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STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

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The Rise of a Wall Decorating Tradition in Rural
Southern Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Southern Africa's rural architecture has long been associated with a tradition in wall decoration which predates the arrival of white colonialists to the region's interior. These designs are generally acknowledged to be the product of women's efforts, and generally have remained their preserve in rural areas right up to present times. Thus it is not difficult to show that this work is a reflection of rural women's fertility, political status, religious cosmology and, in certain instances, family lineage. Within this interplay of social patterns however, the choice and meaning of pictorial subject matter begins to play a different and somewhat ambiguous role. Originally the rural artist derived her inspiration from natural or geometric designs and rendered them in monochromatic earth colours. In more recent times however, most particularly since the 1940s, their scope has been widened to encompass a wide range of colours and subject matter. Many western observers have chosen to interpret this as an obvious manifestation of "cultural cross pollination" and "westernisation", thus denying its social and historical context. A survey of those areas where wall decoration is still widely practiced today however, reveals that although many such designs are undoubtedly polychromatic and inspired by urban themes, these may, nonetheless, be linked to a wider concept of land control and the economic domination of the rural community on the part of another group competing for the same resources. Thus what may outwardly appear to be an act of assimilation, and perhaps even appeasement may, in another context be interpreted as an act of protest and open defiance, visible only to those privy to its codification. This paper seeks to analyse the social processes which give rise to rural wall art and contends that, in the final analysis, this activity is the result of black resistance to outside political domination and land alienation.

FUNCTIONAL NATURE OF WALL DECORATION

It was found, during the course of current field work, that the decoration of rural architecture tended to fall into two major camps : the structural and the manipulative.

Structural decorative patterns arise from the fact that vernacular architecture in general derives much of its stylistic character from its functional use of found materials. Thus the natural textures, details and forms which are achieved in the process of construction are important, at a primary level, in determining the aesthetic nature of such buildings. This does not mean to say that structural elements may not, in themselves, be manipulated (illustration 1). It is possible, for example, to achieve, within the bounds of any one particular technology, a number of different resolutions to the same problem. It is often the case however, that one particular solution will tend to gain predominance in a geographical location or region and thus, with time, may become identified with the material culture of its builders. At the same time it may also be incorporated into their system of cognitive symbolism. It is therefore

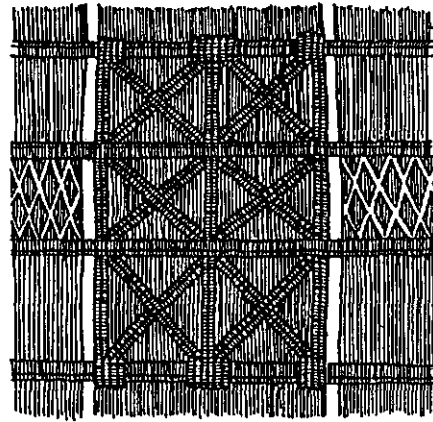


Illustration 1. Decorative rope patterns, Natal Ngweni homestead, Mpenze, Kwa Zulu, c. 1981.

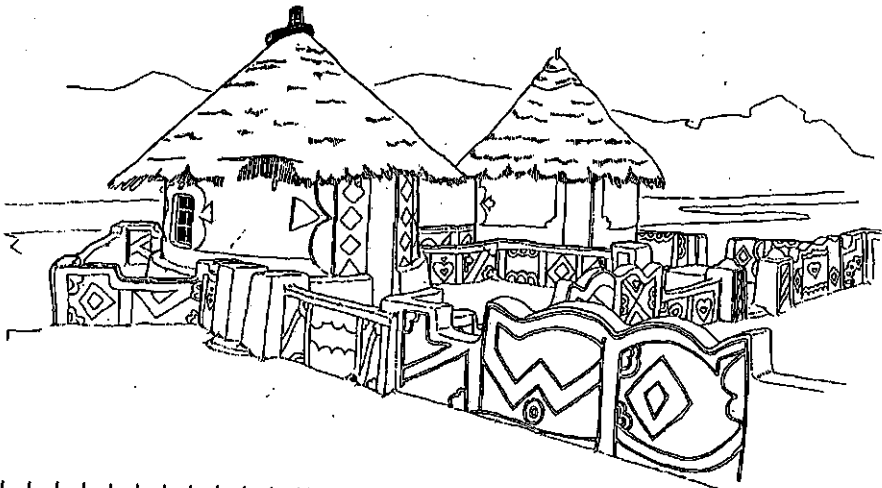


Illustration 2. Venda homestead, Mutele, Northern Venda, July 1989

possible to conclude that, where a group living under one set of conditions develops a strong attachment to a particular style of architecture, it will, under different conditions, attempt to reproduce its more obvious and visual components by manipulative and artificial means. This is equally true in those cases where an architecture is not their own but the acquisition of its aesthetics is deemed to be either desirable or advantageous to the group's interests.

On the other hand manipulative decoration may be seen to be an imposition of textures, colours and forms upon the built habitat for reasons which bear little functional relationship to its structural performance. The motivation behind such an activity may be of a social, religious, mystical, political or symbolic nature, although it is probable that, in reality, a combination of two or more of these elements will be involved at any one time. Unlike structural decorative patterns which arise as the result of the combined efforts of both men and women, most if not all southern African rural groups consider the application of painted motifs to be the work of women (illustration 2).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Perhaps the earliest evidence of a tradition in woman's wall art was recorded by Burchell, who visited the Tlhaping homestead of "Serrakutu" at Dithakong in 1812 where this man's younger wife :

"... exhibited her paintings in a manner which evinced that she was well satisfied with her own performance. They were the figures of several animals, rudely drawn, with a paint of white earth, against the front-wall of the house." (1)

A year later Campbell visited the same homestead and :

"... found them very rough representations of the camel leopard (giraffe), rhinoceros, elephant, lion, tiger and stein-buck, which Salakootoo's wife had drawn on the clay wall with white and black paint." (2)

