

Article

**The challenges of writing about southern African
Archaeological theories of migration**

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The theories of how domestic stock came to be part of the southern African lifestyle (both economic and social) in the last c.2000 years are intertwined in theories of migration. As a student of archaeology I have been taught about migration theories since the first year of my undergraduate degree programme. First, I was taught theories of human evolution and the 'Out of Africa' model, then, the domestication of both plants and animals and the spread of agro-pastoralism into the continent and the rest of the world from the fertile crescent.¹ Finally, I was taught about the rise of complex societies such as Toutswe in Botswana, Mapungubwe in South Africa and Great Zimbabwe and its tradition sites in the region.²

Of all these eras and patterns, I have always been intrigued by the theories of migration of the late Stone Age and the introduction of domestic stock into southern Africa.³ These are intriguing because there are times in the scholarship when the archaeological evidence—or lack of it, as suggested by Phillipson—is overridden by the assumptions or suggestions that southern African hunter-gatherers lacked herd management skills and that their socialisation was a barrier for their becoming fully fledged herders.⁴ These lines of thinking are often used to override hard, archaeological evidence. I have observed, however, that what is sometimes assumed to be the *norm or normal* in one scholarly generation, is not necessarily so within the same society but a different generation. In this paper, I will highlight my unease with the archaeological scholarship of migration of the late Stone Age by discussing the archaeology of hunter-gatherers and herders in Southern Africa. My emphasis will be on sites in Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. I will start by highlighting what these debates are, and then proceed to briefly discussing their merits and the demerits. The aim of this paper is to outline ways in which contemporary ways of addressing the migration patterns of the Stone Age in southern Africa can make scholars think differently about societal patterns and the causes of migration— of both people and livestock.

The debate on how domestic stock, especially cattle, sheep and goats, came into southern African lands in the late Holocene period is always based on either diffusion theories or on mass human and animal migration theories from the northern parts (including the north west and north east) of the continent. The lack of the wild progenitors of these animals is the main reason for the argument that they were introduced into the region.⁵ The diffusion theorists promote the view that domestic stock came into southern Africa as a result of the movement of ideas and animals into new territories occupied by hunter-gatherer societies but with minimal human population movements.⁶ The proponents of diffusion theory argue that domestic stock, especially sheep in sites such as in south

western Zimbabwe's Matopos at around c.2100 BP, Toteng in north western Botswana at 1900 BP and northern Cape in South Africa, could not have been the result of large community migrations but rather of the diffusion of both herding ideas and the actual exchange of sheep, possibly for resources that the herders did not have access to.⁷

Diffusion theorists acknowledge that some herd men would have accompanied the animals. Herders would have been in search of better pastures. And, when they got into contact with hunter-gatherers in other regions, the herdsman would have traded for goods that they did not have, such as fresh wild meat and plants. The possible exchange commodities would be their domestic animals and pottery. There would also have been an exchange of ideas on the landscape and how to take care of domestic animals. An accepted diffusionist argument for what would have prepared hunter-gatherers to readily take on the 'new' subsistence method is that hunter-gatherer societies were not as egalitarian as they are assumed to have been.⁸ Rather, they would display and practice forms of social ranking. The possible forms of social ranking have been identified as debt or spiritual powers.⁹ With regards to debt, the assumption is that those with more goods would create a system where those without goods would always be indebted to the former, and would always have to work for them or support them as a form of payment—without ever fully paying their debt. For the members of these societies with so-called spiritual powers, the possession of such powers were used as a way of gaining control of those without.¹⁰ In either case, the arrival of 'new goods' would have created an opportunity for those who were in these positions of power to further strengthen their positions through accumulation of these 'new' possessions, or skills, and use them to further subjugate those without possessions.

