

Decorated architecture as material culture: a preliminary look at the vernacular architecture of the Msinga area

by

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ABSTRACT

It is well documented that indigenous vernacular and traditional architectures are a product of climatic and geographical influences. In addition, people often surround themselves with material evidence of their metaphysical environments and cultural belief system, evident in art, craft and clothing production. Vernacular architectures or the *indigenous* built environments were often studied in isolation, and have only recently been acknowledged as a reflection of the *material cultural* patterns of the people that built them. The decorated architecture of the Mthembu and Mchunu clans of the Msinga district in KwaZulu-Natal reflects a synergy of the material cultures of the area, where buildings display not only the physical pattern systems seen in the material culture, but also the cognitive patterning of the culture of the people that build them. The architecture is unique in the regional context as it is decorated, a feature unusual for Zulu buildings. It shows that the decorated buildings are as much a part of the material culture as the distinctive local beadwork and earplugs. In addition, the temporal development of the wall decoration styles appears to have been a process that has evolved as a result of dynamic religious, cultural, and aesthetic systems. It is important to include the indigenous vernacular architecture as part of a broader scheme of decorative traditions and not to read it in architectural isolation. This paper seeks to offer interpretations suggested by informants of the decorated building tradition, to identify the different styles of wall painting, and to realise their contribution in the greater decorative culture of Zulu speaking people.

INTRODUCTION

Fitch and Branch (1960), in an early work relating to traditional architectures, noted that environmental and geographical factors inform the style, form and material of architecture, which is created as a practical response to the physical environment. Metaphysical and social environments must also be considered influences in that they strongly dictate the layouts of and spaces between and within buildings. The justification for considering as architectural that which one might essentially classify as humble buildings is embraced by Biermann, who sees the complexity of the beehive hut as of architectural merit (Biermann 1971: 96).

However, there is a need to differentiate between traditional architecture and the architecture of the current vernacular. The former is cognitively entrenched and the result of centuries of trial, error and cultural practice. The latter combines new materials with a wide range of external influences that extend beyond the sanctity of tradition. In addition, environmental pressures such as overgrazing enforce a schism from tradition to create new and exciting forms of architecture. In many cases, the relationships between structures remain constant, but construction materials and building densities change. Further, building may be presented in an entirely individualist manner. This breakaway from the built tradition that Mack *et al* (1991) consider 'uniformity' also makes them significant.

Traditional Zulu buildings do not normally exhibit decoration, the largely grass construction setting limitations. Historical records rarely mention elaboration, though in 1876 Baines recorded pumpkin seeds applied to the inside wall of a beehive hut

