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The Decoration of Containers: An Ethnographic and Historical Study

Ian Hodder

What is the relevance of a chapter about decorated calabashes (gourds) to a volume about ceramics? A characteristic of recent archaeology has been the widespread espousal of a systems theory framework. The various subsystems, such as ceramic production, are discussed in relation to other subsystems, such as exchange or social complexity. Yet, at the same time, the category “ceramics” is seen as universal, as something about which general statements can be made. In the making of such statements “ceramics” are taken out of their contexts and universal assumptions are applied.

In fact, however, archaeologists commonly make a number of decisions that hint at the arbitrariness of the procedures employed. For example, the category “ceramics” or “pottery” often refers only to ceramic containers rather than to items made of fired clay. Thus the Greek “Pre-Pottery Neolithic” contains fired clay figurines and a range of other ceramic materials. Equally, there are many categories other than “ceramics” to which an individual pot can be assigned. For example, it can be placed in the category “containers,” in the category “all decorated (or undecorated) items,” or “items used in food preparation,” and so on. Any ceramic item is involved in overlapping sets of categories and in a network of meanings. The danger of arbitrarily choosing some universal category is apparent. If we want to understand pots, we must see them from many more angles.

Crudely, then, there are two ethnoarchaeological approaches to ceramics. The first involves defining an arbitrary category

“from the outside” and searching for the cross-cultural correlates of that category. The second approach, to be followed in this chapter, is to situate ceramics as fully as possible into their own context of meanings. Such an approach involves discovering the multidimensional networks of meaning in which pots play their role. It involves looking for similarities and contrasts along varied dimensions of meaning (as outlined by van der Leeuw in Chapter 2 of this volume). It involves suggesting ways in which the dimensions of meaning are structured at various levels. But above all, it involves breaking down the notion that “ceramics” implies one category with a single meaning. Rather, if the pots being discussed are painted red, one can ask, “Where else in this culture does one find red?” Or, if the decorative motifs used on pots also occur on cloth, one can ask, “What happens if we place pots and cloth in the same category, and what does this association imply?”

This chapter is about calabashes. But the procedures employed in the analysis are relevant to any item of material culture. Pots are part of a system, but they take part at more than the systemic level.

Baringo Calabashes

In earlier work among the pastoralist, patrilineal, and virilocal Ilchamus (Njemps), I tried to explain why only the Ilchamus, who live in dispersed compounds to the south of Lake Baringo, Kenya, decorate calabashes in terms of information exchange and ethnic competition (Hodder 1982b, 1985). The ethnoarchaeological work involved was quick and “from the outside.” Using the first approach outlined above, measurements of arbitrary categories such as “decorated calabashes” and “intergroup competition” were identified and compared.

In more recent work in Baringo (January–March 1983) an attempt was made to examine more fully the context of meanings within which the calabashes are situated. This is not to argue that the meaning of an object derives entirely from its environment. Certainly the object contributes to the environment. Ultimately there is a two-way dependency between most, if not all, objects in any cultural context. It is difficult to know how to break into this network of associations, contrasts, and meanings.

And once an entry has been made, the account will always be complex.

The Meaning Context

The first thing is to note how Ilchamus decorated calabashes are used. All decorated calabashes, and many undecorated ones, are used to contain and serve cattle and goat milk. They are made and decorated by women, and the insides are periodically cleaned by women. Small decorated calabashes are used to feed milk to young children, up to the age of seven or eight. Medium-sized and large calabashes are used for milking cows, an activity usually carried out by the women. The calabashes, full and empty, are kept in the hut by the woman's bed (*ruet*). They are also stored in the *iltorog*, a cupboard at the end of the woman's bed. Although cattle, and hence cattle milk, are generally owned by men, the care and distribution of the milk is largely in the hands of women. Women frequently lend and give calabashes to each other in the sharing and exchange of milk. Women without cattle may depend on the milk of neighbors to feed young children. A mother-in-law gives milk in a calabash to help a young family. Co-wives share the milk that each has taken from the family herd, dividing according to need. Calabashes without milk may also be given as gifts between women. In particular a young woman about to be married, or a young wife, may give a decorated calabash to her mother-in-law, who lives in and "controls" the compound in which she will now live. A mother-in-law will often give her son's new wife a decorated calabash as a sign of welcome and acceptance.

Not all calabashes are decorated with incised designs, and we shall see that the variability in the decoration of calabashes is of interest. But for the moment we can note that the associations of decorated calabashes lead us to consider three aspects of Ilchamus life: the milk that the calabashes contain; children, since the small calabashes used to feed milk to children are the most frequently decorated; women, since it is women who make and use and keep decorated calabashes.

Women use milk to feed children, on whom the continuity of the clan and society depends, and also to feed adults and to present to visitors. Women claim that they must always have milk

stored, ready for unexpected visitors. They perceive it as their role to provide the husband with his share “without any inconvenience.” The religious leader of the Ilchamus, the *laibon*, says, “Milk is part of Ilchamus life: it means happiness.”

The importance of milk for the Ilchamus derives partly from the central importance of cattle as wealth and from the importance of cattle and milk as a primary resource. But the special significance attached to milk is clear from its frequent use in a wide range of ceremonies linked to fertility and reproduction. There are also instances in which other materials, white in color, are used as symbolic of milk. Milk and cattle themselves are both described as white, and other white things can stand for them.

