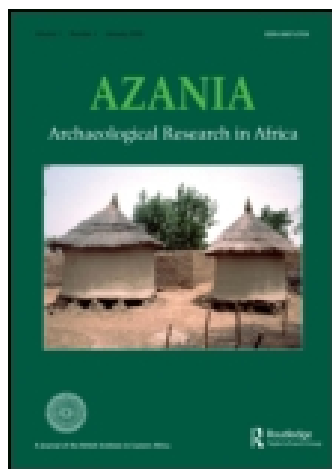


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The social and symbolic context of the royal potters of Buganda

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This paper describes the technical activities of the contemporary makers of the royal pots of Buganda and the social context of this technology and its products, alongside the symbolic world of which these are a part. The ethnoarchaeological research presented here suggests that Ganda pottery was not only a technical and functional product, but was also socially and symbolically constructed, reflecting the moral values of society. This paper identifies pottery in Buganda as a symbolic source of health, which has resulted in the establishment of royal potters who make ritually clean royal pots by following strict taboos in order to protect the health of the *kabaka* (king) and the kingdom. The unfortunate archaeological implications of this work are that it may be the intangible and archaeologically elusive activities of the royal potters that make their pots royal are not necessarily the tangible ones.

Keywords: Buganda; pottery; technology; symbolic; health; medicine

Ce document décrit les activités techniques de ceux qui fabriquent aujourd'hui les poteries royales du Buganda, présentant le contexte social de cette technologie et de ses produits, ainsi que l'univers symbolique dont ils font partie. Les recherches ethno-archéologiques présentées ici suggèrent que la poterie Ganda était non seulement un produit technique et fonctionnel, mais qu'elle était aussi socialement et symboliquement construite, reflétant les valeurs morales de la société. Cet article identifie la poterie au Buganda comme une source symbolique de santé, une idée qui aboutit à la création de potiers royaux qui produisent des poteries royales qui sont rituellement pures en vertu de leur obéissance à des tabous stricts qui visent à protéger la santé du *Kabaka* (le roi) et du royaume. Ce travail a des retombées malheureuses pour les archéologues, dans la mesure où il est possible que ce soient les activités intangibles, et archéologiquement fugaces, des potiers royaux qui rendent royales leur poteries, plutôt que des activités tangibles.

Introduction

Within sub-Saharan Africa royal smelters and smiths have frequently been identified by ethnoarchaeological studies (e.g. Helms 1993; Herbert 1993; Reid and MacLean 1995). However, royal potters have not been investigated and Herbert (1993, 218) has even questioned their existence. Within this context, the identification of two active groups of royal potters in Buganda, whose ritual role within society is still recognised, is therefore highly significant.

Kaggwa ([1907] 1934) and Roscoe (1911) were the first to record traditions that included the royal potters of Buganda, which remember them as ritual and

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technological specialists who had existed within the kingdom since its establishment in the mid-second millennium AD. However, it was not until Trowell's (1941) paper *Some royal craftsmen in Buganda* that the first ethnography of the potters was produced, albeit that this was a very brief examination. Since then non-royal Ganda potters have been subjected to other ethnographic analyses (e.g. Trowell and Wachsmann 1953; Benjamin 2001), but these, like Trowell's (1941) original work, have focused either on the technical aspects of the potter's craft or on the production of an archaeological typology, with limited understanding of the socio-symbolic context of pottery production and use in Buganda.

This paper therefore briefly reviews the case for a symbolic ceramic ethnoarchaeology, before detailing and discussing the technical, social and symbolic context of royal pottery production and use, and of pots more generally, in Buganda.

A symbolic ethnoarchaeology of pottery production and use

Since the 1980s, ethnographies and archaeologies have increasingly considered the technical and social contexts of pottery production and use (e.g. Hodder 1982; Krause 1985, 1990; Herbich 1987; David *et al.* 1988; Dietler and Herbich 1989, 1993, 1994, 1998; Herbich and Dietler 1989; Gosselain 1992, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2011; Berns 1993; Barley 1994, 1997; Maclean 1998; Kreamer 2000; Ashley 2005, 2010; Guèye 2011; Haour 2011). However, the ceramic conceptual world remains poorly understood and pottery continues to be explored in terms of its socio-function context removed from its symbolic meaning (e.g. Kohtamaki 2010; for notable exceptions see Gosselain 1992, 1999; Nangendo 1996; Forni 2007; Lyons 2007). For example, whilst iron production has frequently been identified as a heat transformative technology metaphorically linked to human reproduction (Collett 1993; Herbert 1993; Rowlands and Warnier 1993; Reid and MacLean 1995), a similar symbolic ceramic association has been explored through relatively few case studies (Herbert 1993; Gosselain 1999; Gausset 2002; Haaland 2007; Lyons 2007).