Neither traveller included pictorial graphics of these patterns with their accounts and it was left for Campbell to rectify this omission seven years later when he depicted the interior of a chief's dwelling at Kaditshwene, a Hurutsha town located immediately to the north of present-day Zeerust (illustration 3). This he found to be :

"...neatly finished; ... The wall was painted yellow and ornamented with figures of shields, elephants, cameleopards, etc. It was also adorned with a neat cornice or border painted of a red colour." (3)

Despite being relatively brief, these three reports, taken as a whole, reveal a number of significant factors :

- a. that decoration then, as now, was woman's work
- b. that lime-whites and charcoal or soot-blacks were

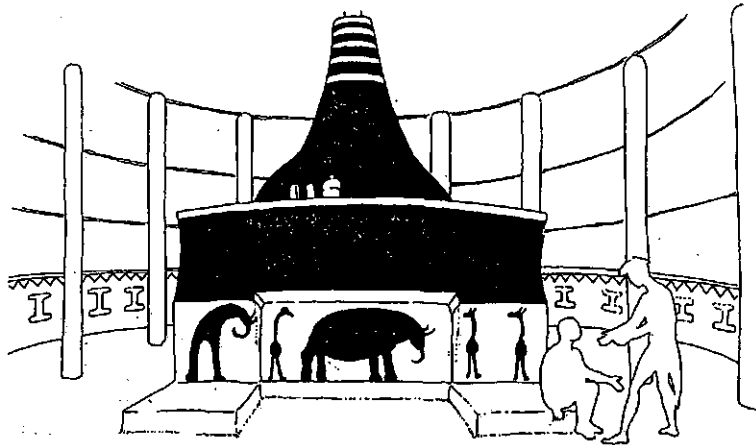


Illustration 5. Campbell: Interior of Tswana chief's dwelling, Kaditshwene, (near present-day Zeerust), c. 1820.



Illustration 4. Campbell: Portrait of a Tswana warrior bearing I-shaped shield, c. 1820.

available to the rural artist thus giving her palette of earth colours a wide range of shades.

- c. and that decorative patterns could be either geometrical and abstract or figurative and representational.

Despite what has been written in the past by such authors as Walton (4), wall art was not limited to any one particular area in southern Africa but can be considered to have been general practice, in one form or another, among most of its agricultural pastoralist groups. Baines, who visited a Xhosa dwelling near the Kabousie river in 1848 told that :

"In the mud with which the interior of the hut was plastered, pumpkin seeds had been stuck in various patterns, one somewhat resembling a snake, and then picked out, leaving their glossy scale attached to the surface of the wall." (5)

This must have created a pattern very similar in nature to the "dotted" drawings recorded by Mathews in this same area nearly 130 years later (6), a style of decoration which, in the interim, has since largely disappeared.

Kropf, who visited the same region between 1846 and 1889 struck a more contemporary note when he described how the Xhosa woman :

"... smoothes the walls and paints them with yellow, red or white clay or uses all three colours at the same time and paints designs on them." (7)

Campbell's report of 1820 is also important in that it reveals that the series of 'I' (or "sideways-H") designs painted on the interior perimeter of the dwelling wall is a graphic representation of the Sotho/Tswana shield pattern (illustration 4). Thus it may be assumed that even then material objects of everyday life were being reduced by rural artists into a series of basic forms and incorporated into their work. Therefore the existence of a body of cognitive symbology perceived to exist in current Sotho wall, Ndebele and Tsonga wall art must be seen to have its roots in a rural society which precedes the growth of industrialisation in southern Africa.

SOME CASE STUDIES

It is possible, in theory, for wall decoration to accommodate as many variations, based upon theme and style, as there are artists to paint them. In reality, however, the functions of such art are governed by the same social, economic and environmental processes as those which generate rural architecture. As in the case of the latter, therefore, there are also certain stylistic preferences which, in the past, have become established on a regional or group basis. In each instance a series of broad aesthetic principles have emerged within which the rural artist is able to create her own individual statement in terms of colour and subject matter. For the purposes of this argument we are only interested in four such regional manifestations in the more

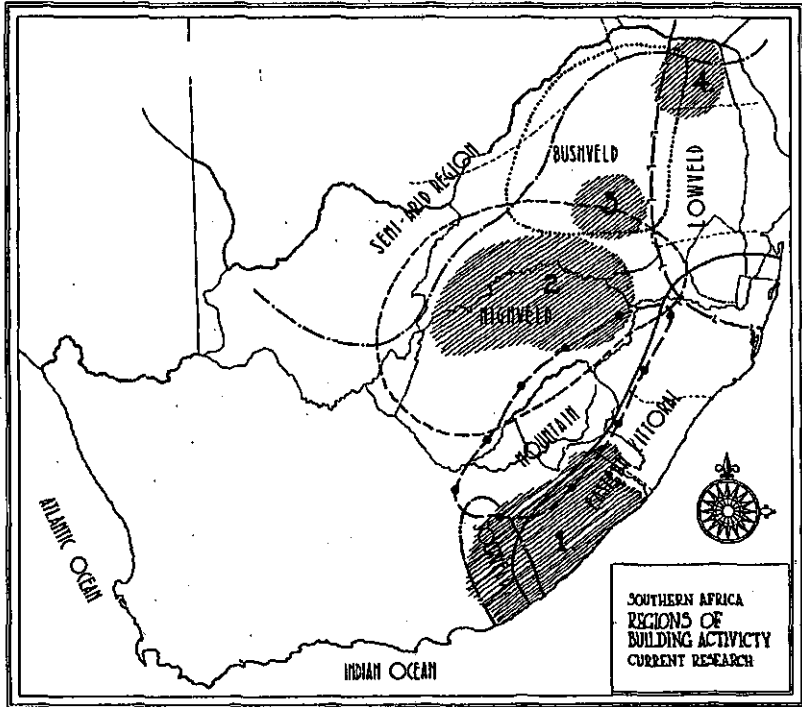


Illustration 5. Map showing areas of case-study under discussion.

