

WILEY



108. The Interpretation of Pakot Visual Art

Author(s): Harold K. Schneider

Source: *Man*, Vol. 56 (Aug., 1956), pp. 103-106

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2793736>

Accessed: 03-11-2016 14:46 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wiley, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Man*

then to find in a Monmouthshire manor house, probably of the late fifteenth century, an open cruck truss with a Gothic moulding on the crucks (fig. 4), and the fact that Innocent figures a very similar truss from Yorkshire⁸

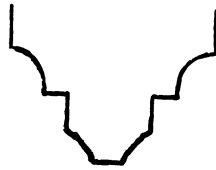


FIG. 4. GOTHIC MOULDING ON A CRUCK IN A HOUSE OF c. 1480

The cruck is 5 inches thick and 1 foot 10 inches broad.
After Fox and Raglan, *op. cit.*, p. 32

suggests that the builders were following a fashion widespread among the well-to-do. That cruck trusses were often used for their decorative effect is pretty certain.

The Gothic arch came into general use about 1200, and my suggestion is that in the thirteenth century the cruck truss was devised by sophisticated builders as a copy in wood of, and an alternative to, that arch. At first finely

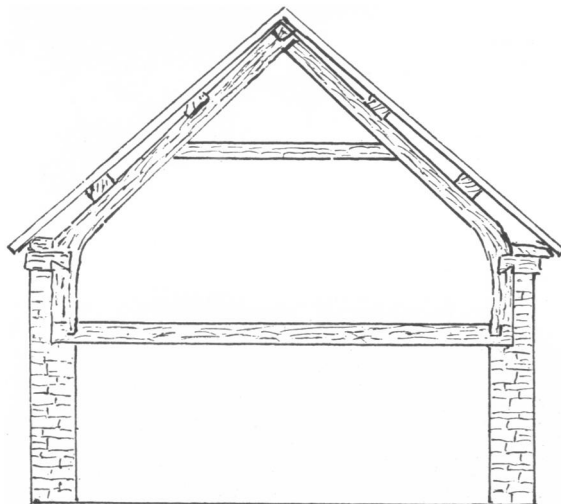


FIG. 5. SECTION OF A STONE HOUSE OF c. 1575 WITH UPPER-CRUCK CONSTRUCTION
After Fox and Raglan, *op. cit.*, p. 70

made and used only in expensive buildings, crucks spread gradually downwards, losing quality as they did so, till they ended in the crudely built cottages which some theorists have supposed to be primitive. Before this happened two variant forms were developed, the upper

cruck and the false cruck. The upper cruck (fig. 5), instead of resting on a plinth, was tenoned into a ceiling beam. The false cruck (fig. 6) is found chiefly in Devon and Somerset. Two pieces of timber are scarfed together so as

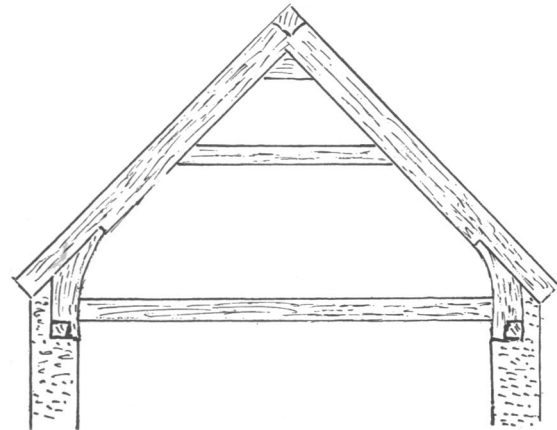


FIG. 6. FALSE CRUCK FROM A HOUSE NEAR EXETER
The walls are of cob. From a drawing by Sir Cyril Fox

to look like a cruck. This suggests the late spread of the fashion for crucks to areas where there was no suitable timber.

It is of course possible that crucks were older, but the evidence for them before 1200 seems very slight. Mr. F. H. Crossley,⁹ indeed, says that 'the early [Saxon] square-ended chapels constructed of timber were designed with a pair of "crucks" or bent timbers, joined at the top and forming a rough arch at either end, united by a ridge pole, the walls of wattle and the roof thatched with reeds.' But he gives no authority for this statement. Other writers rely on the supposed 'primitiveness' of the technique, but this of course is to beg the question. If it were really primitive one would expect a distribution outside Britain, and this, in spite of Erixon, has yet to be established.

