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Panel: Les Traditions Ceramique de la Boucle du Niger à la Volta Noire/
Ceramic Traditions from the Bend of the Niger to the Black Volta

Mahmoud Malik SAAKO
Senior Curator, Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, Upper East Region, Bolgatanga
al_maalikee@yahoo.com

Ethnography and Archaeology of the Ceramic Industry in Babile and Birifoh, Upper West Region, Ghana

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the ethnography and archaeology of the ceramic industry in Babile and Birifoh in the Upper West region of Ghana. In particular, it examines the varied usages and technological attributes of ceramic vessels with emphasis on continuities and changes by comparing the present patterns with those recovered in archaeological contexts at Birifoh Sila-Yiri excavated in November, 2008. Continuities in usages in funerary rituals and architectural layout as well as in the decorative surface patterns on pots, especially those made with a roulette, have been observed. However, it was noted that there is reduction in the use of roulette stamp, in favor of smudged ceramics with little or no decoration. It was also noted that the ceramic industry is facing fierce competition with the plastic industry today.

INTRODUCTION

Birifoh and Babile are inhabited by Lobi and Dagaaba peoples in the northwestern part of Ghana along the Black Volta River (see Fig. 1). Pottery production and use of pottery wares in the domestic activities in the region dates back centuries in the history of Dagaaba and Lobi. Food, water and other beverages are served in bowls made from clay. The ceramic bowls or containers are varied in size, ranging from small tobacco bowls to large storage pots. Ceramic products also play a vital role in the pre-mortuary and post-mortuary practices among these peoples, practices that have been identified in both archaeological and ethnographic contexts at Birifoh-Sila Yiri and Babile. Roulette motifs have also been identified as the dominant decoration in the past, having drastically faded away in favor of smudged pots with little or no decoration. The introduction of plastic products into the country has, in some areas, posed great competition to ceramic traditions, and in others pushed them towards extinction. According to Okoro (2007: 410) the gradual decline of the pottery industry is due to competitive pricing, design, durability and prestige of exotic or locally manufactured substitutes for pottery products in the Ghanaian market. Barbra Priddy (1974) mentioned that the industry was on the verge of decline because it was unable to compete. Plastic products therefore have a negative impact on the pottery industry in the region. Rubber bowls or containers are more durable than clay. Although clay products are far cheaper than the plastic products, the latter is far more cost effective.

POTTERY PRODUCTION IN BIRIFOH AND BABILE

Potters in these two towns and surrounding villages produce pots of various kinds ranging from storage pots to bowls for serving foodstuff. Potters in Babile and its environs did not have any difficulties in accessing clay, as it is very abundant. In Birifoh, pottery production is limited to the villages of Baapare, Chaa and Maalbaa, due to the lack of clay as a resource. Potters in these villages have to walk about three kilometers to Babile to access this raw material. They sourced this raw material free. They only pay a token to the men at the site who dig the clay for them.

All the potters in the two towns are either old or middle aged women in their late fifties, with only a few young girls between the ages of nine and fifteen who are learning from their mothers or grandmothers after school or during vacations. These young girls considered the pottery industry as belonging to the aged in society. They want to become teachers or nurses in the future. The potters interviewed in the two towns were women who dropped out of school to learn a vocation to prepare them for marriage, as early marriage is one of the things that characterizes both Dagaaba and Lobi cultures. The focal point of this early marriage is belief in chastity before marriage as a cultural norm.

DEMAND FOR POTTERY PRODUCTS

There are local markets for pottery products in Birifoh and Babile and their adjoining areas, but the biggest market potters in these areas take their wares to is the Babile market, one of the international market centers within the Lawra District, patronized by locals and by people from Burkina Faso. This market comes on a once every six days interval (see Fig. 2). The competitive nature of the market compelled potters to produce pots that are worthy to compete with other wares in the market. According to the potters, their wares have both local and international demand. People from across the Black Volta (that is in Burkina Faso) buy their wares not only for water storage, serving of local beer or *pito*, and cooking, but for ritual purposes such as pre-mortuary and post-mortuary rituals. Pottery wares also play vital roles in the culture, especially in securing the departure of the person to the next world known as '*Dapare*'.