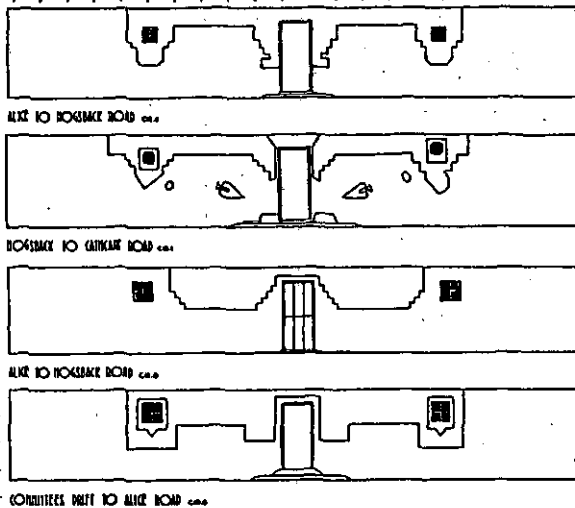


Illustration 6. Examples of wall decoration, Ciskei region, c. 1979.

recent history of southern Africa (illustration 5).

1. THE XHOSA-MFENGU CASE STUDY

The Ciskei and southern Transkei region has long been an area of conflict between indigenous blacks and immigrant whites. Not only was it the stage of nine separate border wars, between 1811 and 1879, but, between 1822 and 1837 it also became the home of Mfengu refugees from the Mfecane. These, together with the activities of missionaries, government agents and labour recruitment officers have all left a legacy of bitterness which manifests itself to the present day in a deep and uncompromising political radicalism. Although the boundaries of black-white settlement were formalised as long ago as 1913 (8), these are still a matter of heated dispute.

This region also has deep historical associations with a grass building technology which has since fallen into disuse. At one time the beehive dwelling was ubiquitous, being built in some parts as recently as three generations ago, but from the 1870s onwards it began to be replaced by other architectural forms. At first the region's builders began to raise the grass dome upon a wattle and daub drum wall but from the 1920s onwards this type of roof construction began to be supplanted by a conical structure. Today the cone on cylinder is the single most popular dwelling form in the Transkei and Ciskei. Although its introduction and spread has been attributed by some chroniclers to the work of missionaries among the Mpondo during the 1850s (9), this point has not yet been confirmed by current research.

The phenomenon of the so-called "white-faced" huts of the Transkei appears to have its origins in the era prior to the mid-1920s (10) and could have arisen as early as the 1900s (11). The form taken by this decoration tends to follow a set pattern: the whitewashed panel covers the front third or door facade of the hut circumference; it is seldom taken down to ground level but a 500 mm high splashband is allowed along its base; the surrounds to both door and window openings are expressed; and sometimes a whitewash band is allowed to run the full perimeter of the hut wall, but only to such a depth as may be sheltered by the width of the eaves. Further decorative patterns of an individual nature may be applied to the door and window surrounds and, in some recorded examples, the rear of the hut is rendered in a darker clay - presumably for reasons of environmental control (illustration 6). This pattern of decoration may be perceived to bear a close resemblance to the exterior facade treatment of some domestic structures during the Victorian era. The conclusion that this style of design arose as a response on the part of the indigenous population to the influx of missionaries and other white settlers to the region during the last century is therefore inescapable. This is supported by informants in the southern Transkei who have attributed its introduction to the Mfengu, also nicknamed locally as the "school people" who, as refugees from the Difaqane, were among the first in the region to gravitate into the social and economic sphere of missionary influence. At one time the use of whitewash was associated with a Mfengu and a Christian identity, a

supposition supported by the fact that hut painting and renewal takes place shortly before the Christmas festivities. However, for the past three generations the painting of hut walls has become a common place occurrence in the Transkei. Today little popular significance is attached to it other than the fact that both the decoration and the cone on cylinder form have become incorporated into the local architectural stereotype.

An interesting connection was made by some informants in the southern Transkei who remarked upon the similarity perceived to exist locally between the white-washing of a hut facade and the fact that it is customary in this region for young mothers to smear white clay on their faces after the birth of a child. The domestic architecture of this region may be perceived to have strong physiognomical characteristics, with the doorway acting as a nose or mouth and the windows on either side as eyes. This parallel has not escaped the local inhabitants, leading to the question whether the two practices are not in fact part of the same process. The young mother smears her face with white clay in order to ward off evil from herself and her baby at a time when they are both vulnerable to such influences. The dwelling is perceived to be the domain of the woman and the task of painting or decorating its walls is also hers. It is conceivable therefore that the twin practices of wall decoration and facial swearing are seen to fulfil the same medical and mystical functions.

2. THE HIGHVELD SOTHO CASE STUDY

The highveld region of the northern Orange Free State and the southern Transvaal was inhabited historically by Sotho and, to a lesser degree, Tswana groups. During the Difaqane the local population was decimated by both famine and warfare and many survivors sought the refuge of the Lesotho mountains. There, under the leadership of Moshweshwe, Sotho, Tswana and Nguni elements coalesced into the political entity of Lesotho, which survives to the present day. Their former home is now part of the Republic of South Africa where it is under the control of a white and predominantly Afrikaner farming community. Some Sotho have since returned to these areas as migrant workers having no legal land ownership rights or tenure. They live with their families on white farms where they are given a small plot of land to plant some crops and build their homes.

