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STYLE AND ETHNICITY IN THE KALAHARI: A REPLY TO WIESSNER

James R. Sackett

Wiessner's analysis of stylistic variation in San arrows entails valuable ethnoarchaeological observation and insight. But her evidence contradicts the iconological *theory she imposes upon it, whereby San artisans are thought to purposefully invest their products with ethnic symbolism in order to transmit social information to various target populations. However, an alternative view, according to which the arrows simply exhibit the ethnic style latent in all* isochrestic *behavior (see Sackett 1982), is consistent both with their formal variation and with the commonplace ethnic symbolism that the San themselves are reported to read into them. This view also provides a more reasonable explanation than does the iconological theory of why stylistic distinctions fail to emerge among San bands engaged in risk-sharing strategies. In any event, isochrestism is the basic source of ethnic style in material culture. Iconicism is a special case and ought not be invoked unless specific expectations are met by the evidence.*

Polly Wiessner's (1983) investigation of stylistic variation among Kalahari San projectile points makes stimulating reading for anyone interested in how items of material culture may serve as ethnic markers. Few have reported concrete data of equal interest to stylistic analysis and fewer still have accompanied it with such useful ethnographic detail or insightful commentary. Yet the article gives the curious impression of being at war with itself: the theoretical mold in which Wiessner casts her analysis conflicts with the evidence she reports, and seems indeed to be refuted by it. What is at issue here is the practice common to archaeologists and ethnographers alike of regarding style as variation in material culture that provides information about social arrangements, more specifically about the shape and boundaries of ethnic groups. This notion is shared by schools of thought that otherwise differ sharply in theoretical outlook and empirical expectations. The basic point of divergence among them is the question of whether style symbolizes ethnicity because it is intended by artisans to do just that or because it just happens to do so for other, perhaps less purposeful, reasons. Wiessner by and large subscribes to the former position, whereas the San data she reports seem to bear out the latter one.

CRITIQUE OF WIESSNER

Wiessner's outlook has been strongly influenced by what I have referred to elsewhere as the *iconological* approach to style (Sackett 1982). Its roots may be traced back in America at least as far as some of Binford's earlier works (e.g., 1965), but the bulk of its coherent theory and method is the more recent product of researchers such as Wobst (1977), Conkey (1978), and Wilmsen (Wilmsen and Roberts 1978). Similar views have been argued in Europe (e.g., Barth 1969), and are now being explored with particular vigor by a British school of symbolic ethnoarchaeology (e.g., Hodder 1979). In this perspective, style is viewed as a kind of iconography purposefully, if perhaps not necessarily consciously, created and manipulated by artisans for social ends. Iconic style is invested in material culture as a means of transmitting to various target populations symbolically encoded information about ethnic affiliation and identity. Ordinarily the message being signalled is "emblemic," to use Wiessner's apposite term, and serves to identify the presence of a specific self-conscious social group.

Given such tenets, it is not surprising to find that the iconologues tend to nourish a fairly coherent body of expectations about how style should express itself. For one thing, uniform and unambiguous signalling would seem to require that the stylistic elements making up the iconography exhibit considerable consistency and even an all-or-nothing uniformity in their expression. For another, it follows that style should distribute quite unevenly over material culture. Those items ought to be favored that take relatively long to make, thereby furnishing artisans ample opportunity for stylistic

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investment, and that in addition have long use-life and high visibility, thereby maximizing the chances of being seen by the target population toward which their symbolic messages are directed. But specifically which attributes of those items? Here the view seems to hold that, since style is a distinct kind of patterning generated by a distinct kind of behavior, attributes that are stylistic ought, at least ideally, be nothing else but stylistic. And, since most material items are functional in the utilitarian sense, it follows that this ideal is best approximated by elements of decoration, that is, by form that is adjunct to function and that presumably serves social and ideational ends rather than techno-economic ones. In turn, where decoration is absent, kinds of attributes should at least be involved that entail considerable transformational change during the manufacturing process, since these supposedly allow scope for the elaboration that stylistic input requires. What these might be is not always made evident, but there does seem to be general agreement that purely functional attributes fail both on principle and in practice to meet the requirements.

