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Pottery and Progress: Traditional and Contemporary Pottery in Vume, Ghana

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School for International Training
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(Arts and Culture)

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**Pottery and Progress: Traditional and
Contemporary Pottery in Vume, Ghana**

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ABSTRACT

In this project I attempted to learn how two different methods of making pots coexist in one town. I tried to learn the techniques hands on, how they differed and to understand the historical and cultural contexts in which they fit. I also was curious to learn about the direction in which these methods are headed. I used the methods of non-participation and participant observation informal and formal interview to gather my data.

I found both methods of pottery to be growing and the potters to be thinking toward the future. I found many differences, but some similarities. I found that in Vume, pots are everywhere and always have been. Aspects of pottery may change, but pottery will stay.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this project was termed the Independent Study Project, by no means was it completed by me independently. It took a lot of help from a lot of people. I first thank my family for their support and patience as I try to find my own way - even if the path is meandering - you are the ones who taught me and I am where I am now with much thanks to you. (By the way, Art is not dead) I also would like to thank my Academic Directors Dr. Olayemi Tinuoye and Mr. Jim Carroll for their guidance and reassurance that things will fall into place. I believe the statement was, "success in your ISP is a test of endurance". I also want to thank Mr. Smiles Ofori for guiding me to Vume in the first place, providing reference materials, food for thought and looking out for my health and happiness during ISP time.

In Vume I want to thank Mr. Daniel K. Banahene, for his generous hospitality, patient guidance and assistance. I am grateful to Sister Emma Amekpewu for her kindness and thorough teaching. My thanks to Mr. John Xeafiade for interpretation, Ewe lessons and keeping me company during my pottery lessons. I thank the boys at Kunnev, especially Collins, Awukuvi and Kwame for all the assistance they gave me. I am also grateful to Tasiwoe for taking care of all my needs when Mr. Banahene was absent and being my friend when he was around. I appreciate the assistance of Cephass Agbitor on my first visit to Vume. I also thank all of the town people of Vume for welcoming me and allowing me to learn from them. Some people that I would like to mention are Togbui Akorsu, E.D. Keteni, Togbui Banahene, Alice Afestrom, Doe Kissi, Elizabeth Aklate, Dosi Akor, Raphael Dzugbede, Bessah Mary, Mama Egbo and Akuba Agbetsi.

Without the help of all of these people the work that follows would have been impossible. *Akpe nani kokoka.*

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INTRODUCTION

I am interested in pottery because aside from its aesthetic qualities, it has a use. There is a need in all cultures to make things that are beautiful and pottery happens to be one of the things that is both useful and beautiful at the same time.

I wanted to study pottery and traditional hand building techniques in Ghana because I thought it would help me to better understand this utilitarian art form. I quickly learned that while traditional techniques are still being employed, change is happening and many different ceramic techniques are in existence, side by side. In the town of Vume, in the Volta Region of Ghana, this coexistence is evident. As you enter the town from either direction, on both sides of the road, pots for sale sit on display. As you walk through the town there are old, large water storage pots, more modern flower pots, cooking pots and bowls inside and outside every house. In Vume, pots are everywhere. One of the chiefs, Togbui Banahene IV said that all the women in Vume are potters. Another estimate was that 98% of the women were potters. In addition to the women, there are two contemporary ceramics studios in Vume. One was established in the 1940's by a prominent British potter, Michael Cardew. The other was begun in 1993 by Mr. Daniel Banahene, called Kunnev Clay Products Ltd.

With all of these pots around I decided that Vume was the perfect place for me to Study. In the Ewe language, however, there is no word for art, "art is an inexact term of

Western culture" (Vansina 1990). The pots that I see as works of art are not considered by the people or the makers to be so.

Because I was interested in how pottery functions in the culture I decided that learning it practically would be good path to follow. In this project I attempted to learn about the different ways that pots are made in Vume. I came to study with a traditional potter, Sister Emma Amekpewu and Mr. Daniel Banahene proprietor of Kunnev Clay Products, Ltd.

I was curious to learn both methods of making pots, in what ways they differ, how they may overlap and in what ways they are changing. I also wanted to understand more of what is meant by the terms traditional and contemporary. I read several ISP's by previous SIT students and the feeling I got was that traditional pottery was dying. I was curious to see if this was true.

Throughout my study I tried to put what I was learning in a historical and cultural context. This led me to ask questions about the history of Vume and Cardew's time there. I wanted to understand as best I could different aspects of what some call a minor art, but others wouldn't call art at all. I wanted to see for myself and form my own opinion.

METHODOLOGY

I went to Vume on a recommendation from my project adviser Mr. Smiles Ofori. He told me that Vume produced both traditional and contemporary utilitarian pottery. The Guide to Ghana that I have noted Vume as "rightfully renowned for its colourful painted pots". The American Crafts Council also listed Vume as its only destination for pottery in its West African Art Safari in 1978. I asked Mr. Ofori about contacts in Vume and he referred me to Mr. Daniel Banahene who would take me to Sister Emma Amekpewu. I also met an SIT helper Mr. Agbitor Cephas who accompanied me on my first visit to the town and brought me to Kunnev Clay Products. It was not until I saw the Kunnev workshop that I decided to study contemporary pottery. Thankfully, both Mr. Banahene and Sister Emma were willing to help me.

When I arrived in Vume I began as a non-participant observer, touring Sister Emma's workplace and the Kunnev workshop. I then began observing in Sister Emma's workplace for a few days. During this time I watched, took notes and asked questions. Little by little I began to participate by watching and then imitating. I began learning to build pots on Wednesday 14 April 1999 and I fired the pots I made with Sister Emma 14 days later. There was a six day overlap of work between my time with Sister Emma and Kunnev. As I was wrapping things up with Sister Emma there was less work to do daily, so I began working at the studio on 22nd April in order to make the most of my time. I finished firing my pots at Kunnev on 4th May, 1999.

During the time when I was not working I conducted interviews with several people in the town. I had an interpreter, Mr. John Xeafiade who accompanied me to my work places in case I needed to ask questions and also helped me with my interviews.

