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Shoe-Pots, Patojos, and the Principle of Whimsy

The traditional broad category of shoe-shaped pots (or bird-forms or patojos) is invalid for analytic purposes. It is a catch-all category for vessels which may have had different histories, uses, and meanings. One kind, the culinary shoe-pot, does form a distinctive class with a special use in cooking and was widely distributed in space and time. Previous researchers, including Varner, Beals, and Sisson most recently, have generated spurious problems and have been led to erroneous conclusions. The following recommendations are explained: (1) culinary shoe-pots should not be classified with bird or foot effigies, although they sometimes become effigies as visual puns; (2) they should not be grouped with other asymmetrical pots on the single criterion of horizontal body elongation without considering the other vessel attributes; (3) further ethnographic and linguistic field investigation should be done where culinary shoe-pots are still used; (4) primary and secondary uses of culinary shoe-pots should not be confused.

At last something is cooking in shoe-pots, thanks to a recent exchange between Varner (1974, 1976), Beals (1976), and Sisson (1975). The so-called shoe-pots or bird-pots constitute a problem of major interest in North and South American archaeology and ethnology. But compared to the number of times the strange form has been reported, the neglect of it for interpretation is surprising. Varner, in his recent brief article, and Beals and Sisson in their comments on Varner, were unaware of the considerable literature that was compiled in my own articles on the form (Dixon 1963, 1964). Varner's points were already established in earlier papers, but he does make a new statement which, as Beals pointed out, is not likely to be correct. Other comments by Varner, Beals, and Sisson require amplification. It will be useful first to summarize the problem and some of the previous research.

For well over a century, the archaeological literature has been accumulating reports of strange pottery vessels from North and South America which are asymmetrical—they are horizontally elongated with the orifice at one end. Because of this one characteristic, they have generally been lumped together in one catch-all category, which has been given a variety of names by different writers. In English the category is usually called shoe-shaped or bird-, duck-, boot-, slipper-, moccasin-, or foot-shaped. In Spanish, similar terms are patojos, patos, zapatillos, botas, and zuecos. While some are obvious effigies others are not. A review of the literature shows that these asymmetric vessels have little in common as a group; the other attributes such as proportions, size, ware, decoration, and context vary wildly. As either a functional or historical unit, or even as a simple descriptive unit, the group made no sense. In fact, it is now apparent that uncritical use of

the category is responsible for various errors in archaeological and ethnological interpretation.

I therefore attempted a systematic review. My main paper, which presented the full discussion and documentation, was published in 1963 (the 1964 paper is a brief summary which had been presented at meetings in 1962).

In brief, I had found that among the variety of forms that had been lumped together, some were remarkably consistent in the clustering of certain attributes of shape, finish, decoration, and ware. So consistent is the attribute association that when specimens are sufficiently described or available for inspection, there is rarely any problem in identifying them as members of the category.

I therefore suggested a name for this distinctive group: culinary shoe-pots. "Culinary" because these vessels evidently were specially made for cooking on a hearth, unlike the rest of the so-called shoe-pots; and "shoe-pot" because it was so well established in the literature. I suggested *patojo culinario* for the Spanish version. Both names sound absurd, but are convenient.

All the other asymmetrical pots that do not qualify as culinary shoe-pots are dismissed as separate and unrelated problems of interpretation and of culture history. As a residual category, I have referred to them in quotes as "shoe-pots" or as *so-called shoe-pots*.

The category *culinary shoe-pot* is distinguished by the following attributes: body shape is elongated horizontally; the orifice is placed at the broader end opposite the prolongation; the orifice diameter is large, usually one-third to two-thirds the horizontal length of the body; the neck is very short; the horizontal body length is generally from 12 to 20 cm (capacity one to three liters); the paste is cooking ware, usually a rough unslipped plainware; decoration

is usually absent, but there may be minor modeled or painted decoration that is consistent with the cooking function; handles are usually absent, but when present are usually a vertical ring or a solid lip tab placed on the side of the rim opposite to the prolongation. (For details see Dixon 1963:594.)