As much as I am in agreement with using some aspects of diffusion theory to partly explain the spread of domestic stock and herders in southern African sites, I have a problem with the way in which the spread of stock is defined in archaeological contexts. For example, I am in agreement with some aspects of Sampson's bow-wave diffusion model but I find his suggestion that herders are better-adapted donors whilst the hunters are a less adapted recipient group troubling.¹¹ The question that arises from this is: aren't the hunters supposed to be the well adapted of the two? Since the hunter-gatherers are indigenous to the areas and the herders are newcomers in transit, it is the hunter-gatherers who are well adapted to the environment, one would imagine. It must be noted that Sampson does acknowledge that his model has flaws as it assumes that technical expertise such as pottery making is the reserve of the Khoi pastoralists and that the hunter-gatherers are the only recipients in the process.¹²

Those against the diffusion argument have always pointed out that herding would not be possible through diffusion as it requires the transfer of skills that would be foreign to the nature of the hunter-gatherers who 'own' dead animals rather than live animals.¹³ Such detractors are of the view that it is only through large scale migrations of pastoralists and agro pastoralists (at later stages) that sheep and other domestic animals (such as goats and cattle) could have reached

southern Africa. What has always troubled me with these arguments is the fact that changes in environment and climates, though used, are not usually as emphasised as linguistic evidence, even though they may have a better preserved archaeological foot print than linguistic evidence. Phillipson points out that where people argue that hunter-gatherers and herders lived side by side, one tends to find hunter-gatherer material culture, with domestic stock and pottery, as the only material remains used to suggest that there would have been herders nearby.¹⁴

In trying to demonstrate how difficult it was for southern African hunter-gatherers to become herders, Smith uses hunter-gatherer socio-economics as an example of what may have been barriers to this type of lifestyle.¹⁵ He is of the view that the sharing and reciprocity concepts which are heavily embedded in the hunter-gatherer culture would make it difficult for them to embrace a culture that restricts sharing and promotes private ownership and wealth accumulation. Furthermore, Smith suggests that hunter-gatherers cannot become herders because women and men contribute equally to food procurement. This suggests some level of social equality, whereas in herding societies, women have a lower status to that of men, and at times are seen as possession of men.¹⁶ The problem with Smith's argument, in my view, is that it is presented in such a way that hunter-gatherers can only become herders if they take every aspect of the herders' culture including domestic stock and discard all aspects of their own culture.¹⁷ Contrary to that, I believe that hunter-gatherers would have adopted domestic stock to suit their own social, economic and cultural needs rather than simply be assimilated into the culture of migrants.

In this regard, Barnard has identified what he terms the 'foraging mode of thought.'¹⁸ In this model, the emphasis is on economic ideology rather than on production. Barnard is of the view that the 'foraging mode of thought' is resilient as it persists even in the mind-sets of those hunter-gatherers who have adopted domestic stock. Thus, hunter-gatherers who adopt domestic stock could never shift completely to become herders, since their socialisation has taught them not to accumulate but rather to value sharing and immediately consume whatever they have gathered. Barnard's model is important as it identifies the ideological resilience of those hunter-gatherers who chose not to adopt domestic stock.¹⁹ Barnard's theory is also important as it demonstrates how hunter-gatherers who adopted domestic stock could have created their own herding style— a balance between their sharing patterns and new herding concepts.

I have become sceptical of migration theories that focus on one approach and leave out another. I am sceptical of interpretations where it is simply argued that hunter-gatherers in southern Africa lacked the skill to become herders in their own right. It cannot be proved archaeologically that they did lack that skill. I embrace approaches that note that some hunter-gatherers may have tried herding for a while and then reverted to their traditional way of life when they realised that the challenges that came with herding were too strenuous. I also embrace approaches that note that herders also may have abandoned herding and gone back to traditional hunting and gathering and then reverted to herding when they

situations changed.²⁰ I find it hard to believe that all herders were migrants travelling to the southern-most point of the continent, who assimilated hunter-gatherers as they passed through their settlements.

