

## Chapter 18

### Jars in the Central Highlands of Mainland Southeast Asia

*Louise Allison Cort and Leedom Lefferts*

Little attention has been paid to a tradition of jar acquisition, classification, use, and transmission in the mainland Southeast Asian Central Highlands. Since the early 1900s, scholars have documented the use and connoisseurship of stoneware jars in the highlands of insular Southeast Asia (e.g. Cole 1912; O'Connor 1983; Adhyatman and Ridho 1984; Harrisson 1986; Valdes, Nguyen-Long and Barbosa 1992). This paper, complementing the research done on the islands but focusing on the neglected mainland, is based on recent field work encompassing the highlands of Central Vietnam, northeastern Cambodia, and southern Laos, and on consultation of collections and related records at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) in Hà Nội and provincial museums in the region. It outlines the complex roles of jars in trade, wealth and inheritance, prestige, ritual, and aesthetic systems for the ethnolinguistic groups of this region.

A key feature of these jars is that they are not locally produced but exotic — manufactured at kilns as far as southern China, coastal Vietnam, northern Cambodia and Northeast Thailand, lowland Laos, Central Thailand, and Burma — and imported along well-worn trading routes into the highlands. Some



**Figure 18.1:** Central Highlands of mainland Southeast Asia, showing sites mentioned in this paper (Map by Daniel Cole, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution).

jars still in use in Central Highland households or excavated from cemeteries in the region date to the 12th–13th centuries, suggesting that the intricate system of acquiring, evaluating, using, and inheriting such jars began by that time and developed over centuries.

Our research shows that assertive and discriminating trade is necessary to amass jars of the desired types and that highly developed aesthetic systems, varying from group to group, determine the relative rankings of jars that lend prestige to the households and communities owning, displaying, and using them.

A contribution of our research is the extension of these findings beyond the modern national borders that have typically created boundaries to scholarship. By looking at jar holdings in Central Highland communities within all three nations, we can begin to outline nuanced variations within sub-regions based on aspects including access to trade routes and disruption and destruction caused by the wars of the second half of the 20th century.

### Jars in a Central Highland Household

Our fieldwork in 2006 and early 2007 took us into many homes in the highlands of Central Vietnam, northeastern Cambodia, and southern Laos.<sup>1</sup> The first house we visited — in Đắk Lắk province, Central Vietnam — introduced many aspects of the present state of jar ownership and use. Built of wood in a long rectangular plan, it had a formal entrance at one end and a kitchen door at the opposite end. Entering from the front, we were invited to take seats on mats in a reception area. As we sat facing our host, the head of the household — posed on the bench reserved for him — we also faced a prominent display of three jars along the wall to our left (Fig. 18.2). These constituted the wealth and pride of this household and



**Figure 18.2:** Three antique stoneware jars in a village house. Êđê Bih ethnic group, Đắk Lắk province, Vietnam, 2 March 2006 (Photograph: Louise Allison Cort).



**Figure 18.3:** Modern jars holding rice beer in various stages of fermentation. M'ong Gar ethnic group, Đắk Lắk province, Vietnam, 4 March 2006 (Photograph: Louise Allison Cort).

had arrived as the wife's possessions, inherited from her parents. We learned that the jars were arrayed in order of importance, with the most valuable one closest to the door. They were empty and were secured to the wall with cords. They were a noticeably disparate group, consisting of a large blue-glazed jar, an unglazed brown jar of similar size, and a smaller blue-glazed jar. Elsewhere, in the interior of the house, other jars — smaller, more uniform in appearance, bearing amber-brown glaze, and clearly new — stood in clusters near the wall, either filled with fermenting rice beer and covered with plastic, or drying upside down (Fig. 18.3). We were told that, in contrast to the occasional ritual roles of the heirloom jars on display, these new jars supplied rice beer for use in providing hospitality to everyday guests.

Our fieldwork unfolded as a process of discovering variations within the consistent pattern of jar ownership by households — variations in quantities of jars, varieties of jars, and systems for ranking jars resulting from both cultural and economic differences.

### Jars in Museums

Our attention was first drawn to the importance of the jars amassed in the Central Highlands of mainland Southeast Asia during an earlier visit to the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME). The museum's collection had been formed in the 1990s by means of intensive and well-documented collecting. The storeroom contained a cluster of unglazed and glazed jars, while more were on display in the longhouse built on the museum grounds by carpenters of the Êde ethnic group. Altogether the VME collection housed over 60 jars. Our research and that of others have dated most of the VME jars to recent centuries and identified them as types made by potters in Guangdong province, southern China, or at kilns set up in Central Vietnam by Việt (Kinh) potters or in southern Vietnam by immigrants from Guangdong. Among

them were blue-glazed and unglazed brown jars similar to those we encountered in the Đắk Lắk household described above.

