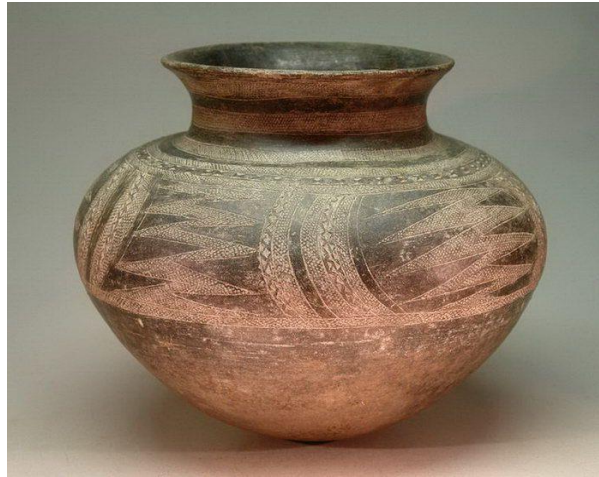


African Pottery



Makonde Grain Storage Pot

African pottery traces the very thread of existence of Africa's inhabitants.

Pots are like data, they provide insight into the cultural interchanges of African societies; the life they led, the paths they trod, the needs they had and the skills they possessed. (2)

In 2007, the Swiss-led team of archaeologists discovered pieces of the oldest African pottery in central Mali, dating back to at least 9,400BC. The discovery was made by Geneva University's Eric Huysecom and his international research team, at Ounjougou near the Unesco-listed Bandiagara cliffs.

The age of the sediment in which they were found suggests that the six ceramic fragments - discovered between 2002 and 2005 - are at least 11,400 years old. Most ancient ceramics from the Middle East and the central and eastern Sahara regions are 10,000 and between 9-10,000 years old. (6)

Women in ancient Africa were the primary people that made ancient African pottery. Ancient African pottery was constructed entirely by hand. It is unknown where and when the first pottery wheel was invented. Eventually, ancient African potters started to make pottery specific for ceremonies such as burials.

Some researchers believe the first potter's wheel was invented in ancient Egypt around 3,000 B.C.E. Pottery was shaped into objects and crude tools were used to etch the designs into the wet clay. The clay pottery would then be placed in an open fire or kiln to harden.

Once the pottery was hardened, people would decorate the pottery. Polishing was important for ancient African pottery. Ancient African pottery from the central areas of the continent has a unique, polished finish. (3)



Decorated global vessel, everted lip, Igbo

Other parts of ancient Africa used plant dyes like red ochre or charcoal to paint on pottery. The figures painted on ancient African pottery were abstract forms of human and animal forms. There are also examples of zig-zag lines and other geometric designs painted on ancient African pottery. Another way ancient African pottery was decorated was with gemstones, ivory and leather. (7)

Around 75 C.E. ancient African potters began to create traditional Roman pottery in style and colour. Factories produced thousands of pieces of ancient African pottery in Romanesque styles. The pottery was then exported to many areas in Europe and Asia.

Sometime around 100 C.E. ancient African potteries became more prominent in the Roman Empire than original Roman pottery.

Within the next 50 years, ancient African pottery forced the closure of numerous pottery facilities in the Roman Empire. (3. Ancient African Pottery)

In some cases, women would pour the clay into a mould made of pottery, wood, or a calabash. After the clay is dried, the pots are put in a pile and covered with wood, bark or dried cow dung and baked outdoors in an open fire. However, in countries such as Nigeria and Mali, real kilns are used to bake the pots. After baking, the pots are then ornamented.

Other parts of Africa use plant dyes for colouring. The dye is randomly splashed on the pots after the firing process. This practice is a common practice among the Congolese people in what is now Zaire. (1)

In other regions, human or animal figures are added to the pots to give them character or serve as handles or pouring beaks. The Mangbetu people of Zaire are known to be masters at mixing designs with round-shaped pottery to produce remarkable vases.

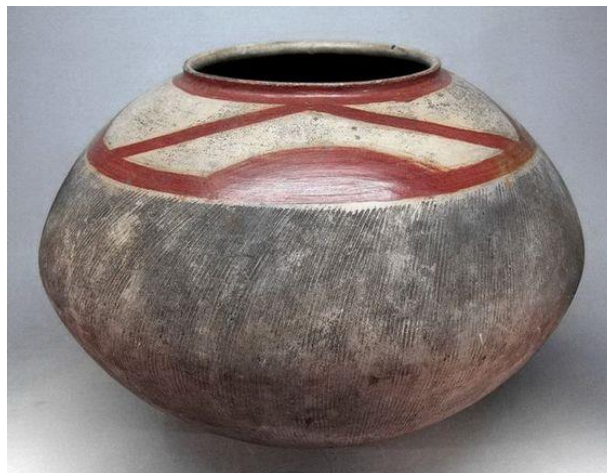
Other materials may be added to the pots for functionality or ornamental purposes. A good example of this is the basketwork covers fitted over the pots, making them more functional and elegant. (3)