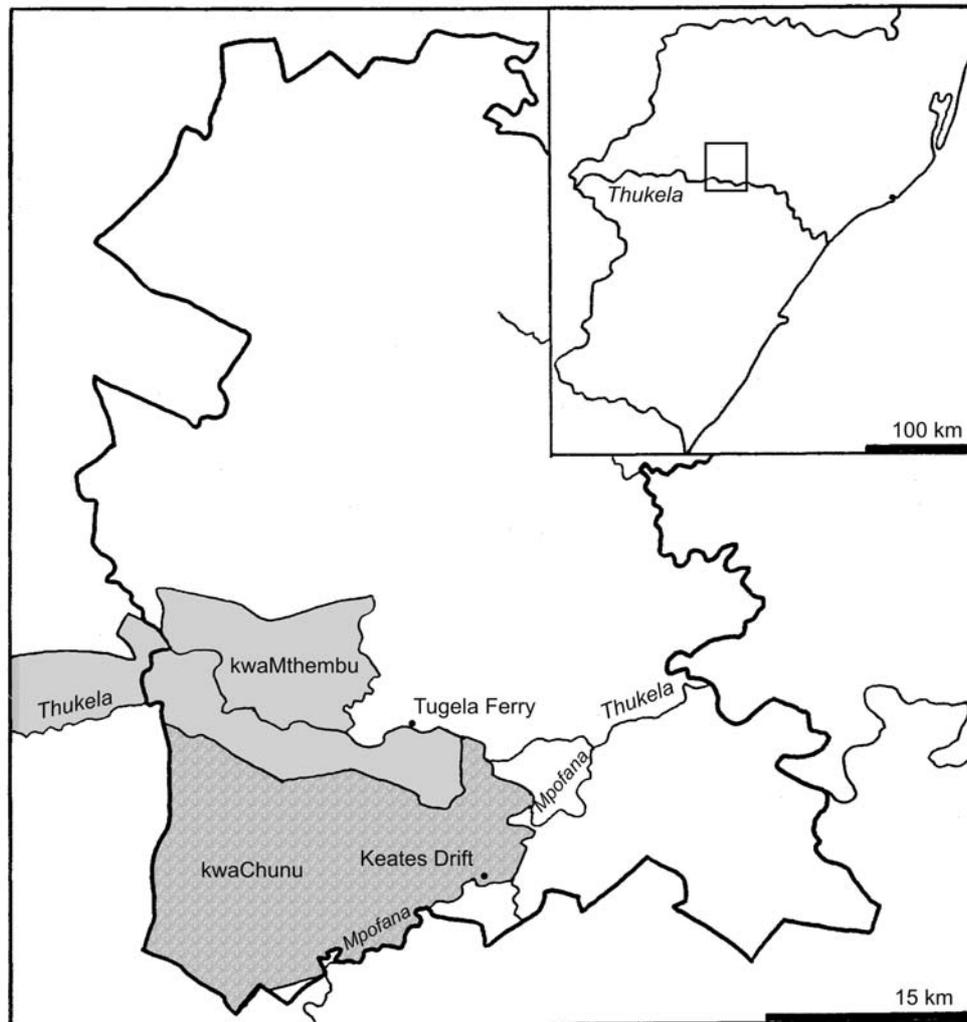


Fig. 1. Msinga in KwaZulu-Natal, showing kwaMthembu and kwaMchunu.

(Lord & Baines 1975: 246). However, the precise location of this example is not clear in the text (F. Frescura *pers. comm.*) suggests it was in the Eastern Cape). Today, decorated structures occur in the Msinga magisterial district at the confluence of the Mpozana (Mooi) and Thukela rivers (Fig. 1). The area is densely populated, supporting over 160 000 people and is emphatically Zulu. The study of 1999 and 2000 focused on the areas of kwaMthembu and kwaMchunu,¹ as these contain the largest proportion of decorated homes. The homesteads selected for investigation were chosen largely by means of a windscreen survey and their owners interviewed regarding the design of the

¹ These are two out of six or seven areas, depending on nomenclature, census information and boundary definitions. Others are KwaMabaso, KwaZondi, KwaQamu, KwaSithole, and Majozi (Alcock 1981; Clegg 1981; Schlemmer 1983).

decorated buildings. Many others were photographed. I was assisted in this research by anthropologist Ms Nelisiwe Mhlongo.

MSINGA

Physical and social environment

The Msinga landscape is physically challenged and challenging; the soil is arid, yet the abundant water in the deeply incised river valleys is too distant to help the sustenance of life on the mountain plateaus a kilometre above. The scrubby and sparse vegetative landscape does not facilitate horticulture nor support adequate livestock. Cultural values attached to livestock, especially cattle, overpopulation partly due to the colonial and apartheid practices of dumping people from areas demarcated for white settlement, communal land ownership and a fragile local ecology have all contributed to environmental degradation. Long dry seasons, hot summers and a noticeable drought cycle restrict the regeneration of building materials of good timber and thatching grass, a traditional and prestige roofing material.