Among the jars in the storeroom, however, one stood out — a large jar bearing dark brown glaze and of a distinctive form associated with the late Angkorian period (12th–14th century) (Fig. 18.4). When the registrar showed us the acquisition record (acc. no. 34.97.38.43, height 63.0 cm), we learned that the Khmer jar had been acquired in 1997 from its owner, a 78-year-old man of the Mnông Preh ethnic group living in a village in Đắk Lắk province. The Mnông Preh name for the jar was *ché rlung mal*. The record noted that the Mnông considered a *ché rlung mal* jar to be the most ancient type of jar and valued it highly; its use was reserved for important ceremonies within the community.

As we reviewed the records for other jars, we discovered additional kinds of information concerning duration of ownership (e.g. the jar was already in the family when the owner was a child, or it had been passed down in the owner's family for a specific number of generations); how the family had acquired the jar (e.g. bought from a Cham person in 1946 or acquired from a Cham person around 100 years ago); how the jar had been inherited (e.g. a female owner had received it from her parents 60 years ago or a male owner had received it from his father); and the value of the jar, most often expressed in terms of the number of animals that would have been expected in trade (although the VME had acquired its jars in exchange for cash payments). For example, one rare jar with a miniature jar attached to its shoulder, known as a *ché tuk bu nak* (“mother holds child jar”), was valued at 1 elephant and 15 buffaloes. That jar had also been acquired in an Êde village in Đắk Lắk province. The jar's record (97.38.38) noted further details: it would be used in a ceremony, sponsored by a wealthy family, in which seven buffaloes rather than the typical single animal would be sacrificed. Whenever the jar was empty of rice beer, it must be “fed” by filling it with rice and eggs. When a woman in the household gave birth, the jar had to be taken to the forest. The family had acquired the jar from a Lao person and owned it for six generations.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of the national Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and the provincial museums in the five provinces in the Central Highlands as repositories of jars together with detailed records about them which were collected directly from the previous owners. Moreover, we came to think of the highland communities of jar owners as creators and proprietors of a special kind of “museum” collection. As we learned during fieldwork, however, the continuity of collections within highland village households had been severely disrupted during the war in the 1960s and 1970s. In Vietnam, villagers were relocated under the “strategic hamlet” program and villages were razed by the South Vietnamese army to destroy any resources that would have supported North Vietnamese soldiers or villagers attempting to return home. If time permitted, villagers buried their most precious jars and other possessions before fleeing, but they could not always locate the place of burial upon their return, or else the site had been destroyed by bombing — or, in one case described to us, by a rampaging herd of wild elephants. During field work in Cambodia, we heard stories indicating that similar losses of jars



**Figure 18.4:** Angkorian period stoneware jar, Cambodia or Northeast Thailand, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, 34.97.38.43 (Photograph: Louise Allison Cort).

took place as the result of the destruction of highland villages by the Khmer Rouge. In southern Laos, American bombing along the Hồ Chí Minh trail also took its toll. Americans living in southern Laos in the early 1970s bought jars from uplanders who came door-to-door selling their possessions to get money to buy food.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the region, postwar transformations of societies and economies have further propelled the losses of jars from households. In Vietnam, one Hồ Chí Minh City-based businessman has amassed an entire longhouse full of jars as part of an amusement park located in Đà Lạt, but not one of those jars has a record concerning past ownership or location. Only in Vietnam were some sales made to museums that now preserve both the jars and their stories.

### Jars in Trade

The highlands of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos are distinguished from the rest of mainland Southeast Asia by the absence of the technology for making stoneware jars. (The reasons for this absence remain to be elucidated.) The only potters in highland communities are women, who make earthenware pots used in kitchens and for ritual (Lefferts and Cort 2010). Thus all stoneware jars entered the communities as the result of trade. The highlands were rich in desirable resources and products (Bourotte 1950: 16–8). As noted above, the most valuable jars were acquired in trade for elephants, highly prized for labor and as pack animals for long-distance journeys. Others were exchanged for water buffalo, cattle, or pigs. One jar in the VME collection (09.02.08.113) is recorded as having been bartered for 800 kilograms of cinnamon bark.

