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POTTERY IN UPPER REGION

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Pottery is one of the most conservative of crafts. Since the first discovery of pottery over eight thousand years ago in the Near East, the techniques flourished virtually unchanged except in detail until the invention first of the potter's wheel in the same area over five thousand years ago, and then of mass-production, in England in the eighteenth century. There were however large areas of the world which were unaffected by these inventions, and over most of Africa pottery continues to be hand-made in small quantities.

Pottery is still made by the traditional methods in every region in Ghana, but in the face of competition from both imported and locally-made iron and steel, aluminium and enamel, mass-produced china and wheel-turned earthenware and stoneware, it is generally in decline. There are exceptions: among some people, such as the Shai of the Accra plains, it is practically obligatory for every girl to learn the art of pottery-making in order to be accepted as a full member of the community—'God has given us pottery-making as our work' they say. In other places, special types of pots which have no modern substitutes—vegetable grinders or palm-wine pots, for example—continue to be made to supply a steady demand. Among the most culturally sophisticated people there is a swing away from the idea that European-type goods are the most prestigious, and a demand for a return to the wares of one's forefathers; while among the least sophisticated rural dwellers in the older age groups there is a demand that has never ceased for pottery cooking-pots, serving dishes, food-bowls, water-jars and so on.

In general, the further north one travels the more traditional pottery one finds being made for everyday use. In Upper Region, whose headquarters, Bolgatanga, is about 350 miles almost due north of Accra, the capital, on the coast, no village is without a potter, while in many villages no compound is without a potter. Hand-made pottery is used for every conceivable purpose: there are enormous jars for brewing and storing corn-beer and storing water (Fig. 1); smaller jars for fetching water and keeping corn-beer; measures in which corn-beer is sold; water-coolers (Fig. 2); cooking-pots of different sizes; mixing-bowls, food-bowls and soup-bowls (Fig. 3); colanders (Fig. 4); wash-hand bowls; small jars for storing shea-butter, large bowls for boiling the oil to make shea-butter, and large pots for pounding the nuts to extract

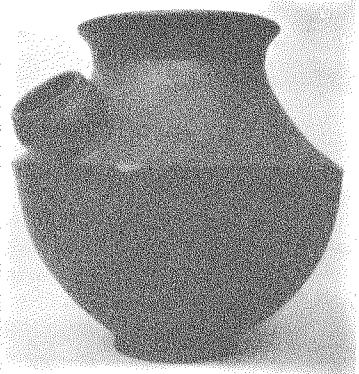


Figure One; Pito-selling jar from Fumbisi; Builsa. Ht. 44cm.

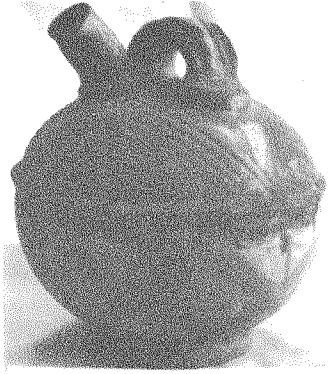


Figure Two; Water cooler from Kameiga; W. Kusasi. Ht. 25cm.