Msinga is also known for a variety of contrary sociological challenges that give it an unique status in the broader South African context. The same historical records that deal with environmental problems also mention political disturbance, poverty and gunrunning. *Cannabis* is cultivated as a much-needed cash crop. Poverty is abject, malnutrition a serious problem stunting emotional, physical and intellectual growth, rendering largely ineffective whatever schooling is available. Male absenteeism has ensured a female-dominated society for the last century, affecting the implementation of traditional roles. Crime and death also prevail, often as a result of faction fighting. Thus the people of Msinga constantly battle for survival.

Material and non-material environment

It is imperative to adopt an holistic approach, taking into account physical and sociological influences. One must embrace the variety of material goods that are produced in the district, as well as the non-material influences that imbue the designs of sign and symbol. In the same way that the need to accommodate televisions and microwave ovens influences the design and everyday functions of an urban western household, so the material *accoutrements* that the people of Msinga cherish inform their homestead design and ultimate function. This connection between belief and artefact is deeply entrenched in the traditionality of the area. Whether or not a cone-on-cylinder building includes windows is an indication of a household's level of traditional awareness, reflecting at the same time the level of aspiration towards western modernity. This use of symbol is an important component of material culture, reflected in the employment of signs, such as the common use of a relief-plastered blind window to convey modernity (Fig. 2). This, according to informants, appeases the old men who feel that a real window is not appropriate in a beehive or cone-on-cylinder dwelling. Traditionalism in this case is both restrictive and energising, it creates the signs, but may sometimes reduce the reality to symbols.

Traditionalism is also often the impetus for the creation of decorated goods such as earplugs and headrests. Beadwork from Msinga is noted, displaying a locally determined pattern and colour-structuring system that is handed down from mother to daughter. In the same manner, the patterning for ceramics and techniques for buildings is also



Fig. 2. The use of sign in the blind window at Msinga.

transferred and an interconnectedness between the material artefacts can be discerned. Beadwork provides a datum for studies of decorated buildings, as patterns in the beadwork of this area are often repeated in wall paintings and in fact, share the same name. The recent revival of cultural awareness through the influence of organisations such as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) has promoted the increased energy with which such goods are made (Klopper 1989: 33). Adding to this, the interaction with monied cultures over the last century-and-a-half has provided both new materials and fresh ideas for these traditional objects. Sometimes Christianity may play a part, as seen by the laminated depiction of the Madonna on locally made *kasse* (kists). Indeed, Christian doctrine has deep influence in much of the art, particularly that of local members of the revivalist churches such as the Shembe.

Similarly, the homestead is yet another part of the whole material culture and these complexes are as individual as other media, in as much as they represent the whole family and its ideals. Historically practised roles, the men providing the structure and women the cladding or the infill, determine the specific tasks in the building of a house. Ultimately the women of the homesteads make most of the aesthetic decisions. It is

they, for example, who choose the particular design and the colour of the paint. In a traditional society, patterning systems change little over generations. However, with the buildings in Msinga, the decoration has emerged and evolved in little over 25 years.

ARCHITECTURAL ENVIRONMENT:
THE DECORATED BUILDINGS

Aerial photographs of Msinga show that beehive huts (*amaqhugwana*, singular: *iqhugwana*) were the dominant structures in the 1940s and 1950s. By the early 1970s, there were few true beehives left; cone-on-cylinder huts were in the majority, though modified beehives—domes on low cylinders—also occurred. Various local opinions as to the demise of the beehives are proffered, the most rational being the lack of available grasses for the thatching of the beehive buildings. The structures require a high level of maintenance as termite and borer infestations force fairly regular replacement of thatch, grass ropes and structural timber. Additionally, according to informants, beehives are more susceptible to arson, an important factor in this politically-flammable area.