The relative lack of explicitly socio-symbolic ethnoarchaeologies of sub-Saharan African pottery production and use is surprising considering the important roles that pottery plays in ceramic reliant societies. For example, the advent of ceramics enabled the development of new cooking and food storage techniques (MacLean 1998, 168–169), which are likely to have had significant health benefits and to have affected working patterns and gender roles (Gifford-Gonzalez 1998, 132). The social centrality of ceramics within food preparation and consumption is also likely to have led to them and their production becoming imbued with symbolic meaning and symbolically constructed. As a result, identification of the royal potters of Buganda, a group of ritual artisans attached to a highly symbolic institution, presented an important opportunity through which the symbolic world of Ganda ceramics might be rendered more visible and thus accessible.

Background

The royal potters of Buganda were first brought to the authors' attention in 2002 when Uganda's *New Vision* newspaper ran an article headed "*Ancient Potters of Buganda's Royalty*". The potters were contacted by the Uganda Museum and in the summer of 2003 the authors undertook two months of fieldwork with

them. This research involved a mixture of methods, including a review of relevant historical texts, participant observation with two separate royal potters and semi-structured interviews with both the royal potters and the users of the royal pots. The user group consisted of individuals who live and work at Ganda royal ceremonial sites, including Kasubi Tombs, Wamala Tombs, Buddu Hill Coronation Site and the Queen Mothers' palaces. The interviews were conducted in Luganda by the second author and Ruth Nantesi, a research assistant, translated the recordings verbatim into English. The results of this research contributed towards the first author's MA thesis (Giblin 2003) and were also presented as a temporary exhibition at the Uganda Museum in 2003.

Historical and contemporary context of the royal potters of Buganda

The kingdom of Buganda

The kingdom of Buganda, located on the northwest shore of Lake Victoria in south-central Uganda (Figure 1), emerged in the mid-second millennium AD and rose to become one of the most politically powerful and populous kingdoms in the region by



Figure 1. Map showing the location of Buganda within Uganda.

the late nineteenth century (Ray 1991; Reid 2002). Initially Buganda was a small kingdom, but during the seventeenth century it underwent territorial expansion, combined with the development of a centralised political system and a powerful military (Oliver and Crowder 1981, 128; Reid 2002, 3).

Despite the arrival of Europeans in the late nineteenth century, the subsequent imposition of colonialism in the early twentieth century and the official abolition of the kingdom in 1967, the kingdom and the *kabaka* (king) remained important throughout the twentieth century (Oliver and Crowder 1981, 258; Ray 1991, 5). The continued public support for the kingdom among the Ganda led to its restoration in 1993 when *Kabaka* Ronald Muwenda Mutebi III was crowned at Buddo Hill, the historic Buganda coronation site. Today, the kingdom of Buganda remains a popular political formation. For example, in 2003, approximately 30,000 people attended the tenth anniversary of *Kabaka* Mutebi's coronation, alongside Ugandan President Museveni (personal observation).

A history of the royal potters

'Potters were among those exempt from the risk of sudden execution. They were highly respected, and so were their pots.' (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159)

Although all Ganda potters received privileges as a reward for their work, the royal potters were the most privileged, being a distinct class, *Bajjoona*, who were exempt from *luwaalo* (tax) because of their importance as royal ritual specialists (Roscoe 1911; Kaggwa [1907] 1934; Trowell 1941; Lugira 1970, 81; Reid 2002).

