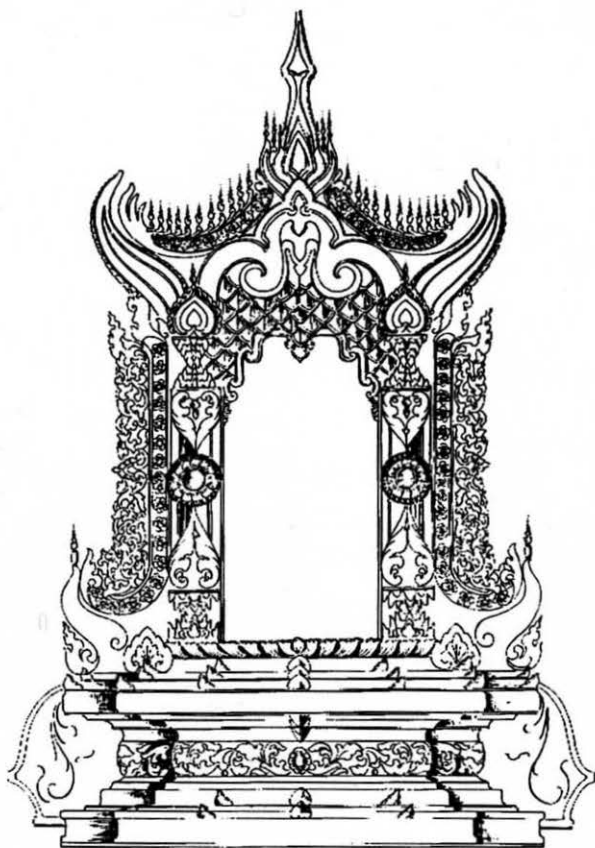


CROSSROADS:


An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies



Special Burma Studies Issue

Volume 4, Number 1
Fall 1988

Center for Southeast Asian Studies

Northern Illinois University 

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CONTEMPORARY BURMESE EARTHENWARE

H. Leedom Lefferts, Jr.

Material Culture and "Development"

J.S. Furnivall, in his *Colonial Policy and Practice* (1948), uses the example of colonial Burma to document the replacement, under the conditions of foreign colonial domination, of locally produced handicrafts—utilitarian artifacts used in the daily lives of the people—by imported and mass-produced objects.¹ He observed that during the early period of colonization up until 1870, Burma experienced an increase in wealth that, in spite of the opening of the Suez Canal, did not result in the wholesale replacement of local goods by imported material. Early colonization actually resulted in an expansion of local industry.

For the period from 1870 to 1923, however, Furnivall charted the replacement of locally-produced material by those materials from the metropolitan power. He noted that this replacement was not on a one-for-one basis. The colonial power's imports interfered with the relatively well-integrated structure of the colonized culture. Replacement of one item led to massive dislocations across a wide spectrum of occupations. Thus,

The introduction of foreign salt and the tax on local manufacture ruined the salt-boilers and the salt-fish industry, to the prejudice also of the potters who specialized in making the large pans for boiling salt....All these people, driven out of the towns and out of other occupations, had to look for employment on the land, and especially in rice cultivation, the only form of agriculture requiring much hand labor (Furnivall 1948:90).

Furnivall observed that, thanks to the expansion of cultivation, this dislocation of labor had little direct effect on wages. Nonetheless, the replacement of local industry by imports meant that the colonized people suffered from a constant and progressive destruction of their indigenous educational, technological, and industrial base.

Furnivall wrote at the end of the colonial era to chart the impact of that experience on the nations that were then becoming free. What he could not foretell were the ways individual nations would pursue their destinies over the years following independence. In particular, with respect to the Union of Burma,

¹I wish to thank Linda Eisenhart of the Smithsonian Institution, Anthropology Department, Processing Laboratory, for bearing with me in my search for these materials, and Dr. Karl Hutterer of the University of Michigan, Anthropology Department, for granting me access to the Orr Collection. This paper has also benefited from the discussions with Dr. Kenneth Orr.

the nation with which he was most concerned, he did not predict how the impact of the Burmese Way to (an independent) Socialism would affect the production of locally-made artifacts.

Furnivall, in his generalizations, also did not treat issues that might override the impact of colonization and the world market system that came to replace it. Thus, supplies from Western powers might not compete effectively with those produced locally that were better adapted to the local ecology. Or, perhaps, continuing problems of transportation might prohibit a sufficiently large marginal rate of return to warrant imports. Or, finally, ethnic preferences, especially in the case of cookware, might influence the kinds of vessels appropriate for use. Some of these factors have been outlined in Solheim's paper, *The Functions of Pottery in Southeast Asia: From the Present to the Past* (1965), which provides an overarching framework for discussion on the uses of ceramic wares in Southeast Asian cultures.