I interviewed Afestrom Alice, Doe Kissi and Elizabeth Aklate on 15th April, 1999. The following day I interviewed Sister Emma. I interviewed Togbui Banahene IV, Dosi Akor, Bessah Mary and Raphael Dzogbede on 30th April 1999. I began to formally interview Daniel Banahene on 1st May and finished interviewing him on 3rd May 1999. He provided my accommodation and helped with some initial translation, so I had been collecting information from him informally throughout my stay. On 2nd May 1999, I interviewed Mama Egbo and Akuba Agbetsi. I formally interviewed Collins Ohene and Awukuvi Reuben, two of the workers at Kunnev on 3rd May 1999. Throughout my stay in Vume I informally discussed pottery with people in the town and kept the information in mind.

I included interviews as part of my data gathering techniques because I felt that it would help supplement the skills I was learning. The interviews provided answers to questions that were raised and provided a context for what I was learning.

It can be noticed that during my interviewing I focused more on traditional potters as informants. Proportionally, however, they are in greater numbers than the contemporary potters. I found it useful to interview two non-potters Mr. Raphael

Dzogbede and Togbui Banahene to get different impressions of what has been happening in Vume's pottery history.

I would have liked to have referred to more literary references, but very little literature is available about West African or Ghanaian pottery. I read some literature on African Art and Art History, but pottery was not as emphasized as work in other media.

I was pleased overall with my data gathering techniques, but would have liked more time to gather information, learn the skills, and synthesize what I have learned. I think that the combination of learning hands on and through research and discussion gave me a broad scope for understanding my topic.

TRADITIONAL OR CONTEMPORARY POTTERY?

I first found a need to define the two types of pottery I studied in Vume. The first type almost exclusively done by women, I will call traditional. These techniques have been handed down for generations, coming from the ancestors in Denkyira. The people in Vume migrated from the Denkyira area in 1701 because of wars with the Ashantis and it is said that they brought their pottery techniques with them. This would mean that the origins of traditional pottery in Vume began over 300 years ago. What I have decided to refer to as contemporary pottery started when a British Potter named Michael Cardew came to Vume in the mid 1940s. He brought with him potters wheels, kilns and glazes which were previously not used in Vume. Currently this type of pottery is almost exclusively done by men. The reason that I say almost is that I did hear of one man who practiced the traditional techniques and I saw women helping the contemporary potters with decorating the pots. In the town, people will often refer to traditional pottery as pottery and contemporary pottery as ceramics, even though both methods produce ceramic pots.

SISTER EMMA AND TRADITIONAL POTTERY

It has been said by some people that Sister Emma is the most skilful traditional potters in the town of Vume. If this is not true then she is certainly among the most skilful potters in Vume. She began making pots about 24 years ago, in her early twenties - she is not sure of her exact age. She was taught by her mother-in-law, Doe Kissi. She began making pots because there was no other work to do. Most of the women I interviewed gave one or both of two answers as to why they make pots, there is no other work for women to do, and it is their tradition. She worked with Doe Kissi for about one year and then began to work on her own. She shares her work place with six other women, family members of hers - but they all work individually on their own pots. The work place is outdoors - there is a thatched roof structure to provide shade and some buildings nearby to store the pots that are drying, or finished. Sister Emma came to this work area about one year ago. She said she likes this place because the ground is flat and there are not many shells. Oyster shells, are ubiquitous on the ground in Vume, but disturb the women as they are working, according to Sister Emma they will cut your fingers or leave indentation on the pots.

During the year Sister Emma averages about 12 firings. The number of pots she fires at a time varies depending on the size of the pots but can range around 80. The number of pots she makes in a year also varies. She does a large portion of her work on orders from people in Accra, Kumasi and abroad. She says that she has worked on order

since she began making pots. She likes working this way because the money is good. Buyers will often give an advance on the purchase so the money comes in steadily rather than in bits by selling to people in the town.

I was curious to know if this information was similar or a different for the other potters in the town, so I conducted several interviews with different women. The answers were varied, some women worked on orders, some women did not. Most expressed interest in getting orders because the money is better.

Although Sister Emma works primarily as an individual, if an order comes that is too large for her alone to fill, she will share it with other women in the town. This made me curious to know if people were making an effort to work in groups. Again, the answers varied. Most of the people I spoke to worked individually. There had been several efforts to form a group of potters and there is one that is in existence presently called Vume Cooperative Potters and Marketing Society Ltd. They have been in existence for three years and are looking for a common market for the pots. They meet once monthly. This is the only successful organization of potters that I heard of during my stay. Other groups were begun and then abandoned because according to some women I interviewed people did not show up to meetings or they were cheating. Sister Emma expressed that she preferred to work on her own because as an individual you must do good work. In a group she said, there is opportunity to do lazy work. Dosi Akor was of the opinion that with large orders it is impossible to do all the work alone and a

group can solve that problem. She also said that some people who place orders would prefer to work with an organization of people rather than individuals.

I was interested to know about what pots the women make and how they have changed throughout the years. An answer that I got repeatedly was, if someone orders it they will make it. The pots I saw to be most common, however, were various sized flower pots and water pots. I am unclear as to when they began making flower pots in Vume, one person said 17 years someone also said 13 or 14. Previously large water storage pots called Ede were more popular. (See Appendix 3 for a list of some pots that I saw). While the demand for the Ede has diminished they are still in use in the town and I saw some people making them.

In addition to making different pots, the pots are stylistically changing. One change that I was repeatedly told was that the afortize or smaller water storage pots used to have 3 legs. Now they rest on one foot ring. Sister Emma gave the reason that if one leg broke then the pot was useless. She said they got the idea for the foot ring on the eating bowl.

The flower pot also used to have a smaller mouth but according to several of the women, those people who order the pots prefer a bigger lip for the mouth.

Another change in the pots is the addition of rings around the mouth of the pot. They were introduced in 1986 by Mr. Banahene. The women like them because it makes the pot more beautiful and the people who come to buy them also like them. Dosi Akor

said that there have been students from Winneba who introduced them to different design ideas to improve the pots, but not everyone uses the ideas.