Their residences are almost invariably built in the form of parapet or highveld dwellings, a domestic form introduced into Cape Town by Malay slaves during the eighteenth century and spread inland by immigrant Dutch farmers after 1837. It is usually a simple, elongated, single-cell rectangular unit topped by a flat corrugated iron roof sloping to the rear. Kitchens are usually kept separate and thatched in order to allow the smoke from the cooking fire to percolate through the roof. Door and window openings are located on the front elevation which normally faces to the north or north-east. The facade is slightly asymmetrical, the door being placed fractionally off-centre, with small, square windows on either

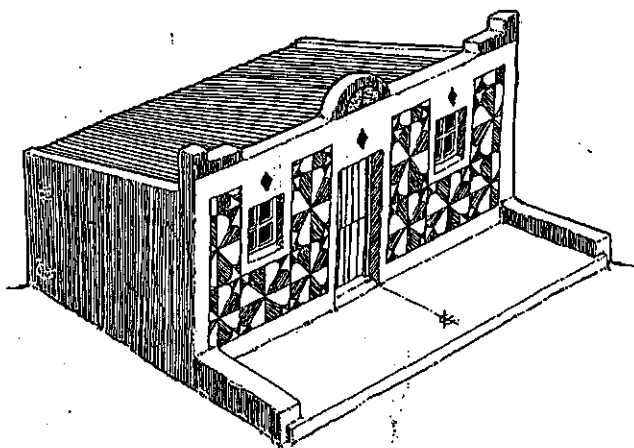
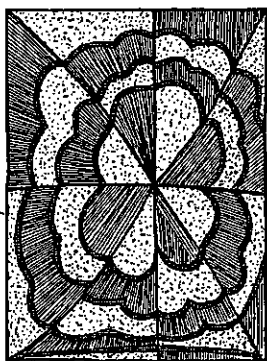
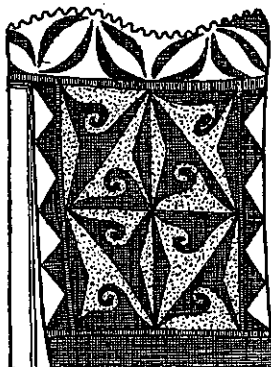


Illustration 7: Stereotypical example of flat-roofed dwelling, Highveld region, during the 1920s and 1930s.



PAINTED & INSCRIBED
S. SOTHO, VILLERS.



PAINTED WALL PATTERN
S. SOTHO, CREYLINGSTAD.

Illustration 8: Examples of Highveld wall decoration, c. 1930

side which imply a division of internal space into two rooms. The basic pattern of decoration is subject to some simple guidelines : the parapet at the top and a low splash board at the base are expressed as long horizontal bands. The two corners on either side are rendered as vertical elements; a broad surround is created about both door and windows and is often allowed to run into the parapet above; the parapet band is often decorated and its top profile sculpted in order to create small pediments and acroterions over the doorway and the corners respectively. Within this basic framework then the Sotho artist can and often does exercise considerable choice to colour, graphic pattern and texture (illustration 7).

As in the case of the "white-faced" huts, it will be perceived that the basic elements of this decorative style have strong links with the facade renderings of a late nineteenth century domestic architecture. In the interior too, the women often recreate, in clay, crockery display shelves which are a stylised rendering of English middle class, turn-of-the-century kitchen furniture, complete down to the presence of a cut-out paper doily trim. The frilliness of the doily is, at times, reflected externally in the rendering on the parapet band, thus emphasising the essentially female nature of dwelling decoration (illustration 8).

Significantly very few examples of such decoration were recorded within Lesotho during the course of present studies. Thus, while the Sotho of Lesotho seldom decorate their walls, their kinfolk inhabiting their former lands, presently in white holding, do so with a great deal of vigour and vivacity.

3. THE SOUTH NDEBELE CASE STUDY.

The South Ndebele are a Nguni group who migrated into the Transvaal during the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries (12). They comprise two major branches, the Manala and the Ndzundza. The latter, generally regarded as being the junior of the two, is the subject of this brief study. When the Dutch first encountered them in 1847, they inhabited the area about Namashaxelo, situated near Roossenekal in the south-eastern Transvaal (13). Today most reside on white-owned farms in the Bronkhorstspuit, Groblersdal and Middelburg districts although more recently the South African government has established a "homeland" on their behalf in the Dennilton area.

On 14 August 1882 the Pedi chief Sekhukhune was killed alongside fourteen of his advisors. The blame for this deed was laid at the door of Mampuru, Sekhukhune's younger brother (14). Kruger's South African Republic (ZAR), which at the time had been endeavouring to establish a suzerainty over the Pedi, attempted to arrest Mampuru, who fled to the Ndzundza. The latter, under the leadership of Nyabele, in their turn not only refused to hand the refugee over, but also declined to pay their hut-tax, thus symbolically rejecting the overlordship which the ZAR had recently imposed over them.

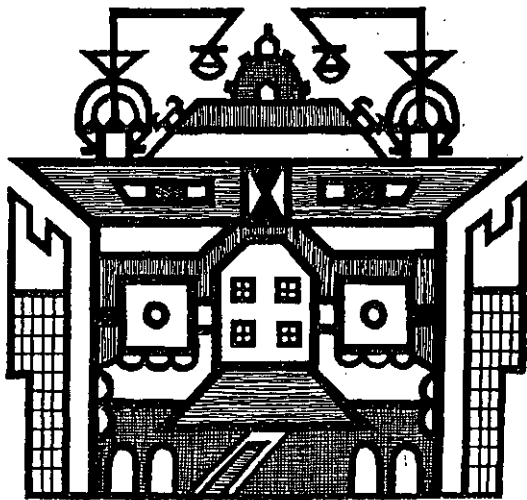
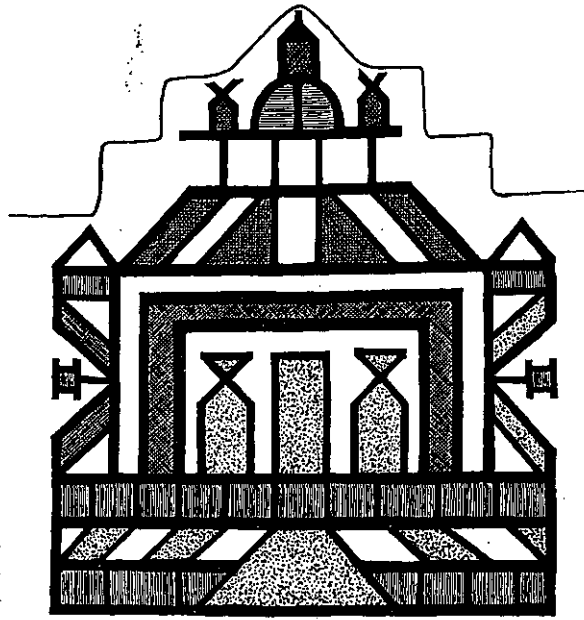


Illustration 9 : Examples of South Ndebele wall decoration, which use the basic elements of Victorian domestic architecture as a theme. Kwa-Matabeleng, Bophuthatswana, c.1951 and 1981 respectively.