Burma, in its current political and economic context, is ideally situated to provide examples of the perpetuation of locally-made ceramic artifacts in an age of near universal replacement by machine-produced items. With an official policy that severely limits imports of non-essential goods, handicrafts in general, especially those that would be replaced by bulky, easily broken or damaged imported products, continue to be produced in large quantities.

However, additional factors may promote indigenous manufacturing that cannot be so readily explained by the ban on imports of foreign non-essential goods. Differences in production technology, design, and perhaps even use occur that might not be a part of the function caused by lack of replacement. In sum, many factors may play a role in Burmese earthenware production, ranging from the ban on imported goods to the fragility and bulk of the product, ecological or environmental determinants, and "ethnic" requirements for cooking and tastiness.

Walking around the Shwedagon in Rangoon, or any other pagoda, or even the streets of the city, one sees earthenware pots. One might correctly receive the impression that the Burmese are extremely friendly people, concerned that no one die of thirst in their hot and humid land.

If one travels by road, markets at intersections often include a pottery stand. These displays are, incidentally, quite similar to those recorded in a nearly lost classic, *A Monograph on Pottery and Glassware of Burma, 1894-1895*, by Taw Sein-Ko (1895).² If one has the time to visit a village, earthenware pots—glazed and unglazed, large and small, in use and broken—can be seen.

And then, of course, there is the *ngapi* factory, with its peculiar array of partially buried, large, glazed pots, unglazed lids, and piquant aromas.

But where do these pots come from? What are the ecological and social

²A copy of this slim volume, in extremely fragile condition, was located at the Yale University Library. A typescript of the text and photographs of the illustrations were made. One complete copy was sent to the Center for Burma Studies at Northern Illinois University; I have a second that may be sent on loan.

conditions of their production and distribution? What are their uses? To begin to answer these questions, I visited two major pottery-producing locations and the site of one individual entrepreneur. Moreover, at these pottery locations, I found interesting differences and potentially fruitful directions of inquiry where I did not expect to find them.

Three Pottery Production Sites in Burma

Twante—a district town about twenty-five miles west of Rangoon—is a relatively famous and familiar earthenware manufactory, at least to foreigners, because of its proximity to the capital. Some fifty privately-owned workshops occupy one section of the town. Labor is on a piecework basis. Workshop owners hire two kinds of workers—artisans and unskilled helpers. Artisans are potters, kiln stackers, kiln builders, and firers; they are all males and earn about twenty *kyat* per working day. Unskilled laborers do everything else and are paid approximately seven *kyat* per day; they can be of either sex.

Each workshop houses one or more wheels, clay mixing areas, drying racks for greenware, and one or more kilns. Clay is brought in from the banks of the nearby river and canal, sliced, and mixed with sand in the proportion of about six clay bricks to one basket of sand. This mixture is shaped into a tractor-tire shaped mass in the workshop. I was informed that so much clay is currently mined from river and clay banks that the government has imposed restrictions on the locations of digging sites.

The production process depends almost exclusively on the potter's wheel. Each pot is formed on a bat centered temporarily on the wheel. Once the pot's base, made from a pancake-sized lump of processed clay, has been placed and aligned on the bat, large, fat coils, produced by the helper, are laid in the desired form by the artisan who rotates the wheel counter-clockwise using his right foot. After each coil is placed, the helper rapidly spins the wheel in the opposite, or clockwise, direction while the potter stretches and thins the shape of the laid-on coil. This process is repeated several times to form the pot that, when taken from the wheel on its bat to be dried, is nearly in its final form. After the pot has dried somewhat, an unskilled helper will smooth out rough spots before firing.

All kilns are built by a single male specialist. No one with whom I talked knew of a kiln's falling into disuse, suggesting that production is maintaining a steady level or, perhaps, even an expanding one. Another man stacks the kiln; I was told one kiln can hold 600 pots of a two gallon size. Finally, a third man is responsible for the firing; I was told that one firer divides his time between about four kilns. This kiln is quite similar to the Chinese Jingdezhen egg-shaped kiln (Kerr 1986). However, the Burmese kiln lacks some modifications that would permit the production of sufficiently high temperatures to produce porcelain. A major modification is the lack of a chimney; the Twante kiln vents heat and air through a "beak"; the Chinese example uses a chimney and air holes.

Some pots from Twante are glazed; I was not able to see that process. Because of Twante's riverine location, almost all pots are shipped by boat.

The process I have sketched appears reasonable. Imagine my surprise when I arrived in Mandalay and travelled to the pottery quarter in Sagaing. Here is a quite different division of labor and a different manufacturing process: in approximately 100 out of 150 households in this pottery quarter, only women engage in earthenware manufacture. Each woman prepares her own clay, which is brought by oxcart from nearby and occasionally distant locations. Each woman does all her own work, up to the point of firing. Each woman owns her own material, including a wheel. Sometimes paddles and anvils are shared. Pots are formed on the wheel into "blanks." A woman makes one set of pots from the clay she has mixed; she processes these day by day until they are completed. Each pot is treated with a paddle and anvil three times after it leaves the wheel. The first time, the bottom is finished and the shape of the pot is roughed out. The second stage smooths the shape and completes some details. The final paddling completes the neck and lip and, if called for, adds decorations. I was told that decoration, up until six years ago, was added exclusively by means of engraved paddles; recently, some potters have begun etching flower decorations on pots. Completed pots are left to sit in the shade for three days and a fourth day in the sun.

