The fading tools and occupational community: Potters of Somaliland

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Abstract

This article looks into the status of the art of pottery making as a social and professional identity taking the case of Somaliland potters. It explores the historical background of the practice in the Horn of Africa but specifically focuses on the Somali community. It has both social identity and economic roles integrated lenses for its exploration. The research has implemented qualitative research through the case study method. The case in focus are potters of Somaliland who were contacted using snowball methods as there is no publicly available wider community to engage with. Oral history methods with guiding questions were used for the data collection. The research finds that there are social labelling, discrimination, and associated naming to the practice and the auctioneers. It also has been evidenced that the practice is highly endangered and is at risk of total loss as only very few families are practicing it. Drawing on experiences in other communities in the horn of Africa, revitalizing and commercializing the production will have multi-fold advantages by creating income generation for potters, tapping into a rebranding pot, and preservation of cultural practices.

Keywords: Pottery, Tradition, discrimination, and revitalization

Introduction

Pottery represents one of humanity's earliest production endeavors, dating back to the early stages of civilization. Clay artifacts have played a crucial role in shedding light on ancient communities, as evident in archaeological discoveries. They often constitute a significant portion of findings at excavation

sites, offering insights into trade relationships between communities and contributing to our understanding of cultural identities that emerged from early production practices.

Early researchers initially linked ethnic groups' identities to their unique pottery cultures. However, later studies expanded their focus to encompass broader cultural contexts (Dietler & Herbrich: 1993). While archaeology has not traditionally been a prominent research area, and public awareness about heritage management remains limited, a handful of archaeological investigations have confirmed the presence of clay products in Somaliland through excavations (Chittick, 1976; Mire, 2005; González-Ruibal et al., 2022).

Notably, observations made by the Hargeysa Cultural Centre indicate a decline in the availability of clay materials in local markets, with imported alternatives gaining preference. Furthermore, traditional community-level pottery production has waned significantly. Primary survey findings conducted by the Centre reveal that very few community members continue to engage in pottery, primarily for personal use. This situation prompted the need for comprehensive research into the historical background, current status, and potential strategies for revitalizing pottery production in the region.

The frequently produced items in Somaliland included but were not limited to *Jalxad* or *Mardabaan* which is like a water jar, dabqaad or idin which is the furnace (used to burn incense for frankincense used by the women), *Dheri* (cooking pot), and *Girgire Xamari* (produced in Somalia and imported to Somaliland which is traditional cooker used with charcoal). More recently flowerpots and other household use materials have been introduced. Accordingly, this research is based on this primary

survey and further research made regarding this aspect.

Historical background of Pottery Making

Pottery encompasses the crafting of utilitarian and decorative items fashioned from clay, for daily use and trade, ranging from dishes, plates, cups, to cooking pots, and storage jars. Historical literature reveals that in ancient times, people utalized clay for crafting dishes and pots, primarily due to its abundant availability and the ease with which it could be fashioned into functional items. (Childs 1994; Stemel et.al. 1982).

As typical with many historical productions, the "where" and "how" of pottery-making cannot be reduced to a singular narrative with a definitive answer. Rather, pottery is considered a natural response to the shift from a "hunter-gatherer" lifestyle to one that involved agriculture and cooking, requiring the production of functional vessels. This shift aligns with the Neolithic revolution, a period of profound societal change when communities' were transtioned from nomadic hunting and gathering to settled farming (Sennebogen, 2020; Barnet, 1999). The timeline for this transition is estimated as early as 14,000 BC, in various early societies worldwide, such as the Middle East, Africa, China, and Japan. Consequently, pottery has emerged simultaneously and independently in communities across the globe.

Further development

The invention of the wheel marked a major milestone in the expansion of pottery production worldwide. This advancement commenced with the adoption of the "slow wheel," which is believed to have originated around 3000 BC, coinciding with the onset of the Bronze Age. In West Asia, people began using the slow potter's wheel, a simple wooden platform for shaping pottery. This innovation allowed potters to rotate the platform,

eliminating the need to constantly move around the pot. Even today, communities without access to faster wheel technology continue to rely on the dependable slow wheel for their pottery needs.