As a result a Boer commando of between 1000 and 2000 men invested the Ndzundza's mountain stronghold in October 1882. Nine months later Nyabele capitulated and handed himself and Mampuru over to the Dutch (15). The Ndzundza, starved and dynamited into submission, were deprived of their lands, divided and indentured to the farmers who had fought on the ZAR commando. They were thus effectively scattered in an attempt to break their political power as a group.

Up to 1883, the South Ndebele as a whole are reputed to have built their dwellings in the form of grass beehive domes (16). Following the defeat of the Ndzundza at the hands of the ZAR, their architecture underwent a measure of change. The cone on cylinder structure, prevalent among their neighbours, the Pedi, was adopted with a few modifications. These include the retention of the "umsamo", a typically Nguni feature of domestic architecture located to the rear of the hut, but acting as a seat for the men, and the partial enclosure of the hut's front circumference with a verandah. It is also possible that this was the stage when they adopted the Pedi manner of building courtyard walls and defining homestead perimeters. This new style of construction however, does not appear to have lasted more than three or four generations for, by the 1940s, the cone on cylinder was already being replaced by flat-roofed parapet or "highveld" dwellings.

It was also during this latter period that the South Ndebele began to paint the walls of their dwellings and courtyards using a variety of decorative patterns. Some decorations are of a textural nature; some adopt a simple geometrical motif and repeat it in various ways on a wall; some begin to pick out and highlight various structural elements of the architecture; and some take a familiar object, most often a flower or a tree, and reproduce it in a stylised manner. South Ndebele architecture does all these things and more. On the one hand it draws deeply from a textural and geometric Sotho/Tswana tradition and, on the other, it gives rise to rules of facade decoration which break down the various structural components of the dwelling in a manner similar to that evolved by the Sotho of the Orange Free State highveld. Most important however, it also develops patterns and images based largely upon the Victorian nature of southern African small-town architecture as well as the graphics of an urban consumer and industrial society further afield (illustration 9). These are then reproduced not only on the courtyard walls and house facade of the homestead but become part of a more complex system of symbology, being transferred from mother to daughter in the form of a beaded apron during the course of the marriage ceremony. A graphic language has also been allowed to develop, similar in many ways to the Zulu bead love letter (17), which, in some cases, has been noticed to advertise the home dweller's profession as a midwife, the husband's sexual potency or just the presence of a certain type of motor vehicle in the vicinity.

4. THE VENDA-TSONGA CASE STUDY

The region of land immediately south of the Soutpansberge, in

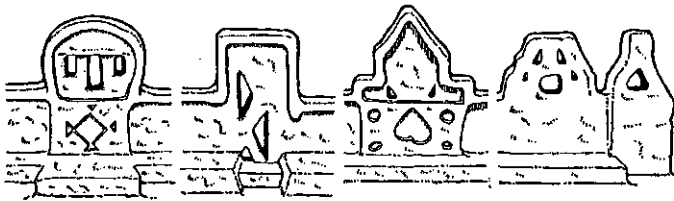
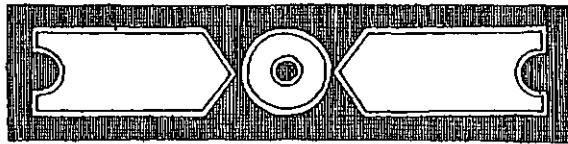
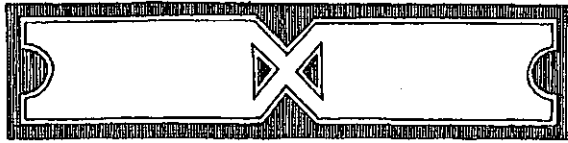
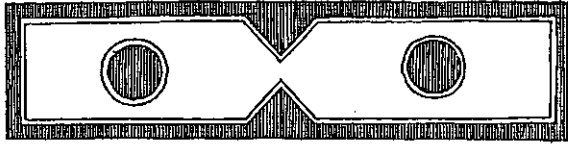


Illustration 10 : Examples of Venda wall decoration (top), northern Venda, 1989; and homestead wall sculptures (bottom), Sambandou, central Venda, c.1980

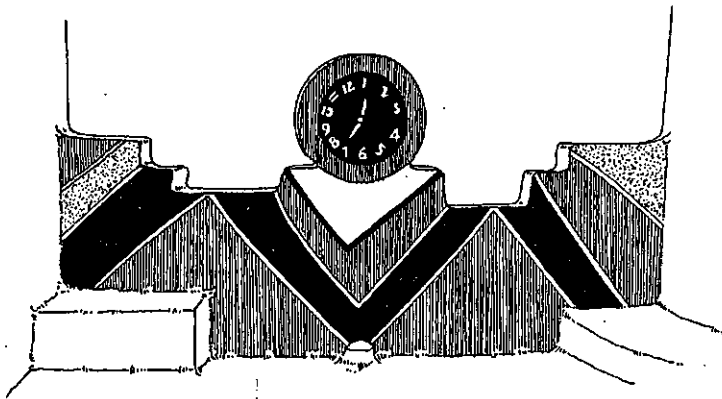
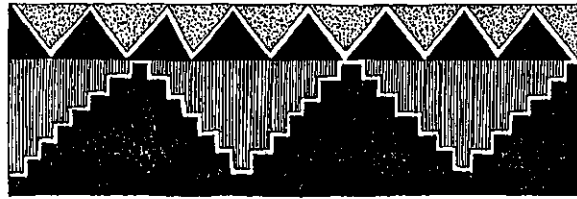
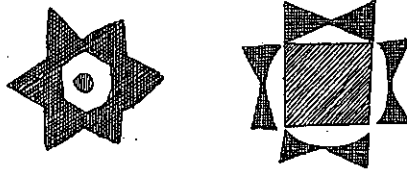
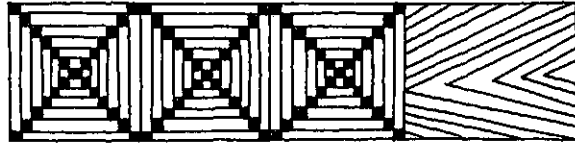
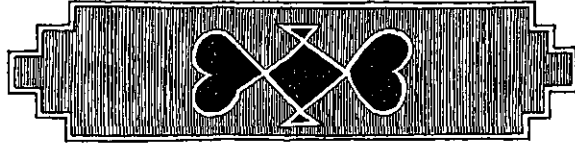


