performance was meant to be the 'climax' of the initiation, and was reserved for the closing ceremony, another clear indication of its significance.

*Nyalilo* was not the only mime in which sexual unison was performed in front of the novices. Another ritual (*ngoma*), called *Gombalume*, required the initiates to squat and shuffle towards a drum that had been turned upside down. When they had reached the drum, they were instructed to dance on it before they jumped back onto the ground. The term *Gombalume* combines *khomba* (the young girl) with the suffix *-lume*, 'male'. The song lines reminded the novices that intercourse was beautiful, in that it was meant to produce children:

*Gombalume li na mpindule*

*Wa li vhona li no mpha madzanga*

Sexual union changes things [mpindule is a species of shrub or creeper]

You (will) see that it gives you beautiful things

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<sup>3</sup> Although the discussion pertaining to Venda girls' initiation in this paper is presented in the past tense, both the *domba* and the *vhusha* have survived into the present. Wooden initiatory statuary, possibly, was once monopolized by major rulers/chiefs. In the *domba* of less important rulers, clay figurines were used. Until the 1960's boys participated in some of the *domba* activities, including the Great Dance.

The spherical drum represented the pregnant womb. The novices' action (climbing and descending) referred to the process of pregnancy. The 'beautiful things' were the children that resulted from responsible intercourse; as in the saying: *madzanga a nnyo ndi nwana*. Literally: the beauty of private parts is a child (Blacking 1969: 157).

On closer inspection, references to the act of sexual union were omnipresent in both types of girls' initiation (*vhusha* and *domba*). Paired male and female symbols featured in aphorisms, rites, exercises, shows, mimes, songs and music. They expressed the 'core curriculum' of ritual pedagogy, namely the complementarity of the sexes: e.g. tusks and hoes; the ladle and the beer calabash; the hippo and the crocodile; the sea eagle and the pool; copper and lead etc. Some of the paired symbols, like the rainbow and the milky way, or the sea serpent and the rainbow serpent, clearly articulated the intimate bond between the realm of initiation on the one hand, and mythical time and space on the other. They also marked the sacred character of the rites of passage.

## 6.2 THE DOLL

The most important feature of the archaeological fertility icon is its dual sexual nature. The iconography of H3 figurines contains bodily references to both genders. The marriage dolls, similarly, display metaphorical details of the sexual identity of men and women. Their female nature is clearly pronounced. Dolls wear the outfit of married women (skirts, capes and headdresses), as well as feminine ornaments in beadwork and other materials (armrings, necklaces, earrings and waistbands). The rotundness of the dolls' torso, especially of those made of a calabash or wild orange, could easily be read as exemplifying the procreative powers of the womb. In contrast, allusions to male identity and sexuality are far less evident, as the 'phallic shape' is often disguised by female beadwork.

However, some of the older, pre-commercial doll types, like the southern Sotho *Ngoana modula* (Child of grass), displayed the feature of dual sexuality most evidently. This fertility icon has been admirably analysed by Marilee Wood (1998: 35–51). The body of *Ngoana modula* was crafted with a bundle of reeds, wrapped in plaited fibre and inserted in a calabash. The arms were made of little strings and the head was moulded of clay. The reed body, which sometimes was covered in clay too, tapered towards the head. After completing the body, the doll was dressed up in beadwork. Wood suggested that the creator of the icon had selected a calabash to represent the womb, and female fertility. In support, she mentioned how pots and calabashes emerged as symbols of the womb, from southern Sotho folk-tales, poetry and songs about barren women. She also proposed that the elongated reed body was intentionally shaped to depict a phallus, which seems plausible, since reeds were strongly associated with fertility and masculinity. Many of the indigenous cosmologies in southern



Africa located the birthplace of the human race in pools surrounded by reeds. Also, reed costumes and associated songs and dances of the first fruit ceremonies, were once common symbols for the celebration of nature's regenerative powers.