The vessels which share these attributes are interpreted as cooking pots that were used in a special way. The evidence is the nature of the attributes themselves that distinguish the vessels as a group, as well as ethnographic reports of their use (Dixon 1963:596-97). The reason for the strange shape is that the pot's prolongation is shoved between hearth stones over the hot coals; the orifice and its handle are conveniently at the edge away from the heat so that the pot can be moved or its contents can be stirred and ladled out easily. Various kinds of foods are cooked in shoe-pots, especially those such as beans which are boiled for a long time (1963:597).

Culinary shoe-pots are found from the eastern United States, through the Southwest, Mexico, Central America, and western South America as far as central Chile. Although made in local cooking wares, they are often virtually indistinguishable from one extreme of the distribution to the other.

I have compiled the distribution with notes on attribute variations, context, and dates (1963:598-607). In the past dozen years, some details have been clarified but the picture remains basically the same. The form is limited to Nuclear America and to the marginal areas that received other ideas and trade goods from Mesoamerica and the Andean area. It appears earliest both in Mesoamerica and the Andean regions, but how much earlier than two thousand years ago is not yet clear. It now appears possible that it is very early in Peru. Culinary shoe-pots did not reach the southwest United States probably until after A.D. 1200, and the eastern United States until even later. It seems to be known ethnographically only in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Chile.

In accounting for the wide distribution of the form and its long persistence, I attempted to focus on the use to which the pots were put—that is, a cooking technique—rather than on the form of the pots themselves. It was an idea or custom that spread, not the pots. The

focus should be on the human behavior, not on the objects themselves. The unusual custom raises several interdependent issues: the significance of the shoe-pot cooking technique for problems of intercultural relationships; the reasons and mechanics of its diffusion; its role in the food-preparation complexes of the cultures where it was used; and its absence from many of the cultures within its broad area of distribution. A number of hypotheses are examined in the original paper and tentative conclusions are drawn (Dixon 1963:608-11).

Two matters were not explained sufficiently in the 1963 paper and still cause some confusion.

The first is that culinary shoe-pots are basically not effigies—that is, they do not have their form because of being effigies. However, they are occasionally turned into effigies *because* of their special form. The asymmetrical shape of the utilitarian shoe-pot is analogous to the shapes of other things. Many people perceive the bird-body analogy, hence the occasional enhancement by adding the highly abstract wing and tail lugs. The culinary shoe-pot can therefore take on effigy properties because of its asymmetry, but these embellishments are always abstract, are non-functional, and remain secondary to a form that is in fact determined by a special function. They are still culinary shoe-pots; they should not be grouped with other asymmetric forms, such as pitchers, which may also take on effigy properties but have different histories, uses, and meanings.

It is much like our oil-well pumps. Their shape is also functionally determined—a long beam on a fulcrum with an engine coupling at one end and a long pump shaft descending from a housing at the other end. The beam tilts rhythmically up and down to move the pump shaft. Some of us perceive a ludicrous analogy with the shape and movements of an insect. In a sense, the pumps become effigies in our own minds as soon as we perceive the analogy. We are further amused (and slower-witted people may perceive our analogy more readily) when we enhance the pumps with cartoon-like insect eyes, antennae, and a coat of green paint. Then they become effigies to everyone, but they also are still just pumps like all the plain ones. They are not to be confused in either history, function, or distribution with other long, moving beams such as cranes, or with other

insect effigies such as naturalistic sculptures and playground equipment.

It follows that the asymmetric shape of a plain culinary shoe-pot is not a sufficient reason for the anthropologist to assume that it is some kind of effigy. We need "emic" data. The ethnologist can attempt it by asking questions. But the archaeologist is not justified in assuming that the maker or user of a culinary shoe-pot perceived it as an effigy unless the specimen was enhanced with wing or tail lugs; these do serve as evidence of what was in the maker's mind. (Nor should we assume that everyone in our own population would see an insect effigy in every unadorned oil-well pump.) Nevertheless, archaeologists continue to class plain culinary shoe-pots along with naturalistic bird or foot effigies because of the analogy which the archaeologist himself sees; such interpretations of culture content are very subject to error.

