

THE STUDY OF MYANMAR TRADITIONAL POTTERY MAKING IN OH-BO VILLAGE, SAGAING REGION

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Abstract

In Myanmar, earthenware has been used since Neolithic period. From that time onwards, potteries have been commonly used for different domestic and religious and ritual repurpose. Earthenware production centers can be found throughout Myanmar. One of the well known earthenware production centers of central Myanmar is Sagaing. Sagaing is famous for its earthenware, *sagaing oui*. Sagaing is situated in Sagaing Region. Oh-Bo village is one of the earthenware production places of Sagaing. Oh-Bo pottery business particularly focuses on making only water storage pot and *Ata Oui* or Thingyan pot. The potters of Oh-Bo village make these earthenware pots by using traditional way. They produce them by hand-made through five production stages. These production stages are collecting raw materials, preparing paste, shaping pot, applying before firing decoration techniques and firing. Because of the plastic bottles and cans, the earthenware production business of Oh-Bo village is now facing the danger of extinction.

Key words: Oh-Bo village, earthenware, water storage pot, *Ata Oui*, Thingyan pot

Introduction

In Myanmar since the Neolithic Period, Pottery has been commonly used for different domestic and religious and ritual purposes, including cooking, drinking, storing and preparing. The earliest pottery was found in Badalin Cave,¹ which is located in the area between Nyaunggat and Yebok villages in Ywagantownship in the Taunggyi district of Southern Shan State. Hence, the culture was gradually developing and the tradition of using pottery had become popular across the country.

In Myanmar, popular pottery business includes Sagaing Pottery at Ywar Htaung-Oh-Bo village in Sagaing; Yandabo Pottery in the Yandabo village at Bagan; Kyauk Myaung Pottery in New Nyein village at Shwe Bo district and Twantae

¹ U Aung Thaw, "The Neolithic Culture of Padalin Cave, " *Journal of Burma Research Society (JBRS)*, Vol.LII, June,1969, pp.10-11

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Pottery in Yangon. Among them, Sagaing Pottery art is known as a simple traditional handicraft which is making by the local raw material without using any advanced hi-technique. Sagaing is located on the west bank of the Ayeyarwaddy River, 21 kilometers to the south of Mandalay. Sagaing is a place which has been well known for handicrafts including cane furniture, silver work, stone sculpture and pottery.

Most of pottery business flourishes in Oh-Bo village, which is located in Ywar Htaung village tract of Sagaing division and is easily reached along the sides of Sagaing-Mandalay-Monywa road. There are 344 houses with 11 pottery cottage industries in the village.² Almost all the villagers earn their livings by making pots. The pots are well known as “Sagaing pots”, named after the town name “Sagaing”.

Unlike other pottery business producing various types of pots, Oh-Bo pottery business particularly focuses on making only “Water pots” and “Thingyan pots”. Although it appears to be a small cottage industry, due to its good quality and affordable prices, “Sagaingpots” occupies huge market of pottery in Myanmar. The market **spreads** from the northern to southern parts of Myanmar, in which trades are distributed by road, rail and sea.³

However, nowadays, the traditions of “Water pot” usage are gradually fading away with modern technology offering new forms of plastic water bottles and cans. The pottery businesses are facing difficult times and the tradition of pottery usage is in real danger of extinction. With the aims of discovering the history of traditional pottery works, tracking changes in pottery making techniques and in pottery business, and exploring the tradition and culture, and difficulties of local people regarding with pottery works, the current paper studied traditional pottery making techniques in Oh-Bo village.

The study conducted in-depth-interview and focus group discussion in Oh-Bo village in March 2017.⁴ In-depth-interview was conducted with an owner of traditional pottery business in Oh-Bo village and focus group discussion was performed with 10 workers in the pottery workshop. Interview questions included area focusing on pottery making techniques, tradition and culture of pottery usage among local people, and difficulties and challenges in the pottery business.

² 2011 Myanmar Population and Housing Census

³ Hla Min Naing, "Sagaing Pottery", *Traveler Journal*, January 21, 2014

⁴ Field Trip (4.3.2017)

Pottery making techniques of Oh-Bo village

It was found that Oh-Bo used traditional hand-made technique in the pottery business. There are five stages in pottery making including (1)collecting raw materials (2) preparing the paste (3) shaping pot (4) decoration and (5)firing.

(1) Collecting raw materials

Oh-Bo uses clay, which is available from "myayni"(the red clay)⁵ of the Khotaung Chaung Pouk village, and "myaynak" (the black clay) ⁶ at the east bank of the Ayeyarwaddy River kilometers (6 miles) away, near the impressive Kaung Mhu Daw pagoda⁷in the Shwe Min Won village. Both raw materials can be gained easily by self- digging or by buying from others clay or mud or ceramic sellers.