Ssekayala (chief decorator) was reportedly the only potter during the reign of the first king of Buganda, *Kabaka* Kintu. Kintu came to recognise *Ssekayala*'s importance as an artisan and renamed him *Sseddagala* (chief medicine man), employing him to 'make the royal cooking-pots' (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159; Roscoe 1911, 143). Subsequently, *Sseddagala* became the name for all royal potters and a key character in the royal traditions of Buganda, the most prominent of which is the story of Prince Kalemeera. Roscoe (1911, 143) records that *Sseddagala* was chosen by *Kabaka* Chwa (the second *kabaka* of Buganda) to go to Bunyoro, another powerful kingdom in the region, with the disgraced Prince Kalemeera who had been banished from Buganda. In Bunyoro, Kalemeera committed a crime by sleeping with Wannyan, the king of Bunyoro's wife, whom he made pregnant. *Sseddagala* calmed the king of Bunyoro and told him to throw the newborn into a clay pit, an act that would give the king a long life but also mean the death of the child. Subsequently, Kalemeera was allowed to leave Bunyoro and return to Buganda, but on the way back he fell ill and died. *Sseddagala* took this opportunity to rescue the child, called Kimera, from the pit and arranged for his care. Meanwhile in Buganda, *Kabaka* Chwa had disappeared, leaving an empty throne and an unstable kingdom, so when the Ganda chiefs heard of Kimera's existence they requested that he be returned to become *kabaka* and help restore order in Buganda (Stanley 1878, 348–349; Kaggwa [1901] 1971, 10–17; Ray 1991, 86–87; Wrigley 1996, 139–142).

The prominent role of *Sseddagala* in this story highlights the historic and symbolic importance of potters in Buganda. The legend of Kimera is the story of *kumera*, the 'sprouting' of a new dynasty, and Kimera is credited with establishing

the new Ganda throne (Ray 1991, 88–89). Within this context the clay pit becomes a ritually significant area and a potter is credited with preserving the life of the first *kabaka* of the new dynasty, who ultimately returned order, and therefore life, to the kingdom of Buganda. Thus, from the earliest traditions, the health of Buganda's royalty and, in turn, that of the kingdom, have been associated with potters and pottery.

Kodesh (2010, 98–130) has recently reconsidered the legend of Kimera, identifying significant similarities between it and the legend of Ndahura, a powerful spirit medium credited with the founding of the Cwezi dynasty in Bunyoro. Ndahura, like Kimera, was 'born illegitimately in a foreign land as the result of an illicit liaison between a visiting prince and a woman of the royal palace' and was cast out as a baby before being saved and raised by a potter and eventually ascending to the throne (Kodesh 2010, 106–7). Thus, following Tantal's (1989) interpretation of the Ndahura legend, Kodesh (2010, 108) suggests that 'we might regard the story of Kimera's being cast into a clay pit and his subsequent rescue as depicting an initiation through the "classic phases of a rite of passage"', which included episodes of separation, liminality and re-entry characteristic of Cwezi *kubándwa* spirit medium initiation. Significantly, Kodesh (2010, 109) also reports that ritual pots were used prominently in *kubándwa* initiation rites and in spirit medium funerals, which he suggests identifies the potter in these stories as a senior initiator.

Kodesh's (2010, 98–130) ideological 'reclotting' of the Kimera legend is extremely important for this account of the social and symbolic context of royal pottery in Buganda because it locates potters and pottery centrally within the domain of public healing and political authority in seventeenth-century Buganda. This, as we explore in more detail later, correlates well with the identification of royal potters as medicine men and protectors of the social health of the kingdom.

Ganda tradition records that Sseddagala remained the only name given to royal potters in Buganda until the time of *Kabaka* Kamaanya (after AD 1710), who took captive 3,000 Banyoro, including a great potter, Kawonawo Banda (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159). *Kabaka* Kamanya employed Banda as a royal potter and gave him the village of Nakigalala for his permanent use (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159; Trowell 1941, 58). After the arrival of Banda, Sseddagala's position was undermined as chief potter because the *kabaka* had a new favourite, and 'although [Sseddagala] remained at the head of the pottery department his work was somewhat slighted and his prestige decreased' (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159). Nevertheless, Sseddagala's role continued to be recognised during the twentieth century even after the abolition of the kingdom. For example, when Nsimbi (1980) compiled *Amannya Amaganda n'ennono Zaago* (*The names of the Baganda and their origins*) the clan's duty to the king was still recognised, 'Sseddagala omubumbi wa kabaka omukulu naye Wangeye' (Sseddagala chief potter from the Colobus Monkey Clan) (Nsimbi 1980, 192).

The name Sseddagala and the potters' prominent place in the founding traditions of Buganda therefore suggest that the potters played a symbolic role within the kingdom. Additionally, Roscoe (1911, 399) records that they were also required to fulfil a functional one:

'The King had his own potters, whose duty it was to furnish the royal store in the royal enclosure, where numbers of pots were kept, and doled out by the store-keeper, whenever they were wanted.'