I believe that hunter-gatherers did become herders in southern Africa— as they could have become herders or agriculturalists in the Near East when people started to experiment with wild plants and animals.²¹ I am not suggesting that *all* hunter-gatherers became herders, since both archaeological and historical evidence shows that while some societies took up herding and agro-pastoralism, others chose to remain hunter-gatherers, and that these societies lived side by side with each other. What I do propose is that some took up herding as they found it to give them an advantage with regards to food security when coupled with hunting and gathering. I am, by no means, advocating for the Neolithic-southern-African-late-Stone-Age period as that would use a European model within an African context, an error that would override the particularities of the local context.²² My suggestion, however, is that if archaeologists were to use climatic and physical geography data as a way of reading such patterns in migration, rather than pottery as the only means for identifying food producers of this period, this could shift archaeologists, such as Walker, from making statements that at around c.2100BP in the Matopos area, there was evidence that hunter gatherers had access to domestic stock but there was no evidence to suggest that they took up herding.²³

Archaeologists tend to argue that the lack of wild progenitors of domestic animals such as sheep and cattle in southern Africa means that they could only have been introduced from outside. These may seem like undisputable facts, but what if the absence of the wild progenitors is a result of limited research in the region, owing to both historical and contemporary factors affecting modes of research? These factors include unstable political situations that made it difficult to conduct research in some southern Africa countries and lacks in or limitations in research funds, especially for archaeology and other ‘non essential sciences’— often missing out on funds where preference is given to health disciplines and poverty eradication programmes.

Lessons from the ethnography of Babirwa

During my fieldwork in the Bobonong area in second half of 2008, I conducted interviews with the occupants of cattle-posts near the archaeological sites that I was working on. The main reason for these interviews was to identify how long these people have been occupying the area and how often they rotate their livestock in this semi-arid landscape. One family, the Marobas claimed to have occupied the cattle post since the 1940s. One of the elders of the family pointed out that first they used to live on the outskirts of Bobonong village, at a place called Mtongolo. This is about three kilometres from the current village administration centre. Today, the area is part of the village. She also pointed out that the family relocated from Mtongolo because the vegetation cover, especially grazing land, could no longer sustain their cattle. They moved to an area in what today is called the Talana farms to allow the area to recover. Their stay there was short-lived as the area was taken up and incorporated into the Tuli Block farms.

The elder further states that they lived briefly in Motlhabaneng but then moved their animals to Mmadale to set up a cattle-post. Here, she lived out the rest of her childhood, and only moved away after getting married. Occasionally the family had to reduce their stock by spreading it to other areas, when Mmadale could no longer sustain their cattle during drought episodes that are common in the area. After the death of her husband, she returned to Mmadale and set up her own cattle-post closer to her younger siblings. However, instead of cattle she has focused on goats, as they can survive better in this unpredictable terrain. She did emphasise that goats are better livestock because they always recover faster than cattle from both diseases and drought.

This interview with Mrs MmaDiope Morebodi (nee Maroba) initiated some thoughts about how migration is viewed. When coupled with Gifford-Gonzalez's suggestion that the introduction of domestic stock in southern Africa may have been the result of a 'filtering' phenomena rather than mass scale migrations, first by the small stock herders with sheep and then cattle keepers in the eastern and southern African context, the migration patterns in this area makes better sense to me.²⁴ The understanding from this is that migration was not as large scale as man scholars thought it was. A herder would move his or her animals from one place to another within a radius of at least 100km. They would still have connections to the rested/abandoned area that would be revisited when the other areas become degraded. If scholars relate Babirwa practice with the hunter-gatherer ethno-archaeological systems, then maybe we can begin to understand southern migration better. The Babirwa system shows that herders and hunter-gatherers always allow their landscapes to recover, and that they have good land and herd management skills that target the mature prey, even though hunting is an opportunistic method.

Discussion and conclusion

As I see it, the way forward in archaeological scholarly debates of migration is not to view it as mass movement of objects and people from one place to another but to try and understand how societies used their landscape pragmatically, and to their own advantage. Archaeologists should bear in mind that conservation is not a new concept but that it has always been an integral part of societies that relied heavily on the environment for their livelihoods. There should be increased awareness about the fact that contemporary and historical hunter-gatherers are not all the direct descendants of the Stone Age hunter-gatherers and that some societies that were agro-pastoralists at the time of contact with European colonists and explorers were also the descendants of former hunter-gatherers who had taken up herding at some point in their lives.²⁵ Once this awareness is integrated into the research methods of contemporary archaeologists, migration can be viewed not as large-scale episodes where one group became assimilated or displaced by another, but as a dynamic means to rotate landscape occupancy so that both animals and plants in a given area recover –seasonal practice for highly mobile societies and a mechanism to deal with drought for more sedentary societies with domestic animals.