In the circumcision ceremonies of both boys and girls, shaving the heads of initiates and elders (indicating renewal and a change of life) is preceded by washing with milk taken from the concave seat of four-legged stools. Also in the circumcision ceremony, the mother of the compound uses the *ilkidongoei* (a type of brush used to clean out calabashes) to sprinkle milk from a calabash over the faces of the initiates as a blessing. Women bring fresh milk to drink at marriage ceremonies, and in the same ceremony milk is used in blessing the married couple. Milk is drunk with ground millet and vegetables at a number of occasions that women attend—for example, at birth rituals—and it is brought for drinking at the rituals for preventing droughts and disease. Milk, together with tobacco and honey beer, is placed over the graves of distinguished elders, in the cattle compound, to remember and honor the family ancestors and to provide for the continuation of the clan. The *laibon* and the elders put milk in their mouths and spit it, bit by bit, over those to be blessed in ceremonies. When advising individuals on their social and personal problems, the *laibon* requires the subject to bring a calabash full of fresh milk, into which he looks and reads the future.

In the ceremony orchestrated by the *laibon* to prevent drought, a mixture of water, clay, thatching grass, and milk is used to bring rain, and a black heifer is fed milk. To prevent disease, a ram is slaughtered and its excretions are mixed with milk and fat from the same animal, kept in the animal’s stomach, and then spread over the land surface. In the same ceremony, a mixture of white earth (symbolic of milk), milk, and water is marked

as a cross on the stomach and under the breasts of women so that, according to the *laibon*, they will have many children. The relationship here between milk, white, and reproduction is widely recognized. The cross design is also important here and is one of the motifs incised on the milk calabashes.

A white, milk cross also occurs as part of the male circumcision ceremony, a long ritual with numerous stages. The circumcision operation (*barta*) itself takes place in the cattle compound, as the boy is held on a cow's skin brought from her house by his mother. On this plain circumcision skin (*nchooni le barta*), she makes a cross in milk fat, which signifies that she has granted her son permission to become adult—that is, to enter into the warrior or *morán* age grade. She also gives him a mixture of milk and water from a calabash, poured into his cupped hands four times and spread over his face. The mother then leaves and the boy is circumcised in the presence of men only. The father has put milk fat on the boy's head as a blessing and as an open acceptance of the coming-of-age of his son. The mother's cross is seen as an equivalent gesture and must, if possible, be done by the boy's birth mother; even if she is divorced and remarried, she is called back to paint the cross. Indeed, the ceremony has to await the woman's presence, and this presence is signified by the use of milk. When the father puts milk fat on the boy's head, it has been prepared by women. It is in milk, obtained by women, that the *laibon* reads the future. Although rituals are usually controlled by men, the importance of women is represented symbolically by milk. In practical terms, too, the frequent use of milk depends on women.

Material symbols come to have meaning through association and use, and in this way milk, and therefore milk calabashes, have numerous positive associations in Ilchamus society. Yet all symbols have their otherness, their contrasts, implied in them. To say something is similar is also to evoke the possibility of opposites. Thus, fully to understand the meaning of milk, we must also grasp that with which it is contrasted.

In many instances white milk, associated with reproduction and fertility inside the domestic context, is contrasted with red and with danger in the outside world. For example, at the *lerinyoren* ceremony for the promotion of *morán* to elders, a bull is slaughtered. But it is first given honey beer and milk "to make the bull happy" and to wish the new generation of elders many

children and long lives. The bull is then killed, not in the usual way—by spearing or cutting the throat—but by suffocation, so that there is no sign of blood, since blood is always associated with danger.

Returning to the male circumcision operation, the boy's penis is washed with a cold mixture of fresh milk and water in order to clean away the blood, and it is then rubbed immediately with "whitewash" (soda ash) in order to stop the bleeding. Another example of the opposition of white (symbolic of milk) and red (symbolic of blood) is the collection of white soda ash from a mountain to the north of Baringo, Mount Paka. At an earlier stage in the male circumcision rituals the initiates journey to this mountain in the Pokot tribal area to collect the ash, which is seen as having been made by god (*ngai*) in active volcanoes. It is dug out by members of the Iltoijo clan, and "when it is dug by a non-member, the source changes to red, blood, instead of the normal white."

As another example, only women are allowed to remove ash, described as white, from the domestic hearth in the huts. But they are not allowed to throw the ash outside the compound with the other domestic rubbish (Hodder 1985). Rather, they have to throw it inside the compound fence. In explaining this, a woman said, "If you compare ash with red soil, you find it is different, because ash is white. So if you spread ash outside your compound, it might be spread everywhere by the wind and it would all become whitish." Here the world outside the compound is perceived as red, to be separated from the inside world associated with women and with white.

