



A HISTORICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF POTTERY- MAKING AMONG THE MEITEIS OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Pottery as a craft forms a vital component of human civilisation and culture. This study attempts to explore the historical, technological and cultural aspects of pottery making among the Meiteis, an indigenous craft tradition rooted in Manipur, a region where numerous potsherds have been unearthed from various archaeological findings. The research aims to trace the evolution of pottery-making among the Meiteis and analyse traditional techniques. It further explores the symbolic significance of pottery in Meitei society and investigates the continuity and transformation of these practices over time. Employing a multidisciplinary methodology, the study integrates historical and literary analysis of ancient manuscripts, archaeological evidence review, comparative cultural studies and ethnographic fieldwork in key pottery villages. Through this comprehensive approach, the research seeks to illuminate the enduring legacy and adaptive resilience of Meitei pottery within the broader context of global ceramic traditions.

KEYWORDS: *Pottery, Traditional, Meitei, Technique, Culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, humans have recognized the necessity of storing food in various vessels and containers, a practice rooted in our hunter-gatherer origins. The invention of pottery emerged as a vital solution to this need. Pottery, which is essentially clay hardened by fire, serves as a significant indicator of cultural development in the field of archaeology. The transition to village life, coupled with significant improvements in essential crafts – such as

crafting wooden vessels, weaving with bark fibres, making baskets, and utilizing bows and arrows – laid the foundation for the art of pottery making.¹ E.B. Taylor supports Goguet’s insightful observation, which suggests that “the way in which pottery came to be made was people daubed combustible wooden vessels with clay to protect them from the fire till they found that clay alone would answer the purpose, and thus the art of pottery came into the world”.²

The history of pottery has been extensively studied, particularly for pottery shards, unlike textiles, are able to withstand decay when buried in the ground. For nomadic people, pottery was often impractical due to its weight and fragility. In numerous societies, it has served as a vital substitute for metal, and its history is significantly shaped by the development of other materials.³ The earliest evidence of pottery firing dates back to 6000 B.C. at a Neolithic site in Cyprus, though this initial attempt ultimately failed.⁴ The Jomon people of Japan are believed to be the earliest potters, distinguished from other foraging societies by their establishment of permanent villages.⁵ In contrast, pottery emerged as a defining feature of Neolithic communities and civilizations in different regions around the world. Sir Lindsay Scott notes that pottery did not originate from a single source; the pottery discovered in Jericho, which has been dated to the Neolithic period, is considered among the oldest.⁶ Additionally, there is archaeological evidence of pottery being fired using vertical kilns in Mesopotamia and Persia even before 4000 B.C.

Harappan pottery, commonly referred to as Black on Red Ware, showcased distinct technological advancements within the Indian subcontinent. Throughout the three phases of the Harappa civilization – early, mature, and late, the pottery making techniques remained consistent.⁷ According to Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, Harappan potters would first beat the clay until it was thoroughly dry, strain it through a cane sieve, and then shape it either by hand or on a wooden wheel.⁸ He noted that most of the vessels had a flat base, suggesting that the pots were removed from the wheel using a string or grass. Decorative elements on the pottery were applied before firing, utilizing techniques such as cording, incising, or creating impressions with a pointed tool, likely made from metal or wood. Additionally, designs were painted with a brush before the process of firing.⁹

According to H.D. Sankalia, pottery in India dates back to the prehistoric era and was crafted using two types of wooden wheels - the potter’s wheel and the foot wheel.¹⁰ He noted that the

foot wheel is regarded as the authentic potter's wheel, resembling those found in regions like Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Various techniques developed around 3000 B.C. in Mohenjodaro, such as drying the clay and straining it using a cane sieve, are still employed by traditional potters in Sindh today.¹¹ Additionally, potters in the Sindh region have been shaping the interior of their pots with another piece of wood held in their other hand. This technique is similar to methods used by potters in China and Japan.¹²

Gordon Childe argued that the creation of pottery was a common practice among various communities during the Neolithic period.¹³ He further suggested that the use of pottery could have emerged even prior to the development of agricultural economies. Childe theorized that pottery could have been discovered accidentally when a basket coated with clay was subjected to fire, rendering it watertight. He believed that the earliest pottery forms were inspired by familiar vessels made from materials such as gourds, woven baskets, wickerwork, and even human skulls.¹⁴

The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) is known for being the only plant that was exclusively cultivated for creating vessels, as many clay containers were modelled after its shape.¹⁵ Gourd-shaped vessels were favoured in various regions of Asia. Pottery served multiple purposes, providing sturdy containers for boiling and preparing food. Over time, people began crafting pots, bowls, and containers in a variety of designs and styles. Similar to spinning and weaving, pottery making was a household art that resulted in domestic items. In numerous cultures, pottery has traditionally been practiced by women. Pots were frequently adorned with decorations, with each culture and era developing its own unique patterns.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are-

- i. to trace the historical evolution of pottery making among the Meiteis through the exploration of archaeological findings and ancient manuscripts that reference pottery practices in Manipur.
- ii. to analyse the traditional techniques used by Meitei potters and document the tools, materials and processes involved in making pottery
- iii. to assess the continuity of techniques and the tradition of making pottery over time and investigate how traditional methods have adapted.



METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature and incorporates historical and socio-anthropological approaches. Primary sources (ancient manuscripts such as *Poireiton Khunthok*, *Panthoibi Khonggul*, *Chakparol*, *Loiyumba Shinyen*, etc.) and secondary sources (books and articles available both in print and digital forms) have been referred to. Field visits to pottery-making sites and interviews with traditional potters are also made requisites for carrying out the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The existence of pottery in Manipur dates back to the Neolithic era, where potsherds have been discovered in both the hilly regions and the valley at locations like Nongpok Keithelmanbi, Napachik, and Phunan. This cultural evidence is similar to that identified in South East Asia and South Asia.¹⁶ The potsherds from Nongpok Keithelmanbi have been dated to approximately 4460±120 years before present.¹⁷ An excavation conducted by O.K. Singh at Napachik uncovered a significant quantity of both plain and corded pottery. The corded pottery was crafted by hand and shaped using a pad wrapped with cord, and it was treated with slip.¹⁸ These pieces typically display reddish-brown and grey hues. The thermoluminescence dating technique has dated the finding at Napachik to around 1450 B.C.¹⁹

The use of pottery by the Meiteis and the making of pots by the Loi community since the ancient period have been suggested by ancient manuscripts. *Poireiton Khunthok*, a travelogue of Poireiton in search of habitable lands in the 1st century A.D., contains accounts of the use of pottery and references to the firing of pots by the Chakpa (Loi) community.²⁰ It has been stated in the *Panthoibi Khonggul*, a text ascribed to the reign of Khongtekcha (762-772 A.D.), that Panthoibi requested her father and brothers to ensure the inclusion of *chak chapu* (cooking pot) in her dowry.²¹ It also referred to the use of pots for storing drinking water.²² According to *Chakparol*, the Chakpas who settled near the foothills of the Nongmaiching range were the first to begin the art of making pots.²³ The manuscript suggested that pots were made by imitating the thalamus of a flower called *Nura Khudonglei* (*Melastoma malabathricum*).²⁴ *Ningthourol Lambuba* (a chronicle of Meitei kings) mentioned the use of pottery during the reign of Taothingmang in the 3rd-4th century A.D.²⁵ The *Loiyumba Shinyen*, a royal decree issued by Loiyumba (1074-1122 A.D.), recorded that Loiyumba assigned the Leishawonbam family to manufacture pots.²⁶ The text also referred to implements such as

phuyeichei (wooden beater), *leishuphal* (wooden platform to pound clay) and *suk* (pestle) used in making pottery.²⁷

The Meitei potters crafted pots solely by hand and still predominantly utilize this method, even after the introduction of the potter's wheel by Muslim migrants in the 17th century during Khagemba's reign.²⁸ T.C. Hodson remarked on the pottery practices of the Meiteis as,

*"It is roughly fashioned by hand, placed on a circular flat disk which is twirled by the thumb and forefinger of the free hand. A rough conventional pattern of cross lines is stamped on it with a piece of wood. The ovens are out in the open. The use of the wheel indicates that they have reached a higher standard than the Nagas... The pots made at these Loi villages are brought by boat to Imphal and there sold."*²⁹

The Meitei potters continue to create pots using traditional methods, specifically by hand and without a wheel, although some have begun to employ its use. There are minor variations in the nomenclature of the tools used depending on the location. The quality of the pottery is greatly influenced by the type of clay utilized, and the firing process is one of the most crucial steps in the craft. The potters avoid using the top layer of soil containing minerals, which necessitates digging at least 1-2 feet deep for clay.³⁰ Most pottery is crafted from red clay. The potters in Andro work with two types of clay, known as *Leitan* and *Leichreng*, while those in Thongjao, Chairel, and Nongpok Sekmai utilize *Leitan* and *Nungjreng*, all sourced from nearby locations.³¹ The dry clay mixture is pounded, and any impurities are removed using a *chegairong* (sieve) or *yangkok* (winnowing basket) before water is added to knead it into a paste.