What I gathered about traditional pottery in Vume is that traditional does not mean stagnant or old. Even though the women use methods that have been handed down for generations, they are always looking for ways to make improvements. Sister Emma said something she would like is more time to finish the pots and make them beautiful. She is always looking for new ways to use tools and create new forms. Between orders she experiments with different ideas to see if people will like them. Her techniques are traditional but her attitude is thinking toward the future.

CLAY

The women in Vume use very coarse, strong clay. They collect the raw clay from a pit about 1/4 of a mile south of the Accra - Aflao Road. According to Alice Atestrom they have been using this pit called Dometi, for about four years. She said that they name each clay pit that they use but I did not find out what the meaning of this name is.

The raw clay is dug from the third layer of earth as the first two are not good for use (See Photo 1). Sister Emma told me that they use the first layer of earth to make grog. Grog is fired clay that is crushed and added to unfired clay in order to give it strength. The women make grog by collecting a pile of the first layer of earth and lighting a fire on it and letting it burn for three days (See Photo 2). On the third day it can be taken back to the work place and pounded into a sand like consistency. It is kept separate from the clay until the potter is ready to use it.

The raw clay is first dried in the sun and then it is combined with water to make it moist and useable. If the clay is not completely dried before it is mixed with water, it will not fully absorb the water and will not be good to work with when the potter is ready to use it.

Sister Emma takes the amount she will need and puts it on her kneading table (See Photo 3). She adds grog to the clay by adding a handful to the clay and dripping some water on it. She then begins to knead it. The kneading helps to mix the clay and prepare it for use. She kneads it into a long coil and is then ready to begin building a pot.

Most women in Vume use a rough piece of a tree as a kneading table. Sister Emma keeps her wet clay in a pot by her kneading table, but will often have prepared clay wrapped under plastic that is ready to be kneaded into a coil. This makes the process of beginning pots go more quickly.

BUILDING THE POTS

When Sister Emma is ready to build a pot she rolls a coil of clay whose size depends on the size of the pot she will build. She takes the coil to the place where she will build the pot and puts it in a loop on the ground. She then pinches the clay around in to a circle or oval depending on the shape of the pot. She will run her finger around the bottom of the inside and outside of the pot to help it to stick to the ground. She then grabs the clay with her left hand and begins to pull the clay up with her right hand, walking backwards in a circle. She alternately pulls up the clay and smooths it always with one hand doing the pulling or smoothing and the other guiding and supporting the clay. (See Photo 4)

She does this until the pot reaches a certain height and then beats the pot with the *ababe* (See Appendix 1). This smooths and helps to shape the pot. Then she uses the *tsubliti* to further smooth the pot (See Appendix 2). The mouth of the pot is then shaped. She takes the *edgo* which is either a leaf or a piece of cloth (See Appendix 1) and smooths the lip of the pot and makes whatever shape lip she wants. (See Photo 5). The

use of the *edgo* is delicate work, it is held with the finger tips and carefully drawn around the lip. It is at this point that any lines will be added by pressing the finger tips on the outside of the pot. The use of the cloth instead of the leaf to do this work began when the size of the lips increased and the leaf was too small to do the job.

This first part of the pot is left to dry until it is leather hard. The length of time it takes to dry varies depending on the weather.

When it is dry enough to work on, the pot is taken from the ground and the inside is scraped to get rid of the extra clay (See Photo 6). The rim of the pot is scraped to a thin edge. The tools that are used are the *abobogoe* and the *ayie* (See Appendix 1) The *abobogoe* is a snail shell and the *ayie* is a bent metal scraper. The first tool gets the bulk of the clay out, the second makes it smooth. The inside of the pot is then dampened with a sponge and smoothed with a rock. The pot is now ready for the second phase.

The half pot is turned upside down to rest on its mouth. Sister Emma brings another coil of clay to the pot and works much in the same way as the first half was built (See Photo 7). She combines pulling and smoothing while working upward and inward until a very small opening is left. The opening is closed and the upside down pot has a coned bottom. The cone is then beaten with the *ababe* into a round shape and smoothed with the *tsubliti*.

The next step is to a foot ring. Sister Emma draws a circle on the bottom of the pot with a piece of a hair comb where she wants to put the foot. She then pinches on a small amount of clay to the circle. She then adds a coil to the clay and shapes the foot ring with the *edgo* much in the same way that she shaped the mouth.

The pot is then left to dry until it is leather hard again and the bottom half is scraped out to make it smooth using both the *abobogoe* and the *ayie*. Again the inside of the pot is moistened with the sponge and then smoothed with a stone. If it is a flower pot, a hole is poked in the bottom before scraping. The pot is then ready to be finished.

FINISHING

All the finishing that the traditional potters do is completed before the firing. First the pot is burnished with a smooth stone to make it shiny. Then it is burnished again with a red iron oxide slip. A slip is clay mixed with water. The slip is rubbed on the pot while the potter holds the pot on her knees and rotates it slowly to cover the whole outside and the inside of the lip. Before it is completely dry the potter rubs it again with either nylon material or a piece of plastic. This makes it very shiny (See Photo 8).

Sister Emma said the women in Vume have been using the red iron slip since 1982. They used to use a mixture of grog, kerosene, palm oil and pomade. A shortage in kerosene made them look for something else. A woman in the town started using the red

iron oxide and liked it. It spread to the other potters and they, too liked it. I noticed that many ideas about pottery in Vume spread like that. One person experiments with something, finds that it works and passes the information along.

FIRING

Once the pots are fully dry - bone dry - they are collected and brought to where the women do their firing. It is a large clearing with all the debris from previous firings removed. They first put down a layer of a thin branches to rest the pots on. If it is a sunny day, the pots are let to sit in the sun to preheat. If the weather is not sunny or it is cool, the women will light a small fire with wood-shavings and other combustible materials in the pot to preheat it (See Photo 9). If the pots are not properly preheated there is a greater chance of them breaking during the firing.

After the first layer of firewood is laid and the pots are preheated they are arranged and stacked on the firewood. The larger pots that are heavier to carry will be first placed on the firewood and then preheated so they do not need to be moved while hot. The pots are laid on their sides with the larger ones on the bottom with the mouths either facing another pot or towards the center of the group. Stones or chunks of fired clay are used under the foot of the pot to help balance it and keep it from rolling. The smaller pots are then placed on top of the larger ones resting on their sides with the

mouths facing the larger pots. The mouths are not faced outwards or upwards in order to prevent too much air circulation. If this happens I am guessing that the pots will break.