The large "mafwe" pot from Namibia is decorated with floral scenes, similar to those attributed to Lozi, however, its pronounced neckline is adorned with a mix of trademark Mafwe chevrons and triangles. (1)

In sub-Saharan Africa, pottery is endowed with great symbolic importance. The craft is surrounded by rituals and symbols, and several steps in the production sequence serve as a metaphor for interpreting and acting upon certain facets of human experience. People make metaphoric use of pottery vocabulary to refer to transformations from wet to dry, soft to hard, raw to cooked, natural to cultural, impure to pure through the operation of heat, to mark isolation and destruction, to designate bodily cavities, or to discuss concepts like spirit, conception, and essence. (1)

In Africa, the making of clay pots and special objects always had some superstition or magical ritual attached to it. In some tribes, only the women are allowed to make pots, in others, the men and still in other tribes both genders. In some cultures, there had to be a cleansing ritual before any work on pottery can begin, and in others, a man wasn't allowed to be with a woman the night before, or a woman menstruating wasn't allowed near the pits.

To make a pot a few things are needed, clay, a temper, skill, and last but not least the fire. The Ovambo, Kavango and Caprivi tribes in Namibia, use the hardened clay from termite hills, as it contains the glue saliva from the termites. This termite clay help make the pots quite robust and lend support to the binding of the clay in forming the pot.



Tanzania/Zambia Nyakusa Grain/Water Pot.

This is how the potters collect and prepare the termite clay: The women will look for a termite mound (hill) that has been built on a fine sandy or clay area. They will break the hard clay out from one side of the mound and carry the chunks back to the village. Here it gets pounded in wood mortars and sifted till only a fine powder is left. The powder gets mixed with finely mortared goat dung (which act as a temper), and then water is added slowly. All the time, the clay is rolled and kneed with the hands, till the clay is formed

In the rain forest areas of West Africa, where streams and rivers run year-round, the clay is usually mined close to existing watercourses. Clay is dug from the banks of streams when the water is low. The clay is usually piled high on the banks, above the high-water mark, so that it can be later carried to the work area. Enough clay is dug while the pits are accessible to keep the potters supplied throughout the rainy season when the pits are full of water.

Farther south, in the dry savannah, clay is mined in deep pits, and even in shafts, which have no connection with any source of running water. This is clay that either has been created by in-place weathering and decomposition or, more frequently, has been transported and deposited by a stream or river which has long since dried up.

Fresh clay is dug from the pits with short, handled hoes or digging sticks and is carried in baskets to the potter's compound, where it is left in piles to dry. It is then broken up, usually by pounding in wooden mortars, and any stones or other foreign matter are picked out by hand. The clay is broken up into small chunks so that it will absorb water, or "slake" more rapidly and more evenly. The clay is then placed in large earthenware pots, mixed with water, and left for several days to soak.



Tutsi water pots, Rwanda

To prevent the pots from cracking, a temper is used, the temper creates space for the clay molecules to expand without cracking the pot. Tempers used in Africa vary widely but may be generally classed in two categories: organic and inorganic.

Organic tempers include finely chopped straw, dried animal dung pounded into a powder, or the chaff left when rice or millet is winnowed. Inorganic tempers include ground-up dried river mud or, most commonly, shards of old pottery which have been reduced to a fine powder by pounding it in a wooden mortar.

Tempers are kneaded into the fresh clay in amounts, which vary with the original quality of the material. Generally, the result is a clay body with from thirty to fifty per cent inert material. At the same time that the tempers are being added, the potter or his/her assistant adds quantities of dry, powdered clay, which absorb excess water from the slaked material, until the clay is the right consistency for use. Finally, the clay is shaped into thick sausages or balls, which the potter will use to form his/her pots.

There are a wide variety of ways to make the pots, two of these ways are the spiral way and the mould way. In a spiral way, clay pieces or sausages are used in a spiralling fashion to build the pot up from a base that rests in a mould to support the base. From time to time the potter needs to stop to give the clay time to stiffen or dry a bit, otherwise, it will fall under its weight. Water is used to smooth the sides of the pot.

In the mould way, a moulded pot is used over which clay is pounded until it assumes the form of the mould pot. The pot is then left to dry a bit to a more manageable dryness after which the pot is then slowly removed from the mould pot and place near fire or in a dry place to dry and stiffen.

Before firing, the pot is decorated by impressing or carving of the pot, sometimes, the design is religious or sometimes just decorative.

After decoration, the pots are left in the sun to dry. If it is in a place where it rains often, the pot is then placed in a dry hut or room or near a fire to dry completely over time. Sometimes if it is too wet, a method known as pre-firing is used, where individual pots are hidden for a short time over a fire to get the moisture out of the pot.

