DIOLA POTTERY OF THE FOGNY AND THE KASA

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Separated from the modern capital of Dakar by rivers and difficult roads, the Diola of the Casamance in southern Senegal, West Africa, remain largely traditional and self-sufficient. Theirs is a subsistence economy in which the more utilitarian crafts, among them pottery, play an important role. The same was true in the past. Dozens of small trash middens filled with pottery and other artifacts now stand as archaeological sites where ancient Diola villages once flourished. A knowledge of modern uses for these artifacts, and an understanding of the social forces behind their manufacture, can help us gain a fuller picture of Diola society as it was in the past. In fact, it is just this special concern with the use of careful ethnographic analogy that has initiated much that is new and exciting in today’s archaeology. It is important to study pottery solely for chronology and areal distributions, archaeologists are now turning their attention to what it can tell us about social and economic change.

These interests led me, while in Senegal, to make a side-study of Diola pottery. For two years (1964-66) my husband and I did fieldwork in two Diola villages. The first, Jipalém (pseudonym) was north of the Casamance River among the recently Islamized Fogny Diola. In our compound lived one of the most productive potters in the village. The second year we were in the more traditional, non-Islamized, or pagan, section of the Casamance called the Kasa, south of the river. I was doing archaeological work in old Diola sites, and nearby was the village of Ejungun which served as the center of pottery manufacture for a very large area. By this time I was hoping to find out what the cultural differences between the Fogny and the Kasa as reflected in their pottery. This, in spite of the fact that all Diola pottery shares basic features of technology, much in the way that all 210,000 Diola share basic principles of social organization such as small descent units, absence of elaborate political institutions, and the practice of wet or inundated rice agriculture.

In the northern village of Jipalém, pottery manufacture is, as among all Diola, a woman’s task. Only a few women in each compound know how to pot. They are, in a sense, craft specialists; but only part-time. Pottery manufacture is confined to a two or three month period, at the end of the dry season when the rice and peanuts have been harvested; the salt has been boiled out of crusty, sandy deposits, and baskets have been woven to replace old, useless ones. The women who know how to make pots have learned after marriage. As one woman put it: “They cannot learn as girls from their mothers, who will boss them too much and they will run away.”

Since residence is always patrilocal—that is, with the husband’s people—and since the rules of exogamy within the compound, and within the quarters (cluster of compounds), are stringent, women are forced to move out when they marry. They may still be within their natal village. However, they will marry into a quarter that may be as far—two to ten kilometers—from the one they were born in, as a quarter of a neighboring village. In the new quarter there may be no potter to learn from. If a woman is highly motivated to learn, which is not always the case, she will have to go to a neighboring quarter. This fact, plus a high rate of divorce, encourages the circulation of women and discourages the perpetuation of individual styles at one locality. The opposite case, for example, has been proposed for the Arikara of North America where strict mother-daughter transmission of pottery skills, plus a matrilocal rule of residence, kept pottery designs within localized matrilineages.

The basic techniques of pottery manufacture are the same for the entire Diola area north and south of the river. Indeed, some techniques, if not universal, are certainly widespread in the world: the use of a rotary bowl or plate to turn the pots, and the coil method of building up the vessel walls. Other techniques, if considered together, are characteristic only of the Fogny Diola. They may be best described by referring to the work of one woman, Ajen, our middle-aged neighbor from Jipalém. Her work was typical of the other Fogny woman whom I observed.

Come April, Ajen, with the help of other women of her compound, built a potting shed from palm leaves and poles. A roof overhead prevents the clay from drying out too fast. That year Ajen had two assistants; a woman from the next compound eager to learn, and her sister, married into the neighboring village, anxious to receive for her a handsome number of Ajen’s pots. Their first task is to procure and prepare the clay. Clay sources are more than a kilometer and a half from the compound, in an area between the ricefields and the river. Women from all the neighboring villages come here to gather clay since, in their judgment, the clay there is heavy and the pots won’t crack. Once taken home in heavy baskets carried on the head, the clay is stored in a shady spot. As it is needed, the assistants pound large lumps in a goatskin with the aid of a wooden pestle used to pound rice. When the clay is soft and pliable, a pulverized potsherds grit is mixed in—what the archaeologists call ‘sherd temper’.