We can safely assume, then, that the design of at least some of the marriage dolls was meant to exemplify the combination of a female body with a phallus. However, little ethnographic material avails itself to determine the exact meaning of the relation between the male and female elements of the symbolic combo. This particular aspect of the ambiguous iconography of the Doll, seems to have escaped the interpretive efforts of most researchers. Not that it would have been easy to discuss the social and political dimensions of sexual potency with informants. In the absence of medical science, the issue of reproduction was heavily cloaked in fear and shrouded by secrecy. However, Margo Timm's analysis of the Kwanyama Ovambo dolls provides some enlightening data (1998: 207–17).

The Kwanyama Ovambo produced two kinds of dolls: *Okana kondunga* (Child of the palm fruit) en *Okana kositi* (Child of wood). For the crafting of the first type, the maker required two fruits from the female palm *Hyphaene ventricosa*. She looked for fruits that had fused together. The one rounded end became the head, the opposite end the torso of the doll. The decoration was kept minimal: a simple necklace of eggshell beads, a girdle and a textile apron. The *Kwanyama* closely associated the palm tree with female identity and fecundity. Timm lists a number of facts to evidence this association. Girls carried their doll-child on the back when attending the *Oshipe* harvest festival, a celebration of the fertility of the earth and of agriculture. The same doll accompanied young women into *efundula*, the female pre-marital initiation school. An important *efundula* song compared an adult woman to a fully grown tree. Some of the school's rituals were performed under the palm tree. The ceremonial outfit of the initiated girls included palm fibre bangles, a palm leaf basket (in which the doll was stored), and the palm fibre five-horned headdress. Finally, a palm leaf basket and a hoe were shown to neighbours and friends, when a newborn girl was first introduced to the outside world (1998: 207, 209).

The *Okana kositi* resembled the Child of the palm fruit, in that it consisted of two spherical ends. Only, these were carved from a single piece of wood by the husband-to-be and had a long, cylinder-like middle section, joining the two rounded ends. It was also more heavily decorated with beadwork, cowrie shells, cowhide, buttons and copper bangles. The maker of the object acquired the prerogative to name the doll and, by the same token, his firstborn child. The dolls were sometimes handed down by men to their daughters (1998: 209, 211).

Timm has suggested that the maker of the palm fruit Child not only emphasized femininity, but also attenuated the phallic middle section of the doll, through the selection of fruits that had fused together. The design of the Child of wood, on the other hand, is explained as an attempt on behalf of the Kwanyama men to redress or even to reverse this symbolical imbalance. The wooden doll, we are told, was intended to make a symbolical statement about the importance

of male fertility and descent. The main support for this hypothesis derives from Malan's thesis on extensive, precolonial changes in the social structure of the Kwanyama. Malan has suggested that the Kwanyama Ovambo once practiced matrilineal descent. The imposition of pastoralism, a masculine mode of subsistence, onto a matrilineal, horticultural society, caused a shift towards patrilineal succession (1995: 23).

The theme of sexual opposition lies tacitly embedded in marriage doll symbolism. This became obvious to me during fieldwork in the Malamulele-Giyani region (Limpopo Province) between 2004 and 2006, when I analysed the Tsonga doll (Dederen 2007). When a girl has graduated from *vukhomba* (puberty initiation), a doll was crafted by her paternal aunt (*hahani*). She was allowed to carry it around for some time and show it to neighbours and friends, in exchange for a small gift. It was then stored away until she got married. Its social meaning is neatly summarised in the following wedding song:

'Grow up, grow up you child. Now you are a woman. This doll shows that you have grown up. It shows you can perform your tasks in marriage.'

After arriving at her husband's village, the bride was secluded for a period of one week. The husband ended the ritual isolation by asking her to see the doll. She would only agree after he offered her a final gift (*ku alula* ceremony). The doll stayed with her 'mother' until the first child was born. It would eventually be dismantled in order to use the beads for other purposes.