This outside world is often seen as male, dangerous, and wild. In the past, and still sometimes today, newly made pots and calabashes, termed "white," are hidden from view lest they be seen, and crack. *Morans* who had been eating meat "in the bush," and men who had murdered or had killed lions or other wild animals, "hated newly made pots and calabashes and smashed them" when they came back to their village or compound. Individuals can provide examples of having had a murderer in a hut, and afterward a calabash broke. In explaining such events, individual elders frequently referred to the strength and power of wild animal blood or of the blood of the murder victim. The *laibon* made the opposition between wild blood and the domestic world with milk and cattle more clear:

The blood out of the wild animals brings about all dislike; it is the blood from these wild animals that makes the *moran* hate the pot and calabashes. Even if lions are miles away, the cattle sense their presence through the air, and cattle disperse and run out of the cattle enclosure and grow wild.

It is particularly the young warriors, the *moran*, who are traditionally associated with wild strength in the outside world. The circumcision ceremony to become a *moran* involves journeys through, and long stays in, the wild, hunting and eating meat unsocially, away from the eyes of women.

We could, then, say that the Ilchamus calabashes are linked into a symbolic structure that opposes milk to blood, white to red, female to male, domestic to wild. In its simplest, it is women who milk cattle and men who bleed them. Both milk and blood are important resources. They are brought together in the drinking of *saroi*, a mixture of blood and milk. *Saroi* is associated with a scarcity of milk. Since milk is normally plentiful, *saroi* is associated with being away from home, with danger in the wild.

But we can already see with *saroi*, the milk and blood mixture, that no such simple structure exists. The structure may be called upon and may be created in social life, but it does not determine that life. And blood and red can have more than one connotation at the same time. They do not always mean danger and a threat to society. Indeed, blood is a basic resource on which the society depends. Both blood and milk occur in *saroi* because, in a sense, they are not opposed; they both give strength. The mixture is drunk by both boys and girls after circumcision so that they regain the strength lost with the blood in the operation. The color red itself also has such positive connotations. In the past, the hair of *moran*, kept long as a sign of the "wild" state, was coated with red ocher, and red ocher was smeared in a red "V" design on their chests. In circumcision ceremonies, red ocher and fat from a ram are rubbed on shaven heads to promote change to a new stage of life and to encourage the hair to grow again. Similarly, red ocher is smeared on the head after shaving at the death of a family member, in order to encourage renewal.

The color red, then, is not always opposed to milk, since both red blood and white milk symbolize, and in practice provide, strength and renewal. Also, red, outside, is not always contrasted with female and the inside world. Women, for example, decorate

themselves with red ocher on their ears and ear decoration, and also use it on beaded skins (*lekisana* and *lekichopo*) used continuously in the past and today used in ceremonies. Many women daily wear clothes colored with a light red dye.

Behind the *leatwa* cage of her *ruet* bed in the hut, the woman gives birth and menstruates. The loss of blood at birth is said to make a woman weak and dirty. During the seclusion after birth she cannot wash, clean utensils or calabashes, or prepare food. Menstruation taboos are relatively limited in Ilchamus society, but once again the loss of blood is seen as being potentially dangerous and dirty. To wash would be to “wash away the blood to have children.” Here blood, associated with women inside the compound, has dangerous, negative qualities, threatening the continuity of society. The danger of red blood here is equivalent to the wild, outside danger of the red-painted *moran*.

Thus, there is no overall structure. White milk can be opposed to red blood, but it can also be associated with it, providing strength. The white inside can be opposed to the red outside, but the inside also can be seen as red and dangerous. Women have both white and red qualities.

In this complex of meanings are the calabashes. They contain white milk and are made and used by women in the domestic context. It might be thought, then, that they fit nicely on the side of white, inside, female as opposed to red, outside, male. New calabashes are often described as white. But there are also opposing qualities here. In time the calabashes are often polished and become reddish. But, more specifically, the designs used refer to other contexts, in which red is used. For example, the red skins worn by women have the same double “V” and zigzag designs found on the calabashes. Red ocher generally is closely linked to ear and other body decorations.

The cross design on the calabashes evokes the white cross painted on the circumcision skin, but the main motifs used refer most directly to men, particularly to young *moran*, the unmarried warriors traditionally associated with the wild outside world. When asked for the ultimate origin of the double “V” design on calabashes and on women’s skins, women always immediately referred to the red “V” painted on the chests of *moran*.

We have seen over and over again that white and red, milk and blood, are brought together in Ilchamus life. They are contrasted, yet the same. White milk washes away red blood in

ceremonies, while domestic ash is contrasted with red outside soil, and milk products and red ocher are put on the head at different times in order to encourage strength and renewal. The calabashes take part in their meaning structure. Once again they bring together milk and blood, white and red. Inside they contain, store, and protect white milk. Outside they are decorated in designs that refer to *moran* warriors, to the use of red ocher in decoration.

Thus, to explain why the Ilchamus calabashes are decorated, we need to interpret the complex structures of meaning within which they are formed. The calabashes are decorated, and they are decorated in a particular way, because the Ilchamus have a particular set of perspectives that separates and brings together milk and blood, white and red, female and male. Decorating calabashes is one way in which this meaning "game" is played out.

But is it enough simply to refer to a structured set of symbolic similarities and differences? Have we adequately understood the meaning structures behind the calabashes in this way? It is possible to demonstrate the limitations of the account so far by asking two further questions. Why are other Ilchamus food and drink containers not decorated? Why do other Baringo groups not decorate calabashes?