VME records suggest the various peoples involved in such trade. Cham traders presumably brought jars from kilns operating along the coast of Central Vietnam or further south in the vicinity of Hồ Chí Minh City. They were descendents of people living in the Cham kingdoms that controlled much of what is now Central Vietnam from the early first millennium through the 15th century or later. Chamic peoples have continued to play important roles in trade with the highlands because they share related Austronesian languages. Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) traders had special connections through Mon-Khmer language affinities with the Hre, Co, Bahnar, and other speakers of related languages. Traders coming up from the coast brought salt, fermented fish, rice, pigs, and cash in addition to jars to exchange for highland goods. Other traders approached from the interior. The Lao village of Ban Don (Buôn Đôn) in Đắk Lắk province, near the Cambodian border, was an important trading center through the French period (1859–1954) (Hickey 1982: 168, 240, 297). It was the place people came to acquire elephants. Members of highland ethnolinguistic groups known for their prowess in elephant hunting and training took them to Buôn Đôn to exchange for jars.

But uplanders did not simply wait for jars to arrive; they went in search of them. In Vietnam we heard stories of grandparents who had walked to Burma to get jars. In Northeast Thailand stoneware potters told us about *kha* (non-Lao-speaking uplanders) who came down from the mountains and across the Mekong river looking for jars — only old jars in perfect condition.

Differences in the assortments of jars still held in households or transferred to the col-



**Figure 18.5:** Jar, Maenam Noi kilns, Singburi province, Central Thailand, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, S2005.314 (Photograph: Robert Harrell, Freer/Sackler, Smithsonian).

lections of the five provincial museums in the Vietnamese Central Highlands appear to reflect variations in interactions with traders from the coast and the interior, relating to linguistic connections as well as to geography and proximity to access routes through river valleys leading to the coast or the interior plains. In contrast to the Khmer jar brought into Đak Lak province, mentioned above, two large jars made at the Maenam Noi kilns in Singburi province, Central Thailand, in the 15th or 16th century are in the collection of the Kon Tum provincial museum, further north (Fig. 18.5). They had belonged to a Jeh-Trieng community; Jeh-Trieng living further west in Laos may have provided a link in the route that brought the Thai jars into the highlands. Angkorian-period jars, rare in Vietnam, are comparatively abundant in northeastern Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> In southern Laos, such jars are outnumbered by yet another type of jar — source still unknown — found also in the adjacent northern half of the Vietnamese highlands (Fig. 18.6).

Once introduced to the upland region, jars circulated within local exchange systems, following the fluctuating economic circumstances of households. Movement of jars was facilitated by the overlap of ethnic groups within regions now divided by modern political boundaries. For example, the Mnông (Pnong) live in both Vietnam and Cambodia; the Jeh-Trieng and B'rau live in both Laos and Vietnam.



**Figure 18.6:** Jar, probably from southern Laos, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, S2005.145 (Photograph: Robert Harrell, Freer/Sackler, Smithsonian).

### Jars in Aesthetic Systems

These practical determinants for acquisition of jars relate complexly to variations within the aesthetic systems that the various highland ethnolinguistic groups have created to frame their jar collections and define their tastes. As we learned in Vietnam through our fieldwork and study of museum collections in collaboration with Dr. Luu Hung of the VME, each ethnolinguistic group maintains a distinctive system for naming jars, ranking them in terms of appearance and value and specifying their use in ceremonies of various types (Luu Hung 2008). Knowledge of this information is maintained in the memory of male heads of households, although in most communities the jars are the property of women and are passed down mainly to daughters. Knowledge of jars extends beyond the family to the community as a whole and includes awareness of cumulative jar holdings and stories of jars now lost.

The features by which jars are categorized and ranked include size (both height and diameter), capacity, diameter of the mouth, the presence or absence of glaze (with some communities favoring unglazed jars), color (of the glaze or unglazed clay), decoration (incised, molded, or applied), and the presence and number of lugs. The distinctions may be extremely subtle: two jars that looked identical to our eyes proved to have different names and values, based on a minute difference in the thickness of the wall. The Êde Bih consider jars ornamented with bands of applied clay bosses — which they term “necklaces” — to be female. The Mnông are known to prize blue-glazed jars of the sort produced in Guangdong province or in southern Vietnam, whereas the Êde living in the same region prefer brown jars. Future fieldwork should explore how this distinction in preference may relate to the availability or

rarity of jars and how it may reflect the accommodation of the groups to a goal of avoiding conflict while living in close proximity.

### Jars in Ritual

Perusal of photographs taken while the Lao–Cambodia–Vietnam Central Highlands were under French colonial occupation gives an indication that then, as today, these imported jars were important ritual implements (Condominas 1965, 1977; Hemmet 2006). As noted earlier, the ritual context varies in formality and intensity from hospitality for guests to communal “new year” ceremonies to life-cycle rituals, beginning in childhood and ending in old age. New jars purchased in the market are used for making beer to welcome guests. Large, important heirloom jars are employed for brewing and serving beer on the occasion of the annual water buffalo sacrifice of the community or for life-cycle events of individuals (Condominas 1977). Life-cycle events require certain numbers and kinds of jars, with the requirements becoming more demanding with the sponsor’s increasing age. Jars also honor the deceased. In highland cemeteries it is usual to see new and sometimes older jars placed on recent graves, although we have been told that people aware of the possibility of theft now bring their most precious jars back to the village after the ritual is completed.