Once all the pots are placed where they will be for the firing, the next layer of firewood is added. It is usually locally collected pieces of palm branches. They are first piled around the edges of the pots horizontally then vertically against the feet of the pots.

The pile of pots will be completely covered with palm branches. Then the pile is covered with hay. Once the pots are completely hidden from view under all of the hay and palm, the women can light the fire. They ignite it with matches and take the burning hay to light it on all sides. Within seconds the pile becomes a huge inferno (See Photo 10). If the pots have been well made and preheated well there will be a great survival rate - otherwise many of the pots will break. The first firing I saw 16 out of 66 pots broke. The pots had been preheated only in the sun. The following day Sister Emma had a firing and almost none of her pots broke, she had preheated them by lighting fires in them. Once the fire is set it is left to its own and lasts about 2 or 3 hours. This is a relatively short time to fire clay but the method has been working for hundreds of years. The clay body, however, is strong enough to withstand such a dramatic rise in temperature. The strength has been attributed to the grog in the clay body.

TABOOS

There are certain taboos that the women observe while making pots. Many of the women are aware of them, but some said they did not know any. The first one that I heard

was that you should not go to the bush on Fridays or Sundays. This means you cannot collect clay on either of those days, nor can you go to farm. Akuba Agbetsi said that specifically you cannot use a hoe on the earth on either of those days. The first reason I heard behind this taboo was that *Axava*, N the local god, forbids it. Akuba Agbetsi said that those days are when the gods go to the land to inspect it. Doe Kissi told a story of a woman who went to farm on one of those days and saw an abnormally short woman. Since that time the woman who went to farm has been sick. Doe Kissi advised that you follow the taboos because if you don't you may get sick or rain may not fall.

Another taboo is that you should not use the *ababe* to beat the pots or pound grog at night. Alice Afestrom said that if you use the *ababe* at night your pots will break when you fire them. Sister Emma gave the reason that you will become oversize if you beat the pots at night.

Sister Emma told me of a taboo that is no longer followed. You should not fix a price to the pot before it is finished. This is no longer followed because they need to fix a price to the pots that they make on order because they receive an advance.

I was curious to know if the reason that men don't make pots by traditional methods was because of a taboo. The women and men that I asked said there is no taboo, but it is tradition for women to make pots and for men to fish or farm.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH SISTER EMMA

My experience with Sister Emma began by doing some non-participant observation of the way in which she and the women at her place work. I first observed and took photos. After a few days I began my hands on work by starting some flower pots. Each day I would go and work on my pots a little or start new ones. Sister Emma would help correct me where I made mistakes. This type of pottery is not easy, but I enjoyed making it. I enjoyed working with her and her family. Her work area always had a number of people around - some working, some sitting and talking. Some young children would be making pots. I liked seeing that for Sister Emma, while making pots is her source of income it is not just a job, in her work place is a sense of life. Michael Cardew said of traditional potters, "they do not notice the beauty of their own works because it is a familiar part of their lives and they take it for granted" (1979). I would say, whether you take it for granted or not, you can't take pots out of Vume, nor do I think you can take Vume out of pottery. Pottery there is always growing and changing, there is movement as the pots progress.

When I asked about the future of pottery Sister Emma and the other people I interviewed said it is bright. Every person I spoke to said that pottery is here to stay, Sister Emma said she sells more pots now than when she first began. During interviews I asked people in what ways things were changing. A common answer is that they are looking for innovations, ways to make the pots more beautiful. Many people expressed

interest in machines to help with the work of making the clay and pounding the grog. Often, though, after they mentioned a machine, they would say "would a machine be able to make these kind of pots"? I would answer that the contemporary potters have machines to make pots, but their pots are different.

CONTEMPORARY POTTERY: CARDEW AND KUNNEV

If you ask any anyone in Vume they will say Michael Cardew introduced ceramics to Vume. Michael Cardew worked in Vume for roughly five years. I could not ascertain the exact dates he was there, but saw a copy of a letter he wrote in November 1948 saying he planned to return in 1949. The chief that I spoke to, Togbui Kofi Banahene IV, senior divisional chief of Vume traditional area, said that Cardew was in Vume from 1945 -50. During his stay he learned about the women's techniques, but established his own studio, for which Togbui Banahene IV gave him land.

In his studio he produced high temperature, stoneware, glazed pots. One woman, Dosi Akor, worked in his studio turning the hand crank wheel, but did not learn how to throw pots. She said that Cardew produced mainly small water coolers that go on your table. He did not make the type of pots she made, nor did he teach the residents of Vume to make the type he made. After Cardew left, his studio and kiln were abandoned. The materials he left were discarded because their value was not known.

A man from Kumasi, S.K. Asare, came to Cardew's place in 1987 with intention to start a brick and tile factory, but the money to follow through with the plan was not able to be raised. Mr. Asare instead taught some people to make flower pots. Those people are still working there now.

Mr. Daniel Banahene began Kunnev Clay Products in 1993. That is where I studied for about two weeks. Mr. Banahene always had an interest in clay, beginning

when he was small watching his aunts and cousins make pots. He saw the things in Cardew's studio and he liked them. Throughout his life he kept the idea in mind that he would become a potter like Cardew. Before he achieved that goal he began buying pots from a place in Tema and selling the pots along the road side. This became profitable for him but he thought it would be better to start his own place. In 1990 he bought a potter's wheel to begin his studio, the land was previously a pig farm. In 1992 the first potter, Mr. James came to work there. He was followed by a man named Mensah who began to teach Mr. Banahene. Following Mensah was Mr. Samuel Asiadu, a master potter from the Central Region. He began working at Kunnev and Mr. Banahene went to a school in Accra called Opportunity Industrialization Center, O.I.C., to study Ceramics during 1995-1996. Eventually Mr. Banahene would like to go to the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi to study ceramics. Until then he plans on experimenting with different things and expanding his marketing connections. His long-term goal is to expand his place and begin to produce bricks and tiles.