Milk calabashes are the only containers that the Ilchamus decorate. Beer calabashes, for example, contain beer, which is often made and cared for by women, and served to men, but they are not decorated. Equally, pots and basket eating containers are not decorated, yet they are made by women and some types are used to cook and serve agricultural products to men and children. Many of the agricultural tasks are carried out by women, and women care for the grain that is stored in the huts for domestic use. Why are these containers not involved in the same oppositions as those described above? Why are grain and baskets for service of cereal foods not associated with milk, inside, white, and surrounded by the type of decoration found on the milk calabashes?

This question is particularly relevant for pots. Like the calabashes, the pots are made and largely used by women. The pots are used in the domestic context to feed men, women, and children. Women are as central to the production of grain as they are to the distribution of milk. Men depend on women working in the fields, caring for grain in the stores in the hut, and preparing

it for consumption. The parallels with the calabashes are clear, but the pots are not decorated. Yet the pots do have symbolic qualities that could be linked to white, milk, and reproduction. Clay is used at several points in rituals to encourage fertility, strength of women, and reproduction. Clay has reproductive qualities that could have been emphasized by women in pot decoration.

The lack of decoration on pots, baskets, and metal containers used to hold grain and cereal products evokes the fact that while agriculture is essential for the production of Ilchamus society, it is perceived as having a low value. This is partly a historical question. In the nineteenth century, the Ilchamus lived in large villages, without cattle, dependent on irrigation agriculture. But originally, before the nineteenth century, they had been pastoralists, and even in the nineteenth-century villages they retained an intention to return to cattle, because cattle were equated with wealth. Thus, as soon as conditions permitted, around 1900, the Ilchamus dispersed and gave up most of their agriculture except insofar as it allowed them to build up cattle stocks. Marriage payments and wealth are counted in terms of cattle. Everything to do with cattle, in particular the blood and the milk, is central to Ilchamus life. Everything to do with cattle is beautiful. Agriculture, and everything to do with agriculture, has low value.

Thus, we could say that the Ilchamus decorate milk calabashes but not grain pots because milk has a higher value than grain. Yet it could be argued that this just pushes the problem back in time, back to the question of why the Ilchamus value cattle. I think it *is* necessary to explain the present by reference to the historical tradition that forms individuals' view of the world. We *do* need to look back, searching for origins, doing culture history, to disentangle the frames of meaning. People grow up to live in a society that is already structured. To some extent the structure is taken for granted, retained via subjective dispositions. Thus, the most common Ilchamus reply to my questions about the meaning of the calabash decoration was simply that it is meaningless; the decoration is just beautiful. Our discussion must give some credence to this frequent statement. On one level, for the Ilchamus, it is natural to decorate calabashes because everything to do with cattle and milk is beautiful and is celebrated. For the Ilchamus there is a real sense of beauty, emotional peace, and aesthetic joy in the whole area of activity. In this sense, then,

the decoration has no cause. It simply exists as part of Ilchamus culture. It is irreducible. To probe such orientations, we need culture history, studies of diffusion and origin, but there is never a "cause."

The same point can be made regarding the second question. Why do only the Ilchamus decorate calabashes? The Ilchamus could highly value milk and cattle without decorating calabashes. They could play on the oppositions between milk and blood, red and white, without decorating calabashes. In all neighboring groups in Baringo, cattle are important and milk is used by women to care for children in the domestic context. Why do they not decorate calabashes as the Ilchamus do? Why do the Ilchamus decorate calabashes? It is difficult to find any contemporary social and economic reason for these differences, despite attempts I have made to do so (Hodder 1982b).

The reasons, again, are largely historical. The Ilchamus derive from the Masai group, and they speak Masai. The other Baringo tribes, Tugen and Pokot, are Kalenjin. Many of the decorative traits and motifs used by the Ilchamus (such as the "V" designs on male bodies and on the ceremonial skins) have a widespread distribution among Masai-related groups. Yet there is a more specific historical context for the Ilchamus decoration.

The "V" decoration on skins is made in colored beads, and the leather caps of the calabashes and the straps around them are usually beaded. Beads and other types of decoration are closely associated. Beads and decoration also have a special meaning, to do with being social. There is an Ilchamus song and dance called *Loodo*. The steps in the dance involve *moran* surrounding a group of women and then mixing with them, separating and mixing again. It is this mixing of men and women that, in the words of the song, "produce[s] beautiful coloring" and gives the song its name, "Beautiful Coloring." The men and women are traditionally dressed in red ocher and beads. A proverb states that a man without beads, with an undecorated skin like the scales on a fish, wants to be alone. For men, wearing beads and other decoration is particularly associated with the period after circumcision when full social relations begin; *moran* are able to marry and control resources and move toward elderhood.

La Seranka ("the decorated one" or "the one with decorated cloth") is the name given to *Lekodom*, the father figure and heroic ancestor of all Ilchamus, who, although not a *laibon*, had mirac-

ulous spiritual powers used for communal social good. He lived sometime in the early nineteenth century and wore a black cloth (for the Ilchamus, black is the color of our blue sky) that had beads attached to long strips of leather. "*Lekodom* was the cloth, and his good deeds were the decoration." He was called the decorated one "because he came from god, who decorates the sky with rainbow colors."

