THE SOCIOCULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF POTTERY PRODUCTION IN KENYA

By: Simiyu Wandibba

Introduction

Pottery-making is one of the oldest crafts known to the human race. The craft was invented independently in different parts of the world at different times. At the moment, the earliest known pottery comes from Japan, where it is dated to about 10500 B.C. In Africa, pottery first appears in the 8th millennium B.C. Since then, potting has existed in most societies where suitable deposits of raw materials are available. Here in Kenya a few potsherds recovered from Gamble's Cave near Elementeita date from around 6000 to 6500 B.C. This means that pottery is an ancient craft in this country.

Today, potting is widely practised in most parts of the world by peasant communities. Indeed, in Africa pottery is made and widely used by most ethnic communities. In fact, pots are the most ubiquitous features of the African household, regardless of the socio-economic status of the household owner. This phenomenon results from the fact that pottery products serve numerous functions, including carriage, storage and ritual purposes. For example, pots are used to carry water from the source of supply to the point of consumption. In terms of storage, pots are used to store liquids such as milk, water, honey and beer, as well as grain and other forms of foodstuff. In addition, Wandibba and Barbour (1989) state that pots are used as dye containers for fabrics and as tubs for bathing babies.

In Kenya pot-making is localized, depending on the availability of suitable clay or, sometimes, of sand for tempering. Sometimes, pot-making is confined to particular clans. This is the case with Avalogoli (Wagner 1970) and the Kipsigis (Peristiany 1939). Lindblom (1920) also reports that traditionally, certain Kamba clans were prohibited by taboo from making pots. On the other hand, Peristiany (1939) states that no one will marry into a family engaged in one of these occupations. In general, potting is a woman's craft.

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the socio-cultural and economic aspects of the manufacture of pottery in Kenya. It is generally assumed that pottery is a vehicle for the expression of cultural patterns. This is because, the pottery of any one culture has its own peculiarities that distinguish it from pots produced by another culture. Also, issues of the status of both the potter and her products in society are important and these need to be addressed. Finally, it is imperative that we examine questions of distribution and consumption of the pottery.

The paper starts off by looking briefly at the pottery making communities in Kenya. I then look at the raw materials and the manufacturing techniques. This is done in order to put later discussions in proper perspective. Third, I examine socio-cultural aspects of the industry. Fourth, the economic features of pottery production are dealt with. Finally, by way of conclusion, general points are raised and discussed.

Pottery -making communities

As already stated, the manufacture of pottery in Kenya is now localized. Today, the main pot-making communities include the Luo, Abaluyia, Akamba, some coastal communities and the Iteso. Other societies that still make pots are the Agikuyu, Marakwet Okiek and Ameru. Pots made by the Luo, especially,

have become so popular that they can be found in markets throughout the country. On the other hand, pot-making among the Agikuyu is now restricted to two sub-locations in Maragua District, namely, Kiria and Gakoigo.

In general, each of these communities makes pottery that is unique to itself. However, those communities that live contiguous to each other tend to influence each other's pottery repertoire. Thus, Luo pottery and the pottery produced by their Luyia neighbours tend to be similar in a number of respects. In the same way, Bukusu and Teso pottery tends to be fairly similar. Finally, the pottery produced by central Kenya communities have quite a few features in common.

Raw materials and techniques

Important factors in the manufacture of pottery include the characteristics and properties of the clay and their relationship to potting skills, techniques, shape, decoration, drying and firing. These factors are important because they ultimately affect the uses and the durability of the vessels produced. Clay is the most important ingredient in the manufacture of pottery. In nature, clay is highly variable in its origin as well as in its physical and chemical properties. However, potters normally use secondary clay, that is, redeposited primary clay that has been mixed with various impurities (including organic matter). Such clay usually occurs along the banks of rivers or streams as well as in marshy swamps, and along lake-shores. Through tradition and experience, the potters would know where good quality clay is to be found.