However, today Buganda's royalty no longer requires royal pots for cooking and only employs the royal potters to fulfil a symbolic, ceremonial role.

The contemporary royal potters

Today the royal potters exist as the Kibumbiro potters from Busega, who are of the Colobus Monkey Clan (*Ngeye*) and descend from the line of Sseddagala (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159; Nsimbi 1980, 192), and the Nakigalala potters from Kanjansi, who descend from the line of Banda and are now part of the Leopard Clan (*Ngo*) (Kaggwa [1907] 1934, 159; Trowell 1941). In 2003 both localities, situated on the outskirts of the Ugandan capital, Kampala, were found to enjoy thriving ceramic industries, with brick production dominating the industry at Busega and pot production at Kajansi. Although the Nakigalala potters were still employed in pottery production full time, the Kibumbiro potters no longer made pots except for royal purposes. Nevertheless, there was still considerable competition between the two groups, neither of whom recognised the legitimacy of the other as royal potters, or indeed as potters at all. This was surprising because Kajansi and Busega are two of the most prominent ceramic-producing areas around Kampala. However, despite the potters' ongoing historical dispute, the kingdom continues to recognise both as legitimate heirs to the role of royal potter, employing the services of both for the coronation of *Kabaka* Ronald Mutebi Muteesa II in 1993, as well as for his subsequent marriage and the birth of his first child. It is also understood that the royal potters will be required to make pots for the reconstructed Kasubi Tombs, the burial place of recent *kabakas* and a World Heritage Site, which were burnt down in 2010 (Kigongo and Reid 2007; Izama 2011).

Technical production sequence

Presented here is an account of the royal potters' technical pottery production activities removed from their socio-symbolic context. The potters' sequences were similar and are only described separately where they deviated. The contemporary techniques and sequence are also similar to that described by earlier ethnographies (e.g. Trowell 1941; Trowell and Wachsmann 1953; Benjamin 2001) and are believed to represent Ganda traditional pottery production techniques more generally. We observed two types of pot being made, *ensuwa* (a large water storage vessel) and *entamu* (a small drinking vessel). The sequence remained the same for both.

Collection of raw materials

The basic raw ingredients include *ebbumba* (clay), *amazzi* (water), and *ensibo* (temper). The clay is collected from local *ekirombe* (clay sources) and is removed from the *ekirombe* by using a hoe (*jjembe*) before being broken by hand into small lumps. The clay lumps are then packed into an *okuguma* (head) and the oblong lumps transported to the production site resting on an *enkata* (twisted banana leaf ring) carried on the head. The clay is stored in a small banana leaf lined pit with a little water for up to a week before it is mixed with the other ingredients.

The clay sources that the Nakigalala and Kibumbiro potters exploit produce clays that are too plastic for forming as they are found and tend to crack during

drying or firing. For these reasons, the potters improve the clay's workability with non-plastic additives. Two types of *ensibo* are employed, grog (crushed pottery sherds) and *embalebale* (crushed red rock). Grog is used for pots that are made to hold cold water and other cold liquids, while *embalebale* is used for making cooking pots. The royal potters say that they employ grog because it helps to waterproof the pots and preserve a desirable flavour in the contents, whilst *embalebale* helps a pot endure heat and prolongs its life.

Preparation of clay

Two main activities take place during the preparation stage, the production of *ensibo* and mixing the *ebumba*. A large quantity of *ensibo* is produced before and during this stage by grinding grog or *embalebale* between two large flat stones.

The clay, temper and water are mixed on a sheep hide in Nakigalala and on a plastic sheet in Kibumbiro. The clay is mixed underfoot as the *ensibo* and *amazzi* (water) are added '*katono katono*' (little by little). Once the desired consistency is achieved, measured by squeezing the clay between thumb and forefinger, the clay is packed into a ball and then wrapped first in freshly cut banana leaves and later with loose plastic. The wrapped clay is placed inside the potter's hut, which is cool and dark.