Illustration 11 : Examples of Tsonga wall decoration (top), northern Gazankulu, & homestead wall sculpture (bottom), 1987-89.

the northern Transvaal, has long been the home to a number of Venda and Tsonga groups. Although the former have laid historical claim to its control for at least two centuries, since the Mfecane of 1822 to 1837, various waves of Tsonga refugees have made their way there from the east. As a result the two cultures have intermingled, the Venda settling the hill-tops, the Tsonga the plains. These patterns have been maintained to the present day, despite attempts of the Pretoria government to enforce its peculiar ideology of ethnic separatism. Because of intermarriage between the two groups, recent times have witnessed the rise of a hybrid culture which belongs to neither but draws deeply from both.

The mechanics of this culture are interesting to trace. The Venda have, in many cases, retained their historical hold on this land and although the Tsonga have been allowed to develop their own political structures, their leadership has remained largely in the hands of Venda appointees. Also the process of initiating teenagers into local social polity is still controlled by the Venda. As a result the Tsonga remained, for many years, a socially and economically underprivileged group, a status which only began to be redressed in more recent times. During this period there occurred a major shift in Tsonga architecture which took it away from the more historical models recorded by Junod as late as the 1900s towards the aesthetics (but not the structural formats) of Venda settlements. Today Tsonga homesteads in this region not only display a barely masked approximation of their Venda neighbours but, through a process of cultural borrowing and intermarriage, the decorations of the one have begun to festoon the dwellings of the other.

At first the decorations painted by Tsonga women followed in demure emulation of the leaf and plant patterns rendered in sombre earth colours by their Venda sisters (illustration 10). Since the mid-1970s however, they have begun to diverge, introducing to their repertoire a rich variety of forms and colours which, although still noticeably related to their Venda origins, are nonetheless already developing regional identity of their own (illustration 11).

SOME COMMON TRENDS

An analysis of the above case studies reveals a number of strong threads which link them into a larger pattern of social activity.

- a. Fertility. Like their historical counterparts documented by Burchell, Campbell and Baines, the above case studies are all the outcome of women's work. They are painted by a wife some two years after she has given birth to her first-born child. Thus, wall decoration is symbolic of women's fertility and serves to indicate her status in the community as a mother, head of homestead and responsible adult.
- b. Family Political Rights. By giving birth to a child a woman also gains for her husband full participation in

the community's council of men as a family head. Her work therefore is symbolic of how her fertility has given her family a voice in the public affairs of the group. This factor is contrasted by the status of bachelors in rural society who, although not necessarily discriminated against, are nonetheless treated as young children, regardless of their age. The homestead of a bachelor, a rare occurrence in rural life, is never decorated nor is it bound by perimeter walls.

c. Rites of Passage. Although wall decoration may, in principle, be applied at any time during the course of the year, in practice it will be seen that such activity is generally limited to two main periods :

- i. times of slow economic activity, generally winter or early spring, which also coincides to the dry season of the southern African interior.
- ii. Times of transition in rural life, such as the initiation of teenagers into adulthood, which theoretically takes place in winter, or a marriage, which may take place at any time.

Either activity must be seen to be primarily connected with the work and existence of women within the rural life cycle, thus reinforcing the symbolism of wall decoration as a reflection of women and their ritual.

d. Territoriality. Wall decoration plays a strong symbolic role in the creation of living areas among those southern African groups who define their exterior living spaces by means of perimeter or courtyard walls. Recent studies conducted among the Pedi of the northern Transvaal have indicated that painting has direct links to a cosmological belief which perceives women to be inherently "hot". Homestead boundaries are seen to be similarly "hot", most particularly where two women share the same division wall; these then need to be "cooled" by a process of wall smearing and decoration which, presumably, might also imply a degree of cooperation between the two parties concerned. Thus wall decoration not only serves to create statements of territorial control but, by implication, suggests that women are more than just passive partners to their menfolk in the control of rural household space and food resources.

e. Heraldry. The case studies quoted above have tended to show, almost without exception, that a measure of heraldry was implied in the designs of rural wall art. A survey conducted in the village of Madakamba in the northern Transkei, revealed that :

- * in virtually all cases, the dwellings in the same homestead grouping, usually numbering no more than three or four, had the same pattern applied to all the units.
- * where a daughter married and settled near her mother, she usually painted the same patterns upon her dwelling as those upon her parents'.

- * where a son married and settled near his mother, his wife painted the same patterns upon her dwelling as those upon her mother-in-laws'.
- * in one case, where a daughter married and settled near her mother, after a family quarrel the former had changed her own wall decorations, to a completely new pattern.

When questioned further on this point local informants admitted to there being a degree of identity implied in wall patterns but did not give it undue significance. As one young woman phrased it "I could see a drawing from the bus and take it home in my head." Although these results are therefore not, in themselves conclusive, other cases of implied heraldry were also recorded among the South Ndebele of the Transvaal. As in other cases the work is conducted either by the mother, or by her daughters under her direct guidance. The complex patterns are thus part of the young girl's training and are reinforced when, upon marriage, she is presented by her mother with a partly-finished beaded apron bearing the essential elements of this design. The daughter is then expected to complete the apron after her marriage. Although in theory the young bride may choose to decorate her walls in whatever pattern she wishes, in reality, her first design seldom strays far from that which she learnt at home as a child and which she carried away with her in a shorthand form as part of her wedding dowry.