Construction of different types of pots obviously requires different procedures. In making an ejogey, or large round jar for carrying water.
from well to house, the main steps employed are: building the base from a single lump by pinching coils into each other and smoothing the walls upwards while rotating the base plate with the left hand, shaping the upper third or shoulder area with the help of a paddle, and, finally, making the mouth. Most women consider that this last step is the most difficult. At the end, any depression on the walls is corrected and if the potter is skillful, an amazingly symmetrical shape will emerge.

The decoration is added next. A tiny braid is made from a vine, and rolled on the shoulder area to produce a subtle dentate pattern. Then with a flourish the potter signs her pot by incising a few lines on the neck. For a long time I assumed this was an expression of aesthetic pride, only to find out that with characteristics Delta practicality was done in order to tell one's own pots from those of a companion when women potted together. That year Ajen did it out of habit. There was little danger of having her pots confused with the first lopsided efforts of her inexperienced apprentices.

From eight to ten such pots is Ajen's average for a day's work. At the end of three weeks she has perhaps two hundred pots of different sizes and shapes drying out in the sun before being fired. The morning this is to happen, the vessels are decorated with a wash or slip, a thin solution of water and special yellowish clay. Dipping a bundle of straw in this liquid, Ajen hurriedly,
and somewhat desertory, rubs it on the outside of some jars and the inside of open bowls. Other vessels are only splattered with the liquid. The yellowish clay apparently contains iron oxides so that it turns bright red when fired.

Late the same afternoon all the vessels are taken to the 'oven'; an open round hole over fourteen feet in diameter and about four feet deep, just outside the compound walls. The bottom of this hole has been lined with a layer of palm stems on which the women slowly and carefully arrange the pots: the big round jars first, the smaller bowls next, and finally the flaring bowls facing upwards. Fuel for firing is laid on top like the layers of a cake as the pile is covered first with coarse, then with light straw, and finally with bundles and bundles of dried leaves. Each of these layers is carefully packed in between the vessels. When all is ready, the pile is set on fire and left overnight to burn.

The next day, the still-smoldering, red-hot pots are lifted out and laid on the grass to cool. They are then tested by tapping with the knuckles (a hollow sound means there is a crack), and by pouring water into them. Small cracks can be repaired with cooked rice, but badly damaged vessels are simply smashed and reused as temper.

A few lightly cracked ones can be used for storage of non-liquids such as salt, rice, seeds, or palm nuts. Of the 179 pots made in this particular batch, eleven were destroyed and eight kept for non-liquids—a very good ratio and a testimonial to Ajen's professional expertise.

Let us at this point stop to ask what an archaeologist could learn by observing the manufacturing techniques alone. First, one learns to identify sherd temper; this is hard to do in archaeological specimens, so the practice on ethnographic ones helps. Also, one can assume that the rotary plate and the coil method may have been used in the past, and one learns to look for signs of these. By knowing that open ovens are used today, and finding signs of them in old sites, one learns to disregard variable firing, inevitable in this kind of oven, as being of possible chronological import. Further, one can learn to recognize simple tools used in decoration: a rolled braid, a leaf, a comb, shell stamping. Finally one can get a pretty good idea of per-capita production by a single woman.

More interesting, however, is what one can learn about vessel shapes and their modern uses. It is precisely in this area that variation and complexity in Deir pottery lie; in the wealth of shapes with different functions. They suggest to us some relevant problems of classification. For instance, there has been a debate in American
Pottery shapers: a, the three sizes of water jars—a, a kabikeg to store water; b, an efegagi to carry liquids on the head; c, an erummbai to pour liquids—d, the small wide-mouth cooking pot called the eburgi; e, the double boiler for steaming cereals; f, the incense burner where a plant is burned to drive away the insect odor of baboon houses in the rainy season.