The second problem is that culinary shoe-pots also continue to be automatically classified with other asymmetric vessels (whether effigies or not) simply on the criterion of asymmetry. The problem lies in the practice of emphasizing one prominent attribute of a specimen and ignoring the others. In my survey of the literature (1963:598-605) I found many cases where the odd shape of unique specimens was briefly described, but not their ware, methods of decoration, size, proportions, signs of use, context, and other necessary details. Often there was no way to judge whether a particular specimen conformed to the criteria of culinary shoe-pots, or was just one of the many other kinds of asymmetric vessels. (In a few cases, I have since been able to examine questionable specimens and have had no problem in applying the criteria.)

The result has been that vessels have been classified together which do have vaguely similar odd shapes, but have them for completely different reasons. The misleading category can include various kinds of bird effigies, foot effigies, water pitchers, burial urns, and numerous other effigies and abstract forms. Inevitably, this variety represents very different functions, meanings, origins, and histories. Such an all-inclusive and unsupported category may generate spurious problems and may lead to erroneous conclusions (for a recent example, see Chadwick 1971:672-73, 679, 690-92).

Now, to comment on Varner (1974, 1976) and Beals (1976). The main points in Varner's first article, all of which were well-established in the literature, are these: (1) the culinary shoe-pot is widespread through North and South America; (2) it has lasted several thousand years; (3) it is currently made, used, and traded by the Mixe of Oaxaca as a continuity from prehispanic times; (4) it is used for cooking so that the opening is at the edge of the fire-pit conveniently away from the heat.

Varner's new point, for which I have seen no precedent in the literature at all, is that among the Zapotec or Mixe three shoe-pots serve as supports for the *comal* (griddle). Beals (1976) rejects this on the grounds that he never saw such usage and it is not logical. I agree completely with his reasoning. If a shoe-pot were shoved into the fire between low hearth stones, its upper edge might be high enough to accidentally tilt and support the *comal*, but any such occurrences are likely to be fortuitous rather than represent a customary purpose of shoe-pots. Varner did not see any shoe-pots in use. His interpretation is in the context of information from his Zapotec informant, but we do not know if the informant happened to report some fortuitous instances of *comal*-support, or whether there was a misunderstanding. In Spanish as in English, there is ambiguity in words meaning "over" or "on top of." As with so much ethnographic reporting, we are unable to evaluate the informant's original statement or its context. Nevertheless, Varner's interpretation appears to be a misunderstanding and I think it is reasonable to discard the *comal*-support function of shoe-pots unless it is confirmed by direct field observation.

I also call attention to the fact that the great majority of culinary shoe-pots in North and South America were used by people who did not use the *comal* or other similar cooking devices. Therefore no basic functional relationship need be postulated on the grounds of their association in Oaxaca.

Varner continues with a related interpretation, also in the context of his informant's statement. He says that the knobs and ridges which sometimes are found on Oaxaca shoe-pots "were specifically designed to serve as *comal* rests." If the knobs and ridges that Varner has seen are like those I have seen on

prehistoric culinary shoe-pots from Oaxaca, the southwestern United States, and elsewhere, they are placed too low on the body of the vessel to have served even temporarily as comal supports; they are also much too small (Dixon 1963, Fig. 1). The slightest movement of the pot would result in a cracked comal and an angry cook.

On the contrary, since these lugs or knobs are usually placed where wings and a tail would be on a bird, they more likely are the result of prehistoric potters' noticing the obvious, time and time again—that the shape of the pot resembles that of a bird's fat body. So they added the non-functional lugs to heighten the effect. (For further discussion, see above and Dixon 1963:595.)

Why should non-functional lugs be added to enhance the bird analogy of these odd pots? I advance the Principle of Whimsy (with tongue only part way in cheek). I suggest it is nothing more profound than a bit of prehistoric wit, often repeated afresh like an obvious pun. The same visual pun can more easily spring up in diverse cultures than can verbal puns. Perhaps most of us would find greater professional satisfaction from more serious principles of explanation, especially those related to the ecological system, functional analysis, practical utility, or the ritual and symbolic system. But I have often reflected on how seldom archaeologists attribute any of their evidence of prehistoric behavior to humor and play. Studies of humor by social anthropologists tend to emphasize deep issues connected with social structure or psychology. Perhaps for inspiration we need some cross-cultural studies in the elusive area of wit and light humor (*ethno-whimsy*, of course!).