In its natural state, clay is sometimes not suitable for pot-making. This would happen in a situation of great plasticity, which makes the clay too sticky to shape, and less porosity, which leads to cracking and warping during the drying and firing processes. Thus, to make the clay more malleable and to prevent excessive shrinkage during drying, potters mix the clay with some tempering material. Tempering materials include sand, animal dung, ground potsherd (grog), rock and various vegetable materials. Kenyan potters generally use sand as their tempering material. However, sometimes the clay could already contain enough sand to make it suitable for fabrication without any admixtures. This is especially the case with clay obtained from termite mounds.

The first step in the manufacture of pottery is the acquisition of clay. As already stated, this is obtained from either river banks, lakeshores, stream banks, marshy swamps or from termite mounds. Every community has its own rules which regulate the quarrying of the clay. For example, among Babukusu the quarrying of clay was traditionally the work of either men, boys, girls who have yet to menstruate or women who have reached menopause. It was taboo for grown-up girls and active women to enter the quarries since, it was believed, their entry would spoil the clay. The argument was that pots made from such clay would crack and break in the firing process (Wandibba, 1989). On the other hand, among the other potting communities the female potters have to acquire the clay themselves or seek help from anyone around. However, among the Agikuyu it was taboo for men to even as much as touch potting clay.

Some potters obtain more than one type of clay, usually determined by colour. For example, Brown (1972) states that Kamba potters collect three different coloured clays, namely, a black clay, a red clay and a white clay. The Adavida also mix three different coloured clays - grey, red and blue (Soper 1989). Gill (1981) observes that amongst the Akamba, the clays are mixed in varying proportions, depending largely on the individual potter's preference. By mixing clays, potters appear to be aware of the fact that this act can modify properties in clay and thus lead to a product superior to either of the clays alone.

At home the potter first removes any visible impuri-

ties, such as stones or large pieces of organic matter. The potters appear to know that if these impurities are not removed, they will cause the pot to crack in drying and to break in firing. Once the impurities have been removed, a common practice among Kenyan potters is to age the clay. The aging seems to give the clay the best working state.

Kenyan potters use different types of temper. For example, Kamba potters add sand and small quantities of micaceous soil to their clay (Gill 1981). Sand tempering is also used by some Bukusu potters as well as some Luo potters in Siaya District. Some of the Luo potters in that district also use grog as their temper. On the other hand, the Gikuyu potters of Maragua District use rock for tempering (personal observation). However, there are also cases where clay is used without any temper. This happens when the clay already has enough sand in it, as is the case with the Adavida, or when it is obtained from termitaria, as seen among the Pokot.

Traditional potting in Kenya does not involve the use of the potter's wheel. Instead, the pots are formed using the coiling or slab modelling technique. Coiling is a process which involves building up the vessel wall with superimposed rolls of clay. Sometimes, the coiling may be employed from the beginning. However, more often than not, a vessel is started with a basal disc of clay or a collar of clay. Potters in Central Kenya as well as the Adavida, build their vessels in two halves, starting with the upper half. On the other hand, the Luo and Luyia potters build their pots in one piece and start from the bottom upwards. As part of the building process, all potters decorate their pots in one way or another. The most elaborate decoration is done by the Luo and those Luyia potters who are their next door neighbours. These groups invariably decorate their pots in either an all-over body fashion or almost entirely so. On the other hand, Kamba potters as well as the Adavida and some Swahili potters decorate their pots with personal marks. In general, the least decorated pots are made in central Kenya. There are also other potters, e.g., the Pokot, who generally do not decorate their wares.

After fabrication, the pots are dried before being fired. The drying period varies from community to community, but these days this is dictated by market forces. Whereas in the past pots used to be dried for a long time, the tendency these days is for potters to rush the process in order not to miss the next market day.

Firing is the final stage in the manufacturing of pottery. This stage, so to say, tests the potter's skill and patience. It is known for a fact that haphazardly made pots are unlikely to survive the pressures exerted on the vessels by the fire. Here in Kenya, potters do not fire their pots in a kiln. Pots are instead fired in what is known as bonfires. Normally the firing is done in a shallow pit or some flat area cleared for the purpose. Different types of fuels are used, but the commonest ones consist of twigs and grass.