The majority of research participants simply listed the doll as one of the many objects contributed by the family of the bride. Its purpose, they explained, was to honour the newly-weds and to remind them of the importance of being married. *Vukati a hi matlangwani*. Marriage is not a game. During the discussions of the Doll, I had noticed how some women referred to it using 'xanga', instead of the more common term *n'wana* (child). *Xanga* (or *nxanga*) is a beaded belt worn by the girls when graduating from the *vukhomba* rites. It took me several months before I grasped the connection between the two objects. In the process an additional layer of meaning was revealed to me.

The xanga belt was usually prepared for a girl before she joined *vukhomba*. It was only worn after the concluding rites, as part of the graduation outfit. Inside the school she wore a small beadlike object (also called *xanga*!) on a string around the waist. This bead had been dipped in her first menses and was treated with great care by the initiate. After *vukhomba* it was sewn inside a tiny beaded container and joined onto the belt as one of its frontal decorative ornaments. The sacred *xanga* bead was said to represent a woman's sex. During the marriage ceremonies, the bead was removed from the belt, hidden under the *xibelani* dancing skirt of her child-doll, and shown to her husband during the *ku alula* ceremony. Both the belt and the doll, some of the women maintained, were primarily containers to house the sacred bead. The bead, belt and doll, symbols of womanhood, motherhood and female fecundity, also indicated to the family

of the bridegroom that the young woman had been respectful to her body, the elders, the laws of the initiation school, tradition and the ancestors.

The ethnographic narrative of the Tsonga doll did not quite end there. As I explored it further, I was told that the bead, *tshutshu* was its proper name, was passed on by a woman to her firstborn daughter (*mativula*). The *xanga* belt for a *mativula* could only be prepared by a close maternal relative, usually the girl's mother or mother's mother. *Tshutshu*, it was said, belonged to 'those who feed from the same breast' and safeguarded the powers of motherhood from one generation to the following. It was put around the firstborn daughter's waist during the taking out ceremony, one month after birth. The baby was shown to the outside world together with her mother's *xanga* belt. The bead was sometimes hidden in the child's carrying sling, in order to protect the infant against witchcraft and disease. The sacred *tshutshu* was returned to the maternal grandmother for safekeeping, as soon as the little girl had started to walk. It would be reused at the time of her *vukhomba*. Some of the women insisted that the bead was *xitshungulu*, a term designating heirlooms used during the appropriation of ancestral spirits.

## 7. THE POLITICS OF THE WOMB<sup>4</sup>

Some important arguments have emerged from the ethnographic analysis of the Pair and the Doll. Both icons served within a similar didactic context, namely the preparation of youths for matrimony and parenthood. They both depicted, symbolically, the mystical and sacred fusion of the bodies of a woman and a man. The Pair confronted the viewer in a rather direct and obvious fashion; the symbolism of the Doll, in contrast, was more ambiguous and evasive. Either way, for the benefit of an audience of young initiates, both icons illustrated and celebrated the theme of sexual unison. Because of the capital importance of marriage, and because of the mystical nature of childbirth, relevant social wisdom was imparted to the novices by means of 'deep' metaphoric language, music and performance. Indigenous education, then, was a form of ritual, in which the body featured as a central metaphor.

The Pair communicated a simple narrative: no family could be complete without offspring. More significantly, this icon (re)presented male and female sexuality on an equal footing. Apart from the fact that the male carving was sometimes slightly taller than its female counterpart, there was no iconographic detail indicating that the concept underlying the visual form, could have been anything else than the complementarity of the sexes. Actually, it appears as if, for the sake of promoting the ideas of unity and interdependence, the notions of masculinity and femininity had been temporarily suspended.

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<sup>4</sup> I found the title of Lynn M. Thomas's book on reproductive controversies in contemporary Kenya (2003) most inspiring, and took the liberty of using it as a heading for this section of the essay.

In the Venda girls' rites of passage, the *Nyalilo* mime may well have been the most solemn expression of sexual complementarity; it certainly wasn't the only one. Paired symbols of both sexes permeated the initiation discourse, a further indication of the prime importance of this theme. It was also established that the Pair originated from the realm of men. Therefore, whenever the master of the *domba* manipulated wooden models of a woman and a man in front of an audience of female initiates, it was probably a masculine perspective that was being presented. The Pair could well have been a male instrument for the control and the ideological conditioning of the 'weaker sex'.