The Dagaaba believe in eschatology and life after death as well as reward and punishment (Alenuma, 2002: 9-11). As a result, they do everything possible not go contrary to the norms of society. Because of the belief in life after death, every Dagarti or Lobi is always ready and know that death can overtake him or her at any point in time. Every married Dagarti or Lobi woman is expected to keep a number of pots in her room, because if not, she may not be considered as a true Dagarti or Lobi woman. The widespread worldview of the people as to the ritual nature of pots and their relationship with ancestral spirits has made the industry resilient throughout the years (Craven, 2007; Okoro, 2007: 414). During one's funeral, the pots that are kept in the room have a role to play in the departure of the soul to the next world or *Dapare*. As a result of the use of pottery for cultural purposes in the region, the demand for these products will not diminish. According to Ganpour, every Dagarti or Lobi woman has to have at least ten of the various types of pots used for cooking or a certain number of pots of different sizes kept in her room for such cultural rituals (Saako, 2009: 21-23).

When a person dies, one pot is used to boil the water to bathe the corpse and one is broken at the place where he/she is going to be bathed. The one that is used to bathe the corpse is broken after the bath. The corpse is dressed in its best clothes and displayed on top of the bier or catafalque (*paala*), a structure made of strong wood raised above the ground. Some of the pots are displayed at the funeral ground where the corpse is put on the *paala* (see Fig. 3) and some of them are broken there, others are broken at the graveyard. Four cooking pots are used to carry water to the graveyard where the corpse is to be buried. Some of the pots are broken by friends of the deceased at the graveyard and some at where the corpse is put up on the *paala*. As for the pots that are used to carry the water to the grave, the daughter of the deceased keeps them for future use. The medium pot is used to cover the mouth of the grave (see Fig. 4), and serves as a grave marker. A hole is created at the top to indicate that the deceased still has relatives who are alive. When the last person within that patriclan is dead, a stone is used to indicate that he/she was the last person within that lineage.

According to Ganpour, anyone close to the deceased may carry a pot to the funeral ground, and after showing it to the relatives, he or she may break it at the base of the *paala*. If one does not have a pot to break at the funeral, one can break a calabash after showing it to the relatives. All the broken pots at the place where the deceased was bathed and those broken at the *paala* ground are collected by her daughters or other relatives and thrown into a stream where there are carried away by the running water. Pots are also used by traditional herbalists, priests and priestesses in the preparation of medicine for their clients. Pots or clay products constitute much of the shrine goods (see Figs. 5 and 6).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT BIRIFOH-SILA YIRI

Two weeks long archaeological excavations were carried out at Birifoh-Sila Yiri, the first settlement site situated on a hilltop. Two units were excavated, one on the top of the hill and one at the base designated BSY1 and BSY2 respectively. At BSY1, a burial was recovered at the depth of 60 cm covered with potsherds. This was alien to the mortuary practice among the inhabitants of Birifoh-Sila Yiri from the ethnographic contexts observed. There was also evidence of pottery pavements identified in the excavation at various intervals. The corpse was probably placed on the pavement before it was covered with soil (see Fig. 7) because the fifth pottery pavement was identified at the same level with the burial. Ethnographic data indicate that potsherds are placed at the sloping edges of the roof to avoid erosion, as the materials used in plastering the floor are not strong (see Fig. 8). Pots are also used in the post mortuary rituals especially, as grave markers different from what has been identified in the archaeological context. It is probable that mortuary practices involving the use of pottery in burial was ubiquitous in the West African sub-region. Organized cemeteries, for example, with interments in large burial urns were recovered at Jenno-jeno (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1977; 1981). The burial at Birifoh-Sila Yiri, covered with potsherds, revealed the belief of the people of that time in life after death (*dapare*), a fundamental religious concept among the Lobi and Dagaaba in the region.