For now he has been selling the pots at Kunnev to people who sell ornamental plants. He works mainly on order and helps some of the women potters in Vume to get orders. His wife will often oversee the delivery of pots from Vume to Accra or sometimes Togo (See Photo 11).

CLAY

The clay at Kunnev Clay Products is dug from just behind the studio. First they dig the clay from the ground and then they dry it. After it is thoroughly dry, they mix it in a pit with water to soften it. It is stirred with a stick and then sieved into a shallower pit (See Photo 12). The clay will then settle to the bottom and the water is drained from the top. In order to dry it more quickly, it is moved to the drying mats which allows the clay to lie 2 inches thick. Depending on the weather it will take between one and two weeks for the clay to be ready for use.

After the clay is taken from the drying mats it is formed into softball sized balls and let to continue drying for a while. The balls are then collected and put into a pile to wedge. Wedging is a process done to remove air from the clay and make sure it is evenly mixed (Nelson 1978). To wedge clay you repeatedly cut off chunks with a cutting wire (See appendix 2) and slam them onto the pile.

Once the clay is sufficiently wedged it is wrapped under plastic and stored. When the potter is ready to use the clay he cuts off what amount he will need and brings it to the kneading table. The kneading tables at Kunnev are made from flat boards. Kneading the clay helps to further remove the air and to align the particles for throwing (Nelson 1978). Air bubbles in the clay will throw the clay off center during throwing or will make the pot explode in the kiln.

The clay is kneaded into the size of ball that the potter will use for his pot. Usually the potter makes several balls at a time and wraps them under plastic so that they are ready for him to use quickly. Also because there is no scale, this helps to maintain a consistency of size if the potter is throwing several of the same size pot.

The clay at Kunnev is very smooth and plastic, it contains no grog. It is good for throwing and can be fired to about 1200•C. After it is fired it is reasonably strong.

MAKING THE POTS

The potters at Kunnev Clay Products mainly make various sized flower pots. If they are large enough, taller than about 12", they are thrown in two sections first the bottom, then the top. The potter has his prepared balls of clay ready and a long board next to him on his left onto which he puts the pots he has finished. The board holds 6 half pots at a time. The potters at Kunnev can throw an average of 30 flower pots in a day which is 60 half pots.

The process of making the pots begins by sticking a ball of clay to the wheel and begin to turn it. They use hand crank wheels, so one person makes the pots while another turns the crank. The potter must first center the clay, making it even and smooth and then open up the hole (See Photo 13). This is done by pressing the thumbs into the center of the clay. He then opens the hole and pulls up the walls of the pot. After the walls are tall and even enough the potter shapes the pot however he likes it. Often he will use a length

of broom to determine the correct diameter of the pot. He then cleans out the water from inside and smooths the outside with a piece of foam. It is important to always move slowly and use water on the pots to make sure they do not get thrown off center.

When the pot is finished it is cut from the wheel-head with the cutting wire and placed on the board (See Photo 14).

After a short while of drying, the pots are ready to be assembled. The rims of both halves of the pot are lined with slip (clay and water) and scored. This allows for better cohesion between the two halves. Then the top half is placed on the bottom half and the mouth is opened up. The potter then reaches his arm in and begins to press the joint together with both hands from inside and out. The now single pot is placed on the wheel to be fully joined and shaped.

First the pot is recentered on the wheel and then the lip is shaped (See Photo 15). The potter then reaches inside the pot and uses the foam to follow the joint on the inside while using the scraper to smooth it on the outside. Any initial design like adding lines is then done before the pot is cut from the wheel.

The following day the pot is ready to be further designed.

DESIGNING

Before the pots are fired, the potters at Kunnev incise designs on the pots. Currently they have three or four designs that they like to do. They make the designs with the scraper or with the trimming tool (See Appendix 2). I asked two of the potters where

they get the ideas for the design from and they said from various sources. Collins Ohene said that as a potter you just need to think and create something that will make the pot more beautiful. Awukuvi Reuben said that sometimes people will request a certain design and they will do it. Both potters expressed interest in innovation and getting books to help give them ideas. For now they will continue with what they are doing. Awukuvi said he particularly likes to draw the "*Gye Nyame*" symbol on his pots.

FIRING

At Kunnev there are two brick, wood fuelled kilns. They were built in 1996 after an older kiln built in 1993 was demolished. It is an updraft kiln which means the pots inside will mature from top to bottom (Cardew 1979). Mr. Asiadu and Mr. Banahene designed and built it.

They begin by stacking the pots on bricks called checkers so that the smoke can escape. The next layer of pots is stacked upside on top of the first layer until there is a tower of pots (See Photo 16). The whole firing process takes two days from packing to unloading. The firing itself from preheating to cooling takes around 13 hours. This depends on how quickly the preheating goes. If the pots are not well dry they must preheat more slowly so that all of the water evaporates. After preheating they begin to increase the temperature slowly until they are going at full blast which is 1200•C. This stage lasts for about 5 hours and then the kiln is left to cool.

FINISHING

After the pots are fired they are sold as is or they are painted with oil paint. They either brush or spray on the paint with a diffuser.

They are interested to learn about glaze technology and glazing techniques but have not yet developed the capability to use glazes. They have the tools they need, they just need the knowledge. Collins Ohene expressed interest in going to school to learn more about ceramic techniques.

MY EXPERIENCE AT KUNNEV

My experience at Kunnev consisted going daily for a week to learn the different techniques. I have had some small experience on the wheel so I was to make some small pots. The first thing that was emphasized was the importance of centering. I had a hard time with this due to my weak arm strength and the way the wheel was configured. I was unused to bracing my arms on the wall of the wheel box as opposed to on my own hips. I was also unused to not controlling the speed of the wheel myself.

In spite of that I was able to have enough success to not have anything collapse. Throughout the weeks my skills improved and I learned different techniques in addition to throwing. I learned the elements of trimming, and joining two pots to form one. My pots remained relatively small due to my skill level. The finishing of the pots was left up to me. I mostly burnished my pots and did some small incised line design.