(2) Preparing the paste

"Sagaing pots" are made of paste (clay) which is made of a mixture of red and black mud. The proportion is 11 bushel (wif;awmif;) of "myayni" (red clay) and 8 bushel (wif;awmif;) of "myaynak" (black clay). At first, black clay is preserved for one night soaking with water in a huge bowl or brick tank. Then, red clay is put into the bowl as per the ratio and then kneaded with the black clay to get well-mixed mud paste. Once thoroughly kneaded, the paste is kept for one or two days covering securely with jute bags or Penang bags to prevent from garbage, sand or pebbles. When the paste is ready to use, it is spread on the jute bags and kneaded again to get the clay. The paste must be sticky enough to make smooth surface of pots as well as to get satisfactory shape of pots. One brick tank of clay (19 bushel)can produce 65-70pots ,10 liters size "Water pots".

⁵ Fig.1

⁶ Fig.2

⁷ Mick Shippen, *The Traditional Ceramics of Southeast Asia*, University of Hawai'i press, Honolulu, 2005, p.166 (Hereafter cited as Mick Shippen, *The Traditional Ceramics of Southeast Asia*)

(3) Shaping pot

Next stage is to shape a pot. Two people is required for this process: one is for putting blocks of clay on the potter's wheel or spinning wheel,⁸ which is used to shape a raw pot, while another is for spinning the wheel by hand.⁹(Generally, in other area, the process is required only one person since electronic or foot-controlled-spinning wheel is used for shaping process.)The challenges for this two-workers-technique ¹⁰is that it needs harmony between two workers and considerable skill and experience are required to throw pots of an acceptable standard. After 3-5 minutes, semi-dry and granulated condition in a mould is formed.¹¹Then the mould is dried in the air for a few minutes, the timing base on weather condition or present of moisture in the surrounding air. The best condition of the raw pot to pass through the next step of production is neither too soft nor too hard. After getting a standard consistency, the second step is to make a smooth and rounded pot, which is done by using paddle and anvil technique. This is the most important step and it is supposed to be assured that the recent raw pot is thick and large enough as well as is good shaped to become round in figure. The process includes different manual technique which can be alteration of impressing, bulging, and using paddle and anvil technique¹².Paddle and anvil- use of two tools to press and shape the wall of a ceramic vessel.¹³Pots are often beaten with a paddle, to smooth and thin them. An anvil which is made of baked clay is held inside the pot so it does not collapse. The terracotta anvil is used to be decorated with incised floral designs on its side. Sometimes, the name or sign the owner of the anvil is inscribed on the flat surface of handle knob of anvil. The anvil is dipped in dry sand and again so it does not stick inside to the pot.¹⁴The potter use his

⁸ Fig.3 and 4

⁹ Fig.5

¹⁰ Fig.6, 7 and 8

¹¹ Fig.9 and 10

¹² Fig.11,12,13 and 14

¹³ Douglas, *"Principles of Archaeology"*, McGraw Hill Companies, New York, 2007, p.301

¹⁴ Bob Hudson, "Handmade Pottery in Myanmar/ Burma", p.2, Handmade pots.pdf

hands or other tools, including paddles or small sticks, as well as knives, fluting tools and wires for cutting the extra clay on the mould.

(4) Decoration

There are two kinds of decoration techniques: use of "plar" and use of paddle and anvil technique. Once the raw pot is made, the pointed wooden tool called "Plar"¹⁵ is used to tap the outside of pot to get the desired designs. Most of the Sagaing pottery use simple designs including floral and Zip-zap designs¹⁶ by using of paddle and anvil technique. Then, the pottery ware is dried in the sunshine one day.

(5) Firing

The last stage is firing pottery. In Oh-Bo village, woods and straws are mainly used for firing. First, a pile of pots (1000 pots) are placed upside down on the ground layers by layers and woods spread around the pile of pots making wall of woods around the pile.¹⁷ Then straw are placed like fencing besides the woods¹⁸ and sticky mud is coated over the straw.¹⁹ This straw fencing and mud coating was done three times and then a pile of pots is surrounded by a layer woods and three layers of mud coated straw fences. Finally, a pile of post is covered by straw and mud is poured on the cover again. The process is called plastering in which the pots are enclosed in mud coated straw layer on the top and in a layer of firewood and three mud coated straw layers. The process requires three trucks of firewood (Htawlar Gyi) and 500 bunches of straw. The purpose is to fire the pots slowing first with burning straws and then slow baking the pots with the heat of firewood within a closed mud-cover. Actually, mud-cover serves as temporary kiln which assists to rise temperature inside the pile of pots. The process takes nearly 11-12 hours, which usually starts at 3 pm and finishes at 4 am of the following day. About 8 to 10 workers are hired for firing a pile of pots. The baked pots are collected by other workers.

¹⁵ Fig.15

¹⁶ Fig.16 ,17 and 18

¹⁷ Fig.19 and 20

¹⁸ Fig.21

¹⁹ Fig.22

After cleaning, the pots are ready to be used.²⁰ Half the pots will be picked up by buyers a day or two after firing, the rest will be stacked by the roadside and sold to passing trade.²¹

The potters of Oh Bo provide water pots for Upper and Central Myanmar as well as for the Shan States. They view the pots they produce as an essential and permanent part of Myanmar culture. From the clay foundation below their feet they have formed a thriving, self-reliant community which is sure of its place. Any suggestion that these wonderful pots may one day face challenges due to changing lifestyles, as seen in neighboring Thailand, is flatly rejected by the woman.²²

Tradition and culture of pottery usage among local people

According to in-depth interview and focus group discussion, it was found that tradition of pottery usage is gradually fading in present time. Even some local people become to use plastic bottles and cans for drinking and storing water due to mobilizing of living standards. However, as the pots can cool water naturally and are affordable and easy to be used, there are some households which are still using pottery. In addition, it is found that people still use pottery in traditional events including seasonal festivals and religious events such as Thingyan festival and Kason- Bodi Tree- water festival.