Socio-cultural aspects

In Kenya pottery production is almost entirely the work of women. Indeed, there are very few communities in which one finds men also engaged in potting. Male potters have been reported among Babukusu, Avalogoli, Abeisukha and Endo. However, in such cases men are confined to making only certain types of pots. For example, among the Endo, men make only two large ritual pots whilst the women make the whole range including those used in rituals (Welbourn 1989). Among Babukusu, male potters were traditionally restricted to the production of the large pots used in the brewing and serving of beer during ceremonies as well as ritual vessels. The women made other types of pots. Potting can therefore be said to have been one way of defining gender roles in society. In the traditional setting, the pottery industry was

associated with quite a number of taboos. Although the adoption of western civilization has resulted in the discard of many of these taboos, some still hold sway. I have already stated, for example, that among Babukusu women who are still under menarche are forbidden from entering the clay quarry. According to Nangendo (1994) this particular taboo possibly reflects the Bukusu conception of metaphysics. Among these people, the quarry (*siumbwa*) has a symbolic relationship with their creation. The primacy of this association is such that both the creator and the potter are referred to by the same term, *omubumbi*, i.e., one who creates. This, therefore, means that *siumbwa* should be kept free from any ritual impurity. Since menstruation is considered a state of impurity, the community has to ensure that women do not enter the quarry. But those women who are unlikely to be ritually impure, i.e., young girls and those who have reached menopause, are permitted to do so. The belief in ritual impurity is even extended to the actual manufacture of pots. Thus, Bukusu women having their menses are not supposed to involve themselves in pot making.

Many other potting communities in Kenya insist that potting can only occur successfully in a state of ritual purity. For example, Brown (1989) reports that among the Pokot, pots in the process of manufacture must be kept well away from any ritual impurity as this would cause cracking during firing. To ensure this purity, a pottery is sited in a secluded place away from any habitation and where passers-by are unlikely. "Young men, in particular, are likely to have had sexual intercourse the previous night and that would adversely affect the potting" (Brown, 1989:54). Therefore, they are chased away if they approach the pottery. Other visitors are, however, also chased away. The potter herself too must be ritually pure when potting. Prohibition of sexual intercourse in potting is also reported among the Agikuyu, Akamba and the Samburu Dorobo who live in the Mathew's Mountains.

Among the Luo, potting is both a responsibility and a symbol of conformity. As Herbich and Dietler (1989:37) observe "A women who marries into a homestead of potters may be expected to learn potting herself, to demonstrate that she does not consider herself too good to participate in such work and to show that she is willing to take up responsibilities for her family". The newly married woman learns from her mother-in-law as well as her senior co-wives. But potting is also a channel of interaction among women. This is especially the case with clusters of potters who live around clay sources. Since such women obtain clay and temper from the same source, their level of interactions and social obligations will normally be higher than could otherwise be.

Among the Akamba, each potter designs her own identification mark. This mark serves as a trade mark and a guarantee of the vessel's quality. Gill (1981) discovered that a young girl uses her mother's mark while learning to pot, but designs her own trade mark as soon as she gets married. This means that the trade mark facilitates the distinction of each individual potter's work. As Gill (1981:207) states, "Not only do the marks record information about the individual woman potter, but they also reflect ownership of property by Kamba women, and make it possible to trace the movement of any one potter's vessels from village to village".

In some communities, potters are considered to have powers of sorcery. For example, the Akamba believe that a potter can swear an oath on such a smashed pot to inflict pain or death on anyone who falsely accused her of lying or wrong-doing (Gill 1981). The Agikuyu also traditionally used pots in administering curses. However, it was taboo for a Gikuyu woman to break a pot, especially when in anger. This taboo is still respected by potters in the Gakoigo sub-location of Maragua District. These potters argue that since a pot is a symbol of a woman's womb, barrenness could

befall the woman who breaks a pot. Thus, traditionally, a woman who broke a pot could not sleep with her husband before she was purified as this could lead to the impotence or death of the husband (Kamau 1992).

Pots also play an important role in certain ceremonies and rituals. Among Babukusu, pots have an important role to play in some aspects of the marriage ceremonies. For example, during the ceremony known as *sitekho*, a woman returns to her father's home and is given one multi-purpose small to medium-sized pot, a water pot and a pot for cooking relishes eaten with the main dish. Babukusu make two ritual pots, namely, *namunwa ebili* and *kumubende*. The former has two mouths and is used in ceremonies associated with the birth of twins. On the other hand, *kumubende* is a small pot with a long neck and is used in cleansing ceremonies where close relatives marry unknowingly.

