

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE MANUFACTURE OF SOAPSTONE PIPES IN NAMAQUALAND, SOUTH AFRICA\*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a technique of manufacturing soapstone smoking pipes in Namaqualand and supports the view that this industry post-dates the introduction of European manufactured metal artefacts to the sub-continent. Two pipe forms are recognized and some comments are made on their origins and possible gender associations. The distribution of these pipes may inform on post-colonial trading systems in the Northern Cape and Namibia.

### INTRODUCTION

Fragments of stone pipes have been recognised from a number of archaeological sites, *e.g.* in the Brandberg (Rudner 1957, Jacobson & Peisach 1982), the central Namib desert (Kinahan 1986), Gordonia in the Northern Cape (Rudner 1971) and at Highlands in the Eastern Cape (Deacon 1976). There are ethnographic collections of soapstone pipes in the South African Museum, (Rudner 1971, Shaw 1938), the McGregor Museum as well as in the Albany Museum. The origin of this industry has not been dated but by historic times both the Nama-speaking Khoekhoen and the Dama of Namibia are reported to have been manufacturing stone pipes (Jacobson & Peisach 1982; Rudner 1971).

The name *Kodas* (or *!kho-ni-s*) which forms part of many place names in Namaqualand and Namibia refers, according to Nienaber & Raper (1977), to the serpentine stone or soapstone used by the Khoekhoen to manufacture their pipes (*!khodi*). There is place by the name of Kodas, some five kilometres north of the Numees copper mine in the Richtersveld, which was reported by Laidler (1927:149) to have been used by the Nama-speaking Khoekhoen for pipe making.

### HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS

Dutch clay pipes were introduced to Namaqualand as early as 1661 when Pieter van Meerhoff recorded the following meeting with a Namaqua chief: "I gave each of them a clean pipe of tobacco; they were anxious enough

to smoke, but most of them could not; the king, instead of drawing in his breath, blew from him; I took his pipe four or five times, and showed him that he must draw in his breath; he began to learn; and they all learned so well while we were with them, women and well as men, that they began to be very fond of tobacco" (Moodie 1960: 232). From this passage it is clear that Van Meerhoff was responsible for introducing the clay-type pipe to the Little Namaqua Khoekhoen and the implication seems to be that he also taught them how to smoke tobacco.

Historical accounts suggest that it was the Nama-speaking Khoekhoen (referred to in the literature as the Namaqua) and the Korana of the Orange River who were primarily responsible for manufacturing soapstone pipes. According to Alexander (1967 Vol 1:99) who travelled through the region in 1838: "The pipes of these Namaquas were composed of green serpentine from the Kamiesberg and were straight tubes three or four inches long, narrowing at the mouth piece, and not broader at the other end than to permit their insertion into the common brass tinder box". Further, he relates, "These pipes were neatly turned and ornamented with a little carving"

When Cornell (1985:101-102) travelled through the Richtersveld in the 1920's he observed "men, women, and quite small children passing from mouth to mouth the native-made soapstone pipes, filled with their loved tabaki. These pipes are peculiarly shaped, being a straight tube like a very large cigar-holder, and often the more primitive natives simply use the hollow shin-bone of buck or sheep".

With respect to another Khoekhoen group, namely the Korana, Somerville who traveled through their territory in

1802 remarked; "they make tobacco pipes of a stone called Prehnite (hydrous silicate of calcium and aluminum) which is brought from the Namaqua Land, and of a kind of ochery red stone soft enough to bear being cut and scraped. Their pipes are straight - about four inches long, small at the extremity put in the mouth and extending to nearly an inch at the other end. They exchange tobacco from the Briquas" (Bradlow 1979:94).

The 'Bushmen', on the other hand, (Engelbrecht 1936) had pipes called *!heis*, which were made of the bones of springbuck or wild dog. Some of these pipes were ornamented with dots. They are reported to have smoked strong tobacco mixed with pipe-oil and soon became 'intoxicated'. Several of Engelbrecht's informants agreed that pipes of stone were originally obtained from the Koranna. In addition to also being part of the material culture the San, historical accounts suggest that the Herero and Tswana (Rudner 1971; Shaw 1938) also used stone pipes but it is not clear whether they manufactured the pipes or obtained them through trade with the Nama-speaking Khoekhoen or the Korana.

