Presidential Address: The Antiquity of Lobola

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1 author:

Thomas Huffman
University of the Witwatersrand
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THE ANTIQUITY OF *LOBOLA**

T. N. HUFFMAN
Department of Archaeology
University of the Witwatersrand
P O Wits, 2050

email: 107arcl@cosmos.wits.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The debate over the role of cattle during the Early Iron Age continues despite the evidence for the Central Cattle Pattern at Broederstroom and KwaGandaganda. A reassessment of early ceramics places Broederstroom in the third phase of Urewe (the 'Eastern Stream'), rather than in Kalundu (the 'Western Stream'). This reassessment suggests that the cattle at Broederstroom were descended from Urewe herds further east in the lowveld. Salvage excavations at the Riverside site near Nelspruit, 300 km east of Broederstroom, confirm this prediction and suggest in turn that lobola *was brought from East Africa.*

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Introduction

Lobola, or a preference for bridewealth in cattle, was a defining characteristic of Eastern Bantu speakers in southern Africa (Kuper 1982). Among other things, the exchange of cattle for wives underpinned kinship relations and political power. Because of its central role, the antiquity of *lobola* is of interest to Africanists, and the subject of a serious debate. Excavations at Broederstroom a few years ago demonstrated that *lobola* probably existed among some Early Iron Age societies, but it did not fully resolve the disagreement. More recently, the re-classification of the Broederstroom ceramics near Pretoria and salvage excavations at an Early Iron Age site near Nelspruit make a further contribution. These new findings also have implications for the Early Iron Age in East Africa.

I begin with a brief outline of the debate and then turn to the new findings and their implications.

The Debate

The *lobola* debate centres on the role of cattle during the Early Iron Age (EIA). Broadly speaking, there have been two schools of thought.

In the first, Africanists inferred the importance of cattle from the number and proportion of large to small stock. At Broederstroom, for example, there was one cow to 42 sheep and goats (Brown in Mason 1981; Brown 1990), and small stock regularly out numbered cattle in other EIA sites (Plug & Voigt 1985). This disparity was thought by some to be due to environmental constraints (Hall 1986, 1987, 1988): grain agriculturalists needed to clear the thick coastal forests before cattle herds could flourish. As cattle herds increased through time, cultural attitudes towards them were thought to have shifted from communal to private ownership (e.g., Garlake 1978). By AD 1000, cattle had increased sufficiently in numbers, and therefore importance, to be used for bridewealth.

The second school questioned the inductive logic of inferring social importance from faunal remains alone. In contrast, it emphasised the identification and location of cattle byres in relation to other features in a settlement. At Broederstroom, for example, there were at least four byres (about 20 m across) in the central area of four different residential units (Huffman 1990, 1993). Further, if there was one cow, there had to have been at least 100 in the neighbourhood in order for the herds to reproduce (Dahl & Hjort 1976). Clearly, faunal samples alone do not accurately reflect cattle numbers.

As this brief synopsis shows, the difference between the two schools begins with theory. In the first place, economy is not a mere list or cluster of resources and technologies. It is instead a form of organisation—a way of procuring, distributing and consuming resources. The way a society uses resources must, at least in part, be related to its wider social organisation that in turn derives its meaning from a worldview, or culture. Patterns of decisions and cultural attitudes are therefore more important in defining an economy than a specific resource.

Secondly, as the philosophy of science has taught us, data cannot speak for themselves. To understand the complexity of past economies and culture, we need models—that is hypotheses—informed by anthropological theory to apply to data. One model germane to the *lobola* debate centres on settlement organisation. This Central Cattle Pattern (Fig. 1) is an ethnographically-derived model that presents the relationships between physical components of a settlement in terms of such concepts as gender, kinship, status and sacred forces (Huffman 1982; Kuper 1982). The Central Cattle Pattern is a generalised normative model that emphasises the underlying principles that give order to society. The model thus goes beyond a simple list of isolated traits. Most importantly, the model represents a cultural package: it is restricted to Eastern Bantu speakers who share a patrilineal ideology about procreation, male hereditary leadership, beliefs about the role of ancestors in daily life and a preference for bridewealth in cattle. I do not claim that all aspects of a culture, or all cultures, are bounded packages; I only claim that these four attitudes about procreation, leadership, ancestors and bridewealth are necessarily interrelated and that the Central Cattle Pattern is necessarily associated with them.