Among the Avalogoli pots were used in two ceremonies, namely, rain-making and burial of a chief. Wagner (1970) reports that in order to predict rain, the rain-maker uses two pairs of new pots of different sizes given to him for this purpose. He takes the pots to a private place in the hills and fills the two larger ones with water and then uses the smaller ones as lids. If the level of the water in the pots remains full, rain is probable. In the burial ceremony of the chief, the grandson is given one of the dead man's cooking pots to take to the dead man's house. "When the grandson arrives he breaks the neck of the pot and this gives everyone permission to wail. The pot is then placed over the dead man's head and buried with the man in his grave" (Barbour, 1989:45).

Finally, symbolism is a characteristic feature of pottery in some communities. Welbourn (1989) reports that among the Endo, old pots are found around the compounds of older people. Although these pots are useless, they are not discarded. The reason for this is that pots are associated with the household and, as such, represent the continuing life of the compound. Thus, "While other items, such as metal hoes, are taken back to smiths to be recycled, pots even when broken reflect the permanence and longevity of their owners" (Welbourn, 1989:60). Babukusu also view potsherds in this same way. According to them, *sikolonjo mulinda ekundu*, i.e., the potsherd is the protector of an abandoned homestead. Thus, wherever one comes across potsherds, one has no hesitation in identifying the point as having been used for habitation in the past.

Economic aspects

In their study of Luo potters, Herbich and Dietler (1989) found that although not held in disdain, potting is not considered a particularly high status activity. In fact, the craft is looked upon as a hard and dirty work but one that is not particularly rewarding financially. Kamau (1992) also found this feeling among the Gikuyu potters. She discovered that potting is regarded as a low status occupation by potters since it is taxing and dirty.

Despite these feelings, there is no doubt that all potters across the country are conscious of the fact that they need regular cash income in order to meet their daily needs. Since there are no viable alternatives, the pottery industry has been chosen as the avenue to this regular cash income. The basic question to ask here then is, why is potting the viable alternative? I think there are two main reasons which make the pottery industry the most attractive, especially for the rural people.

In the first instance, the pottery industry does not require much capital investment to start off. All the potters in Kenya use very simple tools which are either made from naturally occurring products, or from recycled discarded market objects. Secondly, the raw materials are largely acquired freely from

communally owned quarries. Where purchasing has to be done, as in the case of Bukusu and Gikuyu potters, the prices are not prohibitive. Thus, for people who are trying to make ends meet, the pottery industry is very appealing.

Secondly, potting offers to those involved the flexibility and control over their time. This means the potters do not have to follow a fixed work schedule. The individual potter decides on when to pot and when not to pot. In this regard, it is important to remember that the potters normally have a host of other chores to deal with and quite a number of obligations to fulfil. In any business, the management of the time resource is very important in determining the efficient use of other resources. Flexibility therefore permits the potter to produce pots as and when the need arises.

Studies have shown that potters in Kenya are, in general, either illiterate or semi-literate. This means that the chances of their getting salaried jobs are very slim. In addition, their husbands also tend to be lowly educated. Because of this, the husbands would either be jobless or engaged in some menial jobs which cannot earn them sufficient money for family upkeep. In these circumstances, the women have had to look for ways and means of earning some regular income. In communities with a potting tradition, the alternative has had to be the pottery industry. Kamau (1992) found that potters in her study area earned, on average, between Ksh 300 and Ksh 600 per month. Although these figures may not appear significant, they have to be looked at in terms of their real value. Three hundred shillings in the countryside is, in my view, much higher than one thousand shillings in an urban setting where the earner has to pay for a house and water, and then purchase foodstuffs. In any case, in this same area, there are potters who earn much more than the average figures given.

On the basis of household inventories in Ukambani, Gill (1981) found that the potters ranked relatively high on the list of families with iron roofs, glass dishes, *sufurias* and *jikos*. She also discovered that because of their relative wealth, the potters generally transported their goods to market by bus rather than on foot. In fact, unlike potters elsewhere in the country, Kamba potters are held in high regard.