On closer scrutiny, the teaching of *milayo* (initiation aphorisms) exemplified various references to gender conflict. Some of the paired symbols, far from being neutral, were clearly expressive of male dominance and sexual aggression. Men were portrayed as hunters, shooting arrows, and women as their prey. Men were compared to predators, scavengers or dangerous animals like the sea-eagle, the vulture or the night adder. The vocabulary selected to describe sexual unison frequently defined it as an agonizing experience, either directly or metaphorically: e.g. 'ripping apart; striker of the thighs; crusher of the little bones; piercing; tearing; breaking; pole ramming; stirring of the entrails' etc. So much for complementarity! Perhaps the Pair was not an icon after all, but rather an idol, an expression of a false belief. Its real purpose was not so much to represent an idea acceptable to both sexes, than to instil a wider male-dominated ideology.

It would be naive to assume that women would have simply accepted this idol, when the Doll provided them with an ideal tool to counteract or, at least, symbolically weaken the patriarchy. The Doll was produced by women; it passed on knowledge relevant to women; and its use and ownership remained safely in their hands. Like the Pair, it combined male and female sexual forms, only, embedded in its design or mode of representation was a narrative of denial of masculinity. In many specimens the masculine element was covered with bead work, possibly to render it less visible or to feminise it. In fact, most Doll types essentially appear to the viewer as conical and cylindrical forms (the phallus), dressed in female garments and body ornaments. The Doll offered women the opportunity to express, celebrate or teach an autonomous concept of female identity and fertility. The Ovambo-Kwanyama represented an extreme case in point. Their 'all female' doll simply removed the phallus from the equation. The Tsonga dolls, on the other hand, embodied concealed references to the sacrosanct concepts of motherhood and matrilineality.

There is ample evidence for women's ideological opposition to the patriarchy in the related field of traditional storytelling.<sup>5</sup> In the late 1990's and between 2001 and 2003, I collected folk-tales in the northern and north-eastern regions of the Limpopo Province. Discord between the sexes, I learned, was a common theme. It was expressed in a variety of ways and in different degrees of

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<sup>5</sup> The realms of storytelling and initiation are very similar in their didactic purposes and modes of discourse.

intensity. In many narratives young women were being cautioned against the sexual aggression of men. In others, the virility of men was questioned or ridiculed. Often, husbands were reminded of their duties and of the social limits to their authority. Generally, the stories provided a public platform for the airing of women's grievances. In a few narratives women symbolically celebrated the essence of womanhood: their life-giving potency. In the realm of folklore, I concluded, the criticism against men was mostly discrete, indirect and of a non-subversive nature.<sup>6</sup> I would like to suggest that the same qualities apply to the Doll (and to its prehistoric predecessor, the archaeological figurine).

## 8. SUMMING UP

In the absence of written or oral sources, any reconstruction of prehistoric social life is almost by definition speculative. Moreover, many archaeological and anthropological questions pertaining to the study of fertility icons, ancient or modern, will remain unanswered. Yet, there is sufficient data to allow the formulation of some interesting assumptions concerning the meaning and function of the H3 clay image.

The intriguing phallic female icon belonged to a wider tradition of figurine making in a cultural region that included the northern section of South Africa, eastern Botswana and the southern and south-western parts of Zimbabwe. In terms of its formal features and ownership, the H3 type constituted a distinct class within the repertoire of Iron Age figurative art. The object was highly stylized and ambiguous in appearance. Unlike the other figurine types, it appears that it was designed to be carried around rather than to be placed in a standing position. Because of its portability and size, it could well have been an image of the Child (in addition to being a representation of Woman and Man). Moreover, the archaeological context clearly associates the archaeological icon with the world of women. The protuberance around the navel (the area of the womb), the erect shape of the phallus and the engraved decoration which links both, decisively point at sexual potency or fertility being its prime message.