CERAMIC DECORATIONS

Potters in the two towns see decoration as a trademark and for easy differentiation of their wares from others. Decoration is therefore a unique feature to every potter from the ethnographic

context. From the oral tradition, ethnographic and archaeological data gathered from the two towns there were indications that the applications of roulette motifs on ceramics have a long history. Roulette motifs also serve other functions. According to the potters, roulette designs on pots make the back of the pots rough for easy handling and help prevent them from slipping out of one's hands or off of the head. Pots are used to carry water from streams and rivers and the roulette designs were made to make handling easy. Roulette decorations on local ceramics are widespread in West Africa. Trading contacts among ethnic groups across the sub-region of West Africa may be one of the possible ways through which rouletting became a common style of decoration in the region. Secondly, ethnic groups might have been sharing this style among members of the same ethnic group who live in other countries. These decorations are restricted to the exterior of the pots. Decorations on ceramics are consistent across the region in terms of their application and orientation. But today, roulette motifs have been reduced drastically in favor of smudged ceramics with little or no decoration (see Fig. 2). Available data according to Gosselain (2000: 196-197) indicate that about one-half of contemporary sub-Saharan populations use roulettes as primary or secondary decoration tools.

COMPETITION FROM THE PLASTIC INDUSTRY

The local beverage or *pito* brewers and sellers in Babile and Birifoh see plastic rubber gallon containers as something that has come to save their business. According to them, in the past when conveying *pito* to the market in pots, when there was an accident, one would usually lose all the pots because of their fragile nature. The rubber gallons saved them from these heavy losses (see Fig. 9). Consumers, especially those of the younger generation, did not see anything wrong in drinking the local beverage in these rubber containers. The only merit of storing or serving *pito* in pots is the ability of the pot to cool down the local beverage during the warm season, while the rubber containers rather make the drink warm. Older folks believed that the rubber gallons alter the taste of the beverage. *Pito* brewers and sellers today make sure that they meet the demand of all their customers, both the older and the younger generation, with both plastic and ceramic *pito* pots.

CONCLUSION

The market for pottery products remains very resilient due to their cultural roles in the pre-mortuary and post-mortuary practices of the Lobi and Dagaaba. Pots are also used by traditional herbalists for boiling herbs and for their architectural constructions. Potters in the towns of Babile and Birifoh did not see the introduction of plastic products as a hindrance to indigenous vocation because of the large demand for pottery products in the region and in Burkina Faso for domestic, industrial and ritual purposes. Decorations for many potters in these towns are mere identification of one's wares from others. Babile market is an international market center that brings potters and buyers together. The pottery industry has a bright future as far as demand is concerned, however, supply will be the problem as the young women are not prepared to take up pottery as a vocation. Potters in these towns need to encourage their daughters to take up this job after them. Most of the potters in the two towns are elderly and the lack of younger potters entering the production process poses a great danger to the survival of this indigenous industry in the region.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Map of the study area.

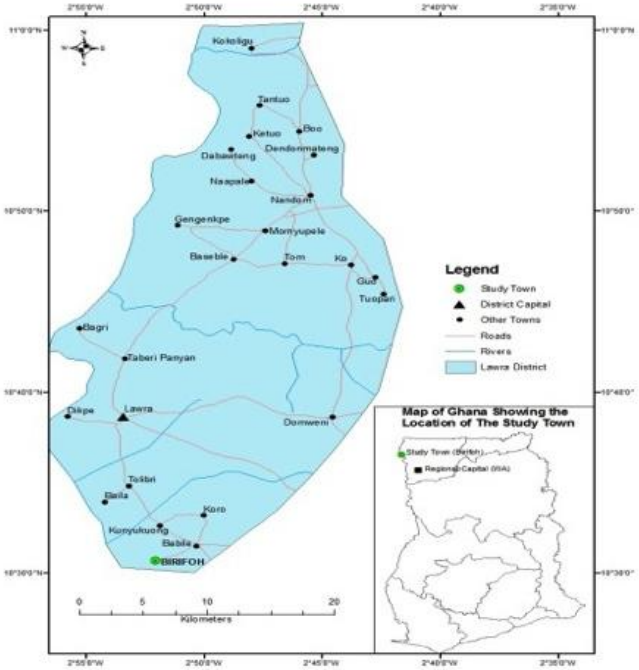

Fig. 2a. Babile Pottery Market.

Fig. 2b. Babile Pottery Market.

Fig. 3a. Catafalque of a female.

Fig. 3b. Catafalque of a female (detail).

Fig. 4. Pot used as a grave marker.

Fig. 5. Pot used in a shrine.

Fig. 6. Pot used in a shrine.

Fig. 7. Burial covered with potsherds.

Fig. 8. Potsherds used on a roof.

Fig. 9. Pito served in rubber gallons.