Now, Wiessner's test case for probing the operation of iconic style in San material culture is a sophisticated form of detachable arrow point of metal. This is said to have greater import than any other single San artifact, playing significant roles in the social, political, and ideological realms as well as the economic. These multiple roles, particularly when combined with its high degree of visibility, supposedly render the arrow especially well suited for transmitting information about groups and their boundaries.

Wiessner's results indicate that at least some of this potential is realized. To begin with, the arrows exhibit clear-cut stylistic differences at the highest unit of ethnicity among the San, the language group. Here they distinguish the !Kung, G/wi, and !Xo, who speak mutually unintelligible tongues and occupy distinct territories (but who nonetheless share a high degree of similarity in their inventories of craft products). At more intermediate levels of ethnicity results are somewhat equivocal, seemingly due in part to problems involved in obtaining adequate samples of arrows for purposes of comparison. What may be said is that dialect groups can apparently be distinguished among the !Kung and, at a somewhat lower level still, band clusters within the !Xo. If I understand Wiessner correctly, these units respectively constitute the major regional subdivisions within the two language groups. Finally, at the relatively low level of ethnicity represented by the local bands, no stylistic differentiation among arrows is discernible at all in any of the language groups.

So far so good. But are San artisans really purposefully manipulating the forms of their products to achieve these results? The evidence in fact suggests to the contrary that the arrows fail overwhelmingly to meet the expectations generated by iconological theory. Perhaps we may grant that the degree of visibility of a hunting arrow somehow compensates for its relatively short manufacturing time and short use-life. But in no aspect apart from visibility are expectations met. As Wiessner herself points out, no coherent principles at all seem to be reflected in the selection of those attributes of the San arrow that exhibit significant stylistic variation; instead they suggest to her the operation of chance historical factors. First of all, they fail to exhibit the selection for uniformity and clarity that supposedly characterizes iconic signalling. No one attribute or group of attributes consistently defines stylistic variation at any given level of ethnicity, nor is the stylistic role of any given attribute necessarily restricted to a single level. To give but one example, at the level of the language group, !Kung arrows are distinguished from those of the G/wi and !Xo by overall point size, whereas the latter two groups are distinguished from one another by variations in tip and body shape—attributes that among the !Kung themselves operate only at the sub-band level as traits that simply highlight the "assertive" style of individual artisans.

Even more serious departures from theoretical expectations appear with regard to the nature of the attributes that do, and do not, possess stylistic significance. For those that do consist almost exclusively of features such as the size, overall shape, and specific configuration of the individual elements of the points. These are traits that are neither decorative nor, it would seem, more prone than any other features of the arrows to require significant transformational change during the manufacturing process of the kind that supposedly allow enhanced opportunity for stylistic input. While, as will be seen, Wiessner may not fully agree, I would argue that these are in fact traits that in all other respects must be regarded as patently functional ones in the utilitarian sense. Equally

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telling is the nature of the attributes that fail to play important stylistic roles. Especially noteworthy here is that the feature of the San arrow that might be expected on theoretical grounds to play the dominant role in stylistic messaging is nearly mute. This is the link shaft, whose proximal end joins the detachable head portion of the arrow to the main shaft; made of wood or giraffe rib, it can be decorated by means of engraving. For reasons already noted, decoration is by its very nature the proper seat of iconographic elaboration. Yet we are told that the link shaft is only infrequently decorated among the !Kung bands (where its maximum frequency in any collection site fails to attain 8%) and apparently not at all in the other two language groups. It is difficult to imagine why artisans would so consistently ignore such an ideal vehicle for ethnic symbolling if they were really intent upon investing their craft products with social information.