I was much diverted by Varner's and Beals' remarks on whether the asymmetrical cooking pots look more like shoes or like ducks. To Varner, some look like birds, others more like shoes. Beals insists that he can see no resemblance to a bird or duck (*patojo*). To support his view, Beals says in a linguistic excursion that *patojo* also means foot or shoe anyway. He cites a colloquialism (*Ay, cómo duelen mis patos*) in support of the foot association. He even suggests that *pato* may be the root word of *zapato* (shoe), thereby strengthening the association even more. But my own guess about the colloquialism is that

people have humorously associated fat ducks and big feet through connotations of clumsiness. I very much doubt that when a cooking pot is called a *patojo*, the speaker really has a shoe or foot image in the back of his mind. He means what he is saying, that it looks like the body of a fat and clumsy duck. I therefore reject Beals' etymological subconscious in favor of my Principle of Whimsy. In any case, I fail to see the relevance of either Spanish or English vocabulary to native thinking.

Beals has not made a good case in linguistics for associating asymmetric cooking pots to shoe and foot imagery in the minds of their users. In addition, the prehispanic jaguar-foot shapes at Monte Albán that Beals refers to are effigies with other uses, not cooking pots, and there is no reason other than asymmetry to associate them together.

Linguistic evidence does have a place, however. If Spanish and English terms are not relevant, the native languages certainly could be. The North and South American communities that have used culinary shoe-pots in recent times should be expected to have terms for them in their own languages that might give a clue to their users' own thinking about the shape, its use, or its associations. I have never come across any such terms in the literature with the exception of a brief note by Elsie Clews Parsons and a cryptic comment by Eduard Seler (Dixon 1963:597, 602). This is not surprising, since culinary equipment is a generally neglected subject. Let us hope that someone will check up on the Mixe and Zapotec terms in Oaxaca and the Popoloca terms in Puebla, being duly cautious of back-translations from Spanish words for ducks and shoes (explainable by the Principle of Whimsy, of course). One Zapotec in Mitla who is equally fluent in English, and whose sense of humor I vividly recall, has had reprints of my two papers since 1967.

In his reply to Beals, Varner points out that the Mixe shoe-pot he illustrated is not a miniature. I also have a similar full-size Mixe culinary shoe-pot (Dixon 1963:594, 597). Mine was purchased at a store in the city of Oaxaca. It was attributed to the Mixe village Tlahuitoltepec, though I have no way to confirm it. The village is very near the two Mixe pottery-making villages mentioned by Beals.

Beals' comments on the Mixe ritual use of miniature forms should be compared with Parsons' earlier comments on the Zapotec ritual use of miniatures at Mitla (cf. Dixon 1963:597). Published information is not clear, but it is my impression that miniature versions of pots in general, not of shoe-pots specifically, are significant in ritual contexts in Oaxaca. We need to know whether the shape categories of miniature vessels are represented in the same proportion as those which are in daily use, or whether some are more often miniaturized for ritual specifically because of certain meanings. As Beals also reported in his Mixe monograph (1945:89), full-size pots including culinary shoe-pots are also found in Mixe ritual context.

Turning now to the comment by Sisson (1975), he agrees with Varner that the Mixe shoe-pot *shape* is a continuity from the prehistoric past. But he says that Varner has failed to show that Mixe *use* of the pots for cooking is a continuation of prehistoric practices. Therefore, he concludes that the ethnographic example does not serve to interpret the archaeological specimens. His lines of reasoning are probably not correct.

First, he says Varner did not demonstrate that any prehistoric shoe-pots were in context appropriate to the cooking function. He is correct in that the Monte Albán specimens mentioned by Varner were in burials and tombs (Caso, Bernal, and Acosta 1967:460-63), but he is not familiar with the numerous instances of culinary shoe-pots in domestic context in other prehistoric sites (Dixon 1963:601-05). More to the point, however, is that Sisson evidently requires that there be *contextual* evidence in order to interpret the use of prehistoric shoe-pots. This is an unrealistic position. One of the fundamental bases of archaeological research is that artifact use may often be reliably inferred from analysis of artifact attributes, regardless of context. Indeed, in this case context may actually have misled Sisson.