It was mentioned earlier that the ambiguous relationship between the two essential components of the icon (female body-male organ), could be defined in three ways. Option one (the phallic element rules), must be rejected. The phallus, even if it has been rendered more visible by the stylisation of the figurine's limbs and head, was probably perceived by the maker as being only a part of the total female configuration. The image of a 'feminised penis', in any case, logically contradicts the idea of masculinity. Also, a number of 'pure' phallic figurine types have been found at Schroda. They were located in area six,

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<sup>6</sup> (Dederen J.-M. 2010).

a space associated with the realm of men.<sup>7</sup> Men, in other words, had ‘their own’ phallic clay images, ‘uncontaminated’ by references to the female body.

The two remaining options (simple juxtaposition; the female component rules) were ‘tested against’ the ethnographic data relating to the Pair and the Doll. The Doll, it was suggested, resembled the H3 figurine in terms of design or basic formal features, i.e. the combination of phallus and female torso. In addition, some of the dolls were found to be expressive of a separate, autonomous female perspective on procreation. Or phrased differently, these particular dolls presented the viewer with an alternative to the masculine vision of sexual complementarity (as embedded in and expressed by the Pair). I would like to propose here that the ambiguous H3 figurine, possibly, expressed the same alternative vision, namely sexual opposition. Like the Doll, this vision would have been propagated in a public and a private context.

Public use. It could be carried around and shown off to uninitiated girls and to future husbands, after the completion of the puberty rites. It could accompany the young bride on her way to the homestead of the husband. Young girls could even have been allowed to play with an old damaged specimen or a replica of her mother’s original doll. Its public use would not necessarily challenge or offend manhood. As far as men were concerned, the doll simply depicted a child and a woman’s willingness to continue the male lineage.

Private use. Within the intimate and secret realm of girls’ initiation, the Doll/figurine would have been perceived quite differently. Here, young women were most probably being cautioned against the sexual aggression of men. Masculinity could be taunted, mocked and challenged. E.g. female etiquette and respectful behaviour in the presence of men, or the performance of domestic duties for the benefit of men, took on a new meaning. They were inculcated, not as submissive behaviour, but as a matter of female pride. Furthermore, childbirth was probably presented to the novices as the ultimate fulfilment of womanhood and as the most important manifestation of female identity. In its most ‘extreme’ form, the feminised phallic image would have redefined manhood as a mere tool for the realisation of female identity.

Obviously, there could not have been one, single, immutable narrative of the Doll. There would have been several narratives and numerous ways for the expression of its subject matter and for its application in cultural practice. In one scenario, the figurine would have been a mere emblem. Its deeper meaning would have been expressed in a symbolic manner in the praxis of ritual pedagogy. In another scenario the clay image could have played a more ‘pro-active’ role, and dominated the actual teaching. It could have served as a kind of ‘talismán’, protecting the novices in the liminal state that is usually associated with rites of passage. It could also have featured in actual fertility rites, restoring the procreative powers of women who failed to produce children.

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<sup>7</sup> Phallic figurine types have been excavated from the same sites where the H3 type/phallic torsos have been found. Their exact meaning remains obscured by the fact that no ‘contemporary’ counterpart could be identified for them.

These social narratives of the use of the figurine would have been changed, adapted and innovated over the centuries. In the final analysis, I believe, they were all variations on a singular theme. The figurine stated tacitly what all women knew intuitively, and what men did not like to discuss, or refused to admit openly, namely that the phallus does not beget children, but the womb does: in the sphere of human procreation, female sexual potency rules supreme.