During conversation, Mr. Banahene expressed great interest in making pots that are black. I had done firings in the U.S. in pit kilns. In these kilns there is a reduction atmosphere where the oxygen is removed from the clay body and carbon turns the pots black. I showed him a simple design and he decided he would like to experiment with it, so I helped to over see the construction of a small pit kiln. We did one experimental firing, but the air holes were not well sealed so the reduction was not very good. The foundation is laid for future experiments with this type of firing. Next time the air holes will be better sealed and more fuel will be used.

Something Mr. Banahene expressed repeatedly is the need to do research and make experiments to try and get different results. The potters at Kunnev also expressed the same interest. Awukuvi said he would like to learn the traditional techniques too, because knowing both would help him as a potter.

FINDINGS

I found the most important difference between traditional and contemporary pottery to be the clay. The coarse texture of the clay that the traditional potters use is perfect for the techniques they employ. The same goes for the clay and techniques at Kunnev. Neither type of work would be possible if they swapped clay. Also the pots they produce would look entirely different with different types of clay. The lightness of the contemporary pots would be lost and the sturdiness of the traditional pots would also be lost. Nor would either clay be able to stand the others firing techniques. The kiln would be too hot for the coarse clay and open firing would have too quick of a rise in temperature for the studio clay.

The similarities between traditional and contemporary pottery in Vume are few. Both make pots - often flower pots, but the processes and products are completely different. The traditional potters emphasize smooth and polished surface where as the contemporary potters favour adding designs but leaving a rough texture. The traditional potters may add some rings around the mouth but leave the lip smooth. The contemporary potters often make indentations on the lip to get a scalloped or wave like effect. The colour the traditional potters use is a simple, natural red iron oxide while the contemporary potters often use different brightly coloured paints.

Perhaps it is these differences that allow them to be doing the same type of work, but to supply different demands. They are not competing for the same customers.

CONCLUSION

It has been said time and again that the only constant in the universe is change. I found this to be true in Vume. What I learned about traditional pottery is that traditional does not mean stagnant or not forward thinking. The women are producing different pots today than in the past, but their methods are still traditional. They use some different tools and even use some different techniques. Pottery is an integral part of their culture and culture is alive and changing, so pottery too must be alive and change. This change does not mean traditional pottery will be lost or die, it will simply progress. "Art is a long process which dates from the hidden past, runs through our own modern times and passes into the future" (Asihene 1972).

Contemporary pottery has been in Vume almost 50 years, it has brought the introduction of some new machines to do certain aspects of the work and what is produced there is different than the traditional pots. The contemporary potters, too, are looking to progress and change. Together they coexist, one does not overshadow the other.

What greatly impressed me is that in Vume, children make pots. I met a young boy who was helping his grandmother by making some small things. Sister Emma's young daughter often would work alongside of us. Even at Kunnev there are younger boys helping to do the work.

I found a shard of a pot that Michael Cardew made on the ground. I figured it was his because the colour of the clay is not what any one in Vume uses. It is a small piece of history that was buried in the ground. Ceramics help people construct histories because ceramic is durable - it lasts longer than wood, fibre or metal. "Clay has been formed by man into domestic pottery and sculpted objects ever since he learned to work and fire it. And in Africa that happened some 8,000 - 9,000 years ago" (Wening cited in Gillon 1991). That is a lot of history to learn about.

I feel that my study helped to answer some questions for me, but it raised many more. As I learned about Cardew's stay in Vume I wondered what specifically he did, and how long he stayed. I was curious to know why his studio had been abandoned for so long and why he left Vume. I also became interested in the different efforts of people to form groups, those that have been successful and those that have not. As my time in Vume grew shorter my interest in the place grew more. I left Vume feeling that I have learned a lot, but I have only scratched the surface. What I have learned about the different aspects of pottery is immeasurable and invaluable.



Photo 1: Digging the Clay.



Photo 2: Firing the Grog.



Photo 3: Preparing the wet Clay – Mixing it with Grog.



Photo 4: Beginning to Build the Pot-Starting with the top half.

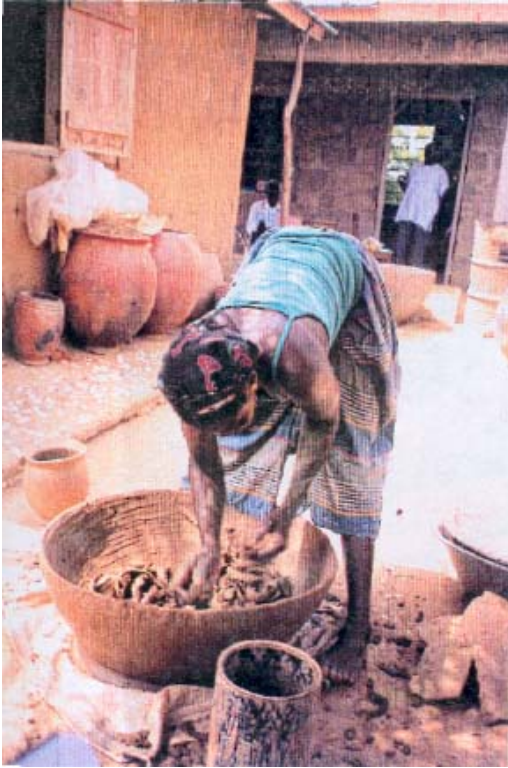


Photo 5: Scraping the Inside of the pot with the aboboogoe.

Photo 6:
Smoothing the lip with the edge.





Photo 7: The second phase of building the pot, adding the coil.

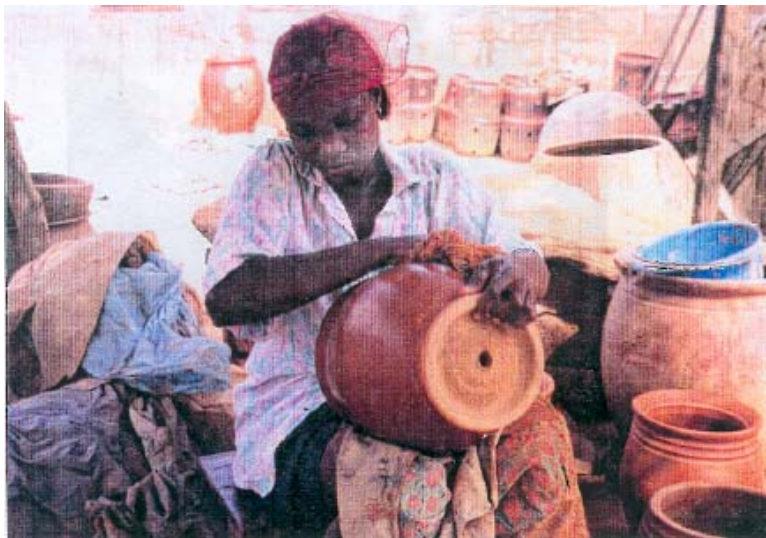


Photo 8:
Burnising the
Pot before Firing.