The Zapotec continued to rely on the slow wheel until around 2000 BC when most potters in Europe, Asia, and North Africa had transitioned to using the fast wheel. The fast wheel, unlike the slow wheel, spins on an axle like a top. Potters can set it in motion with a push or a kick and then gradually shape the pot from a lump of clay. This method is significantly faster than coiling or using the slow wheel, leading to more affordable pottery production. While some remote areas still employ this traditional technique, the global pottery industry has largely shifted to advanced machine-based production methods (Meyer, 2022).

Local History

Research into the early civilizations of the Horn of Africa has also explored the production and utilization of clay and ceramic materials. Much of this research has been focused on the social aspects of pottery-making, revealing a history of discrimination against many communities (Arthur, 2006, 2014; Bazar Author & L Mallowan, 1947; Lyons et al., 2018). The practice was often passed down within families, emphasizing kinship-based knowledge transfer.

As mentioned earlier, archaeological investigations have placed a significant emphasis on pottery. They have not only used pottery as a central tool but have also highlighted its role in trade relations between early East African communities and distant regions (Mire, 2005; Fernández, Ruibal, and Torres, 2022). The Red Sea coast and the Indian Ocean served as major trade routes that facilitated the exchange of various gift items, some of which have been discovered in the graves of notable individuals in the region (David and Kramer, 2001; Bahn et al.,

1996; Fernández, Ruibal, and Torres, 2022).

Pottery production is a widespread practice among various communities in Ethiopia, with documented instances in different regions of the country. Examples include the Gamo people in the southwestern region, the Falasha communities in Amhara, the Oromo in Wollega's Dongoro district, and the Tigray National Regional State (Bula, 2011; Arthur, 2002, 2003; Gedef, 2011; Tilahun, 2016). This practice also has historical connections to Sudan, as Kabangi (2013) suggests. According to this theory, a migration of "Pre-Nilotic" Eastern Sudanic-speaking populations from Sudan into the Ethiopian highlands during the Mid-Holocene climatic desiccation brought with them domesticated plants, animals, and agricultural knowledge. Subsequently, these populations adopted pottery for transporting and storing food.

Regarding the technology of pottery production in Ethiopia, Pankhurst (1992) noted that it was primarily handmade. Additionally, Barnet (1999) highlighted the morphological distinctiveness of Ethiopian ceramic materials when compared to early ceramics from neighboring regions. Numerous archaeological expeditions have uncovered evidence of ancient pottery production in various parts of Ethiopia. For instance, in the southern regions of Ethiopia, pottery remnants were discovered in locations like Yabello, Moche-Borago, and Melka Kunture (Arthur, 2000). Similarly, remnants of pottery in eastern Ethiopia were found at sites such as Lake Basaka (Barnet, 1999), Porc-Epic, Laga Oda, and the Macho and Waso sites around Lake Ziway. These findings provide evidence of both Terminal Pleistocene and Holocene occupations in the region (Barnet, 1999).

The practice of pottery in Ethiopia has faced challenges due to the influx of clay and ceramic products, mainly from China, which have come to dominate the market. However, pottery production still continues in rural areas of the country, often using the fast wheel. Additionally, there is a vibrant pottery

production scene in the capital city, Addis Ababa, particularly in the locality known as Kechene, where potters live and work together. Their products can be found in traditional artifact shops, even though the potters continue to face social discrimination. The enduring demand for clay pots in Ethiopia's nationally celebrated coffee culture has contributed to the continued production of these traditional items.

Potters of the Somali community

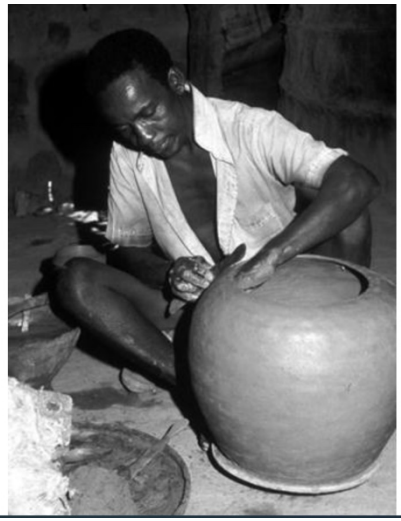
The history and practice of pottery-making within Somali communities are not extensively documented in the literature, creating a significant gap in our understanding. However, it is evident that pottery-making has been and continues to be an integral part of the material culture of these communities, as families still possess clay items that serve as tangible evidence of this practice. Archaeological findings offer valuable insights into the timeline of pottery use in Somali society, and researchers in the area, such as Sada Mire (2008, 2015, 2019), have contributed to this understanding.