The potter sells completed greenware to a woman who will fire it. The going rate is about seventy *kyat* for 100 cooking bowls. The pots are carried to the firing location, stacked in the open in constructions that contain about 600-800 pieces of varying size, piled with fuel materials, and fired. The bark used for firing comes by train from the north, the rice straw is brought by truck from Shwebo, and "cow pies" are manufactured in the village and sold to the firer. Fired pots are sold to middlemen who transport them to markets in Mandalay and other nearby towns.

The Sagaing potters recognize five different types of locally-produced, unglazed earthenware. The smaller pieces range from wide-mouth cooking and flower pots to water pots with narrow necks just wide enough for a person's fist to enter. In addition, there are lids and other miscellaneous pieces. Wide-mouth pieces are produced during the wet season, when internal drying may be a problem; narrow-necked water and other jars are formed in the dry season, when drying is not an issue. My Burmese tourist guide, a native of Mandalay, later said that the most prized water jars are those produced in February and March; she also admitted that cooking with earthenware makes food taste better. However, she herself does not use earthenware because she says it breaks too easily.

There are other pottery centers, to the north of Shwebo at Shwe-Nyein, where the big, black, glazed jars for processing *ngapi* are produced and then floated down the Irrawaddy (Adhyatman 1985:10-11), and at Bassein, another delta center similar to Twante (Apa 1984:171).

However, we ought not to think that all earthenware is made in centralized locations. On the right hand side of the road from Rangoon to Pegu, one lone man has his workshop in which he produces, fires, and sells what he makes. The clay and temper comes from nearby. All work, except the firing, is done in a single, interconnected, thatched-roofed structure. The display of earthenware found abutting the road outside his establishment evidenced an impressive command of a broad array of forms. Of course, one of the reasons why he located there was

because of the tourist traffic--both Burmese and foreign--on the road from Pegu to Rangoon. However, not too far distant was a small marketplace where his wares and those of others were for sale.

Burmese Earthenware Collections in the U.S.

The United States has at least two major repositories of Burmese earthenware: at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, and at the University of Michigan Anthropology Museum. The exact Burmese points of origin of the material contained at the Smithsonian are not specified. The Peacock Collection, created by the former Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Rangoon, was shipped in 1963; it originated either from the village in which Dr. Melford Spiro did his field work, or from a village in Twante District. The other recent collection was made in 1967 by Dr. William Sturtevant, who gathered material from many locations in the country. His earthenware, however, comes from Thaton District. In both cases, the material was sometimes collected not from communities in which it was made, but rather at places where it was for sale. In addition, the Smithsonian has material dating from as early as 1860, although much of it is poorly traced.

The Orr Collection, at the University of Michigan, is "relatively small" when compared to the Smithsonian material collection. Of particular interest are two pieces purchased in Rangoon that came from India, allegedly to serve the needs of the Indian populace in the city. Most of the pieces in the Orr Collection were broken in transit and repaired. As with the Smithsonian collections, some glazed pieces and stoneware pieces are included.

Conclusion: A Field for Exploration

In comparison with earthenware material collected from Thailand, that coming from Burma and available for study in the U.S. overfloweth. Lacking, however, are the range of studies that would permit us to document the Burmese earthenware industry in its many dimensions. A few published works (cf. Solheim 1964, 1967) provide a possible context for understanding some of the complexities of manufacture and usages of earthenware among T'ai speakers. In contrast, while we in the United States have relatively substantial collections of Burmese pots, we have almost nothing on Burmese pottery.

Discussions of earthenware seem to be almost entirely missing from reports of post-Ban Chiang archaeology in Mainland Southeast Asia.³ Until recently, earthenware must have provided the majority of the vessels with which people cooked, collected water, and engaged in a multitude of other activities needing

³This obviously and especially excludes the excellent work done in Philippine pre-history, where it appears earthenware is treated on an equal footing with imports from the rest of Southeast Asia and China (cf. Hutterer 1985).

containers. Most post-Ban Chiang reports from Mainland Southeast Asia contain only detailed analyses of celadon and other "elite" ceramics.

A re-orientation to earthenware in archaeological research would enable us to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of daily life of the common people of past years in Southeast Asia.

Many questions concerning the contexts of contemporary production, distribution, demand, and uses of Burmese earthenware remain. Moreover, for a multitude of reasons, if we initiate a study of Burmese pottery today, we may have the opportunity to understand the complex uses of earthenware in a context where it is relatively unaffected by the world market system. It is to be hoped that work can take place on this task.

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