It also becomes possible, among this same group, to extend the symbolism of female power and fertility to the homestead plan as a whole. The front courtyard is the wedding apron, the main dwelling is the womb from which the children and the wealth of the family originate; the rear quarters which house the children and the kitchen are the breasts whence all nourishment originates.

When one considers the practice of wall painting in the larger socio-economic and political context of southern Africa, this activity could be interpreted as being symbolic of a new status for women in rural society. The widespread use of migrant labour in the industrial and urban areas takes a large proportion of the rural male population away from their families for the major part of the year. During this time the control of resources is largely left in the hands of their women and although their society is both patrilineal and patrilocal, the absence of the menfolk begins to meet some of the criteria for the establishment of a matrilineal and even matrilineal society (18).

It may therefore be suggested that rural wall decoration is the first material manifestation of such a development, an idea supported by the fact the transmittance of decorative patterns is well into its third generation and could now be entering a fourth.

- f. Regional Identity. Although it may be shown that the indigenous architecture of rural southern Africa falls into two major settlement cosmologies (19), it is equally true that a number of smaller regional identities have also developed within this larger framework. Their nature is dependent upon the creation of aesthetic stereotypes based upon building technology, dwelling form and decorative motif. However, whilst the first two may be found to be common to a number of geographical areas, there is no doubt that in each case study quoted above the women concerned have created a style of wall decoration unique to their region. Thus the work of women must be seen as a major factor in the recent growth of smaller social polities in this country.
- g. Source of Decorative Material. Each case study quoted above also highlights the fact that the rural artist has derived her decorative motifs from the artifacts and culture of another socially, economically and politically dominant group. The Mfengu and Xhosa, the highveld Sotho and the South Ndebele have all based their wall art upon the material culture of late nineteenth century colonial society whose artifacts they observed in the urban areas they visited during market days or in search of employment. The Tsonga, on the other hand, patterned themselves upon the aesthetics of the neighbouring Venda upon whose lands they settled some generations ago.

POLITICAL RESISTANCE AND LAND CONTROL

A clue as to the more fundamental reasons underlying the development of a wall decorating tradition in my study areas may probably be found in the struggle for land which has taken place in southern Africa over the past two centuries, most particularly since the 1920s. Although such competition has, in the main, involved indigenous black and immigrant white groups, the Venda-Tsonga case study indicates that the control of land is, and has also been, a point of contention between indigenous communities.

Despite the claims of white propagandists, it may be shown that the arrival of European settlers to southern Africa did not bring about a pax abalunga over the region. On the contrary it is recorded that, since 1811, we have seen 24 major conflicts and over two score smaller localised conflagrations. This means that, on average, one major rebellion, war or uprising has taken place in this country every third year for the past 176 years (20).

An analysis of these conflagrations also makes for interesting reading. Only two were the result of internal black-on-black schisms although seven others were affairs to which only whites were invited. Their chronology also reveals that, in almost every case, they coincide with the spread of white settlement throughout the region, beginning in the Eastern Cape, fanning out onto the highveld and eventually engulfing the entire coastal belt.

The reasons recorded for these conflicts are many and varied. The majority however may be seen to have been the result of competition for land between white and black rural groups. The single most important source of friction between these two therefore must lie in the control, or lack of, that each exercises over agricultural land.

The relationship existing between the rural activity of wall decoration and the land conflict which has taken place between indigenous black and immigrant white is not one which may be easily quantified. For one thing it is doubtful that any one person or body took the conscious decision that walls should be painted as an act of popular protest against the process of land dispossession. For another, the nature of the subject matter renders it highly unlikely that it would be openly discussed with strangers, particularly if they were white. Also, the possibility of stumbling across the fountainhead - if indeed she may even be considered to exist! - is so remote as to make such empirical research virtually impossible. However all circumstantial evidence on the subject seems to indicate that such a hypothesis is indeed correct.

In every case study quoted thus far the aesthetics of wall decoration have played an important role in reinforcing (or perhaps even creating) a unique regional identity for the groups concerned. The Mfengu began whitewashing their walls at the urgings of white missionaries upon whose stations they had settled as landless refugees. The practice spread to other Mfengu occupying Xhosa land outside the mission as a statement of their identity but, as the differences between "school people" (Mfengu) and "red blanket people" (Xhosa) began to be reconciled through social interaction and marriage, wall art gained undertones of Christian religious affiliation. Ultimately, during the 1940s and 1950s the practice became identified with a wider Xhosa-speaking identity. Significantly current research has shown that a notable reduction in wall decorating activity has taken place in the Transkei since that region gained a measure of governmental autonomy in 1976.

Similar patterns may be established for the Tsonga whose precarious land tenure led them to adopt the architectural aesthetics of the neighbouring Venda and for the highveld Sotho and the South Ndebele whose land is currently in the holding of the very white farmers whose colonial architecture they emulate in their decoration. It is again important to note that Sotho residing in Lesotho seldom decorate their walls whilst a marked reduction has been noted amongst the South Ndebele since the establishment of KwaNdebele immediately north-east of Pretoria.