Archaeological excavations have yielded clay artifacts that play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the community's profile. These archaeological discoveries are often associated with the "Mysterious Ruined Cities of Somaliland," which have been described as an unsolved riddle of Africa. Many of these ancient cities are located in the western region of British Somaliland, particularly in the Borama administrative district, and some extend into the adjacent areas of Ethiopia, situated roughly halfway between the ancient port of Zeila and the walled town of Harar.

Notable researchers such as A. T. Curle (1934) and González-Ruibal et al. (2022), in their fieldwork at Xiis, Somaliland, have provided extensive descriptions of the trade routes linked to these clay pots and other items collected from the site, shedding light on the significance of imported clay

items. Based on available knowledge, clay items produced in Somaliland traditionally included Jalxad or Mardabaan (water jars), Dabqaad or Idin (used for burning incense, especially for women), and Dheri (cooking pots). More recently, additional clay items, such as flower pots and household materials, have been introduced. For instance, Girgire Xamari, a traditional cooker used with charcoal, is produced in Somalia and imported. References to clay materials are also made in relation to items discovered through excavation, serving as evidence of trade routes and the exchange of gifts between communities along these trade routes.

The sole documented account of pottery-making within the Somali community pertains to the Buur Heybe Potters, which was studied and documented by Tara Belkin in collaboration with Steven Brandt in 2006. This study resulted in both a documentary and a brief anthropological publication.



3 Photo credit: Belkin and Bandit (2008).

Buur Heybe, which translates to "The Hill of the Potter's Sand," is an archaeological complex dating from the late Pleistocene to the Holocene. It is situated in the largest granite inselberg within the inter-riverine region of the southern Bay province of Somalia, approximately 180 kilometers northwest of the capital, Mogadishu. Although the majority of the community in this area were farmers, there was also a significant presence

of potters.

According to Belkin and Brandt (2008), the Buur Heybe community comprised around 400 individuals. They had an exchange strategy with pastoralists who visited the area seasonally. In this exchange, farmers provided grains, while pastoralists offered milk and hide. The differences in their house structures reflected their distinct ways of life. The farmers' houses were constructed using permanent materials and were cemented with clay, while pastoralists used animal skins to cover their homes, allowing for easier mobility.

Within the Buur Heybe community of approximately 400 individuals, there were 20 potters. The pottery-makers were exclusively men. While women gathered clay and prepared the necessary materials for production. The clay material used for the pottery was sourced from a mountain known as Buur Heybe, which was accessible to all in the area. While they didn't have a formal community bond, they collaborated and worked together in this endeavor (Belkin and Brandt, 2008).

The primary items produced included cooking pots, water vases with flat and pointed bases, and a significant number of incense burners. Initially, the pots were exclusively used within the mountain community, leading to a daily production of only three items. However, over time, they established a trading system with neighboring communities, enabling them to increase their daily production to around 30 items (Belkin and Brandt, 2008).

The production process varies depending on the type of vessel being made. For round-bottomed cooking pots, they start by making the rim and build it upside down. For flat-bottomed pots, they start with a flat base. They use coils to construct the pots, and a small turntable helps shape them evenly (although they don't use a potter's wheel). The local clay they use is easy to work with, allowing for shaping and thinning as the pots dry.

They primarily use a wooden scraper, seashell, and wooden paddle as their main tools, without needing an anvil (Belkin and Brandt, 2008).

Decorations are applied to the pots, primarily consisting of incised designs, though these designs don't hold specific meanings and are mainly used to signify the pots are from Buur Heybe. Typical decorations involve longitudinal lines and sets of parallel obliques. The pots are fired using stacks of dead wood and grassy weeds. The process involves preheating large pots and creating a stack of 40-50 pots, deadwood is stacked on the outside with grassy weeds stuffed in the gaps. The firing usually takes about an hour, with the pots turning red to indicate the desired temperature, which can reach 500-600 degrees Celsius.