Primary forming

Before forming, fresh banana leaves, dried *kawuli* (reeds) and an *anjolou* (papyrus) stalk are collected. The banana leaves are placed in an *olubumbiro* (a wide shallow vessel), which sits on an *enkata* (a twisted dried banana leaf ring). The *olubumbiro* is a potter's tool, which is used as a moulding platform for the new pot, while the *enkata* allows the potter to revolve the new pot during construction. The prepared clay is mixed by hand with water into a ball, which is then pressed and drawn out by hand into a flat, thick clay circle. The circle is pressed onto the banana leaves lining the *olubumbiro* with an *ekikaayi* (calabash sherd). A reed blade is then used to trim the clay in the *olubumbiro* into the *entobo* (base) on which the *ekibula* (stomach) of the vessel is formed. Coiling a long roll of clay around the edge of the *entobo* until it completes a full circuit (Figure 2), and then repeating this process with more clay coils above, forms the *ekibula*. Smoothing the clay walls by hand and wet *ekikaayi* increases the height and width of the *ekibula*. Before the *obulago* (neck) is added the unfinished pot is placed in the shade to dry before further shaping with a wet *ekikayi*. Once the pot is sufficiently dry for the *obulago* to be added without the *ekibula* collapsing, the pot is brought back inside. When the *obulago* is completed the *omugo* (rim) is added before being smoothed and shaped with a wet *ekikaayi*. Finally, the vessel is smoothed and strengthened with the *ekikayi* before being left to dry overnight.

Secondary forming

When the pot is dry enough to be removed from the *olubumbiro* (something that usually takes one or two days) the pot is ready for *okubula* (expansion). *Okubula* is achieved by scraping the inner surface of the pot with a wet *ekikaayi*, which more

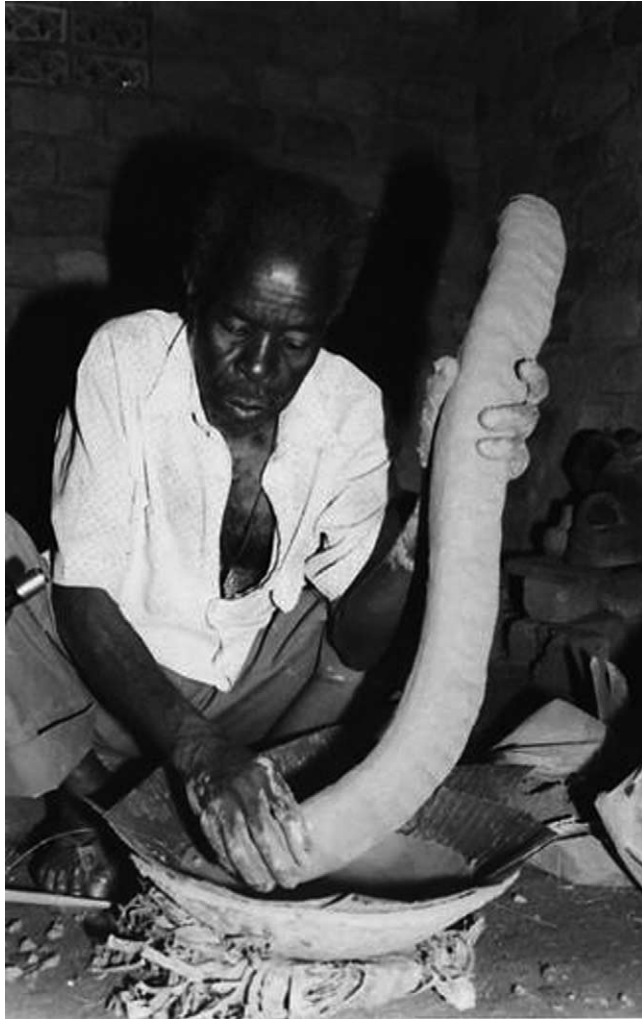


Figure 2. Photo showing Emmanuel Kamanya, a Nakigalala royal potter, adding the first coil to the base of a new pot.

than doubles the size of the base. The base that originally followed the shallow contours of the *olubumbiro* now becomes deep and bulbous in form. After *ekibula* the pot is turned upside down and left to dry again. The drying time depends on the weather, the clay, the pot, and the schedule of the potter, but may take anywhere from two to six weeks.

Surface modification

During and after forming the surface of the vessel is regularly modified by smoothing with a combination of wet tools, such as the *ekikayi*, which give a glossy appearance to the unfired pots. Roulette decoration is applied to large pots at the end of the primary forming stage and to small pots at the end of the secondary forming stage.