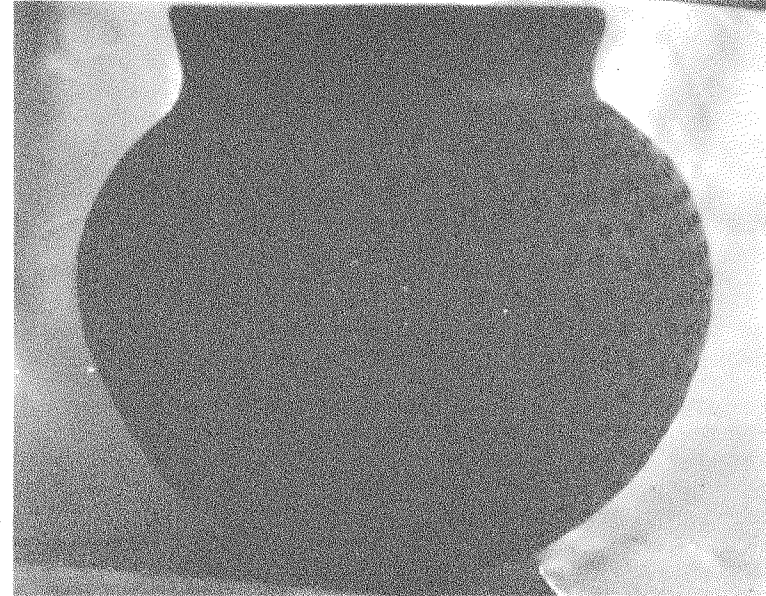
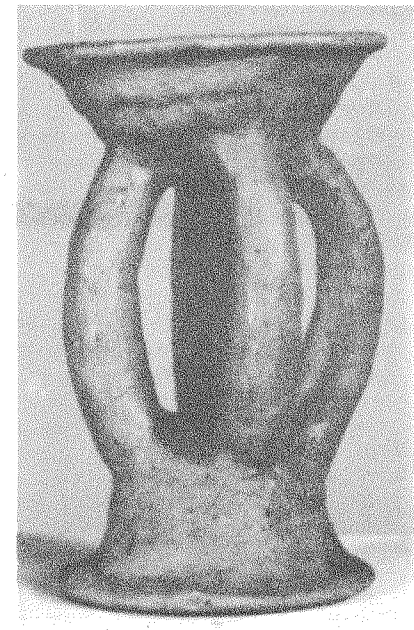


Figure Four; Colander from Charia, near Wa; Lo-Dagaa. Ht. 25cm.



Figure Three; Mixing bowl from Ampur, near Lawra; Lo-Dagaa. Ht. 19.5cm.

Figure Five; Shea butter lamp from Binduri; Kusasi. Ht. 16cm.



the oil; ingenious pots for holding water for ducks and chickens (in this arid country they cannot be allowed to swim in or foul the water, while this shape of pot lessens the loss by evaporation); animal troughs; lamps (though these are now uncommon, the kerosene tin variety being preferred) (Fig. 5); small globular pots which are smeared with a mixture of dung and herbs to attract ants to feed chickens; vegetable grinding bowls, their interior roughened with deeply scored linear patterns; circular patty-pans for frying corn-cakes; ritual pots with lids, covered in knobs (Fig. 6); globular pots with lids and ventilation holes for storing salt and meat; tiny toy pots for children — the list is endless, and of course any pot may be used as need dictates — in the groundnut harvest season, for example, all spare vessels are full of groundnuts, regardless of shape or usual purpose.

The country is orchard bush or parkland savannah, between 10° and 11° N, at an elevation of 200-500m. The climate is typical of this belt - the first rains bring the sowing in April-May, and fairly intensive agriculture continues until the end of the rains and the final harvest in August-September. The dry season is the time of festivals, and brings leisure and suitable weather for craftwork; by December the harmattan, the dry dusty wind from the Sahara, is blowing; after the end of this, February-March, the heat and humidity increase until the rains break in violent thunderstorms.

The peoples of this region are diverse in origin and language, but have a great deal in common; a subsistence economy based on mixed farming (grains and yams, green vegetables, onions, tomatoes, groundnuts; fowls, sheep and goats, cows) supplemented by hunting, fishing and gathering; knowledge of pottery, brass-working, iron-working. Languages of either the Mossi or Grusi division of the Gur family are spoken, but are not usually mutually intelligible. Social organisation is traditionally acephalous, but under the influence first of the powerful northern empires of Mossi, Dagomba, Mamprussi and Gonja, then of the Ashanti Empire, and finally of British colonial rule, the system of chieftancy has been adopted. Outside the towns, the settlements still however take the form of scattered homesteads, perhaps 60-200 yards apart, the pattern of settlement expressing the relationships of the inhabitants. Descent is patrilineal, marriage virilocal and in general endogamous within the ethnic group. While outside relationships are changing rapidly, thanks to the provision of roads, hospitals, schools, a police force, and so on, domestic life and daily routine inside the compound have changed little for centuries. To this economy, money, although desirable (and many young men work semi-permanently or seasonally in the south) is peripheral; it provides the luxuries of life, not the essentials.

Each people has its own individual and distinctive style of pottery: the shapes may be partly the result of the different techniques employed, but the designs and colouring are the expression of individual artists; although the mediums in which they work may be laid down by tradition, there is still plenty of scope for individual genius.