Whatever the details of this historical information, it is clear that decoration is closely linked to historical notions of being Ilchamus, of beauty, and of sociability. Decoration happens to be one of the ways the Ilchamus celebrate things they value and play upon things they think important. Here there is, again, an irreducible set of subjective dispositions that can be unraveled only historically.

But there is a danger here that we may relapse into a normative and idealist stance in which we are content to decode the structure and peel back the history. How is this set of meanings involved in social action? How does change occur? And if decoration is linked to sociability, how does this occur?

Social Action

We need now to examine more of the social context of the calabash decoration. In particular we have seen that the calabashes used by women to feed children are the most frequently decorated. Thus we need to consider the social context of women and children.

On a day-to-day basis, it is women who are more frequently found in and around the domestic compound. Men are more frequently away in meetings, visiting, working outside the region. The work of women in the home centers on the care of children and milk, but also involves other essential tasks, such as the collection of firewood to be stored in the hut, the collection of water, and the maintenance of fire in the hearth. They also repair the mud hut walls and the roofing thatch. Women and children also do the major share of tending cattle while they are being grazed near the compound.

Perhaps more important, however, is the role of women in agriculture. The Ilchamus today depend on dry and irrigation agriculture in order to make up for losses of cattle; however, work in the fields has a low status for Ilchamus men, and a majority of the

tedious, daily tasks are carried out by women. And in the home each wife controls the grain that is to be used in the feeding of her family.

In all these ways women make a real contribution to the Il-chamus economy. Still more important is the role of women in caring for children. A primary male concern is to have many children, and elder men closely link the reproduction of cattle and children. The main concern of the patrilans is to increase in size and wealth through increasing cattle stocks. Male children are thus necessary for the expansion of the clan and the building up of clan-owned cattle stocks. Daughters are necessary because their marriage into other clans, in exchange for cattle, is a prime way of increasing cattle wealth.

Thus, all men say they wish to have many wives and many children. The importance of children is represented by numerous rituals and practices. Given this social context, coupled with the inherited high historical value of milk, cattle, and decoration, the decoration of calabashes, particularly those used for children, has clear strategic value. The decoration surrounds the involvement by women in a valued resource—the milk of cattle. It involves female use of milk and milk symbolism in relation to men and children. It involves the varied attempts of women to find a way of working within the interstices of male power, via milk and children.

We can see these varied strategies in the variability of the calabash decoration. It obviously is dangerously subjective to claim that a certain design is poorly executed, yet many of the designs are clearly intended to be regular but are not. Often only one side of the calabash is well or fully decorated, or decorated at all. The provision of dots or hatching infill of triangles, for example, may stop or tail off along a band of decoration. The decoration often appears halfhearted when looked at in detail, the women not having bothered to fill in all the triangle designs. There is often overlapping as new designs are added (Fig. 4.1). While some of the variation is due to incomplete calabashes, the difference between compounds with many well-decorated calabashes and those with few, badly decorated calabashes and those with no decorated calabashes is stark.

What is the strategy, then, of those who decorate calabashes well? Within the male, dominant view, to decorate calabashes well shows that a woman cares. It shows she cares about the do-

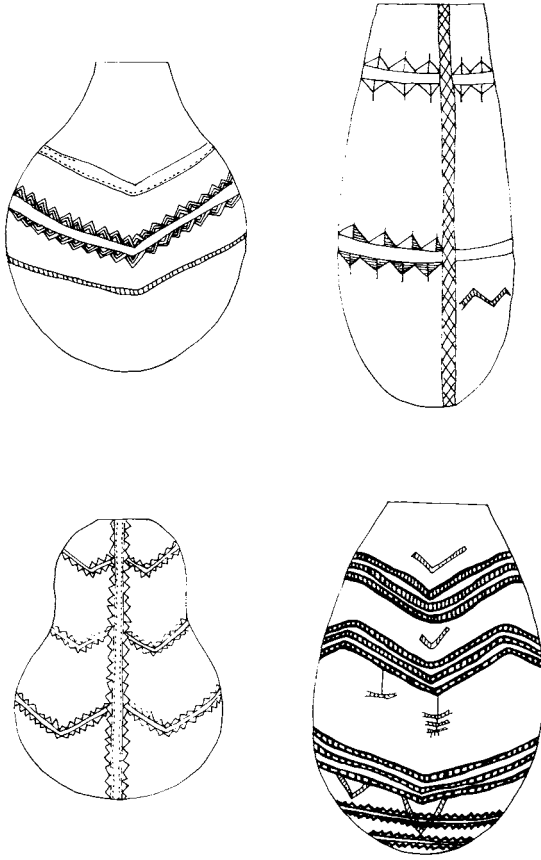


FIGURE 4.1. Some examples of incised calabashes made by the Ilchamus, Baringo, Kenya.

mestic context on which male interests, in relation to cattle and children, depend. A woman who does not have the time or interest to decorate her calabashes, or to decorate them well, is described as “careless.” A man says “She is a very clean woman; look at her calabashes,” which are carefully decorated and highly polished. An older woman bemoans the recent decline in calabash decoration “because it was beautiful,” and women recognize that their husbands like to see them decorate calabashes. “The decorated calabashes are part of how to decorate the house.”