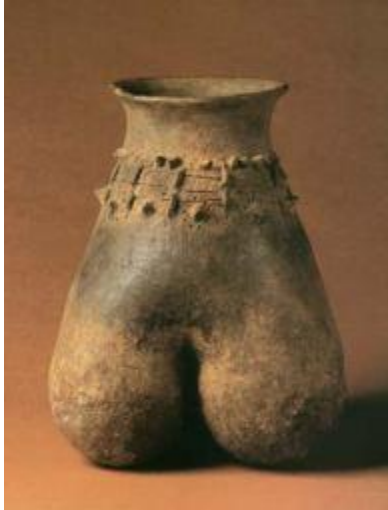
The firing process of the pot begins when a thick layer of burning material is laid on the ground on which the dried pot is laid out, after the first layer on the pot, a second layer of burning material is laid on top of the pot. If there are many pots the pots are laid out layer upon layer with burning material between them. The whole heap of pottery and burning material are then burned. After a few hours, all the burning material has burned away, and the pots are left to cool down. The broken and defective pots are separated from the good ones and later used as temper with the clay again. (*How did African People Make Clay Pots? Gateway Encyclopedia*)

Every tribe has their own way of making its pottery. In the African traditional society, every home had a special clay pot for cooling drinking water. This pot would chill the water and give it a nice aroma as well. It was a must for every house to have one, especially when offering visitors drinking water.

- Bamana potters are part of a complex social and artistic network among the Mande peoples of West Africa. Identified collectively as *nyamakalaw*, blacksmiths, potters, bards and leatherworkers form a separate social class from the mostly farmer majority. A woman does not simply choose to become a potter. She is born into a family of blacksmiths and potters, who protect the secrets of their trades by endogamous marriage practices. The Bamana term for potter, *numumuso*, is generally translated as "blacksmith woman", but means much more than the wife or mother of a blacksmith. (5)
- The Nyakyusa peoples of Tanzania and Zambia had large grain/water pots that were referred to as "ngonde" or "nyakusa". The Nyakusa live adjacent to the Makonde, in the fertile mountains of southern Tanzanian and northern Malawi.
- The Akans of Ghana, called their water pot "Kukuo". It was an earthen pot periodically heated with the husk of the palm nut which gives the water kept in it beautiful scent and great taste. The pot not only cooled the water in it but also made it healthy and delightful to drink.
- The Haitians called it the "pearl of the island" or "gove" and in South Haiti it was called "cruche."
- The Swahili speakers in East Africans called it "Mtungi wa maji" pronounced "Mthunghi" in authentic Kiswahili. Some may refer to it as "chungu cha maji."

- It was referred to as "mvuvhelo" amongst the Tshivenḁa peoples from South Africa.
- Imbiza / Igula lobumba was used to store water from rain or from a spring fountain.
- The Owan Edo language speakers referred to it as "ulee".
- The Wolof of Senegal referred to it as "ndaa"
- The Shona peoples of Zimbabwe referred to it as "chirongo".
- In Sudan it was referred to as "zeer" and is still popular today in many households.
- In Northern Sudan there's a similar clay pot that is also called zeer or "dody". It is still being used to date to hold water for communal use and can be sighted along the streets.
- In Uganda it was referred to as "enyungu y'amaizi" amongst the Runyankore of Southwestern Uganda. Elsewhere amongst the Luganda peoples of Uganda it was referred to as "ensuwa".
- The Acholi peoples of Uganda used a calabash bowl (awal/agwatta pii) for drinking from this pot.
- It was referred to as "obele" amongst the Epie peoples of Nigeria.
- In the Yoruba language (southwestern Nigeria), it was referred to as "aamu".
- In Igboland, Nigeria, it was referred to as "idu".
- It was referred to as "nkgo" when big, and when small "nkgwana" amongst the Setswana and Sesotho of South Africa, Botswana and Lesotho.
- The dholuo peoples of Kenya referred to it as "oimore nyar katiga"; or "agulu" or "daa pii"
- It was referred to as "daga" or "djifiai" amongst the Bambara peoples of Mali.
- The Grebo peoples of Liberia referred to it as "coiu`"
- In Annang language it was referred to as "abang itie".
- The abagusii peoples Kenya referred to it as "enyongo ya amache" for a large one and a miniature version was referred to as "egetono kia amache".
- Amongst the Kalenjin people of Kenya, it was referred to as "chebungut". "The water so cold and fresh like it's from a spring".
- Amongst the Yao people of Malawi, it was referred to as "lulo".

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Kwiri ceramic pot, Cameroon

Notwithstanding its beauty, African pottery has had two drawbacks; it is both fragile and heavy. Therefore, most of the early pieces are becoming harder to find, making them very pricey to own. However, thanks to the many skilled craftspeople, they are still being made and sold to collectors all over the world.

Despite its age, the craft is still alive in many parts of the continent. It has of course witnessed a lot of changes through the centuries, in regards to the forms, functions and decorations of the products, but also regarding the manufacturing techniques, the scale of production or the social status of the potters. The last decades have been particularly significant, due to the massive introduction of plastic and metal containers, social and economic upheavals, the development of tourism and urban lifestyle, and the geographic extension of individual movements.

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