Production is mainly the responsibility of males, and once the pots are in use, males rarely handle them again. About 80% of the production is sold outside the community, including to semi-nomadic herders. Women in the village handle cooking and water collection. Clay pots remain in use due to their affordability compared to metal pots, and the common belief by users that food cooked in clay vessels tastes better (Belkin and Brandit, 2008).

The Art of Clay Making in Somaliland

As mentioned earlier, there are limited documents referencing pottery practices in Somaliland. However, most of the items obtained are associated with the region's historical trade relations, facilitated by its strategic coastal location. Some families have preserved these items as part of their household collections, indicating their past use. Currently, there are no publicly known production sites or widespread use of locally produced clay items. Instead, these items have taken on a role as symbols of cultural tribute and aesthetics.

A small number of families are still involved in pottery

production, typically on a pre-ordered basis, often for NGO-driven programs or individuals with specific connections to the producers. This signifies a decline in the traditional practice of clay item production. The primary aim of this research was to create a series of activities designed to improve the livelihoods of selected women from low-income backgrounds in Somaliland. The project seeks to sustain the pottery tradition and generate income through a pilot initiative. This effort also addresses the challenges faced by occupational groups, including potters, who are often marginalized within the Somali community.

The Gabooye—Madhibaan and Muse Dheriye—are the most prominent occupational minorities in Somaliland. They are also found in smaller numbers in regions like Ethiopia, Puntland, and southern Somalia. Historically, the Madhibaan and Muse Dheriye engaged in various occupations such as hunting, shoemaking, tanning, pottery, well digging, and water carrying for the communities they served. Muse Dheriye, in addition to these roles, had a tradition of basket making. Members of the Gabooye community face limited protection and recognition throughout Somalia (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022).

Dating as far back as the early 1900s, occupational minorities were marginalized and treated as social outcasts by other clans, despite the similarities in language, physical appearance, and customs. This segregation and discrimination were fueled, in part, by baseless myths associating these groups with the consumption of impure or unclean food, leading to unjust stigmatization. They were often wrongly perceived as having the "evil eye" and special, albeit unfounded, powers. Some individuals sought their blessings for events like the birth of a newborn. Moreover, many women in these communities were involved in reproductive health practices, serving as traditional birth attendants and, in some cases, as practitioners of female genital cutting (FGC).

In Ethiopia, there is a specific group known as the "Shekla

Seri," which directly translates to "Clay Makers." This term is sometimes used derogatorily. The Shekla Seri group faces marginalization similar to that experienced by minority groups in Somaliland. They are often associated with the "evil eye" superstition, which has contributed to their specific ownership of pottery production. This superstition has also limited the involvement of the presumed Noble class in pottery production. A common sentiment expressed within this occupational group is, "They like our products, but they detest us." Despite this, there exists a hierarchy within the group.

Members of this occupational group are currently engaged in pottery making in Somaliland, residing in two specific locations: Daami and Sh. Madar. Our findings indicate there is limited academic literature on the historical context, production typology, and techniques used in pottery making in Somaliland. The nearest places where Somali people reside and have published works available are Buur Haybe in the Bay province of Somalia, Jigjiga and Harar in Ethiopia, and the coastal areas of Djibouti (Mukhtar, 2003:60; Peter, 1990; Pamela, 2006; Belkin and Brandit, 2008).

During our research, we discovered two families engaged in pottery production with a pre-ordering system. Unlike the Buur Heybe practice, which predominantly involves male potters, these families inherited the skill through the female line of generations. This is noteworthy because the broader regional experience often sees female members engaging in pottery production. Therefore, gender plays a role in Somaliland pottery production. The research participants made it clear that they learned the practice from their grandmother and mother at a young age, using it as a means of income generation.

Through interviews with community members still involved in pottery production, the research has revealed that only three family members are currently engaged in pottery making, and they produce pots on a request basis. These family members

include:

1. Rukia Abdilahi, an elderly woman in her late 70s who is visually challenged and holds the longest experience with the practice. She learned pottery production from her elder sister, who, in turn, learned it from their grandmother.