It is expected by the husband that the wife will provide “good

calabashes with good milk.” That the decoration of calabashes is connected with expectations about the role of women in caring for milk, cattle, and children is often acknowledged. A woman would often explain that she had no calabashes because she had no cows (they had been lost in droughts, e.g.). A man: “My wife has no decorated calabashes because we have little milk now and it is unthinkable to have empty decorated calabashes.” In some cases women in a family without cows *do* decorate calabashes carefully, since they are dependent on loans of milk from neighbors, and it is important in such a situation to show other women that one cares about one’s children and domestic duties, deserves help, and will repay.

The quantitative information (Tables 4.1–4.7) shows that there is indeed a correlation between the number of cattle owned by a compound and the percentage of the calabashes that are decorated. Generally, it is the large, rich families, with many cattle, with many wives and children, and with middle-aged husbands trying to build up their family size, that have a larger proportion of decorated calabashes. It is in these compounds that men are most concerned to generate the spiral of greater wealth and political importance through the reproduction of cattle and children. This social strategy depends also on women and domestic care. Such a man would want and choose a wife who supported his strategy. One of the ways in which women express this support is via calabash decoration. A woman who decorates calabashes well is aiming at gaining power through her domestic contribution and through her children. As she reaches elderhood, she obtains a certain control of resources, and as a “good wife” she is liable to be supported by the community in complaints (which can be formally made and tried) against the husband. As her sons grow

TABLE 4.1. Proportion of All Calabashes That Are Decorated in Compounds Owning Different Numbers of Cattle

	<i>Number of Cattle</i>					
	<i>0–5</i>	<i>6–10</i>	<i>11–20</i>	<i>21–50</i>	<i>51–100</i>	<i>>100</i>
Decorated	48	24	30	18	12	5
Undecorated	207	71	73	53	13	10
% Decorated	19	25	29	25	48	33

TABLE 4.2. Proportion of Decorated Calabashes in Regions Around Baringo, Correlated with Numbers of Cattle

<i>Region</i>	<i>% Decorated Calabashes (total sample)</i>	<i>Average Herd Size per Family</i>	<i>Range of Herd Size</i>	<i>No. of Cattle</i>	<i>% Total Baringo Cattle</i>
Langarwa					
{ Sintaan	25(318)	18	0–171	4250	34
{ Njambo					
Salabari	33(64)	17	0–83	3116	25
Eldume	25(71)	15	0–88	1808	14
Mukutani	16(38)	9	0–60	936	7
{ Loiminang					
{ and	23(78)	9	0–50	1782	14
{ Logumukum					

TABLE 4.3. Decorated Calabashes in Compounds of Different Ilchamus Clans

<i>Clan</i>	<i>Calabashes</i>		
	<i>Number Decorated</i>	<i>Number Undecorated</i>	<i>% Decorated</i>
Sakaam	26	57	31
Persaina	2	28	7
Il Kapis	19	86	18
Loiborkichu	10	23	30
Il Murbanat	16	46	26
Loimisi	19	29	24
Il Kunguan	11	28	28
Il Toimal	12	49	20

older, she will probably move to live with them and be supported by them in conflicts against the husband.

As a young child becomes more and more aware of the world around it, one of the earliest impressions is of the mother's milk provided in a decorated container. Most of the other things people eat or drink from seem to be dull, black, and plain. Even at eight years old, the child recognizes his or her own calabash from its

TABLE 4.4. Decorated Calabashes in Compounds with Male Heads of Different Generations

<i>Age-Set</i>	<i>Calabashes</i>		
	<i>Number Decorated</i>	<i>Number Undecorated</i>	<i>% Decorated</i>
Ririmpot (older)	4	30	12
Ilnapunye	10	31	24
Il Paremo	12	38	24
Il Moricho	18	57	24
Il Medoti	17	42	29
Il Kiapu (younger)	28	119	19

TABLE 4.5. Decorated Calabashes in Compounds Containing One–Five Co-wives

<i>Calabashes</i>	<i>Number of Co-wives</i>			
	5	3–4	2	1
Decorated	8	30	37	28
Undecorated	19	78	115	101
% Decorated	30	28	24	22

TABLE 4.6. Decorated Calabashes Owned by Women Aged 20–40

<i>Calabashes</i>	<i>Ages of Women</i>		
	20	21–30	31–40
Decorated	35	41	12
Undecorated	79	142	52
% Decorated	31	22	19

TABLE 4.7. Decorated Calabashes Owned by Women with One–Five Children Under the Age of Ten

<i>Calabashes</i>	<i>Number of Children</i>		
	1–2	3–4	5
Decorated	11	18	31
Undecorated	40	60	68
% Decorated	22	23	31

decoration. The calabash is closely associated with the mother. In this way the importance of milk and of the mother in providing it are emphasized (by the decoration) at an early stage. Children, the basis of male power, are in this way closely tied to women.