The methods by which the pots are made are extremely simple, yet call for some very hard work. The clay must be dug — and clay deposits may be several miles away from the potter's home — with a hoe, or, where it is very hard and dry, with a wedge and hammerstone; then it must be head-loaded home in baskets or basins holding up to 40lbs. of clay. It is left to weather for a few days, then treated according to its properties: in many cases it simply needs to be soaked and pounded and have the impurities removed by hand, while a stickier clay will be half soaked, half ground, and the two mixed together. The very sticky plastic clay of the area around Bolgatanga also needs tempering or grog in the form of finely-ground old potsherds. Before starting work the clay is well-kneaded with water to a consistency which neither sticks to the hand too much nor fails to hold together. There are three distinct techniques of making pots in use in the region: in the west, the coiling technique (usually combined with hand-shaping of a primary mass, which for small bowls may be the only procedure employed); in the east, moulding the base over the bottom of an old pot and finishing the pot by coiling; and in the far east and over the border in Upper Volta to the north the men employ the moulding or forming technique to make fine water jars.

In the first method, a lump of clay is placed on a potsherd or pot-neck 'tournette' or on a patch of grog or sand on the floor: the potter opens it up by inserting two fingers into the centre and enlarging the hole thus made, at the same time pulling up the walls. When the walls are the right thickness, cylinders of clay are rolled and placed on top of the walls. Where the pot is being made on a tournette, the basal lump may have the hole extended right through the bottom of it, or be very thin, or be replaced altogether by a piece or pieces of clay forming a ring. Where it is being made on the ground, the bottom is left very thick. When the pot has reached the required height, the top is roughly trimmed to form the rim, the outside is pulled up and smoothed with a piece of calabash, the walls are pushed out to the required shape from the inside with the piece of calabash, which also smooths the inside, and the rim is shaped and finally smoothed with a piece of leather or leaves. When it has stiffened, it is turned over and the bottom dealt with. If there is a hole, it is filled in; if there are the remains of the basal lump, they are removed with a sharp knife; the bottom is smoothed with the cala-

bash and beaten with a block of wood, a lump of clay or a thick sherd.

In the second method, a sphere of clay is rolled, beaten to a disc on the ground, laid over the bottom of an upturned pot, and beaten to shape over it. When it has stiffened, it is removed and set to dry right way up. Then the edge is cut straight, cylinders of clay are added to the walls and the pot is built up as in method 1.

The third method is characterised by the use of little or no water: it is used exclusively by men to produce very fine, light water-pots. The potter uses his hand or foot to beat out a ball of clay into a disc in a concave mould; he then pushes the disc to the back of the mould and beats on a small piece of clay to the front of it with his knuckles: then he rotates the disc and adds another piece of clay, and so on, all the time lubricating the mould with clay dust, until the pot assumes an almost spherical shape, when a cylinder of clay is laid around the small remaining hole to form the rim, and smoothed into place.

As soon as the form is complete, the decorations are added. Many tools, mostly very simple are used to make impressions in the clay: the pointed end of a stick or stalk, the edge of a pebble or calabash sherd, are the most common, but anything that comes to hand may be used: the edge of a beer-bottle top or the broken handle of a metal spoon for example (Fig. 7). A common specialised tool is the twisted cord roulette: this is simply a length of fibre twisted so that it coils itself into a double helix. One used solely by the LoDagaa peoples of the west is a steel bracelet (which incidentally is never worn as a bracelet) of triangular section, toothed (like a cog-wheel) around its outer face, which is rolled backwards and forwards to make rows of impressions (Fig. 8): also used by these peoples is a corncob, rolled round the bottom of a pot to make impressions, on the theory that this makes the pot less liable to crack when put on the fire.

After this the pot is set aside to dry until it is 'leather-hard'. Now, if it is to have any slip, this is applied. Most peoples use a red slip for at least some pots: this may be obtained from lateritic gravel, red clay, termite nests, or red ochre. The Kassena use a black clay slip for some pots, and the Kusasi a slip of black graphite for picking out grooved designs on red-slipped pots. The Yanga men use a white clay slip for filling in panels of designs or painting freehand designs. Whether slipped or not, the pots must then when 'black-hard' be burnished all over with a river-pebble or string of baobab seeds: this gives a smooth, almost impermeable and quite glossy surface and, more important, gives the pot strength to resist breaking both in the firing and in everyday use.