Rudner (1971) and Deacon (1984) have suggested that this industry post-dates the introduction of metal to South Africa and Kinahan (1986) has also stated that all the stone pipes from the central Namib desert shows signs of metal working.

#### THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS

While undertaking ethnographic research among semi-sedentary pastoralist groups in three Rural Areas in Namaqualand, the author observed the manufacture of soapstone pipes. A resident of the Steinkopf Rural Area, Mr C and his son E, are reported to be the last craftsmen in Namaqualand who still practice this trade. Their reputation has spread as far afield as the Richtersveld on the Orange River and Leliefontein in the Kamiesberg, and they are regularly visited by people with requests for soapstone pipes, ash trays, cups and saucers, teapots and candle holders.

Mr C was contacted and interviewed in August 1986. He had not visited a stone quarry for some time but was persuaded to use a piece of soapstone in his yard. He generally collected his stone from two sources, i.e. Uityk (a distance of 30 km) and *!Kosis* (40 km). Both are sources of blue/grey stone. Mr C was aware of other localities of green soapstone in the vicinity of the town of O'Kiep (30 km). In addition he recalled seeing fragments of pink soapstone around Geselskapbank (45 km), a site formerly reputed to have been occupied by San groups.

Mr C described to me that the stone is quarried by boring holes into the soapstone outcrops using a hand-drill. Long iron bars (called *kuile*) are inserted into the holes and struck at right angles with a hammer until roughly rectangular blocks are broken out of the bedrock. A large amount of stone is collected and transported by donkey cart or truck to his house where the processing takes place. The pipes are made by Mr C and his son with the latter doing most of the hard work. E saws a

rudimentary pipe shape out of the stone using a metal hand-saw (Fig. 1). He then uses a hand-drill to bore a hole into the bowl of the pipe (Fig. 2). Mr C refines the shape of the pipe using a rat-tail file to produce a rounded shape (Fig. 3). Afterward he uses a home-made drill to drill a hole into the pipe stem (Fig. 4). The final touches are added with water and sand-paper to produce a glossy finish and E uses his penknife to decorate the bowl of one of the pipes with a cross-hatching design. The two pipes (Fig 5) took two hours to complete.

#### EXPLANATION OF THE PIPES

Mr C described the 'cigar-shaped' on the left (Fig. 5) as a 'Bushman' pipe. It was, he said, formerly made from the shin bone of animals. The pipe with the bowl and spur (similar to the clay pipe introduced by the Dutch) on the other hand, he said, is always smoked by Nama women. It appears that Mr C acquired this information, together with the craft of stone pipe-making, from the late Dirk Oorlam during the 1940's. Dirk worked on the roads in the Northern Cape and made stone pipes in his spare time for sixpence a piece. Mr C recalled that Dirk Oorlam used a bowdrill or cotton reel and bow, strung with a thong (*riem*), to drill the hole in the pipe bowls. He also used a home-made awl made of a length of fence wire fitted into a wooden handle.

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES ON THE USE OF SOAPSTONE PIPES

Informants from the Leliefontein and Steinkopf Rural Areas all agreed that they had obtained their stone pipes from the Steinkopf/Concordia area, north of the town of Springbok. Although they recognise both pipe forms only the bowl-shaped type is commonly found in both the Leliefontein and Steinkopf Rural Areas. According to informants from these areas, the very old, weak women (*oumaka*) smoked the straight pipe, which is variously called the *!ko* or *!kanoes* (my spelling) pipe. The bowl-shaped pipe, called the '*klip-pyp*' was smoked by the women 'who could still walk around'. Today many elderly women in both areas own the bowl-shaped type (Fig. 6). Most retain their pipes only for sentimental reasons as they have inherited them from mothers and grandmothers. One informant of 84, however, still smokes '*boer twak*' in her pipe on a regular basis (Fig. 7).

Information from the Nama-speaking communities in the Richtersveld indicated that soapstone for making pipes was obtained from the Helsberg area. Only three elderly males reported that they were still able to make stone pipes in 1997, but when approached they said they would need the proper equipment and transport to the soapstone quarries and they were not sure if they could still remember the process. Female informants said that the pipes had been manufactured by their fathers, but that they had been used by the women - generally the older women. An elderly female informant, who had undergone the female initiation ceremony in the 1950's, told me that



Fig. 1. E uses a saw to produce the rough shape of the pipe.