Changes are also evident in the organisation of homestead space. Traditionally, dwellings and other structures (granaries, kitchens, storerooms) are arranged around a centrally located cattle pen, especially, in more recent times, its upper half (cf. Mack *et al.* 1991). By the early 1970s, homestead were being re-organised or ‘opened out’ so

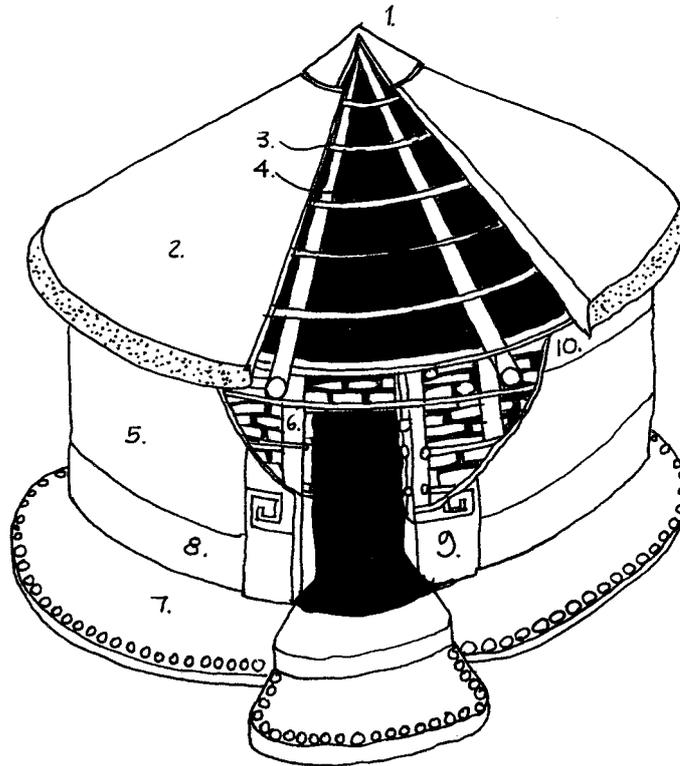


Fig. 3. Elements of the Msinga hut (names vary from area to area): 1. *isicolo sikarondi*; 2. *utshani*; 3. *ikapha/umgod*; 4. *uthingo*; 5. *udonga*; 6. *isicapha*; 7. *isitupa*; 8. *isikaladi*; 9. no real name; 10. *isicala*.

that dwellings formed a linear arrangement across the slope. This transition is described as *ukuvelwa umuzi* (to have opened out the homestead) (Mack *et al.* 1991). A hierarchical arrangement of huts is retained, though differently manifested.

Today Msinga is characterised by relatively simple buildings. Cone-on-cylinder units are the norm (Fig. 3), with occasional four-cornered, two-room, flat-roofed, monopitch buildings. The forms remain pure and uncomplicated, providing a canvas for aesthetic elaboration. Some of the buildings, particularly in Mthembu and Mchunu, are decorated and a rough classification can be suggested by observing the age of the buildings. This is possible because buildings are not recycled and kitchen buildings usually outlast the sleeping units due to the pesticidal nature of the smoke. Kitchen huts therefore tend to be the longest surviving units in a homestead. Over-painting of wall decoration is not common, nor is repainting, so a sequence of patterns is identifiable.

A variety of reasons for wall decoration may exist, usually explained by people as a matter of taste. Beinart has observed that a range of different cultural influences created the decorative variation in the houses painted in Western Native Township, Johannesburg (Beinart 1975: 176). This is the case in Msinga too. Certainly, the cosmopolitan lifestyle brought closer through the migrant labour connection with the Witwatersrand gold fields provides for a high degree of assimilation, as well as financial enablement at Christmas when painting occurs. 'Elaborated' homes are recorded as early as the late 1970s (Frescura 1981: 66). Although little formal documentation is available, these provide a starting point for dating the styles. Local memory provides most of the information. The sequence begins with the simplest of decoration and a suggestion of a South Sotho (*litema*-type) stimulus (Walton 1956: fig. 88)—the plausibility of which is enhanced somewhat by the presence of many Hlubi people, originally of Sotho descent, in the Msinga area and possibly, the Sotho presence on the mines. It progresses to the highly elaborate and sometimes figurative work that we see today. The development of the decorative elaboration appears to have accelerated once the departure from the architectural *cul-de-sac* and limiting form and material of the *iqhugwana* attained tacit acceptance (Frescura 1981: 56). The last 25 years has seen the development of this decorative form parallel changes in the execution, subject matter and material of dress, beadwork, ceramics and woodcarving. However, there is an innate conservatism which prompts the reworking again and again of the same forms, themes and layouts of the homestead.