Above Photo 9: Preheating
The pot before open firing.

Photo 10: Firing the Pots
in the traditional open
firing





Photo 11: Pots to be taken to Accra.



Photo 12: Stirring the clay at Kunnev.

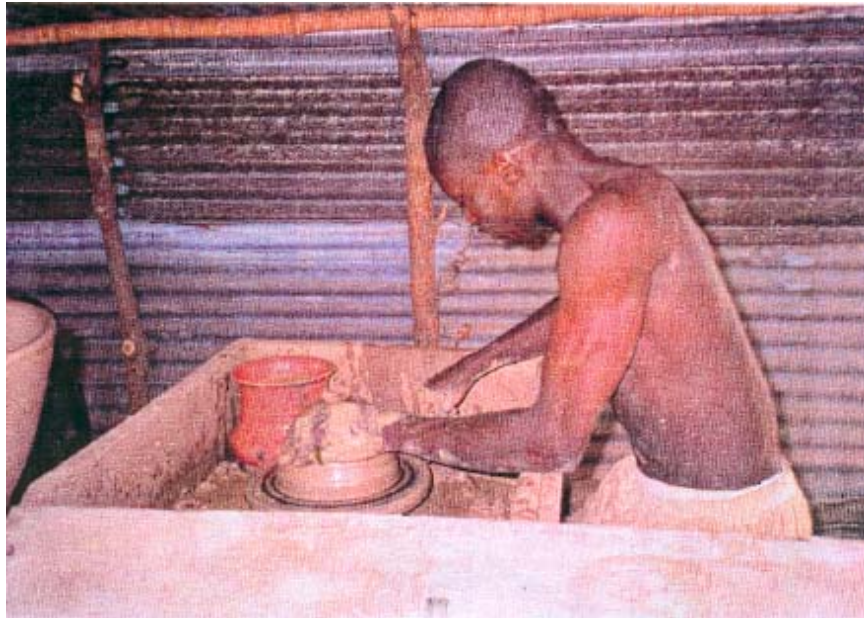


Photo 13: Centering the Clay.

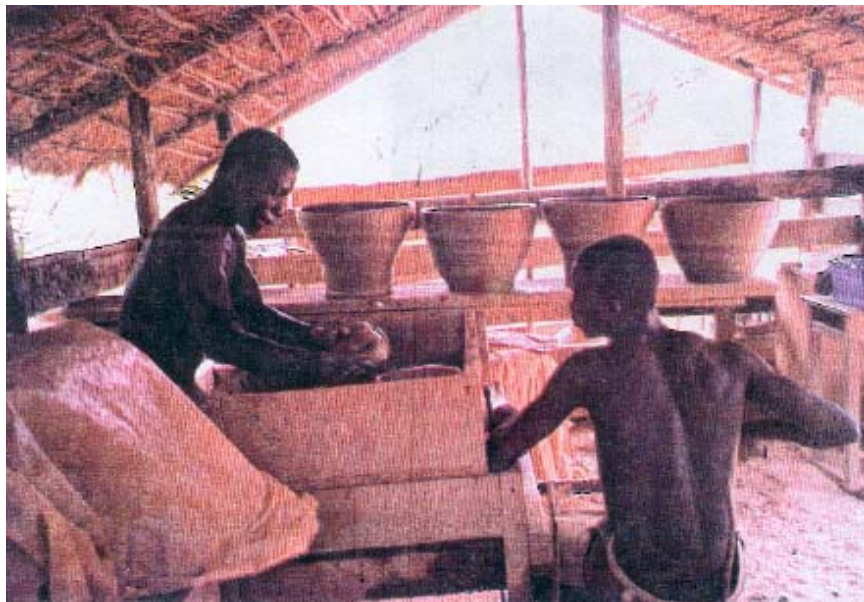


Photo 14: Pots in sections waiting to be joined. The bottom half is on the regent of the top.



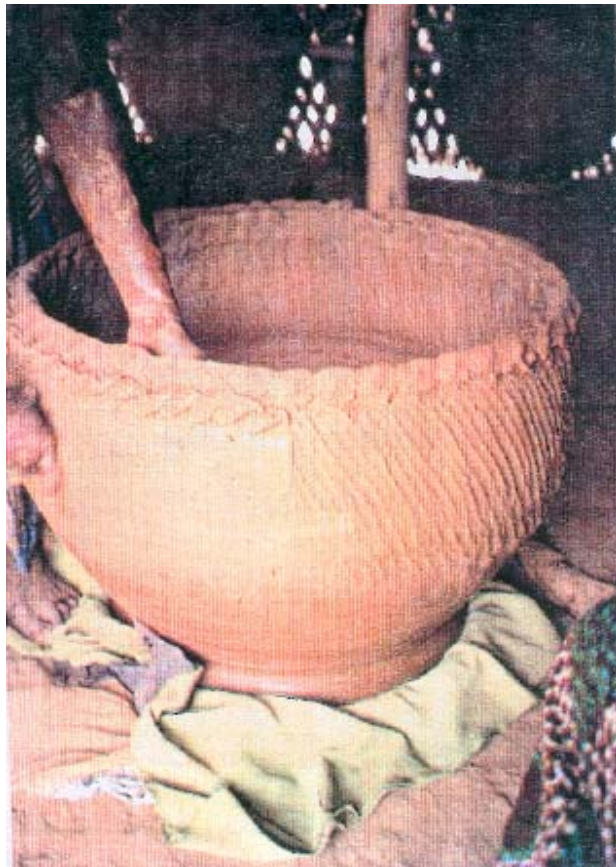
Photo 15: Joining the two halves and making the lip.