As a girl grows up, she tries her hand at decorating calabashes and produces poor, crude copies of those made by her mother. She tries out this particular social strategy and finds her way in the world of women. She may find, through the decoration, that she wants to participate in this strategy, or she may reject it altogether. Women who are “stylish,” who produce “good” or even different or eye-catching calabashes, will follow one strategy. Those who do not, are often concerned to follow different strategies, including not cooperating with the demands of husbands.

But even within those strategies which are based on decorating calabashes well, we can see a negative component emerging. The designs not only support male interests, they also mark out an area in which men are dependent on women and which women in practice control. The decoration draws attention to and marks out an area of limited female control—the care of milk and children. The designs used are elsewhere closely associated with women. The use of these female-linked designs on the calabashes unmistakably draws a boundary around an area of activity, marking it as female. Why should this active marking out be socially necessary?

We have seen that women do contribute in a variety of ways to obtaining essential resources in the environment. But this contribution gives them little social and political influence in Ilchamus society. Women largely control the domestic context, in practice, but even here men see themselves as in ultimate control. They frequently beat women openly and cruelly. Men frequently talk of “selling” women in exchange for cattle, and of “buying” a new wife “just like buying a new set of clothes.” This denigration of women simply as exchange goods and as instruments of reproduction is also seen in field labor and in looking after cattle. “If you want to be a rich man, you need to have cheap labor from your wives.” “I would like to have four wives, one at business in my shop (*duka*), one looking after the animals, and two working in the fields.”

Women never really own and control cattle. Also, women are given little overt political power. All decision making is by discussions at which women can rarely be present and rarely speak.

Women are not allowed to speak in front of men in many situations. The formal meetings, without women, take place away from domestic compounds, under trees in the outside world dominated by men. When I asked elder men what the view of women might be on a particular topic involving cattle, resources, or social rules, they would frequently remark, "It is not for women to have a say." A man told me that few women, only elder ones, understood the meanings of rituals, "because women are unable to speak. They are cowards and fear that what they say may turn out to be lies later on and they will be blamed for it."

But by listening to female songs and proverbs, and by using female research assistants, I began to get a very different view. It became clear that women do not accept this situation passively. They are continually using myriad meanings to assert their independence, claim certain rights, discuss their fear and hatred of the elders, and so on. Yet this other point of view can never be expressed overtly. It is expressed among themselves and tangentially, obscurely in songs and proverbs.

The decoration of the calabashes can be seen in a similar light. Women are clearly aware of the dependence of male interests on children and the domestic context, and this importance is expressed in the symbolic importance of milk, calabashes, and children in rituals. But overtly it is men who control even the domestic domain. Women can control it only in practice. By drawing female-linked designs on calabashes, women exert a practical ownership of an important area of activity. They negotiate a silent, covert, and practical control in a world where the dominant modes of discourse are denied to them. Women who decorate calabashes well are thus making their play in a social game. They achieve power through the control of children, in support of, but also in reaction against, the elders.

These (from the elder male point of view) negative connotations of the calabash decoration are further emphasized by the nature and designs of the decoration itself. We have already seen how the designs link to red and danger, to the wild outside, and to the threat of female sexuality. We have seen how women primarily link the "V" design used on the calabashes to the red "V" on the chests of the warrior *morán*. Here women are reinforcing their links to the *morán*, links that are seen in many symbols and songs. Women and *morán*, particularly mothers and their *morán* sons, often cooperate with each other in opposition to the elders.

The division between elder and *moran* is as strong as that between male and female in Ilchamus society, and involves the elders' attempts to control the unruly, unsocial activities of the *moran*. There are also sexual liaisons between *moran* and young women that threaten the rights of the elders to marry young women. In a highly polygamous society, the elders need to prevent young men from marrying the potential pool of young women. The "V" designs on the calabashes refer to the sexual attractions and relationships between women and *moran*.

Here the two sides of the meaning context—milk/blood, white/red, inside/outside—are brought together in an active social context. Women emphasize the importance of milk and children, but they associate these positive qualities with the more ambiguous, dangerous world of red, *morans*, and the wild. Underlying this structure and this strategy is a set of values and dispositions about the beauty and worth of cattle and the beauty and sociability of decoration. It is these values which make calabash decoration appropriate in Ilchamus society. But the structures that are developed are integrally linked to an active social context. Decoration in this context plays on the cultural assumptions surrounding cattle and children to create social power and influence.

Yet we have seen that some women follow a rather different path. The refusal of many to invest effort in calabash decoration annoys men and may lead to a different strategy. In some families the result of a general refusal to be caring and productive in the domestic context is continual stress and failure of either husband or wife to achieve influence and power. In other families, however, the refusal to decorate calabashes can be a highly successful strategy involving changes of attitude by both husband and wife. For example, some women align the nondecoration of traditional calabashes with an overall move away from traditional artifacts and traditional female roles, toward modern material goods and a modern life-style. They become educated and have few children. They emphasize the contribution and importance of women in agriculture and treat directly with outside development agencies. The whole house becomes reorganized to be open to visitors and to express material success in the modern world.

