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# Ethnicity,class and polity: The emergence of social and political complexity in the Shashi-Limpopo valley of Southern Africa, AD 900 to 1300

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# ABSTRACT

The issues surrounding the nature and timing of the relations between users of the Zhizo and Leopard's Kopje ceramic styles in the area of the Shashi-Limpopo confluence from AD 900 to 1300 are addressed. The results of archaeological investigations at five sites in the region are presented, as are the results of a re-analysis of the ceramic and radiocarbon material from the site Schroda. These results demonstrate that Leopard's Kopje, Zhizo and Zhizo-derived ceramics co-occur in the region between around AD 1000 and 1200. These two ceramic styles are proposed to be the ceramic expressions of two separate, interacting, ethnic groups. It is proposed that interaction between these ethnic groups led, in part, to the development of more complex social and political institutions.

The ceramic style called Zhizo is shown to change after around AD 1000 in reaction to this interaction. Zhizo ceramics after AD 1000 represent a new phase and facies of the Nkope Branch of the Urewe Tradition. This ceramic style is named "Leokwe" after the site at which it was identified, Leokwe Hill.

The class-based social system in the area is hypothesised to have been the product of a prestige goods system. This prestige goods system involved the use of aggressive prestation whereby new social, economic, and political dependencies were created outside the traditional exchange system. The prestige goods system penetrated only to the upper tiers of society. Inclusion within this system, and thus within the new elite class, was not limited by ethnicity, and segments of both the Leokwe and Leopard's Kopje ethnic groups participated within it.

This new exchange system is proposed to have undermined the traditional exchange system, thereby encouraging a process of secularisation whereby exotic trade goods may have been seen as wealth items that potentially supplanted other, more traditional, exchange media.

The continuing social and political status of Leokwe peoples after the Leopard's Kopje entry into the region is posited to have been based upon the role of Leokwe ancestors as the owners of the land. The differential intra-site settlement patterns observed within the region, involving the removal of the central cattle byre from key centres, including Leokwe Hill, K2, and Mapungubwe Hill, are proposed to signal a rejection by Leopard's Kopje elites of the traditional exchange system and its social, political, and religious underpinnings. This removal reflected a rejection of Leokwe peoples' source of political standing and ritual authority. This shift is first seen at Leokwe Hill after around the mid-12$^{th}$ century AD. The implementation of the settlement pattern shift is proposed to mark a system of ethnic stratification which subordinated Leokwe peoples to Leopard's Kopje elites; this shift paved the way for the submergence of the Leokwe style and the end of their ethnic identity in the region.