It would appear then that the formal stylistic variation exhibited by the arrows themselves fails to conform to the expectations of iconic theory. And Wiessner herself seems aware of the fact at least to a considerable extent. But she appears to find the theory agreeable nonetheless, and frequently uses terms like "artisan investment," stylistic "signalling" and "messaging," "target populations," and so forth as if they had much more than metaphorical value to her. Where then does the evidence for purposeful iconicism lie? The only remaining possibility would seem to be in the field observations she has made on the behavior of San artisans while manufacturing arrows and talking about them afterwards.

Yet here again there seems little to suggest that iconic signalling is being engaged in at all. Indeed, it would appear that even the circumstances that might invoke it are as often as not missing. One does not gain the impression for instance that self-conscious identification with social groupings is highly developed at any level of ethnicity among the San. And it is difficult to believe in any case that their language groups (the level where stylistic distinctions are most clear-cut) regard one another as target populations for ethnic messaging when we are told that San living in the interior of one group are only vaguely aware that other such groups even exist. Some in fact are reported as never even having seen arrows from other groups. And, interestingly enough, the sole explicit reference to what may be a target population concerns one that exists *within* the artisan's own band: it appears that one of the reasons that motivates a !Kung to decorate the link shaft is to entertain others who are watching him make arrows.

In any case, the messages reported by Wiessner are themselves of the most general kind. They seem no more specific than recognition of the fact that an arrow can be made by those "who are not our people," that is, "different people who did things in a different way" (p. 269). This is said to be accompanied by the belief that those who make similar arrows hold similar values and are trustworthy, whereas those who make different ones may hold different values and as a consequence behave unpredictably. To be sure, such messages indicate that the San find symbolic meaning in material culture. But they fall far short of suggesting the purposeful emblemic signalling of ethnic identity and affiliation postulated by iconological theory.

Hence to maintain nonetheless that the San purposefully manipulate style toward social ends would seem to require that one either argue from theoretical conviction alone or develop a thesis that somehow depends upon negative evidence. Wiessner in fact attempts the latter in dealing with the question of why stylistic distinctions fail to emerge at the relatively low level of ethnicity represented by the local band (see also Wiessner 1982). In brief, it is her contention that style should by all rights express itself at this level, and the very fact that it does not indicates that it is purposefully being held in check. The explanation supposedly lies in the San's habitual demographic response to environmental stress, which requires that bands frequently join together in risk-pooling strategies that call for common effort and reciprocity on a regional scale. Between-band style is consequently suppressed because it would establish symbolic distinctions between them that might inhibit the ease with which their members could combine for the common effort. The idea is surely a provocative one. And I will happily admit that to suppress style is just as much purposeful manipulation on the part of artisans as to enhance it: the behavior involved might be viewed as a kind of iconicism in reverse. But such an argument would be tenable only in the absence of a simpler and more obvious explanation to account for the same phenomenon. And there does seem to be one.

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AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

The explanation I favor by no means denies the existence of iconographic signalling in the archaeological and ethnographic records. But it regards iconicism as a special case, one appearing only sporadically against a vastly more pervasive background of ethnic style that flows from a much deeper source in human behavior. In this view the emphasis falls upon a special linkage that connects ethnicity with what I have termed *isochrestic* variation (Sackett 1982). The neologism means literally "equivalent in use" and refers to the fact that there normally exists an appreciable range of equivalent alternatives, of equally viable options, for attaining any given end in manufacturing craft products. Style enters the equation when it is recognized that the choices artisans make among the range of options potentially available to them tend to be quite specific and consistent, and that these are dictated largely by the craft traditions within which the artisans have been enculturated as members of social groups. In other words, there are in material culture highly specific patterns of isochrestic variation that are socially bounded and that therefore may be regarded as idiomatic or diagnostic of ethnicity. And it is these that we perceive as style. This is of course style in the passive voice, not so much a force that acts as a latent quality that can be invoked.