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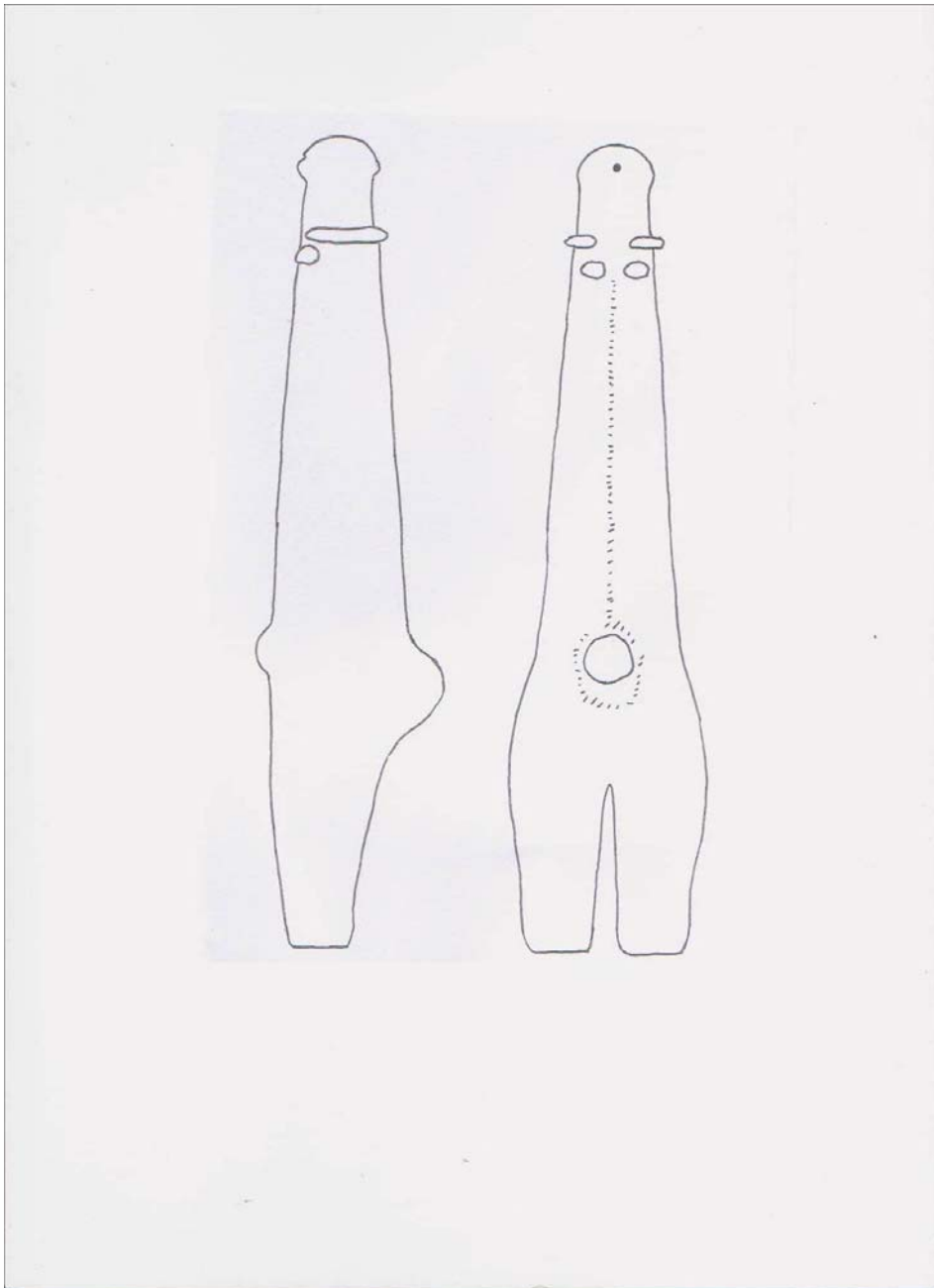
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ILLUSTRATIONS



**Illustration 1.** *Sketch of a reconstructed H3 figurine from Schroda, 1000 A.D. Fired clay. H: 240mm.*



**Illustration 2.** *Paired female and male carving, by Azwimphelele Magoro, 1996. Quinine tree, ochre ointment. H: 600mm. Author's collection.*



**Illustration 3** (on the left). *Gimwale Doll* (Ntwane), 2004. *Beads, grass, rope, animal hide.*  
*H: 300mm. Author's collection.*

**Illustration 4** (on the right). *N'wana Doll* (Tsonga), 2006. *Beads, textile, buttons, metal bells and medallions.*  
*H: 190mm. Autor's collection.*