Photo 16: Pots after firing in the kiln at kunnev. They are stacked on bricks one on top of the other.



Photo 16 &17: The pulling up stages of building the large flower pots.



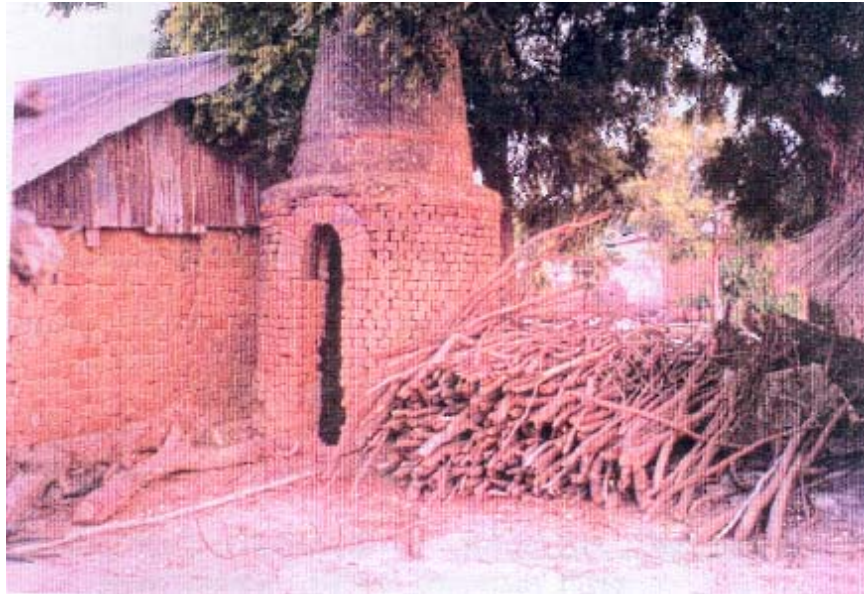


Photo 18: Cardew's old kiln-on longer in use

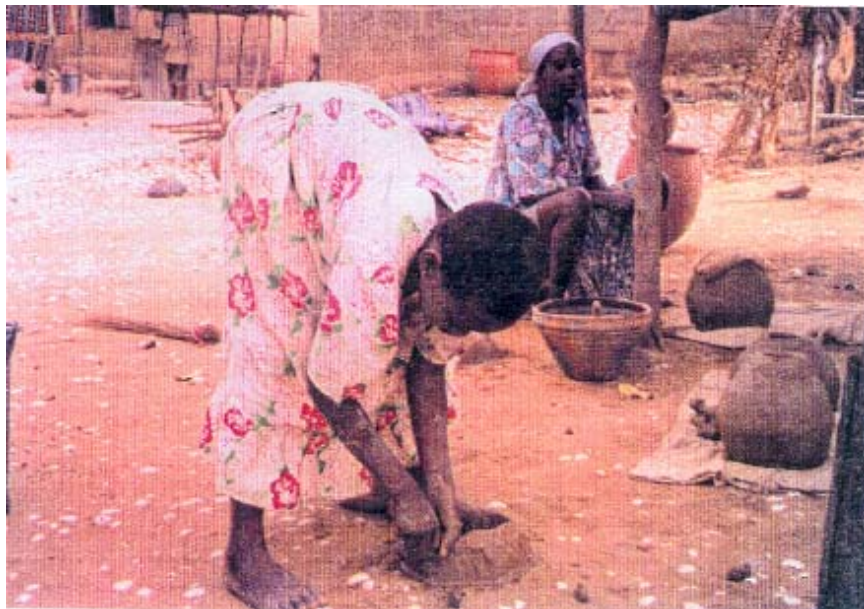


Photo 19: young girl working on a pot

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INFORMANTS

Vume is a small enough town that if you ask for someone it should be easy to find them.

Daniel K. Banahene: Interviewed on 1st May, 1999, 3rd May 1999

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Emma Amekpewu: Interviewed on 19th April, 1999

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Afestrom Alice: Interviewed on 18th April, 1999

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Doe Kissi: Interviewed on 18th April, 1999

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Elizabeth Aklate: Interviewed on 18th April, 1999

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APPENDIX 1

Tools at Sister Emma's workplace.

1. *edzo* - desert plant leaf used for smoothing the lip and foot of the pot. For bigger pots or when the edzo is not handy a rag is used.
2. *Tsubliti*- a smooth wooden stick used for smoothing pot while it is still plastic.
3. *Ababe*- Round paddle with a handle used to hit the pot into shape and strengthen areas where two sections are joined.
4. *Abobogoe*- snail shell used for scraping the inside of the pot. Used for getting the bulk of the excess clay out.
5. *Ayie* J or L shaped bent metal scraper used for trimming the inside of the pot. This is used for smoothing the inside after the *Abobogoe* has gotten the bulk out.
6. Smooth stone for burnishing leather hard pots. Also used to smooth inside the pot after scraping but before the 2nd section is joined.
7. Rag for final burnishing and application of red iron oxide for red colour
8. Hoe for digging clay
9. Mortar and pestle for grinding grog.

APPENDIX 2

Tools at Kunnev

1. Scraper - used for shaping pot and adding detail. Also used for cleaning wheel head and kneading table.
2. Foam Sponge - used for applying water and smoothing the outside of the pot. Also used to clean water from inside pot.
3. Cutting Wire - used for cutting clay to be wedged, cutting pots off the wheel and trimming the lip of the pot.
4. Diamond shaped trimming tool used for designing and detailing the pots. Can be used to trim the feet. Handle end is used to draw designs and make texture.
5. Wooden Knife - used to mark the pot when recentering before joining and used for designing.
6. Piece of broom used to measure diameter of the pots.
7. Potters wheel - Hand crank, two person, wheel used by potters to make symmetrical small to medium sized pots at a swift rate.
8. Kiln - Large brick structure used for firing pots to 1200°C - Wood fuelled. Capacity 120 pots.

Appendix 3

A Short list of Some Pots that I saw in Vame



afotige - for storing water



to ko deze for fetching water from the river



agba bowl for fowls to drink from



Ede large water storage pot



Toga flower pot



Katu for preparing soup



akple daze for cooking food