In Kenya, pottery is generally distributed mainly by means of periodic markets. On the markets, pots are exchanged for cash. This means, therefore, that for the potter, the periodic markets are synonymous with a steady income from the sale of the wares. In most cases, the buyers of the pots are also the ultimate users. However, in the case of Luo and some Luyia pots ,the buyers are third parties who then sell the pots outside the areas of production. In this way, pots produced in Western Kenya find their way to Nairobi and to as far away as Mombasa. These transactions have tended to popularize Luo pots and thereby stimulate more production of these pots.

Many of the sedentary people in Kenya still use pots for various functions in their houses. Water pots, especially, are still very popular. It is because of this that pots continue to find a ready market. This, in turn, ensures potters of a steady income. Even among the nomadic pastoral communities, there are certain ceremonies which demand that pots be used. Thus, among the Rendille, pots must be used for the boiling of meat used in the warriors' initiation ceremony and in weddings (Clarfield 1989). Since the Rendille do not make pots, they have to make a "pilgrimage" to the Ndoto Mountains to purchase the wares from the Dorobo potters there. In this way, these Dorobo potters find a steady market for their pots.

In the villages, pots tend to be bartered for foodstuffs. Thus, when pots are not being sold for cash, they are exchanged for foodstuff. In this way, potters can actually pile on their stocks of food and thereby avert food shortages.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to give an overview of the sociocultural and economic aspects of pottery production in Kenya. Potting is today one of the few traditional industries still practised on a large scale in this country. It is mainly practised in the following provinces: Nyanza, Western, Eastern and Coast. Elsewhere, it is only done on a small scale. This is the case with the Rift Valley and Central Provinces. Wherever it is practised, potting could be described as a small-scale industry. And since it does not require a license or much capital investment, it is a very popular occupation in the rural areas.

There are some technological differences between the potters in western Kenya and those in central Kenya. Whereas the former use the coiling technique, for example, the latter use the slab modelling technique. The latter technique is also used by the Adavida whilst coiling is used by the Okiek. Secondly, there are differences in decorative techniques and motifs between the potters from the two regions. Whereas western Kenya potters decorate their pots elaborately, those from central Kenya tend to be simplistic in this particular aspect.

There is no doubt that the pottery industry still plays an important role in the various traditions of many Kenyan communities. For example, many ceremonies related to birth, initiation and death still demand that pots must be used. Among Babukusu ,beer brewed for these ceremonies must be drunk from pots. For older generations even the brewing itself has to be in pots. This same practice prevails among the Agikuyu in that *irio* to be eaten in ceremonies must be cooked in a pot.

Pots also tend to reflect a society's social cohesion. When one looks at pots produced by a particular society, one cannot fail to notice the general uniformity in terms of shape and decoration. Thus, although individual potters may have minor personal variations in their products, they tend to conform to what could be termed "societal expectations" of their products.

We have also seen that for some communities both the quarry and the clay are so important they have to be protected from ritual impurity. By and large, this belief emanates from the fact that the fabrication of pots is likened to the human creation. Thus, taboos have been instituted to protect the quarry, the clay and the whole process of pottery manufacture from ritual impurities. Although the whole-sale adoption of western civilization has led to the discard of some of the taboos, a few still persist.

There are two main economic advantages of potting. One, since it does not require particular skills, and since there are no social prohibitions against anyone intending to become a potter, literally anybody can become a potter. Studies have revealed that the level of education of the potters as well as that of their husbands is very low. This means that neither the husbands nor the wives could have secured jobs that would be lucrative enough to provide for their needs. Added to this, the flexibility of the industry in terms of the production schedule means that a potter can still cope with her other domestic chores.

Two, potters tend to make just about enough money to subsist on. There are, of course, regional variations. For example, among the Luo, potters are looked down upon because they do not appear to make that much money. But when one looks at the other crafts or trades practised by women in the country-side, these are not financially that rewarding either. When it comes to Ukambani, we find that potters are held in high esteem because they are able to accumulate some wealth. But the most important thing about money earned from potting is that it belongs to the woman. The woman herself plans how to use it and the husband does not interfere. In this way, a woman

gains economic independence unparalled by most other income-generating activities, such as farm work.

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