Where should we expect such style to reside? In this view the potential for stylistically significant patterning obviously exists wherever the potential for isochrestic variation is to be found. We should not then expect style to be necessarily distinctive or circumscribed in its expression, but rather to be banal and essentially ubiquitous to material culture as a whole. Moreover, it follows that exclusively stylistic features as such need not exist, but that all attributes can vary stylistically. In other words, stylistic significance, at least in theory, can be assigned to any attribute, regardless of whether it functions primarily in the non-utilitarian domain, such as an element of pottery decoration, or the utilitarian one, such as the outline profile described by a stone tool's margin. The only requisites are that it constitutes one of a range of equally viable options that were potentially available to the artisan and that its choice was dictated by the craft tradition specific to the social group within which he or she has been, and presumably continues to be, enculturated.

Now, stylistic variation in San arrows is quite consistent with the implications of an isochrestic point of view. For example, it is not at all surprising that the seemingly arbitrary historical events evoked by Wiessner appear to have determined which attributes would exhibit stylistic variation among the arrows. For it is the socially bounded craft tradition, very much an historical product, that guides the choices a San artisan makes among the isochrestic options open to him when he manufactures an arrow. And that link shafts only rarely bear decoration means no more and no less than that San artisans only rarely choose this particular option available to them. While the reason may be of great potential interest, isochrestic theory in itself (unlike iconological theory) neither suggests nor requires an explanation of why any given kind of attribute does or does not have stylistic significance in any given situation. The matter, in other words, is not an issue of doctrine or first principles, and is to be dealt with simply in terms of the specifics of the situation. Nonetheless, it is in no sense contrary to our expectations to find that nearly all of the attributes that do possess stylistic significance are neither decorative nor even particularly elaborate. For a San arrow is a highly utilitarian object composed largely of highly utilitarian attributes, and it seems entirely reasonable to expect chance alone to dictate that most of those that are stylistically significant are at the same time functionally significant in the techno-economic sense.

This last point needs additional comment because it is a key issue and one upon which Wiessner assumes an equivocal position. While much too good an observer to deny the stylistic utility of such traits, she remains too much of an iconologue to accept the full significance of her findings. Her conflict, of course, arises from the iconological tenet that traits that possess style at least ideally ought not be traits that also possess function. Thus she attempts to minimize the contradiction between observation and theory by arguing that, whereas attributes like overall arrowhead size and shape are admittedly functional, others such as the specific shape of a point's size and barbs are somehow "detached" from the weapon's function and technology. The argument simply strikes me as being arbitrary and ad hoc. It may be consistent with her recommendation, following Stiles's (1979) proposal, that "in choosing stylistic attributes, one should omit only attributes whose variation

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can be proven by experiment to be exclusively caused by function" (p. 270). But I submit that for all practical purposes such traits do not exist. To be sure, techno-economic restrictions upon artifactual form operate much less stringently in the case of non-utilitarian variation like decorative design elements. But it is a question of degree, not kind. As we have seen, functional traits too are subject to isochrestic variation, and where such variation exists so does the potential for style. A good observer is likely to find, as Wiessner has in fact done, that artisans exercise choice in functional design just as they do in decoration. And in such cases style is simply function writ small. (See Sackett 1984 for an extended discussion of the dualism of style and function in utilitarian traits.)

A word is in order at this point regarding the behavioral source of isochrestic variation. That artisans strongly tend to conform to and perpetuate the isochrestic options dictated by their craft traditions is presumably no different from their conforming to and perpetuating the specific motor habits, cuisines, hunting practices, attitudes, and supernatural beliefs appropriate to, and characteristic of, the social groupings in which such traditions are fostered. Isochrestic choice permeates all aspects of social and cultural life. While its root causes may be obscure, its need is obvious. For, as Kroeber so often reminds us (e.g., 1948:329), life would simply be chaotic or altogether impossible without it. Order, skill, facility in human relations and technology require the definitiveness and effectiveness that come from choosing specific lines of procedure from the nearly infinite arc of possibility and then sticking to them.