Notes

- ¹ S. O. Addy, *The Evolution of the English House*, London, 1933 (first published 1898), p. 41.
- ² C. F. Innocent, *The Development of English Building Construction*, London, 1916, pp. 27, 59.
- ³ I. C. Peate, *The Welsh House*, London, 1940, p. 166.
- ⁴ S. Erixon in *Folkliv*, 1937, p. 141.
- ⁵ H. Braun, *The Story of the English House*, London, 1940, p. 28.
- ⁶ J. Walton in *Antiquity*, 1948, p. 185.
- ⁷ Addy, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Innocent, *op. cit.*, p. 32; Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- ⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 53.
- ⁹ F. H. Crossley, *Timber Building in England*, London, 1951, p. 10.

THE INTERPRETATION OF PAKOT VISUAL ART

by

DR. HAROLD K. SCHNEIDER

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Lawrence College, Wisconsin

108 Anthropologists seem agreed that aesthetic sense is universal¹ but most would probably agree that standards relating to what is aesthetically pleasing vary

from culture to culture. Nevertheless, in practice scholars who discuss the art of non-literate people do sometimes seem to impute standards to them or, what amounts to the

same thing, try to deduce the standards of beauty of a people by analysis of objects from their cultures. In both cases standards of beauty learned in Western cultures are used as a basis for judging what is or is not art in a non-literate group. Almost all discussions of the Magdalenian people make reference to the 'art' of these cave dwellers.² In effect this is the attribution of standards of beauty to Magdalenian people based upon the assumption that their standards were the same as ours. In the study of prehistoric cultures such deductions are inevitable and in fact probably close to the truth, but we can never know for sure.

In the study of contemporary people such deductions are also seemingly common. Since discussions of art seldom include any but an implied note of the standards of beauty of the subjects, it seems possible that what constitutes the art of the people is derived at least in part by deduction.

The present paper is an addition to the limited number of studies of concepts of beauty of non-literate people. It is proposed to show what Pakot³ standards are and to define their visual art in terms of them. It is further proposed to illustrate from this how deduction of art may lead to erroneous conclusions if the standards of beauty of a people are not taken into account.

The Pakot distinguish between what is useful in subsistence or the ordinary acts of getting a living and what is an aesthetically pleasing embellishment having no subsistence or utilitarian use except as decoration. In this discussion the term utilitarian may be most conveniently defined as anything which has no aesthetic component. Thus the utilitarian object is one that has any function in living other than an aesthetic function. This distinction became apparent during a discussion of a carved wooden milk pot (*aleput*) which has a projecting lip carved into the rim. Informants said that the pot was *karam*, a word usually translated as 'good,' and which may be used in a wide variety of situations. When asked to explain further what was meant by 'good,' one informant said that the pot was useful for holding milk and so was 'good to have.' This informant further stated, however, that the lip of the jug was *pachigh*, a word which had been previously translated by the interpreter as 'pretty' or 'beautiful' and which, it was explained on this occasion, meant 'pleasant to look at' and 'unusual.' Additional questioning elicited the information that the lip was a recent invention by some unknown inventor, before whose time milk pots had had no lips. The lip is in fact superfluous to the function of the pot when used to handle milk. No other Pakot containers, to my knowledge, have a lip, which is why it is considered unusual. To generalize, the thing which is *pachigh*, in this case, is something pleasant to contemplate, strange or new and an embellishment. The pot is clearly not considered wholly beautiful and the utilitarian part is plainly distinguished conceptually from the pretty.

Subsequent investigations showed that, with the qualifications discussed further on, the following things were only *karam*, i.e., had useful functions that were non-aesthetic: clay cooking pots, shoes made from old rubber tires or cow hide, spears, headrests which are used as neck

pillows to protect the mens' clay headdresses, calabash containers, cotton sheets and other clothing, houses, water holes and cattle (except for one type). That cattle should be included in this list was surprising since they are the most highly valued of all goods and the attitude of the Pakot towards them might lead one to suppose that they would be considered beautiful.