There is an acknowledgement that some people within larger groups may have been involved in mass migrations as indicated by the sudden abandonment of Mapungubwe at around 1290AD and the relocation to Great Zimbabwe 250 kilometres to the north-east.²⁶ However, according to O'Connor and Kiker, the shift was mainly influenced by climatic conditions, such as a decrease in rainfall which made both cropping and livestock husbandry not viable.²⁷ Therefore, climate and environment were the key pull factors on the shift.

There is an implication in this hypothesis that these societies knew where they wanted to relocate specifically, and didn't just pack and move without having a specific destination.²⁸ We have to acknowledge that resource decline in Mapungubwe was the motivating factor for migration. The occupants of Mapungubwe knew that the areas around where they established their centre (Great Zimbabwe) were less affected by the changes in the climatic conditions compared to where they were before their move. For every migration that takes place, whether it is long distance or short distance, it is also necessary to investigate if there had been any return migration.²⁹ Furthermore for every long distance mass migration that is suggested by the archaeological evidence available to us, the concept of 'filtering in' movement, which allows for the gradual movement into an area, has to be examined thoroughly. It has to be noted that this paper does not suggest that there was no migration from the East to Southern part of Africa, what it suggests is that the scale for which it is suggested needs to be redefined and the idea that hunter-gatherers could not have become herders should be scrutinised, bearing in mind that not all southern African hunter-gatherers were limited to the Kalahari. Thus, some hunter-gatherers did become herders and some did not.

Notes

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- ¹ See, for instance: K Flannery, "Origins and ecological effects of early domestication in Iran and the Near East" In Ed. P. J. Ucko and G. W. Dimbleby. *The domestication of plants and animals*. (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd. 1969); L. R. Binford, "*Post Pleistocene adaptations*". Ed. S. R. Binford and L. R. Binford, *New Perspectives in Archaeology*. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company. 1968); C. K. Cooke, "Evidence of human migrations from rock art of southern Africa" *Africa*, 3,5 (1965); C. G. Sampson, "Model of prehistoric hunter-herder contact zone: a first approximation" *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series*, 5 (1986); J. Deacon, "Later Stone Age people and their descendants in southern Africa" Ed. R. G. Klein, *Southern African prehistory and paleoenvironments*. (Rotterdam and Boston: A. A. Balkema. 1984); T. N. Huffman, "Toteng pottery and the origins of Bambata" *South African Field Archaeology*, 3 (1994); E. Boonzaier, C. Malherbe, P. Berens and A. Smith, *The cape Herders: A history of the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa*. (Cape Town: David Phillip. 1996); A. B. Smith, "The concepts of 'Neolithisation' for Africa?" *Before Farming*, (2005)
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- ³ See for instance: Cooke 1965; Sampson 1986; Smith 2005; Boonzaier et al 1996
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- ⁴ Boonzaier et al, 1996; Smith, 2008
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- ⁵ Boonzaier et al, 1996
- ⁶ Sampson, 1986
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Sadr, 2003
- ⁹ Sadr, 2004; B. Hayden, "Nimrods, Pistcaters, pluckers and planters: The emergence of food production" *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 9, 31-65. (1991)
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 2004
- ¹¹ Sampson, 1986
- ¹² *Ibid*, 1986
- ¹³ Smith, 1990; 2005; 2008
- ¹⁴ Sampson, 2005; Sampson 1986
- ¹⁵ Smith, 1990
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 1990
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, 1990
- ¹⁸ A. Barnard, "From Mesolithic to Neolithic modes of thought" Ed. A. Whittle and V. Cummings *Going Over: The Mesolithic-Neolithic Transition in North-West Europe*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*
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