The preparation of clay is an essential part of the art of pottery. Meitei pottery is crafted using a coiling technique that involves circular strips of clay.³² The pots are shaped on a base, which can be made from stone or an inverted pot. After the pots are shaped with a simple wooden beater, various decorative patterns are added using beaters of different designs. The pots are then left to dry in the shade since sun exposure can cause cracks during fire. Before the pots are fully dry, their outer surfaces are polished with the seed of *Kangkhil*.³³ A shed or workshop known as *phusashang* is needed for making and storing pots, along with another shed for firing them. The pots are fired in open furnaces using materials like bamboo, wood, rice husk, and straw.

The chemical alterations that occur in clay during firing are highly intricate and rely on factors such as the clay's composition, firing temperature, the rate of reaching that temperature, and the gases that interact with the pottery throughout the firing process. The calibre of pottery is significantly influenced by the choice and preparation of the clay, while the firing process itself is among the most crucial phases of the craft.³⁴ Firing not only transforms the physical properties of clay but also affects its coloration, indicating that pottery making likely represents humanity's earliest deliberate use of chemical transformation. Therefore, even in its basic form, the potter's craft was inherently complex, as it involved several distinct processes and a variety of techniques. The traditional tools utilized in pottery making by the Meiteis are minimal and these are elaborated upon below.

1. Leishu shuk (mortar and pestle)



Figure: Leishu shuk

A wooden mortar and pestle are essential for pounding and kneading clay. The pestle, referred to as *shuk*, typically measures between 7 to 10 feet in length, has a cylindrical shape, and is crafted from wood. The mortar, or *uku*, is also made of wood and features a hole on the front surface. Pounding the clay is important to eliminate air pockets and impurities, followed by kneading. Only small portions of the clay slime are kneaded at once to identify and remove any particles that cannot be ground. In Andro, potters call the mortar '*uku*' and the pestle '*leibak shuk*'.³⁵

2. Lepshum



Figure: Lepshum

It is a wooden base in the shape of an hourglass on which the clay, initially formed into a cylindrical tube by hand, is placed. The clay is progressively moulded into a pot on the *lepsum*. However, when making smaller pots, the *lepsum* is not necessary.³⁶

3. Phuyeichei (paddle)



Figure: Phuyeichei

This is a wooden beater typically crafted from the wood of trees such as *heikru* (*Emblica officinalis*) and *heibi* (*Vangueria spinosa*) due to their durability against cracks.³⁷ One side of the *phuyeichei* has a smooth finish, while the opposite side has marks designed to create impressions. This tool is utilized for striking the exterior surface of pots. During the early stages of pot-making, the smooth side is employed to shape the pot to the desired dimensions. At the end of the process, the marked side is used to create decorative impressions on the pot's outer surface. Pots are frequently adorned with designs like *nga maru* or *samjet maya* (herring or fish bone), *kei yen*, *thouri*, *tomloi*, *walong*, criss-cross pattern, and others.³⁸ In Andro, potters also make use of a wooden shaping beater known as *tektap*.³⁹

4. Phuyeinung



Figure: Phuyeinung

This is an oval-shaped stone utilized during pottery making to help shape the pot. The *phuyeinung* is held from within the pot and positioned opposite to the *phuyeichei*, allowing the potter to push the inner surface of the pot against the pressure exerted by the beater from the outside.

5. Kongreng



Figure: Kongreng

The edge of a *kongreng* shell (mussel) is employed as a scraper to smooth the pot's surface. The excess or thicker areas are refined by scraping with it. Occasionally, instead of using a mussel shell, a bamboo silver is also used to accomplish the same task.⁴⁰

6. Petap



Figure: Petap

Petap is a cotton cloth that is moistened with water and utilized during the pot-making process to smooth and shape the neck and rim of the pot.

7. Kangkhil



Figure: Kangkhil

Kangkhil refers to the flat, round seed of the *Entada scandens*, which is used to polish the outer surface of the pot, providing it with a shiny appearance. Polishing applies only to plain pottery, while decorated pots cannot be polished.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The craft of making pottery has been the primary livelihood of the Loi communities for centuries. Historically, only married women participated in this craft, with unmarried girls being barred from involvement. The field of archaeology in Manipur, although not widely recognised, primarily focuses on discoveries related to pottery and fragments of pots. Even though metal utensils have largely supplanted earthenware, pottery continues to hold significance in various domestic and ceremonial functions in Manipur. The skills required for pottery production have been transmitted across generations and are considered a vital aspect of the Meitei culture and economy. Despite the rapid growth in the manufacturing of contemporary utensils and pots due to technological advancements, the importance of traditional earthenware has consistently retained its prestige. Among the Meiteis, clay pots have been essential household items for countless generations. Initially, pottery was exclusively done by Meitei women. Over time, however, changes occurred, and now both men and women at the villages of Thongjao and Ningthemcha Karong are involved in this craft, while at Andro, it remains solely a practice of married women.



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