The term *pachigh* (which refers to a state of being, a condition of a thing) can be applied to two classes of objects which, however, are not separated conceptually by Pakot. First are those things which are considered beautiful but are not made by the Pakot. These include the beauties of nature and objects of foreign manufacture, and in both cases what is beautiful is a part of something which is useful in some other way. For example, with one exception all cattle are *karam*, their value lying in the fact that they provide meat, milk, blood and certain by-products and that they are useful for obtaining other goods through trade and for 'buying' rights in other persons. The colours of the hides of these cattle are *pachigh*. A woman is also 'good,' but she may have aspects of beauty such as firm, round breasts, a light, chocolate-coloured skin, and white, even teeth. The glossy surface of 'americani' cloth imported into the reserve is similarly considered pretty, but when it wears off the cloth becomes purely *karam*.

In regard to this last case, the common designation of art as man-made beauty,⁴ the definition used here, in contrast to beauty occurring in nature, would exclude the glossy cloth as Pakot art since it is imported in that condition and not applied by Pakot. It may be art to the manufacturer but it is in the nature of a 'natural' occurrence to Pakot.

The second class of beautiful objects are those made or obtained by Pakot which are added to utilitarian objects by Pakot themselves. It includes paint which is made and applied to objects by Pakot and also coloured beads which are not made by Pakot but which are added by them to utilitarian goods for decoration. A special type of steer called a *kamar*, who is selected for certain admirable qualities and whose horns are warped by his owner, is considered to be wholly beautiful, unlike other cattle, and is kept somewhat like a pet and as a symbol of prestige to his owner. He is not put to subsistence use except under special circumstances and so is thought of by Pakot as an embellishment. Other objects in this class are cowry shells which are used to decorate various objects, polished wood surfaces as on spears or headrests, and bits of aluminium and iron or copper which are inlaid on the surface of the headrest to provide decoration. A design incised on any surface is also *pachigh*, as is a house if it is unusual in style or especially carefully and regularly built. Finally, a basket may have a pattern of weaving that is considered beautiful if it is unusual or if it comes from another district where the pattern of weaving is different from that of the area to which it is imported. Some of these objects are always separable from the things they enhance (e.g., cowry shells) and some are in a sense inseparable after they are added. But all are initially added to utilitarian things by Pakot and are not inherent in them. To reiterate, these *pachigh*

things seldom if ever exist of and by themselves but are used to decorate some utilitarian thing. This is not so clear in the case of the prize ox, but he may be regarded as being 'added' to his owner or as being an embellishment on his owner's herd.

We may summarize Pakot visual art as consisting of objects having purely æsthetic functions, including necklaces, headdresses and hairdress, pigments, polish or gloss, cowry shells, bits of polished iron and aluminium, iron and copper bracelets, ostrich feathers, the *kamar* steer, and unusual regularity and evenness in patterns or designs.

Informants sometimes refer without qualification to such things as a fully decorated adult man as 'beautiful,' but it is clear that they mean only the æsthetic embellishments. The Pakot tend to atomize the unit (or what might seem to be a unit to us) into its component pretty and non-pretty parts. Thus the term *pachigh* applies to the æsthetic components of a complex like the fully dressed adult man. In fact this atomization goes further, and the *pachigh* aspect may be broken down into its components. Thus a fully dressed man wears a headdress, necklaces, bracelets, etc. In contrast to the collection of æsthetic elements which are called collectively *pachigh*, any single element may be called *pachigha*, the final *a* in the morpheme being added as a modifier to show that the thing referred to is but one element in what may be thought of as a complex. Why this should be necessary is not understood. Neither is it known whether an element that may be *pachigha* in one context may be *pachigh* in another.

The Pakot concept of beauty is relative or a matter of degree. Any beautiful object may be viewed as more or less æsthetically pleasing than something else. Of three coloured shirts covered with designs which were shown to informants, the one with the brightest colours, the largest number of colours, and a wealth of surface pattern was considered prettier than the others. Of all cattle those coloured pure black are prettier than the others. This is true only for the locality in which the investigation took place where black cattle are relatively rare.