The current changes in Ilchamus life are massive, and I cannot discuss them here. But the traditional assumptions sometimes remain as the media of these changes. Tables 4.8 and 4.9

TABLE 4.8. Decorated Calabashes in Compounds Described as “Traditional” or “Modern” on the Basis of Dress and Hut Type and Decor

<i>Calabashes</i>	<i>Dress</i>		<i>Hut</i>	
	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>
Decorated	84	34	88	19
Undecorated	260	77	260	56
% Decorated	24	25	25	26

TABLE 4.9. Decorated Calabashes in Compounds of Young (Il Kiapu) Men Described as “Traditional” or “Modern” on the Basis of Dress and Hut Type and Decor

<i>Calabashes</i>	<i>Dress</i>		<i>Hut</i>	
	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>
Decorated	14	11	13	5
Undecorated	62	47	51	19
% Decorated	18	19	20	21

show that although many women following a “modernizing” strategy do not decorate calabashes, such women often have a higher proportion of decorated calabashes in their huts than do “traditional” women. This is largely because “modernizing” families have replaced most calabashes with metal and plastic containers. The calabashes that are retained are those used to serve milk and to feed children, and these continue to be decorated. In this way the traditional demands and expectations of men can be met (women show this concern for children and the home) even while changes are taking place. Indeed, “modernizing” women not only may continue to decorate calabashes but also may extend the same principles to other spheres. Recently a number of Ilchamus huts have appeared with internal wall decoration reminiscent of that used on the calabashes and female skins: triangles, “V”s, and zigzags. Here women, dressed in modern style, use the old symbolic connotations to mark out the whole of the house, not just milk and children, as their own. These old ideas and practices are used to exert a new social influence. Again, only the Il-

chamus, not the neighboring tribes, decorate hut interiors. The historical tradition is continued in the new Ilchamus context on the basis of old values about the “sociability” and beauty of decoration.

In the contemporary context, many Ilchamus men live for long periods outside the Baringo area as wage earners. Their wives often take on a larger responsibility for the maintenance of the domestic resources in the husband’s absence. Rather than being confined to the back area of the hut, women extend their influence and may in practice control the entire domestic domain. To extend the calabash decoration, with its (from the elder male point of view) positive and negative connotations, to cover the interior of the house is an acceptable yet active strategy contributing to and objectifying the woman’s new role.

Conclusion

The analysis described in this chapter has involved following the contextual threads that together make up the network of decorated calabash meanings. By asking questions such as “Why are other containers not decorated?” “Where else do the same designs occur?” and “What are the calabashes used for?” a complex set of dimensions has been discovered.

It has not been enough to examine such dimensions at the “surface” systemic level. Rather, it has been found necessary to refer to levels of meaning that might be termed structural. For example, there is a paradigmatic structure in Ilchamus society that contrasts milk with blood, inside with outside, and women with (young) men. The calabashes, through their uses and decoration, partake in this structure, associating and contrasting its major elements. Alongside this symbolic structure is the structured set of social relations by which elder males maintain dominance through the control of cattle and the exchange of women. Indeed, the symbolic structure appears to support the male-dominated social structure. Young men, competing with the elders for access to wives, are described as dangerous and “outside.” Women, born “on the outside” and marrying into the patrilines, are symbolically made “inside,” reproducing for the clan.

The decorated calabashes do not create this world on their own. But they play their part. Indeed, the symbolic and social

structures do not exist except through activities of various kinds. It would be possible to interpret the decorated calabash as reflecting the dominant social and symbolic structures still further. The inside of the calabash is like the inside of the hut. It is dark, contains milk used to feed children, and is cleaned by taking a burning stick from the domestic hearth and rubbing the stick round the interior of the calabash. The insides are then brushed out with the *ilkidongoei*, but the milk stored in a calabash always tastes of ash and burning. Ash itself is closely associated with women and the domestic, inside world around the hearth (Hodder 1986b). It might even be possible to suggest that the gourd represents the vagina and/or the womb, and I have certainly heard Ilchamus men talk of having intercourse with a calabash. The outside of the calabash refers to the "outside" world, to the warrior *moran*, to red and danger. The inside/outside structure is expressed.

However, it is not argued here that all members of Ilchamus society see such structures from the same point of view, or that they would accept my rendering of them. Clearly some individuals, such as the *laibon*, do have analytical accounts that can be made explicit. But for many, one is only talking of partial and/or nondiscursive knowledge. Social life involves drawing on the structures to varying degrees and with varying success.

Thus the structures are not determining or fixed. They exist only in the practices of daily life. Individual calabashes may be "better" or "worse" examples. Individual women may choose a variety of paths, using calabashes in different ways. In a society such as that of the Ilchamus, the structures are only provisional and are continually being negotiated. The calabashes play an active role in re-creating and transforming society. As each mark is incised on the calabash wall, the individual is making choices, creating strategies; but this ability to act, like our ability to speak, does not necessarily entail a discursive knowledge about structure or grammar.

Rather than talk of "systems of interrelationships," the concern here has been to examine the interdependence between structure and process. Such a direction may involve breaking down well-established dichotomies in archaeology, but it has the potential of introducing a wider discussion, more dimensions of variability, and a greater flexibility of approach. In this chapter it

has been necessary to consider structure, history, and the individual. It has been necessary to consider calabashes as containers, decorated, red, female, domestic, and so on; to place them into an internal framework of meaning from which wider, external generalizations can ultimately be made. They are not just pots or ceramics.