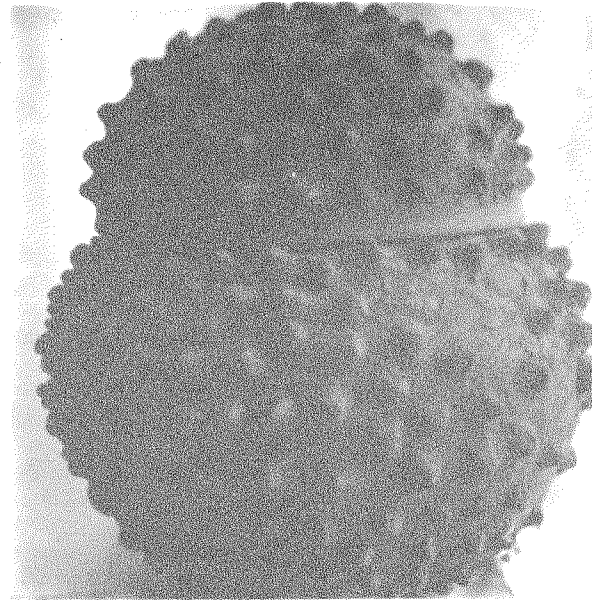


Figure Six: Ritual bowl from Bongo; Nankansi.
Total ht. 28cm.



Figure Seven: Decorating with a broken spoon at Widana; Yanga.

To ensure that the pot is completely dry it may either stay drying for several days in a shady, airy place, or, after a shorter period of drying; it may receive a preliminary warming: this is usually just a few hours in the full heat of the sun (between 35° C and 45° C) but among the Dagaaba around Wa consists of heating the pot over a small fire (something over 100° C). This drives off all residual water which, by sudden expansion during firing, would cause the pot to break.

Firing itself is a very short process, although the potter may have spent several days gathering the necessary firewood and grass. There are again three basic types of fire: the open bonfire, shading into the shallow-pit bonfire, which latter occasionally develops a low earth-wall; the bonfire enclosed in a wall of old pots; and simple cylindrical kilns. The geographical distribution of these types again runs from west to east, although there is no correlation with the pot-making techniques. Firing takes place usually early in the morning or towards sunset, when the sun is not too hot: in the first two methods, a bed of small firewood is laid, on which the pots are arranged, and covered with more firewood, to form a solid enclosed pile: grass as an igniting fuel may also be used. The fire burns for at the most an hour, and often as little as half-an-hour: temperatures do not exceed 600°-650° C. the range in which maximum permanent expansion of the clay body takes place, and below the range in which the silica in the body would liquefy, which would create on cooling an undesirable rigidity in the pot. As the body has expanded, the texture of the pot is very open and porous. This is desirable in some types of pot, such as water-coolers, but for cooking-pots, although the open texture and non-rigid body give them good resistance to cracking under the strain of the sudden thermal shocks involved in cooking over an open fire, some way must be found of closing the pores so that they do not leak their contents into the fire. This is done as soon as the fire dies down (when all the fuel has been consumed) by hooking out the hot pots with a long stick and either dipping them in a pot full of dye (or applying the dye with a leafy switch) or putting them into a pile of chaff, which bursts into flame and is doused with water, creating thick smoke and releasing a great deal of carbon which penetrates the whole body; after this they are usually dyed. This treatment produces a permanently glossy black surface. The dye, which is usually a decoction or infusion of the husks of the fruit of *Parkia* spp. (Dawadawa or locust bean), is also sometimes used decoratively for picking out impressed designs or for painting patterns.

In the third method, the pots are stacked in the kiln, and covered over with old potsherds. The fire is lit by pushing in burning fuel through stoke-holes around the base of the kiln,

and thereafter kept fuelled by pushing in more as required. This goes on for about an hour, after which the pots should be fired: any that are not are left for the next firing. Temperatures in these kilns are probably slightly higher than in the open bonfires, about 800° C. resulting in a more compact body, which is not smoked, but dyed, when cool, over the red slip.