2. Safia Hussein, also in her late 60s, who is involved in the practice.

3. Nasri Caydiid, the son of Rukia, who joined the production to assist his mother.

Interestingly, the history of Rukia's family indicates that they inherited the practice through the female line of their family, and they consider pottery making as an activity traditionally undertaken by women. The presence of Nasri as the only male involved in the practice is considered exceptional. The research attempted to explore these cultural differences further, but data limitations prevented a comprehensive investigation.

The interview with Rukia Abdillahi Hussein about pottery making provided several valuable insights, some of which were also shared by other interviewees. One key insight was that pottery making is not practiced in rural areas of Somaliland due to the unavailability of clay in those locations. While nomadic communities traditionally engage in herding and other responsibilities relating to their way of living.

Rukia also explained that pottery making was initially not market-oriented but emerged out of household needs. Later, it became a source of income for her family. She emphasized that the absence of advanced tools for pottery making, the lack of a permanent workspace and sponsorship, and the introduction of ceramics were the main reasons why pottery making has declined. Rukia expressed concerns about the future of this cultural practice, as families have not passed down the

knowledge as her family did.

She highlighted the importance of prioritizing the transmission of knowledge in efforts to revitalize pottery making, echoing Sada Mire's (2019) argument that considers factors such as the method of production, function, meaning, context, and significance are important to consider in order to preserve knowledge and not objects. In this case, both the cultural practice and objects are at risk, underscoring the need for a coordinated effort in heritage preservation and a methodological approach that respects the communities involved.

Safia Hussein, in her interview, shared insights into how the societal perception of pottery making has evolved over time, largely influenced by the introduction of imported ceramic products. As a result, people began to view traditional clay pots as less important and discouraged Safia and her daughter from selling them in the city. However, Safia emphasized that pottery making is an integral part of the Hiddihii iyo Dhaqankii (Cultural Identity) and described it as "the essence of our culture." Despite the challenges and social discrimination faced by their community, Safia expressed her determination to carry on the legacy.

Nasri Caydiid, the only male interviewee in this project, shared insights into his journey as a male practitioner of pottery-making. His decision to take up pottery-making was driven by his realization that his mother was growing older and he wanted to provide her with relief from the physically demanding business that had sustained their livelihood. Additionally, he expressed his awareness of the practice being at risk of fading away.

The informants mentioned that organizations like ADRA and HAVOYOCO offer training in pottery-making. As stated on their website, ADRA is a global humanitarian organization with a mission to assist people in poverty. While, HAVOYOCO is a youth

association that engages in various aspects of social, political, and economic empowerment of youth, including creating practical income-generating activities, one of which is pottery-making.

Aside from support provided by these organizations, the family receives orders but only from individuals who have a personal interest in clay items. Sustaining the practice is challenging because there is little community interest, and the materials required for production must be obtained from distant areas, such as Jigjiga in the Somali regional State of Ethiopia. Consequently, without broader demand, the cost of sourcing materials and producing items becomes unsustainable for the family.

Conclusions

Heritage, whether in the form of built structures, intangible traditions, or material culture, serves as an instruments of identity, a pathway to retrace one's self-awareness, and a means of livelihood. Without romanticizing it, the preservation and adoption of cultural tools that contribute to social development are pertinent.

This article delves into the case of the pottery community in Somaliland, revealing a disconcerting trend as this traditional craft is dwindling, along with the means of livelihood for the community. It is also disconcerting that similar items are imported at a higher cost, benefiting distant communities, rather than empowering the practitioners to enhance their skills while preserving tradition. Clay production has become a distant and almost unattainable concept for the younger generation in Somaliland. Hence, it is crucial to conduct a thorough assessment and create a plan of action to preserve this practice before it vanishes entirely.

Revitalization efforts in neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya,

that focus on inclusivity, respecting practitioners, and income generation programs, have been successful. This model should also be applied in Somaliland, utilizing the few remaining practitioners to preserve the culture and pass it on to the younger generation. This can contribute to community cohesion and help address the social discrimination faced by minority groups who groups who are for now the sole owners of the dying practice. Additionally, further research is necessary to bridge the substantial gap in understanding the origins and practice of pottery-making in Somaliland.

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