Logically, the presence of the Central Cattle Pattern at Broederstroom effectively countered the first school and showed that *lobola* was most probably present in the EIA. In practice, however, this evidence did not wholly resolve the debate. One important criticism concerned methodology. Some argued that the excavated portion of Broederstroom was too small to reconstruct the settlement pattern (Lane 1994/95). In reply, two points need to be clarified. First, the majority of space in the Central Cattle Pattern is open and devoid of features. If one takes

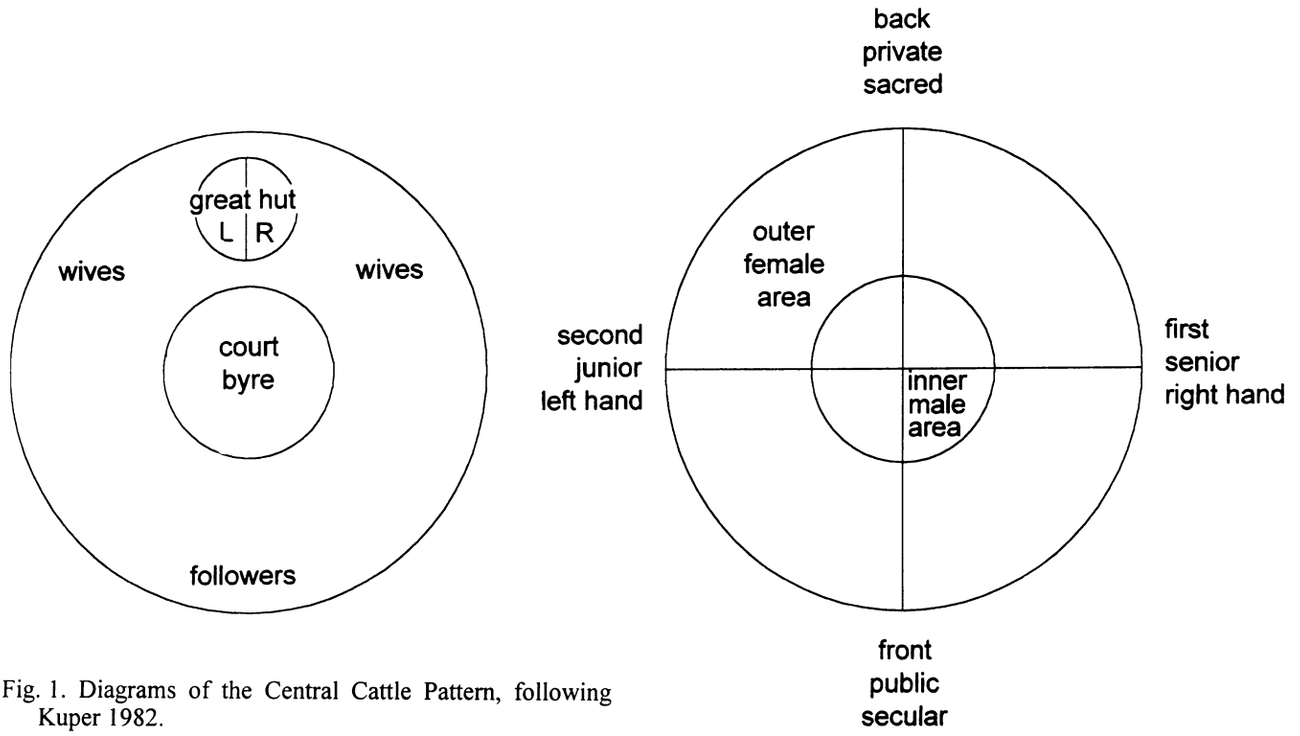

Fig. 1. Diagrams of the Central Cattle Pattern, following Kuper 1982.