Difficulties and challenges in pottery business

Due to life style and living standards changes in present time, pottery business owners are facing tough times to maintain the good market of pottery ware. According to interviews with an owner of pottery business in Oh-Bo, it was found that the pottery market is active only in certain seasons such as Tagu (April) and Kason (May) for traditional-cultural usage, while the market was active in the whole year in old days. The reason is that in previous decades, there was domestic-pottery-ware market across the country since people used earthen ware to store drinking water and plastic water bottle were not quite popular meanwhile as well. In present time, the market only relies on

²⁰ Fig.23 and 24

²¹ Mick Shippen. **The Traditional Ceramics of Southeast Asia**, 2005, p.174

²² Mick Shippen, **The Traditional Ceramics of Southeast Asia**, 2005, p.174

traditional usage of pots such as Thingyan-pots (Atar-pot) and Kason-pots which are used for seasonal traditional events. Apart from these two seasons, pottery business halts in other seasons.

The busy moment is from Tazaungmon to Tagu and potters usually produce pots in Nattaw and Pyarho at which they can get better clay for the raw materials. In addition, due to its better quality of cooling water, pots made in these two months appeal customers much more than pots made in other months. A regular pot prices 800 kyats for wholesale market and it is sold at 1500-2000 kyats in retailed shops. Price at the retailed shops can be higher or lower depends on location and consumers' demand. However, since wholesale prices are generally fixed, the pottery makers and workers cannot get benefits from prices changes.

Discussion

The current study found that the pottery market in Oh-Bo is in crisis conditions and the pottery production business is vanishing from generation to generation. Currently there are only 11 households out of 344 doing pottery production while previously the whole Oh-Bo village did their living with pottery production. These days, the demand for large storage jars and drinking-water-pots has been disappeared and this affects not only to owners of pottery business but also to the employers of the business. Majority of employers in pottery business are local villagers who lives near the business area and are daily wage. Since the pottery market is active in only two seasons, it is also difficult for them to survive with working at the pottery business and some villagers moved to urban area for other job opportunities and hence, there are fewer workers for pottery making. In addition, rising competition from mechanical or factory-style pottery production market with cheap ceramics, the traditional hand-powered pottery making becomes more difficult every year. Moreover, there is almost no demand for handmade pottery household ware, Oh-Bo handmade pottery workshops, which mainly focus on producing water-pots, becomes dying family trade.

Limitation

The current study has some limitations. First, the present study only focused on Oh-Bo village and findings would not probably generalize the whole pottery business across the country. Second, due to time-limitation, the study conducted interview with only one owner of pottery workshops in Oh-Bo and it might be difficult to use the findings as representative for all Oh-Bo handmade pottery workshops. Finally, the study didn't analyze advantages and disadvantages among machine-powered pottery ware, handmade pottery ware and currently used plastic bottles and cans which would be important for future direction in maintaining handmade pottery tradition.

Conclusion and recommendation

Currently, the tradition of Oh-Bo' handmade pottery production becomes in danger of extinction due to economic reason. With decreasing demands of handmade pots and jars for household purposes as well as competition from mechanical pottery production, the demand for Oh-Bo handmade pottery ware becomes disappeared and it is important to save the fading craft. It could be better if Oh-Bo pottery workshops focus on other crafts which appeals to consumers in present times, including cups, smaller pots and vases. Since making the pottery ware by hand is a precious beautiful work, Oh-Bo pottery workshops could also focus more on making artistic things such as traditional pottery gifts with Oh-Bo signature, for example, as "Bagan's Lacquer ware". Finally, future studies focusing on analyzing handmade vs mechanical pottery business would be required for future directions to save the fading tradition.

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Figure1: the red clay



Figure 2: the black clay



Figure 3: putting block of clay on the spinning wheel



Figure 4: the spinning wheel



Figure 5: shaping and spinning the wheel by hand



Figure 6: shaping and spinning the wheel



Figure 7: shaping and spinning the wheel



Figure 8: shaping a pot



Figure 9: the rough pot



Figure 10: the rough pots



Figure 11: an anvil with sand



← 9 inches →

3 inches



Figure12: paddle tool



Figure 13: using the paddle and anvil



Figure 14: using the paddle and anvil



Figure 15: Plar tool



Figure 16: the floral design pots



Figure 17: the decorated pots



Figure 18: the zip-zap designs pots



Figure 19: pots upside down the ground layer



Figure 20: woods spread around the pile of pots



Figure 21: straw are fencing besides the woods



Figure 22: sticky mud is coated over the straw



Figure 23 : firing the pots



Figure 24: a woman carrying the
Sagaing pots