Not every homestead has decorated buildings and architectural elaboration is still the exception rather than the norm. Alcock is not aware of any decorated homesteads near her home, which is 25 km upstream from Tugela Ferry town, and without ready access to modern materials (C. Alcock *pers. comm.* 2000). However, one finds in kwaMchnunu a prevalence of the decorated houses, often clumped and following a local fashion spurred on by a creative individual.

A typology of decoration

In 2001 there appeared to be at least six types of decorated hut, the structural and decorative elements of which are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 (at end of paper). Type 1, of which many functional buildings such as kitchens still exist, is covered in mud plaster and usually painted a single colour (Fig. 4). The application is similar to a South Sotho building practice where only the dado and packed panels flanking each side of



Fig. 4. Type 1. Wall colour is pale cyan (blue).

the door are plastered with mud, which is then painted a single colour, limewashed or distempered. This is described by Walton (1956: 145) as follows: 'The wide border on each side of the entrance is often coloured differently from the wall and deep bands are sometimes found around the top and bottom of the wall: especially in north Basotholand and Griqualand East'.



Fig. 5. A 1983 photograph by W. Hartley showing Type 2 chevron decoration. Note the organisation of the homestead, with huts arranged around a central cattle pen.



Fig. 6. Type 3, *isimodeni*. Colours on panels flanking the door are, from bottom, deep green, black and rust red, separated by white. The two bands around the base of the hut (*isikaladi*) are deep green below and black.

The technique was elaborated in Type 2 examples of the late 1970s and early 1980s, creating a style noted by Frescura and Hartley where basic geometric patterns flanking the door were painted (Fig. 5). Frescura (1980: 66) refers to it as consisting of chevrons. This style has long since died out. No other styles were documented photographically or in written form at this time.

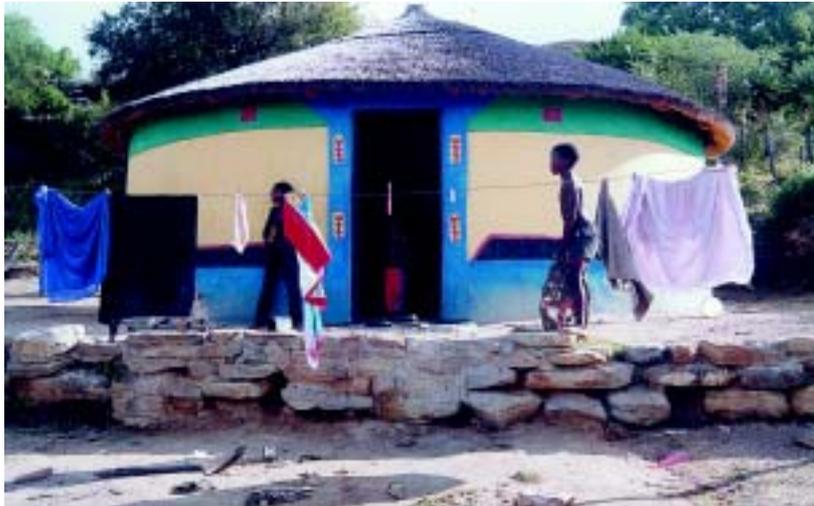


Fig. 7. Type 4. Panels flanking the door are royal blue, with designs in rust red on a maize background. The deep band around the base of the hut (*isikaladi*) is royal blue. Above it is a black band, with a repetitive relief plaster motif, outlined in rust red. The wall above (*udonga*) is maize, topped by a deep turquoise band (*isicala*), with airbricks coloured rust red.