Fig. 3. Mr C. shapes the pipe using a rat-tail file.



Fig. 4. The hole in the pipestem is made with a home made awl.



Fig. 2. The bowl of the pipe is made with a hand drill.

the bowl-shaped pipe (called the *'agterkop pyp'* or the *'vroumens pyp'* in Afrikaans) was definitely smoked by the *'groot vrouens'* or elderly and respected women.

In Nama (spelling verified by Nama-speaking informant), these pipes are called:

!noro-!kos (bowl-shaped type)

≠go-!kob (cigar-shaped pipe).

According to these informants, men did not smoke the stone pipes but used the fore limb of the goat instead. While there seems to be some confusion, especially among the younger generation, the majority of those questioned in Leliefontein, Steinkopf and the Richtersveld emphasised that it was the women who used the bowl-shaped pipes. This does not mean that men went straight from the bone pipe to the shop-bought wooden pipes, but it does suggest that it is women, rather than men, who are traditionally associated with stone pipes.

#### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Two stone pipe types have been recognised archaeologically and ethnographically from the Northern Cape and Namibia. It appears likely that the cigar-shaped pipe has its origin in the earlier bone pipes made from the shin



Fig. 5. The complete pipes. The cigar-shaped pipe is on the left and the bowl-shaped type on the right.

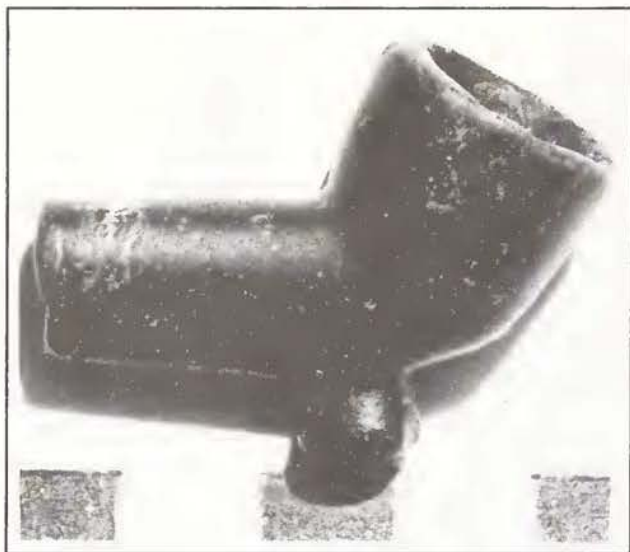


Fig. 6. An old stone pipe owned by one of my informants.

bones of small ungulates (Rudner 1971). The bowl-shaped type, however, is a copy of the Dutch clay pipes in use at the Cape during the 17th and 18th centuries. It has been suggested (J. Deetz pers. comm.) that a careful study of a large collection of these soapstone pipes, including the shape and angle of the bowl, may enable the approximate date of this cultural borrowing to be determined.

After having witnessed the manufacture of soapstone pipes, I am of the opinion that they may only be produced with metal artefacts. It is clearly possible, however, that bone pipes may have a longer history and may have been used for smoking dagga or *Cannabis sativa* (Elphick 1985; Shaw 1938).

The hatching around the rim of the bowl-shaped pipes closely resembles the zigzag and check designs which decorate the rims of wooden milk vessels (*bambus*) found amongst the Nama and Korana during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Northern Cape. It has been argued elsewhere (Webley 1997), that these designs (hatching,



Fig. 7. A few of the pipes are still in regular use.

zigzags, parallel and diagonal lines) are overt male symbols applied by men to certain items of material culture in order to reassert their authority over their womenfolk. As with the *bambus*, it was necessary to have metal implements to manufacture the stone pipes and men used this opportunity to exercise their control over activities (in this case smoking) mainly enjoyed by women. That pipe-making is a peculiarly male activity is supported by Lau (1987) who has noted that by the 1850's men in southern Namibia were still making the wooden milk bowls and the pipes of soapstone.

Both pipe types have been associated with a number of groups including the Khoekhoen, San, Dama, and Tswana stretching geographically from the Western Cape to Namibia and inland along the Orange River as far as the Vaal-Orange confluence. If more data can be collected on the distribution of soapstone pipes and a sourcing of the raw material is undertaken, we may be able to make important inferences about the trading links in the north-western part of South Africa after the introduction of metal.

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