The connection between wall art and black political protest was also made in 1975 by Julian Beinard during the course of research set in the Johannesburg suburb of Western Native Township. In it he described how the first decorations, consisting of basic patterns and animals scratched in the mud plaster, were applied by Kwena residents between 1918 and 1930. The next three decades witnessed an increase in local

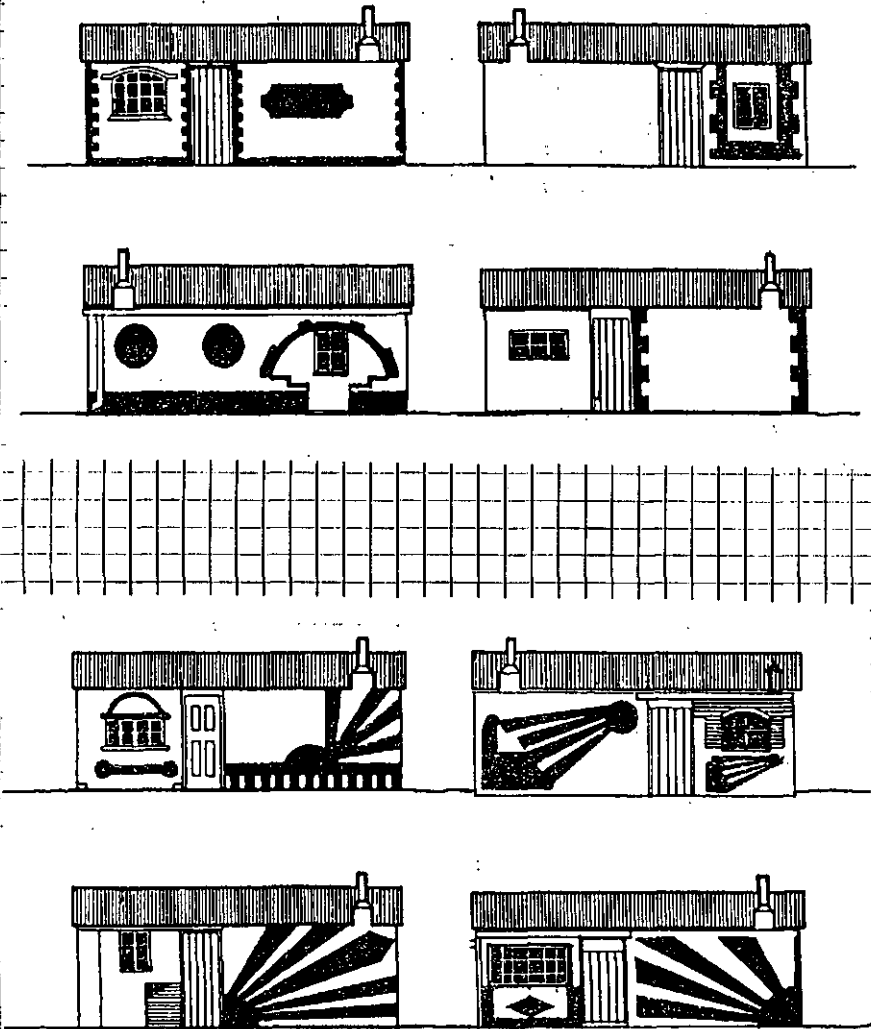


Illustration 12. Beinhard, 1977. Wall decorations, Western Native Township, Johannesburg, c. 1950-60.

political activity which was paralleled by a similar growth in the practice of wall art (illustration 12). This reached its peak between 1950 and 1962 during which time :

"Decorations on plaster walls (became) very popular with many variations on a limited number of themes." (21)

Ultimately, in 1962, the black residents of Western Native Township were forcibly resettled out of their homes into the newly established suburb town of Soweto. The new inhabitants of the suburb, now renamed Western Coloured Township, did not bother to maintain these decorations and, within a short time, these all disappeared (22).

Finally, the chronology of wall decoration on the highveld tends to indicate that, although its basic elements may have been present in a rudimentary form before the 1930s, the practice did not begin to gain momentum until the decades before and during the Second World War. Significantly this is also a period which saw the rise and ultimate coming to power of Afrikaner Nationalism and when the black struggle for political emancipation had not yet reached the levels of activity it achieved in the post-1948 era. The rural practice of decorating a homestead's walls may therefore be interpreted to have arisen during the hiatus between the last rural war of resistance, the so-called "Bambata Rebellion" of 1906 and the black freedom movements of the 1950s and 1960s.

There is little doubt that, like the women of the Transkei and Ciskei region who whiten their faces in propitiation of ancestral spirits, there is an element of appeasement in the practice of wall decoration. The use of western building technologies and house aesthetics may well be attributable to practical reasons such as economics and ease of construction, but the use of decorative patterns acquired from another group stretches beyond this into the field of symbolism and social practice. However one needs to question whether such a message of overt appeasement is not, in reality, an act of subvert resistance. Generally speaking and with the notable exception of the Tsonga, the use of borrowed wall designs is limited to the outside facade of the dwelling or the homestead concerned. Internal walls are normally rendered in a simpler monochromatic style linked to the decorative motifs of earlier generations which stand in sharp contrast to the complex polychromatic work of recent times. The latter's chronology of development places it firmly into a time when formal resistance to white political dominance was at a low; when the effects of the rural land acts were beginning to become evident; when rural poverty was beginning to spread; when rural women began to find their men being channeled in increasing numbers into a system of migrant labour; when whites across the virtual spectrum of political opinion saw blacks as being voteless, dispossessed and landless in perpetuity; and at a time when formal black resistance was limited to an ANC which had but recently adopted a more confrontational stance. It was during this time that rural women took up the cudgels of their people's struggle and began to decorate their homestead walls, making statements about their social conditions and creating images

of regional and political identity.

THE FUTURE OF RURAL WALL ART AND DECORATION

It is not easy to make projections regarding the survival, the evolution or, even, the dissemination of rural wall art in a future southern Africa. Certainly if the practice is the mere aesthetic manifestation of the status and role of women in their own societies, then its continuance may be confidently predicted for as long as the social processes which generated it are still in force. However, if its symbolism is indeed connected to a wider concept of political resistance and land tenure, then the question becomes more difficult to answer. It is possible that a redress of the social and economic inequalities which beset this country may well remove its reason for survival and thus, indirectly, bring about its eventual demise. However it might equally be more realistic to create a scenario whereby a prolonged struggle between black and white would bring about a reduction of regional differences for the sake of a united front towards a common antagonist. One of the first victims of such a move will undoubtedly be the more obvious and visible elements of rural material culture, such as local decorative patterns, building textures, dwelling forms and, ultimately, regional architecture as a whole. The sad truth of rural wall art therefore, is that it may only have arisen in the first place as a black response to white political domination, and that this same social imbalance may ultimately bring about its demise.

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