Of the new shapes the most interesting is the one called the ebuteele. The form has a wide Islamic distribution, and it occurs in North Africa. It was probably introduced to the Fogy Diola by the Mandingo who have long been Islamized. The Diola use it only to carry water to the fields. That it is a new form in the Fogy is attested by the fact that only three of the Jipolam potters, including Ajen, know how to make them. All three potters are in their forties or younger.

In fact, the subtle differences in style that exist between the pots made in Jipolam usually follow age lines. The older ladies cannot make the ebuteele, nor, they claim, can they 'sign' their pottery. Also, they use somewhat more profuse 'plastic' decoration than younger women, rubbing a spiral shell with pointed spikes over the bottom of the vessel, and making incisions on the shoulder area with the use of a fish spine. These differences, however, and the variations between the pottery of different villages are largely a matter of emphasis. The degree of similarity over the entire Fogy-Diola area is truly amazing.

Turning now to the Kasa area south of the river where we find the Diola town of Ejgunj, the situation here is quite different. Jipolam in the Fogy was fairly isolated, but Ejgunj is really a section of Oussouye, the administrative center for a large area. While Jipolam was located inland, Ejgunj is virtually on an arm of the Cassamance River, a fact which gives it access to a large area by canoe. These two factors help explain why the women of Ejgunj have become the commercial potters for the entire area. They serve the area of Pte. St. Georges, Oussouye itself, west to Kabrousse and Diermerring, and as far north as the islands of Niomoune, an area of over twenty by forty kilometers. Nowadays, women outside of Ejgunj have largely stopped making pots and instead buy Ejgunj-made vessels with surplus rice. This cooperation works out very well, since the Ejgunj people are too near a town and too over-populated to have large ricefields. Nonetheless, Ejgunj women still do a certain amount of work in the ricefields and, like women elsewhere in the world, manage their households.

During the dry season, which begins in March, even a casual stroll through Ejgunj reveals women potting in every backyard. Old ladies, young ones, all are busy searching for clay, gathering mollusks for temper, turning their pots, and loading them in canoes for sale in distant markets. No wonder, then, that the way in which pottery knowledge is transmitted between generations is different here than in Jipolam. Rather than casually and after marriage, Ejgunj women learn fairly early, and usually from their mothers. Since the village is large and family names (within which marriage is prohibited) are numerous, most young men marry endogamously—that is, they tend to marry home-town girls. Women in Ejgunj, therefore, usually stay put after marriage or move next door to their husband's house. As a result, not only are potting techniques and design motifs passed from mother to daughter but they are kept within the village.

There are other obvious differences between Ejgunj and Jipolam pottery. While the latter use sherd temper, Ejgunj women use pounded shell. The favored species is a uniole (lympancuratorius) which grows abundantly in the surrounding mangrove. The shells are first burned in piles, then pounded in mortars before they are added to the clay. Since the gathering of mollusks has been important in the Kasa area for centuries, if not millennia, the use of shell temper is a logical by-product of their use as food. Mollusks, and therefore shell temper, are absent from the Fogy area.
Simple implements used in Ejungun for decorating the water jars: a, d, f, sticks to smooth the walls; h, a comb to braid and make punctations on the shoulder; c, a rolled leaf to smooth the mouth; i, a tray braid to decorate the shoulder area; k, sheet metal to scrape the walls and lighten the weight of the vessel; l, a coil of clay before being flattened; m, the syranguous shell which serves for temper and to decorate with punctations.

The coils from which the vessel walls are made are flattened before application in the village of Ejungun.