Denbow's (1986) large-scale excavations at Kgaswe as an example, the byre, pits, burials, midden, grain bins and huts together only account for about 20% of the total settlement space. The pertinent question therefore is which 20% is excavated. At Broederstroom the settlement constituted several homesteads: one, the lower levels of Area K–X, yielded a cattle byre with a burial and dung-lined pit, fragments of other burials, a separate dung-lined pit, and two forge areas with associated slag heaps. Two hut floors outside this area were also probably associated. Higher levels in the K–X area yielded more hut floors and grain bin foundations from another homestead (Mason 1981; Huffman 1993). The quality of the data from this area is therefore good, regardless of the percentage it represents.

Secondly, since the model emphasises relationships between settlement features, certain features may be particularly diagnostic. In the case of Broederstroom the lower level of Area K–X was the centre of a residential unit and therefore formed part of a network of relationships with the residential periphery. Because of the necessary interconnections between the pattern and certain cultural attitudes, the central byre, burial and dung-lined pit are sufficient evidence for *lobola*.

Whitelaw (1994) recovered equally good data from large-scale excavations at KwaGandaganda in Natal. These together with Broederstroom, however, still did not resolve the debate because there were at least two different movements of EIA people into southern Africa. Commonly called the Eastern and Western Streams (Phillipson 1977), each could have been culturally different. A re-classification of Broederstroom affects this point.

Re-classification

Originally, I placed Broederstroom in the Kalundu Tradition (i.e., Western Stream), but recent work changes this assignment. An analysis of EIA pottery from the eastern part of the country (Klapwijk & Huffman 1996) shows that Silver Leaves represents the first phase, Mzonjani and Eiland Salt Works the second and Broederstroom the third phase of the Kwale Branch of the Urewe Tradition (i.e., the Eastern Stream). KwaGandaganda on the other hand, contains a large assemblage of Msuluzi phase ceramics, the 'second expression' of the EIA in Natal (Maggs 1980). Msuluzi was probably produced by Kalundu people who moved into the lowveld (Huffman 1982), incorporating Mzonjani communities and some of their stylistic elements

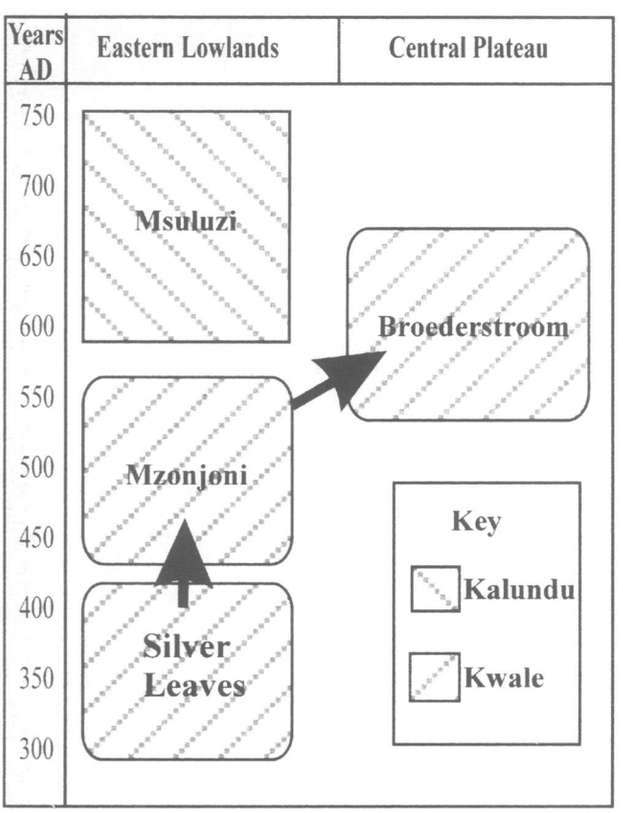

Fig. 2. Some ceramic relationships in the Early Iron Age.

in the process. These ceramic and historical relationships, shown in Fig. 2, have major implications for the *lobola* debate.