There is general agreement about the beauty of things in broad categories like colour. But while informants stated that all colours or pigments are pretty, the coloured hides of goats and sheep are not considered to be pretty in any way. Their colours are thought to be too drab and monotonous. Similarly, coloured beads arranged in a pattern are usually beautiful. But Pakot have preferences which exclude some arrangements. Some colours are preferred, such as blue in the locality under consideration, but any colour may be strung out in a solid line and be juxtaposed with any other solid-coloured string and be pretty. When different-coloured beads are strung on the same line an alternation of white and blue or of red and white is acceptable while alternation of red and yellow, red and blue, or yellow and white is not, apparently without regard to pattern. It would seem that the latter groupings are unacceptable because the contrast between colours is reduced and like the colours of goats and sheep they become monotonous. White and yellow provide little contrast but white and blue do.

Although there is general agreement on what is beautiful, there are areas of disagreement. We have already noted the regional variations in opinions about the relative beauty of cattle colours. There is sometimes disagreement about whether a thing is beautiful at all. A notable example is the case of a woman who felt that there was nothing beautiful about cattle, but that a healthy, green field of eleusine plants was beautiful. Most men would take just the opposite position. This difference of opinion apparently derives from the division of labour by sex. Women usually have little control over cattle, resent the menial labour associated with them which they must perform, and derive little prestige from them, while they can control the crops they produce and spend much of their time in the fields. In short, the men and women seem to find aspects of beauty in areas of life that interest them most and to which they willingly give attention. But at least one man was found who was a devoted cultivator and who described a field of eleusine plants as pretty because 'the plants are even and regular and green and when a man stands by the field he can look over all of them.' It was the panorama of all the plants which, unlike a field of straggling sorghum, can be easily viewed as a whole that appealed to him.

Allusion has been made a number of times to the beauty inherent in unique or unusual objects such as strangely woven baskets, unusually carefully built houses, or the lip on the milk pot. One informant said that European possessions were the prettiest things he had ever seen because he had never seen anything like them before. But not all things that are strange are necessarily beautiful. We have already seen that some strange arrangements of beads are not pretty. Some things which are unusual at first may acquire some utilitarian use and become common, thus losing the quality of *pachigh*. A concrete bridge built by Europeans in the reserve a few years ago apparently was at first considered to be wholly pretty. Now that the Pakot depend on it to cross the river its beauty has been reduced to certain embellishments such as the 'battlements' located along the sides.

New things which are startlingly beautiful are called *wechigha*, while those which are ugly and frightening are *wechipachigha*. It was difficult to find any example of the latter other than the hypothetical case of a man walking down the road carrying his head under his arm, but there was emphatic agreement that this was *wechipachigha*. Not all strange things are thought of as either pretty or ugly. There is disagreement about innovations and no generalization seems possible, except perhaps that when a new item has obvious utilitarian use it is excluded from the area of beauty.

Taken as a whole the Pakot attitude to new things is not so strange. Even among ourselves uniqueness is often a quality that has æsthetic virtue, and like Pakot we may consider some new thing pretty, such as a late-model automobile, until it becomes common and its other functions become dominant. The principal difference between Pakot and ourselves is that new things are rarer among them. They idolize the *status quo* and do not encourage change. When an innovation appears it may be especially striking.

Throughout this paper we have spoken only of what I have called visual art. There is a suggestion that the term *pachigh* may be applied to such things as dances and songs but the evidence is too scanty to discuss.

To conclude, Pakot visual art, defined as man-made embellishments with æsthetic appeal, consists essentially of the decoration of objects with no æsthetic qualities. Objects of art are things which are glossy or polished, have an unusual pattern or form (including strange baskets and finely built houses as well as the *kamar steer*) and colours. There are exceptions in that some unusual forms are ugly according to Pakot interpretations and drab colours are not pretty. Further, it seems to be generally true that any form which is useful in getting a living or has some non-æsthetic function is not beautiful. One essential characteristic of the Pakot concept of beauty is that it is an embellishment on the ordinary non-æsthetic things of life. These objects of art seldom if ever stand alone; they are applied to other objects as decoration.