The Type 2 chevron style was superseded by Type 3, known as *isimodeni* (modern) (Fig. 6). *Isimodeni* is characterised by banded paintings flanking the door in red, black, white, green and occasionally blue. The style reflects the banded colouring systems of the beadwork of the same name. This constructs a series of repeated harmonics (F. Jolles *pers. comm.* 2000) and consists of regimented proportions, colour choices and patterning systems. The huts in their entirety are also decorated and often have *isitupa* (aprons) and intricately moulded steps picked out with pebbles. Many *isimodeni* huts still exist, sitting on platforms cut prior to recent homestead densification—where lack of available land has resulted in the distance between homesteads being significantly reduced—and there are still some being decorated in this fashion. Again, a high proportion of *isimodeni* buildings are kitchens.

The *isimodeni* style was superseded by Type 4, where the whole house is considered a canvas instead of the limited area flanking the door (Fig. 7). Also, there is careful consideration of a hut's context within the homestead, with the units belonging to the homestead head and the first wife being decorated first. Decoration involves the symmetrical application of a relief plaster design, often to the whole hut: one woman used a teaspoon to mould the plaster, after which she picked out the plaster detail in coloured PVA. Type 4 shows a breakaway in choices, from the regimented *isimodeni* colours to maize, brown, bay-blue, carmine and black. The colours are chosen by the women of the homestead and usually the work is executed by them. However, men trained in the building trade have assumed some of this work in the current economic downturn and will contract themselves out to individuals.

A development out of Type 4 reached new aesthetic heights. Figurative patterning depicting birds, trees and lacy geometric patterns characterises Type 5 (Fig. 8), which



Fig. 8. Type 5. The band at the base of the hut (*isikaladi*) is black, the wall (*udonga*) maize and the band above (*isicala*) royal blue. The vertical panel is black, outlined in blue. Motifs are in blue, green, red, black and white.

is contractor built and usually contractor painted and plastered. Both Types 4 and 5 have raised plaster relief in common, which is the basis for the painted designs. This technique commits a hut to a particular decoration for its lifetime; over-painting has not been observed. Type 5 has yet again a broader choice of palette: brown and olive green are common. Again the whole house is seen as a backdrop for creativity.

Type 6 is more understated and does not fit as readily into the evolutionary sequence as the other examples (Fig. 9). It typically consists of a simple plastered building with a single-colour painted background, and figurative motifs on each side of the door. Other types of decoration do exist, but not in sufficient numbers to justify categorisation as a style.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The personal perception of Msinga residents as to what constitutes a proper house is varied. A real house is often not a two-roomed cottage, as it is with many people living at the edges of modern economies. The Msinga people use the two-roomed dwelling occasionally, as it forms the bachelor's quarters of some of the homesteads: bachelors are perceived of as more worldly-wise and have more claim to a rectangular building, as they are on the brink of joining the list of absentee males. Generally, the women interviewed speak of the need for the circular buildings. These are perceived as proper homes, they show a respectful attitude to the ancestors and placate the conservative elderly.

In many instances, the formal building code learnt in cities is combined with the traditional needs of the homesteader. People, men especially, who move between city and country, and out-of-work building contractors, have facilitated shifts in design.



Fig. 9. Type 6. Wall in blue, motifs and doorframe in rust red.

Consequently, elements of 'proper' buildings such as ventilation units (airbricks) are copied or integrated on a large scale as symbolic items. Thus, when Mr Nxumalo says that houses are painted and built to be similar to houses in the cities, he is probably right. The imitation of perceived grandeur, however, does not extend through the entire catalogue of urban forms and materials. For instance, the Sithole family's positive perception of thatch is totally different from the attitude of urban people, whether living in formal or informal housing, who view thatch as impractical and old-fashioned. Certainly, the people in Msinga realise its shortcomings. They are all too aware of its incendiary properties in arson and lightning strikes. They are also painfully aware of its cost; of somehow finding, cutting and conveying it, or buying it locally.