The ecological argument against cattle in the EIA was first developed for the eastern lowlands where Mzonjani sites occur. It was the forests here that grain agriculturalists needed to clear before cattle herds could flourish. But if Broederstroom was the oldest phase in Gauteng and if the Central Cattle Pattern did not originate there, then cattle and the Central Cattle Pattern had to have been present in older phases of the Urewe Tradition. This conclusion represents a predictive consequence of the re-classification of Broederstroom.

The EIA site near Nelspruit 300 km east of Broederstroom satisfies this prediction. I turn now to a description of the site and the excavation results.

The Riverside Early Iron Age Site

The Riverside site (25.26.12S 30.58.08E) lies a few kilometres north of Nelspruit in the eastern lowlands, next to the confluence of the Nelspruit and Crocodile River. It was discovered during the course of an environmental impact assessment for the new offices of the Mpumalanga Provincial Government.

A bulldozer cutting for a new road to the government offices exposed storage pits, cattle byres, a burial and a midden on the crest of a gentle slope (Fig. 3). Salvage excavations in December 1997 and March 1998 recovered the burial, and the contents of several pits.

Fig. 3. The Riverside site.

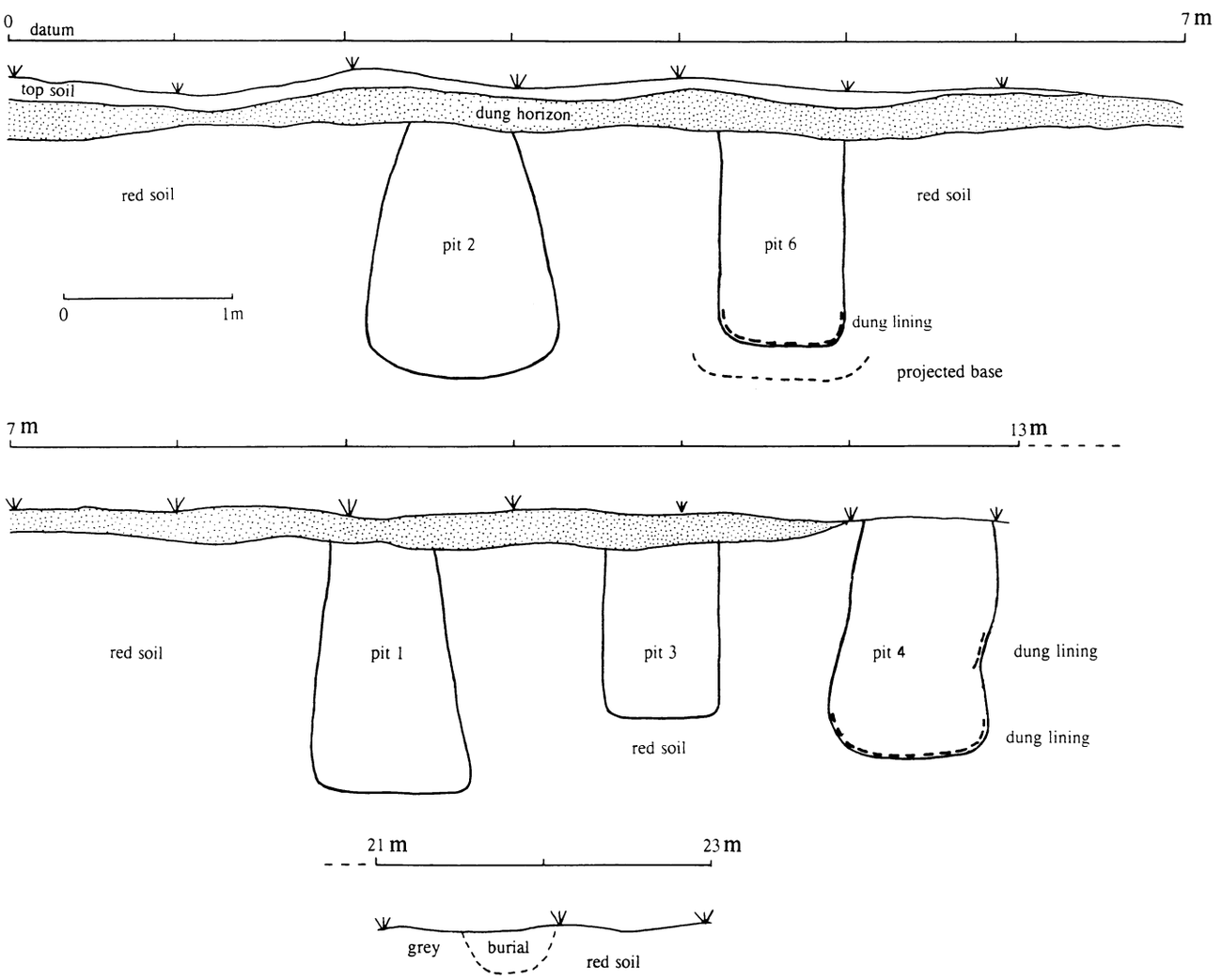

Fig 4. Section showing cattle byre and storage pits. NB: The section did not cut through the middle of each pit.

One bell-shaped pit contained charcoal, cattle bones and pottery dating to the eleventh century (AD 1070 ± 40 BP (Pta–7670) calibrated to AD 990–1025 using the Pretoria calibration curve adjusted for the Southern Hemisphere (Vogel *et al.* 1993)). Some 30 m north lay a cluster of at least five other pits (Fig. 4) connected to a 100 mm to 200 mm thick grey horizon. This horizon could be identified as the remains of a cattle byre by its phytolith content (microscopic silica formations derived from grasses, sedges and herbs). The pits themselves varied from 1 m to 1,45 m below the byre. At least two still bore the remains of a dung lining, and one appears to have been smeared twice as if it had been reused. Charcoal from Pit 2 dates to 1540 ± 50 BP (Pta–7591), which calibrates to between AD 540 and AD 630. This calibration overlaps with the Mzonjani and Broederstroom phases, while associated pottery (Fig. 5) also resembles both Mzonjani and Broederstroom. The early assemblage therefore clearly belongs to the Kwale Branch of Urewe.