We have analysed the Pakot concept of beauty and have isolated their art according to it, using the definition of art as man-made beauty. It remains to consider the possible errors introduced by attempts to deduce æsthetic values in another culture. I myself provide a useful case in point because before the Pakot ideas of beauty were discovered I unwittingly indulged in such deduction. To some extent the deductive approach was successful in that such things as necklaces and bracelets were classified as art objects in agreement with the Pakot. This was probably due to the fact that to a certain extent Pakot and European standards of beauty coincide or that some standards are universal. But a European has a tendency to generalize beauty to a whole object on which embellishment had been made, and thus to fail to recognize the fine distinction that Pakot make between an object and its embellishments. Furthermore, some things which the Pakot consider æsthetically pleasing embellishments were missed, while some were considered beautiful which Pakot would not. Deductively the lip of the milk pot along with the pot was considered non-æsthetic. This proved to be wrong, the lip being considered by the Pakot as a pretty embellishment. On the other hand, the headrest was deductively classified as an object of art because, although it has non-æsthetic functions, it is carried about by its owner like a decorative

cane and is polished and decorated. To the Pakot only the gloss and incised or inlaid design are beautiful. A headrest without these is not beautiful in any way.

This discussion would be incomplete if it were not said that although it may be useful for purposes of ethnography to isolate according to a universal definition the particular area of life of the Pakot that may be called 'art,' a classification of this kind is liable to be very misleading if not qualified by Pakot concepts of beauty. Pakot do not recognize anything called art as such. There is mere *pachigh* and non-*pachigh* whether man-made or occurring in nature. Our attempts to separate the two for purposes of this paper were highly artificial, in some cases dubious, and a violation of Pakot conceptualization of the universe. In short, we might argue that analysis of Pakot culture would proceed more adequately with a category of 'beautiful' or 'æsthetic' things than with a category of 'art.'

Our discussion suggests that attempts to classify the art of a non-literate people deductively without determining at first their concepts of beauty are bound to be only partly accurate. On the positive side, securing such information can directly contribute to art theory, as in this case to the old debate over whether the art of non-literate people is utilitarian or not. As we have seen, Pakot art is never utilitarian if we define utilitarian as having any non-æsthetic function. Beautiful things have only the function of pleasing the eye and only the function of enhancing non-æsthetic things.

Notes

¹ Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, Dover Publications, 1955, p. 9.

² For example see Leonhard Adam, *Primitive Art*, London (Penguin Books), 1949 (revised edition), p. 25; or L. Beals and H. Hoijer, *An Introduction to Anthropology*, New York (Macmillan), 1953, p. 539. These examples could, of course, be multiplied greatly.

³ The term *Pakot* is the plural form of which the singular is *Pachon*; to avoid unnecessary confusion only the plural is used in this paper. The Pakot, more commonly known as Suk, inhabit, in the main, the West Suk District of Kenya and belong to the pastoral Nilotic group of tribes of East Africa, being most nearly related to the Nandi. The research upon which this paper rests was carried out in the Ortum area of West Suk in 1951-52 under grants from the United States State Department (Fulbright Act), the Social Science Research Council and the Program of African Studies of Northwestern University.

⁴ Boas, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

ROYAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE PROCEEDINGS

The Work of the Ethnomusicology Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

109 The Ethnomusicology Committee of the Institute was appointed by the Council on 6 August, 1953, for the purpose of promoting the growth of this branch of anthropology in conjunction with interested bodies elsewhere, and especially of encouraging the use of ethnomusicological techniques by field anthropologists of all kinds.

The membership of the committee at the close of the session 1955-1956 is: the President, Joint Hon. Secretaries, Hon. Treasurer

and Hon. Editor of the Institute (*ex officio*), Dr. A. A. Bake, Mr. H. J. Braunholtz, C.B.E., Dr. P. J. Bohannan, Dr. G. H. S. Bushnell, Mr. R. E. Clausen, Mr. H. G. Farmer, Professor R. Firth, F.B.A., Professor M. Fortes, Professor C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, Mr. F. Howes, the Revd. A. M. Jones, Miss M. Karpeles, Dr. J. Layard, Mr. T. K. Penniman, Mr. D. Rycroft, Dr. O. W. Samson, Mr. P. Saul, Professor A. N. Tucker and Miss B. de Zoete. The present chairman of the committee is Professor Firth and the Hon. Secretary Mr. Clausen. In addition to the full members, the following have been appointed Corre-