When the pots are finished, they are disposed of in several different ways. Quite often they have been made on commission, and will be collected direct from the firing-ground by their prospective owners; also other women who need pots but who have not placed orders will come to buy from the house. In most small village markets may be seen two or three potters with perhaps half-a-dozen pots each; i.e. all that they have not sold before market day. In the heavily-populated areas around large towns, the production of pottery has been encouraged by the demand from urban housewives: the potters live in the villages around the towns and bring their wares to market, and people from long distances will come to buy in the market. To Nandom, for example, come people from as far afield as Upper Volta; to Tumu come people from a 20 mile radius; the other centres, Wa, Lawra, Navrongo, Bolgatanga, Bawku, have similar catchment areas. (This is referring only to customers for pottery in these markets; one can also see traders who sell exotic or luxury items such as beads, gun-flints, stone bracelets, 'medicine'; they come from Southern Ghana, Nigeria and the Francophone countries to the North). Sometimes one or two villages, where there is a ready supply of good clay and tradition of pottery-making, will become virtual factories: this has happened at Wa, where Kaleo and Charia are the source villages, their production geared to the 6 day market cycle: and at Nandom, where Puffien and Gwozir are the source villages. In this latter town an interesting system has developed: the potters bring their products, often the very large water or beer storage and brewing jars, into town a few at a time, and leave them with relatives who are brewers in town; they will sell some through the week and then the potters will come on a market day and take the rest to market. Around Navrongo the local potters are unequal to the local demands: all their pots are sold from the house and the pots that come to market are from the Nankansi area of Sirigu, over 10 miles away. East of Bawku, there is an interesting situation where Yanga men potters make fine water jars, while Kusasi women make other types of pot (cooking-pots, food-bowls etc.) and both go to market at Widana. In this north-eastern area, a fascinating trade system has developed, based on the demand from the Northern Region immediately to the south; it is probably on its present scale a fairly recent development with the advent of peaceful conditions and the motor-lorry. It is carried out by retailers, who buy in bulk from markets such as Bawku, and sell along the

markets of the Gambaga scarp to the Mamprussi, who do not themselves make pots at all; and by retailers, sometimes in this case potters or their relatives, who buy in bulk from Bolgatanga, hire a lorry, and come down to Tamale, picking up the famous Builsa water storage jars from Walewale market on route (these have already travelled some 40 or 50 miles from their village of origin) to sell to both local customers and some not so local; an extreme case is a Builsa brewing pot seen in the house of a brewer in Yendi, 60 miles east of Tamale.

In view of the obvious demand which the potters are supplying, there would seem to be an assured future for the craft in Upper Region. However, the older potters are often heard complaining that the young girls do not like to follow the craft. Why is this? Potting is hard work. It is not work that brings you into contact with plenty of other people, as brewing does. It does not bring much profit, for the prices of pots are regulated by the amount of money in circulation among the women: generally a food-bowl is about 2½ p., a cooking-pot 10-20 p depending on size, while even an enormous water-storage pot will not be more than about ₵1.00. Although expenses are practically non-existent, potters have their household and farms to see to and cannot therefore spend all their time on potting, so it is doubtful whether many make more than ₵2.00 or ₵3.00 a week from their work. What do they spend it on? A lot goes on household necessities; soup ingredients, salt, and so on, that they cannot produce for themselves; if they can save enough they may buy a piece of cloth; and then there are the children to see to.

Pottery-making in this area is a very matter-of-fact occupation. There are no rituals attached to it, no taboos or observances connected with it as there are in some parts of the south. In isolated cases the fire had to be lit by a 'lucky' girl, or not watched until it had taken proper hold, but these were personal observances based on past misfortunes and not a cultural trait. Designs are indeed subject to being a recognisable part of their cultural matrix. Potters who know types and designs of pots made by other peoples say that 'they do that and we do this': however within the framework there is room for individual experimentation. Experimentation is however subject to economic, if not social, sanctions: pots deviating too far from the norm would not be bought, or so the potters say. One example is interesting: a Kusasi potter in Nakum, east of Bawku was making water-coolers, which while they had the typical red slip and black graphite decoration, had, instead of the normal ovoid bodies with constricted necks and everted rims, more spherical bodies with bulbous necks. She said that it had just come into her head one day to make this shape, in imitation of a gourd (Fig. 9), and that they were selling well, so she had stopped making the nor-