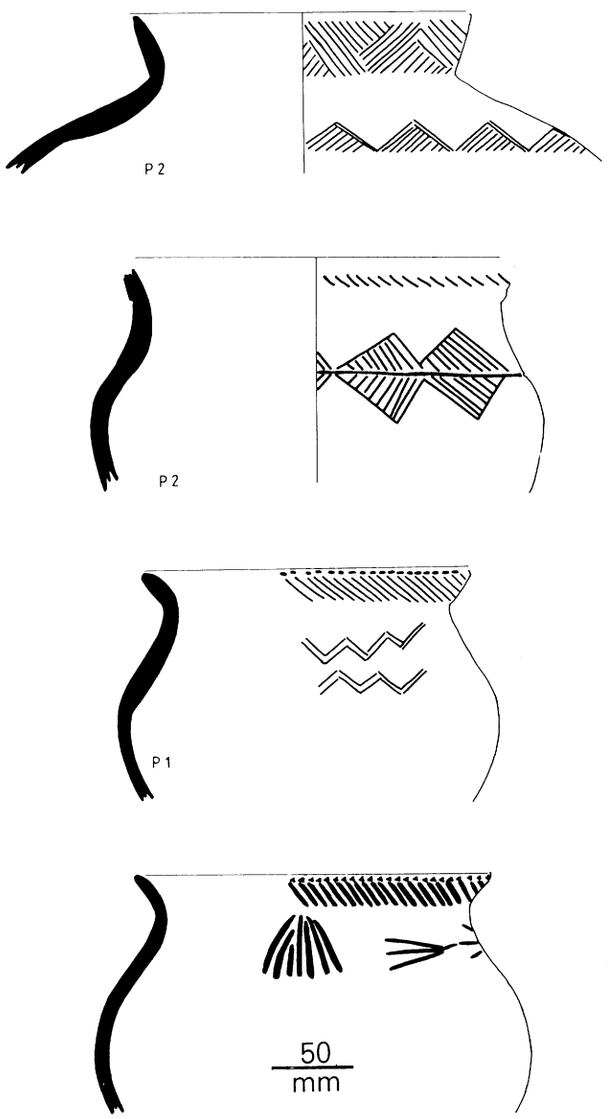

Fig. 5. Early Iron Age pottery from Riverside.

The burial of a young woman 8 m north of the pit cluster has been radiocarbon dated to 390 ± 60 BP (Pta–7654) and indicates that there was a third component. Consequently, other features in the cutting that lacked diagnostic pottery are difficult to assign to a specific occupation. Grey areas at 51,70–54,15 m; 57,55–59,35 m and 62,75–70,20 m were probably the remnants of more byres. Another grey patch with early pottery at 84–96 m contained the remains of a pit, and it was probably also a cattle pen.

The correct assignment of these features would clarify the size of the central area of the early component. If the pit and byre cluster were associated with the other byres, the central area would then have been at least 90 m across, similar to KwaGandaganda. If they were separate, then the pattern is similar to Broederstroom. Whatever the case, the byre and cluster of pits—especially the two with dung lining—are diagnostic of the Central Cattle Pattern. Because of the necessary interconnections between settlement features and cultural attitudes, the Riverside site, like Broederstroom and KwaGandaganda, provides archaeological evidence for *lobola*.

Environment, Location and Interaction

The environmental argument against *lobola* in the eastern lowlands, of course, falls away with the settlement evidence from Riverside. Instead of environmental barriers, the lack of evidence for cattle at other Mzonjani sites must be due in part to such factors as preservation, excavation strategy and analytical techniques. Another part of the problem was the database available ten years ago. Mzonjani sites were then mostly recorded along the inland margin of the coastal dune cordon. Further, the relationship of Mzonjani to Silver Leaves and Broederstroom was unclear. Now that more sites have been recorded and we know the relationship, there are many related sites further inland. Although the Natal interior may have been too arid for agricultural communities during the Mzonjani phase (Whitelaw & Moon 1996), a coastal focus was not the norm, and environmental factors did not prevent the spread of cattle into southern Africa.

At present, it is unclear whether cattle and the Central Cattle Pattern spread independently with the Kalundu Tradition, or whether the Central Cattle Pattern in southern Africa was initially limited to Urewe Tradition settlements. KwaGandaganda and the Msuluzi phase, one should remember, most probably incorporated earlier Urewe people, while Silver Leaves sites that may predate the Kalundu Tradition are known in Zimbabwe (Huffman 1978) and the Soutpansberg (Klapwijk & Huffman 1996). Thus the spatial organisation of Kalundu settlements could have been derived from earlier Urewe communities.

What is more, it is still an empirical question whether *lobola* and the Central Cattle Pattern evolved locally or were introduced. Because the Central Cattle Pattern was undoubtedly present in Urewe Tradition sites in southern Africa, it is relevant to consider its possible origins in East Africa.

The argument against an origin in East Africa involves an environmental component similar to the debate in southern Africa. It also involves an inappropriate model of cattle keeping. I turn now to this last topic.

