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EDITORIAL

Identity, fashion and exchange: pottery in West Africa

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This is the second in a series of planned themed issues of *Azania*, following the spring 2010 issue on early East African food production. The papers presented here arise from a five-day symposium held in December 2008 at the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire and the Musée Théodore Monod d’Art Africain in Dakar, involving a collaborative team of archaeologists and ethnographers specialising in impressed ceramics from the West African Sahara-Sahelian region. This symposium built on a first meeting in Oxford earlier in the year, during which we developed a systematic framework for the classification of fibre roulettes. While the objective of that first symposium was to establish common terminologies for the analysis of impressed pottery, the Dakar meeting aimed to illustrate the necessity of such an endeavour: specifically, the way in which clearer and more robust ceramic classification schemes can be used to inform us about past social and cultural change.

Six of the 11 papers presented in Dakar are collected here. All make the argument that by confronting archaeological and ethnographic data we can better understand the role of ceramics in mediating and tracking social interaction and cultural change. The six authors make use of data drawn from studies of present-day potting techniques and apprenticeship networks to derive implications for the past. Drawing on extensive ethnographic works, Olivier Gosselain revisits a fundamental question – why decorate? – and thus establishes the foundations of this special issue. What aspects of social organisation, and what scale of social interaction, are represented in the choice and adoption of different decorative types? Katie Manning explores the potential of ceramics in shedding light on micro-scale processes in the archaeological record, by examining aspects of stylistic experimentation and village identity in the Tilemsi Valley of Mali. At the other end of the scale, Kevin MacDonald, also working with examples from Mali, questions the classification of archaeological ceramic cultural entities by highlighting the complex and often highly personal processes by which researchers develop them. Dealing with more recent archaeological materials, both Anne Haour and Anne Mayor offer wide regional overviews (of the central Sahel and the Niger Bend respectively) to examine the impact of political influences on stylistic homogenisation, while Sokhna Ndèye Guèye explores
the production and distribution networks of ceramics in a highly stratified, ‘casted’ society, the Halpulaaren of Senegal.

The aims of this research network have been to achieve homogeneity in classification systems, strengthen collaboration among researchers and provide a fresh view on the theoretical advancements in West African ceramic studies. Most encouragingly, perhaps, this initiative is just one of a growing number of similar collaborative networks. Whilst African archaeology is achieving an ever increasing presence in global archaeology, we all know the adage that ‘together we stand, divided we fall’. Food for thought indeed. We hope, then, that the collaborative programmes under way will in turn motivate researchers and students to organise further events in which ideas, methodologies and data can be shared.

Notes
1. These meetings took place as part of the research network ‘Making a good impression’, which was made possible by a grant by the Leverhulme Trust to Anne Haour (F/00 204/AI), with Katie Manning acting as Network Facilitator.
2. Other outcomes of the research collaboration are the volume African pottery roulettes past and present: Techniques, identification and distribution (Haour et al. 2010) and the digital archive: http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/archive/wafrican_lt_2010/index.cfm?CFID=4824429&CFTOKEN=36855026.
3. See, in particular, the work by CERAFIM (http://sites.univ-provence.fr/lampea/ressources/cerafim/) with its extensive and rapidly evolving collection of images and descriptive texts; or, under construction, the Ceramics and Society project’s database of East African Tana and Triangular Incised wares, soon to be online hosted by Rice University.

Reference