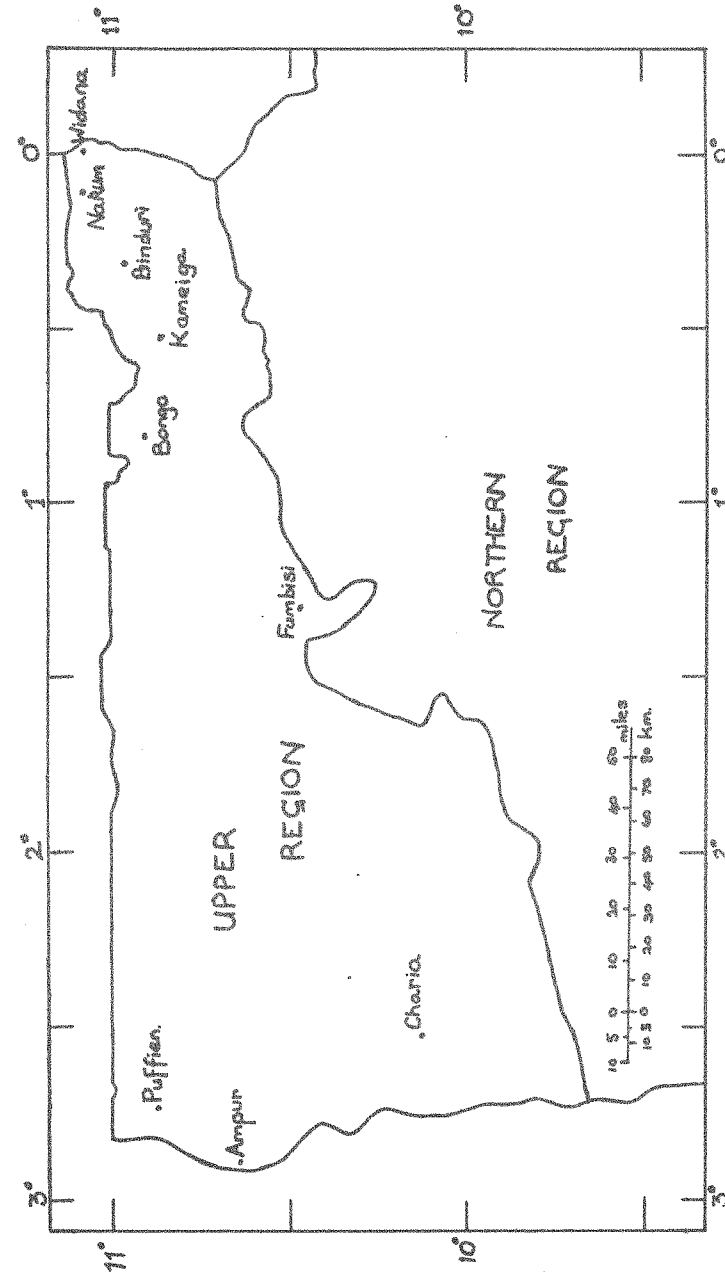
Figure Eight: Decorating with a steel bracelet roulette at Puffien, near Nandom; Lo-Dagaa.



Figure Nine: Gourd-shaped pots for sale at Nakum; E. Kusasi.

mal shape. The designs have no meanings, neither does each potter have her own exclusive designs: although everyone agreed that a potter can recognise her own pots, it is not clear how long this recognition would last; I have seen in Kaleo four potters separating out their own pots from one fire, but whether a potter would recognise her own pots, encountered unawares in another house some years later, is doubtful.

However, one does not need to be a potter to recognise the typical products of each area, a selection of which, from the collections of the Ghana National Museum, Accra, are shown here. The Museum is undertaking a complete survey of traditional pottery-making in Ghana, in the course of which the information in this article was collected: it is also hoped to encourage interest in the craft by having potters to work in the newly constructed craftwork area in the grounds of the museum and sell their products in the attached shop.



Map of Upper Region showing villages mentioned in the text.