East African Implications

EIA sites in East Africa have yielded few cattle bones. EIA sites, furthermore, appear oriented towards arable soils, as they are in southern Africa, rather than grasslands (MacLean 1994/95; Reid 1994/95). Cattle pastoralists, on the other hand, were present in the savannah from about 1000 BC (Robertshaw 1990), and large cattle herds grazed the interlacustrine grasslands during the Late Iron Age (LIA) (Sutton 1993). This combination of data leads to the belief that EIA farmers in East Africa did not consider cattle important.

A fundamental weakness in this interpretation is the datum for determining cultural importance. East Africa today incorporates a wide range of economies, from those based on cultivation to elite classes of cattle pastoralists. Because of the prominence of pastoralism, East Africanists tend to use the LIA pattern of large-scale cattle herding as their model for a cattle-oriented society (e.g., Sutton 1994/95). This LIA model, however, is inappropriate for sociocultural reasons.

Most importantly, the model equates the survival, or subsistence, value of cattle with social significance. Because of this misconception, Reid thought EIA economies were more like Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers than LIA pastoralists (paralleling an argument by Hall (1988) for southern Africa).

To clarify this issue we must return to theory and the concept of economy. Economy involves a network of politics, kinship, culture and ideology. Thus Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers and EIA agropastoralists all could have gathered wild plants and hunted wild game and still have had quite different systems of procurement, distribution and consumption. Group access to wild resources, after all, is organisationally different from the unequal ownership of domestic stock.

Further, it should be remembered, the significance of *lobola* lies beyond subsistence. As a Botswana student recently expressed it: "they [cattle-owning elders] would rather starve to death than eat one of their cows". Rather than simply subsistence, cattle were the main avenue to status, success and power.

Among Eastern Bantu speakers with the Central Cattle Pattern, herd size helps to determine degrees of success and power, and in that sense herd size is related to social significance. But the reverse—that in any society social significance is determined by herd size—does not logically follow. This fundamental misunderstanding is the basis of the debate.

The ultimate origin, or origins, of bridewealth in cattle is an exceedingly complex issue. But whatever the original causes, once evolved it is certainly possible to maintain *lobola* with small herds.

The Shona provide a relevant example. At the beginning of this century, the Zimbabwe national herd was greatly reduced because of rinderpest, and the average homestead only owned two beasts. Nevertheless, Shona speakers had a fully integrated bridewealth system requiring four beasts per wife. As herds increased, so did the ratio. In the late 1920s, when the average had grown to five beasts per homestead, the normal bridewealth was ten head of cattle (Holleman 1952:162).

Lane (1994/95) criticises this example because it allegedly disregards certain historical details. But he misses the point about numbers. Regardless of the context, Shona speakers at the time were able to maintain bridewealth with small numbers of cattle. Large cattle numbers are thus not required evidence for *lobola*, and the LIA model in East Africa is inappropriate.

The origin of *lobola* among Sotho-Tswana and Nguni is also relevant to this debate. For independent reasons, linguists (e.g., Louw & Finlayson 1990) and archaeologists (e.g., Huffman 1989) place the Nguni and Sotho-Tswana language families in East Africa during the EIA. Evidently, the ancestors of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana people moved into southern Africa between about AD 1200 and AD 1300. Significant to the *lobola* debate, the earliest Sotho-Tswana sites in South Africa were organised according to the Central Cattle Pattern (e.g., Hanisch 1979). It is possible, of course, that early Nguni and Sotho-Tswana adopted the pattern from their Eastern Bantu relatives already living in southern Africa. But if this was the case, the transition was very rapid indeed. Rather, it is more likely that early Nguni and Sotho-Tswana brought the pattern with them.

As this final section shows, the argument against the earlier presence of *lobola* in East Africa is remarkably similar to the debate in southern Africa. In both areas, there has been an appeal to environmental restrictions and the use of a model that equated numbers with social significance. The evidence from Broederstroom and now Riverside undermines this argument. The cattle in these Urewe sites are the oldest so far in southern Africa, and merely their presence challenges the interpretation of the EIA in East Africa. Iron Age research in East Africa needs to take a new direction.

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