The possibility for variation in types between and within homesteads is large, particularly in the newer work. There is an indication of the expression of 'self' beyond the bounds of traditional architectural norms, with the recent decorations referring to subjects not normally depicted in decorated media. The *isicolo sikarondi* (apical cap) provides one example: the standard manner of finishing off the *iqhugwana* was with a grass top knot known as *ingqongwana* (Walton 1956: 129). This apical completion had to be re-resolved with the change of form and structural material from beehive dome to conical, a conundrum between staying with the original solution, or changing it for both efficiency and aesthetics sake, and current fashion. Thus, we see a variety of approaches today and occasionally some that are wonderfully anomalous. One hut has as an *isicolo sikarondi* a knight on a charger, purchased in Johannesburg and typical of informal street-side merchant-ware, which could not be more incongruous in this rural African context. Nevertheless, it works as part of the eclectic decorative language of the homestead whilst enriching the image of the homestead head in the community.

Variation is strongly demonstrated in the continually-evolving decorative types. The recent breakaway from the geometric influence of beadwork creates a new evolutionary path for contemporary design in South African vernacular architecture, as it is very different from the more famous Ndebele, for example, and unique amongst Zulu homestead design. Additionally, the integration of plaster, paint and materials shows conviction and commitment; once relief plasterwork is executed, the design is final and variation is possible only in the choice of paint colours. The sense that a decision is correct, even during an experimentation process, is quite obvious.

An important recent factor in the evolution of this vernacular architecture is the impact of decorative contractors who execute designs in plaster and paint at the whims of the wives of homestead heads. As yet, we have little information on this development. It reflects a perceived need in the community for the work, but restricts variety to a set of basic design types. Mr C. Sithole (*pers. comm.* 2001), a local decorator, admits to the existence of a 'catalogue' for Type 5 buildings. He was reluctant to elucidate.

There is little evidence of how and why the Msinga vernacular style developed, as ephemeral memories and a lack of photographic and written data testify. Nevertheless, a discernable and gradual enrichment has occurred, moving through a series of types which, according to local sources, are a matter of taste and local fashion. Influences closely follow other forms of material culture manufactured locally, facilitating the establishment of a broad chronology. In addition, Msinga architecture is a product of tension between traditional and modern Western: the indigenous hut has embraced the new millennium, its modernity reflected in both element and material.

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TABLE 1.
Structural features.

Type	construction	roof pitch	window	steps	door
Type 1	frame and infill	greater than 20°	none	simple	usually stable type, SA pine
Type 2	frame and infill	greater than 20°	none	simple	usually stable type, SA pine
Type 3	frame and infill	greater than 20°	none	simple or decorated	usually stable type, SA pine
Type 4	frame and infill or concrete block	often less than 20°	none; blind or painted steel	simple or decorated	usually standard hardwood (meranti) with additional SA pine stable lower half
Type 5	concrete block	often less than 20°	none; blind or painted steel	simple or decorated	usually standard hardwood with additional SA pine stable lower half
Type 6	frame and infill or concrete block	greater than 20°	no specific standard	no specific standard	standard hardwood or stable type

TABLE 2.
Decorative features.

Type	plaster	annular shoulder	dado	apron	decorative tradition
Type 1	none, excluding the dado	open	plastered and painted	simple	simple
Type 2		open	plastered and painted	simple	simple
Type 3	yes, to door head height	open	painted	simple or decorated	more complex forms in standard patterns on sides of doors only
Type 4	relief, full	painted	relief plastered and painted	simple or decorated	whole building painted with geometric patterns at openings
Type 5	relief, full	painted	relief plaster and paint	simple or decorated	whole building painted: motif patterns
Type 6	no specific standard	open or painted	none	no specific standard	simple linear graphics, or swathes of colour