Beer is brewed and consumed for almost every communal activity. The preferred brew is a mixture of steamed rice, rice husks, and yeast, packed into jars and allowed to ferment for weeks or months. Men and women in highland communities told us that it was possible to brew beer in earthenware pots, although such pots would not last long. The arrival of stoneware jars in highland communities — as early as the 12th century, as suggested by archaeological evidence for Chinese and Angkorian jars from cemeteries in Lâm Đồng province (Bùi Chí Hoàng, Vũ Nhật Nguyễn and Phạm Hữu Thọ 2000; Bùi Chí Hoàng 2007) — presumably made possible a longer period of fermentation (up to several years) and thus the creation of specially aged brews for special ceremonies.

The arrival of stoneware jars of various forms and colors probably also encouraged an elaboration of ritual. Cambodian ethnographer Ang Choulean has likened drinking beer to “communion with the divinity” (pers. comm. 2007). In festivals, the rice beer prepared in jars is offered to the deity together with the blood of the ritually sacrificed animals and then shared in prescribed order by community members (Condominas 1977). Certainly, this communal activity is governed by rules of status and hierarchy. We observed that both women potters and their male assistants partook even in the context of making earthenware pots, where beer was poured over the stands on which the pots were made (Fig. 18.7).<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

This paper outlines the various roles and histories of acquisition of jars imported into the Central Highlands of mainland Southeast Asia. While we present ethnographic evidence, we suggest ways to think of aspects of history that remain to be confirmed by archaeological testing. Trade routes used in recent memory certainly follow paths developed long ago, for traffic into and across these mainland highlands was an important aspect of the prehistory and history of Southeast Asia as a whole (Cooke and Li Tana 2004; Tran and Reid 2006). Jars made at kilns in southern China became important as trade goods by the 12th century and the presence of 12th-century Chinese jars in highland cemeteries suggests that highland communities were among the earliest recipients in mainland Southeast Asia. Although Angkorian stoneware jars of similar vintage appear not to have participated in trade by sea, their presence in the highlands demonstrates overland trade affiliations. Jars from Burma, Central Thailand, and lowland Laos later supplemented or replaced products of Angkorian kilns. As stoneware jars became available, they undoubtedly wrought significant transformations in the material culture, social organization, and ritual of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Central Highlands. They offered new modes of accumulating and displaying wealth and facilitated the evolution of ritual practice.

In the present, these coveted exotic jars have complex roles. Jars serve as important mechanisms for greeting visitors. Collections of jars are similar to bank accounts — they represent family wealth amassed over generations. Displayed with pride in the household and during life-cycle rituals, jar collections reflect



**Figure 18.7:** Tapping on rice beer jar rim to call spirits before anointing earthenware pot production, Tamphuan ethnic group, Ratanakiri province, Cambodia, 17 January 2007 (Photograph: Leedom Lefferts).

the prestige and success of the household. As ritual equipment, jars are essential to the enactment of important communal festivals and to the proper treatment of the dead. Whether on display or employed in ritual, they represent shared aesthetic standards of the community. The mainland Southeast Asian Central Highlands, now divided among three nations, used to form a coherent ecological region with similar adaptations by different members of differing linguistic groups. Through consideration of the commonalities among these peoples, including stoneware jars and related rituals, we may once again recover traces of the past.

### Notes

1. In Vietnam we conducted research in collaboration with Dr. Luu Hung and Mr. Tran Trung Hieu of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (Luu Hung 2008). In Cambodia, Leedom Lefferts collaborated with Dr. Ang Choulean and Mr. Chy Rotha, Royal University of Fine Arts, Phnom Penh. We express our appreciation to all for their knowledge, guidance, and companionship.
2. Two such jars, collected by Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. Snyder in Pakse in 1974, have been donated to the Freer Gallery Study Collection, FSC-P-4270-71 (Rehfuss 2008: 22–3).
3. The very abundance of these jars of Angkorian style challenges the assumption that production of such jars ceased with the decline of the Angkorian empire. A recent discovery of kiln sites east of Angkor suggests a possible source of such jars for highland Cambodia (Hendrickson 2008).
4. This practice was observed in a village in northeastern Cambodia in 2007.

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