Isochrestic behavior (if one may be permitted the reification) is not of course without its own symbolic element. Consistency of actions provides the means by which members of a group express their mutual identity, coordinate their actions, and bind themselves together. And it also implies security. Those who share one's style of thinking and acting are people who engage in sensible and predictable behavior, while those who do not are correspondingly alien. Perhaps here too a kind of iconography is involved, but it is an iconography of the commonplace. It is acquired for the most part unconsciously; it is taught for the most part by insinuation; it is employed for the most part automatically. And it presumably arises more from the perceptions of the observer than from the intentions of the actor. An artisan need not invest his craft products with ethnic symbolism any more purposefully than he invests his gestures, eating habits, or attitudes toward cross-cousins with such symbolism. He most often simply does things in what he regards as the prescribed manner, and he need not be at all mindful of the others who, consciously or not, draw the ethnic conclusion.

It seems to me that these simple and obvious generalizations about isochrestic behavior are entirely sufficient to account for what Wiessner reports about her informants' reactions to stylistic variation among arrows. The "messages" they read in the arrows are ones that we have no reason or need to believe were ever purposefully transmitted. That the San distinguish their group's arrows from those of other groups and that they recognize that different people make things in different ways is to say no more than that, like all humans, they are sensitive to isochrestic variation in material culture. And that they trust those who make arrows like their own and distrust those who do not is simply to say that they, like everyone else, use form as an index to behavior: those who share your style are sensible and predictable, while those who do not may be the opposite. These are the sorts of messages people habitually read into material culture as a function of the commonplace iconography that emerges from all isochrestism in human behavior.

Finally, there remains Wiessner's contention that style is purposefully suppressed at the band level in order to facilitate risk-sharing. Here again an isochrestic explanation appears to be simpler and more convincing. She depicts the San as foraging in local bands that are flexible with respect to available resources, with frequent moves and frequent adjustments in group size and composition. In other words, sharing risk literally means coming together, seemingly creating groups where social interaction—and consequently, enculturation—takes place at a level of ethnicity higher than that of the local band. It is highly suggestive to note in this connection that, although a San hunter may learn to make arrows from watching his father and other close relatives, his design notions are also influenced by arrows he receives from exchange partners who live at considerable distances. These partners, by the way, are said to occupy locales possessing resources complementary to, rather than similar to, the artisan's own, and such partnerships provide a social basis for bands to come together periodically in order to pool risk. Under such conditions we should expect tendencies toward stylistic

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differentiation to be blurred at the local level and craft traditions only begin to rise to visibility at the regional level. In short, I would argue that style is not suppressed at the band level in order to facilitate bands coming together, but instead that it is simply inhibited in expression by the very fact that they do come together.

CONCLUSION

It is a tribute to Wiessner's qualities as a solid researcher to have reported her material and observational data in such clear-cut and objective fashion that they can be used to argue interpretations other than her own. I regret that she has not been equally explicit as to why she finds so congenial a theoretical outlook that seems to exceed the carrying capacity of these data. To be sure, an iconological perspective on style has definite attractions. It pictures style in the active, dynamic voice; it purports to account for style as a functional aspect of social behavior; and it points to where style supposedly resides. It thus provides at once an attractive idiom in which to discuss style and an alluringly coherent argument that claims to tell how style works and where to find it. But, unless one is also prepared to claim that *all* symbolism to be found in material culture has been purposefully invested there, the argument requires that evidence be furnished for ethnic symbolism beyond the commonplace iconography that arises from isochrestic variation. To speak of ethnic investment, information signalling, target populations and so forth without reference to solid confirmatory data is simply to assert tautologically what one has already assumed. And it opens one to the charge of having confused metaphor with model, of having reified a handful of abstractions rather than explained any real behavior.

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