Other differences between Ejungun and Jipalom potters are more secondary. Ejungun women, for instance, do not build potting sheds but use their backyards instead. The pottery plates they use to turn the pots are flat and they flatten the clay coils before applying them, in contrast to the pinching technique of Jipalom. Ejungun women also decorate their pots more profusely. A common water jar like the one described for Ajum would in Ejungun receive two kinds of braid impressions, plus comb incisions and punctations. Conversely, Ejungun women use less red wash. Speaking impressionistically, the Ejungun product looks rather like the pottery made by the older generation in Jipalom.

The greatest obvious divergence between the pottery of the two areas lies in the shapes of the pots. Vessels to carry and store water are identical. But Ejungun women make in addition a large one-handled cup from which the port drink palmwine with the help of a ladle. The prototype is a lovely wooden cup still seen sometimes, but rarely made because it is time-consuming to carve. Nowadays the Fognyo-Diola do not make these cups any more. First, let me review fifty years they have embraced Islam, which forbids the drinking of palmwine as the symbol of the old pre-Muslim religion. The ebueles is not made by Ejungun women because they are not Islamized. In addition, neither the double-boiler for millet, nor the funnel for pouring millet beer is present in Ejunger. This is due to differences in subsistence. Millet and sorghum were introduced into the Fognyo area of Jipalom, together with Islam and other crops such as peanuts, by the neighboring group, the Mandingo or Malinke. Such influences have bypassed the Kasa area which has little well-drained land and limited contact with the Mandingo.

Contrasts between the archaeological pottery that I excavated in the Kasa and the modern pottery of Ejungun are also interesting from the viewpoint of social change. In the most recent of two archaeological periods established for the ancient potters, continuity with today is marked in matters of manufacture and decoration. Shell temper was used, as well as decoration with a slip, braid impressions, and punctations with shell and comb. However, two forms occur archaeologically only. One is an enormous bottle-shaped container, obviously used for palmwine storage before the Portuguese introduced the demijan. The other is a small, lidded pot which was probably used for cooking rice, the only food the Diola have which they feel absolutely needs a lid to cook. Today this vessel has been replaced by the iron pot and the iron lid.

Other kinds of inferences can be made from the Diola middens beyond parallels in the pottery. For instance, two kinds of middens are made today: pure shell heaps on the side of the rivers, where families go to shell the mollusks so that they will have to carry only the meat home, and ordinary refuse dumps near the houses. In addition to some shell the latter also contain broken pottery in large quantities, animal bones, and kitchen refuse. Both kinds of shell midden also occur archaeologically. Knowing their modern parallels helps to reconstruct ancient courses of the river; and by analogy with the modern situation, we can calculate the number of houses that once existed and can give approximate population figures even though nothing but the middens now remains.

To conclude, then, what have we learned from Diola pottery? (i) That is useful in understanding Diola society, and the reverse? What have we learned about the relationship between pottery styles and forces in the society which make for or against change? First, let me review the factors that contribute to the basic stylistic similarity of pottery north and south of the Casamance River. The most important of these is historical: the Fognyo migrated north initially from somewhere in the Kasa. Then, in each of these two areas, standard forms and techniques are diffused, in one case by circulating the women, in the other by circulating the pots. As far as stylistic conservatism through time is concerned, I think there are several reasons for this. One is the overwhelming value placed in Diola society on the function of the pottery and the complete indifference to surface aesthetics. So long as the need to transport water remains, so will the rounded jars. And embellishment is disregarded in favor of symmetry, lightness, and durability. A corollary of the stress on function is the use of pottery for utilitarian needs only. The opposite was true of the pottery made by many Latin American Indians, for example, where special ceramic pottery had social functions as well—for instance, as grave-goods for important people. Among the Diola, rank and class are minimized and a wealthy man is distinguished at death by the party his kin give rather than by what is buried with him. Material possessions such as pottery do not serve as a symbol of status differences. The Diola are preeminently pragmatic people and their society is strongly egalitarian.