It is therefore appropriate to examine Sisson's own interpretation of shoe-pot use based on context. He states that 45 shoe-pots have been found in archaeological sites in the Tehuacan Valley, dating to the Late Postclassic and Early Colonial periods. From his brief description, I judge that they probably conform to the definition of culinary shoe-pots; the two ceramic types he mentions, Quachilco Mica and

El Riego Marble-tempered, do seem appropriate as cooking ware (MacNeish, Peterson, and Flannery 1970:110-14, 178).

Sisson's point is that the context of the prehistoric Tehuacan pots shows a use *different* from cooking—every one of the 45 shoe-pots was buried in the context of ceremonial structures and shrines and contained cremations. From this, he concludes that "shoe-form vessels were used primarily, if not solely, for the interment of cremated human remains."

Context can often be misleading for the obvious reason that artifacts may have secondary uses. It is a commonplace around the world that containers designed for one specific purpose can be used for other purposes, and this includes the use of various kinds of pots as burial urns. There is an especially interesting parallel in Central America—shoe-pots similar to some of those found in Oaxaca were commonly used for burials. In fact, the rim often had to be broken out of the smaller shoe-pots in order to admit the body, which would surely imply a secondary usage (or very bad planning). The parallels will doubtless be carefully examined by the Tehuacan archaeologists (cf. Dixon 1963:597, 603).

In Oaxaca, other ritual connections with death customs may have survived from prehistoric times, which Sisson might wish to investigate further. At Mitla, according to Parsons (cf. Dixon 1963:597), the Zapotec word for the shoe-pot is the same as the name for the stream the dead must cross, and the stream runs near an old burial ground; miniatures of shoe-pots are buried with the dead. However, any secondary use as burial urns, and any other ritual associations with death, do not contradict the primary function of the culinary shoe-pot as a cooking device.

In his emphasis on context, Sisson makes too much of the fact that shoe-pots have been found only in burials in Tehuacan sites, and not in trash deposits. This merely reflects the fact that whole pots of any type are most apt to be deposited whole, and remain whole, in deliberate burials (cf. Dixon 1963:597). It is not significant that shoe-pots are unreported from trash deposits in Tehuacan sites. MacNeish, Peterson, and Flannery (1970:10) had to depend primarily on rim sherds in their analyses. A moment's reflection will show that culinary shoe-pot rim sherds would be indistin-

guishable from any other cooking ware rim fragments unless a nearly complete neck were preserved to show the body's asymmetry. The body sherds would not be distinctive either, unless one happened to recognize a sufficiently large sherd from the elongated end of a shoe-pot. Although culinary shoe-pots might be present in a collection of sherds, they would be hard to recognize even if a conscious effort were made to search for them. Sisson's negative evidence is therefore not significant.

Sisson also claims that the shoe-pots used as burial urns do not show any smudging or other evidence of having been used in a fire. This may mean simply that the people chose new vessels in which to bury their dead, rather than shoving the remains of their relatives into the pots in which they had been cooking their beans. Again, negative evidence is not significant.

It is of course conceivable that the primary use of an implement—the one which determined its shape and other attributes—may eventually be superseded entirely by a secondary use, without causing any changes in the implement's attributes. But Sisson has not convincingly shown that culinary shoe-pots ceased to be used for cooking in the Tehuacan Valley and were retained, unchanged, only as cremation urns.

Neither Sisson's critique of Varner nor his own conclusions about the primary function of shoe-pots based on context seem valid. Nevertheless, his discussion does serve to remind us once again of that perennial problem in archaeology—the inventiveness of people in thinking up ways to use implements for purposes other than those for which they were primarily designed. Secondary uses are just as important for interpretation as primary ones, but they must be carefully distinguished.

In conclusion, I suspect some might think we have by now overcooked this issue and it still is not well done. However, I trust that the Principle of Whimsy will not be used to dismiss our discussions of culinary shoe-pots merely as humorous trivia, like that other long-abused

artifact from a subsistence-related subsystem, the three-tined fork. The culinary shoe-pot is an important clue to understanding prehistory in North and South America for reasons that were discussed in my 1963 paper.

(I am assembling data for a paper to bring the distribution and time range of culinary shoe-pots up to date, and would be grateful to receive any further information on the form's occurrence and associations.)

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