The *okwala* (roulette) is prepared from an *anjolou* stem, which is split down its length (c. 80 cm) with a knife until it is a fine strip. This strip is then tied in repetitive knots until a tight roulette is produced (c. 5 cm long), which creates an impressed pattern when rolled across the clay surface. The potters apply rouletting to the neck or stomach of the vessel depending on its form. The type of rouletting employed is knotted strip rouletting, often abbreviated to KPR in archaeological texts, which has been found alongside other types of rouletting across the region at archaeological sites from the early second millennium AD to the present day (see Soper 1985; Ashley 2010; Haour *et al.* 2010).

Firing

The firing stage begins with the collection of elephant grass and wood, which are carefully dried so that they burn well, but not too quickly. Two layers of wood are laid out to form a rectangular platform. The pots are carefully arranged on top of the firing platform, with the largest pots in the centre and the smallest around them, before bundles of elephant grass are arranged carefully over and around them and the firing platform. The firing takes approximately one and a half hours, during which the potters add extra grass to areas that are not burning well and check the status of the pots with a stick. Once satisfied, they use a stick to peel the burnt grass off of each of the pots. The success rate of the firing was found to vary between 60 and 80%.

Post-firing treatment

Apparently post-firing treatments, involving polishing the surface of a pot with a banana leaf to give a glossy appearance, are applied to some pots, although this was not observed during our research.

The social and symbolic context of pottery in Buganda

Menstrual, sexual and gender taboos

Historical accounts commonly record that pottery production in Buganda was a male activity and that women were actively excluded from it (Schweinforth *et al.* 1888, 88; Roscoe 1911; Trowell and Wachsmann 1953: 117). However, Felkin (1885–86, 726) and, more recently Benjamin (2001, 13, 15), both observed rare examples of female potters. The royal potters, in contrast, still observe strict gender taboos that state that women are at no time allowed to make royal pots, to visit the clay pit or to have any direct contact with the production process. The clay pit taboo is particularly pronounced and extends to all pottery making, whether royal or otherwise. Trowell (1941, 61) recorded that this was because ‘pots made from clay dug when women are present will not dry’. The Kibumbiro royal potters explained that the gender taboo was so important that after their *Sseddagala* (chief potter) died in 1979 without producing a son, his daughter, Nakayiza, was not allowed to succeed her father. Nkumbi, the head of all Buganda’s clans, held a meeting with the Kibumbiro potters at which it was decided that there had never been, and never would be, a female *Sseddagala*.

The exclusion of women from pottery production is explained and defined by their ability to reproduce. The royal potters explained that the fertility of a menstruating woman is so powerful that, if combined with the fertility of the pottery production process, the two might neutralise each other. Similarly, men must observe a sexual taboo that states that the potters must refrain from sexual intercourse for at least twenty-four hours before beginning work and throughout the entire production process for fear that sexual contact with women might pollute the pots. The potters reported that this taboo is so important that, after they have been given an order for royal pots, they may be visited at night by a royal aide to check on their sleeping habits.

In Buganda once pots enter the realm of the user they become a tool in the artisanal activities of women in the technology of food preparation. Women were found to control access to the pots at the royal sites and during royal ceremonies. The women stated that in Buganda, although a single man may be obliged to use pots to collect water or cook his food, no man would use a pot if he has a wife, because if a married man were to use a pot publicly it would be demeaning to his wife as it would suggest that she was unable to fulfil her role. The association of women with pottery is explicitly emphasised in traditional Buganda marriage ceremonies when the bride is made to carry a pot and collect firewood, a rite that even the *Nabagereka* (queen) of Buganda reportedly carried out before she was married. Nevertheless, women did not own the pots. When marriages were dissolved women were reportedly allowed to take all the articles used in the home except the 'cooking pot and water pot [which] seem to be so closely connected with the welfare of the house and its master that it would be fatal to remove them' (Mair 1934, 98).

Pottery production as food production

The symbolic association between pottery and food is perhaps an obvious one (for sub-Saharan African examples elsewhere see Haaland 2007; Lyons 2007) and in Buganda this relationship is not just practised by the users of the pots, but also performed by the potters themselves. Throughout the production process the potters compared their technical actions with food production activities and associated materials. For example:

- when the clay was stored for maturation a potter would ... 'wrap it like you would wrap *matooke* (steamed mashed banana)';
- when the base was being formed out of clay a potter reported that, 'I am making a chapatti';
- the name of the mould support, *olubumbiro*, in which a new pot is prepared, comes from *olwaliiro*, meaning the place where food is prepared;
- the body of the vessel, which will contain food as it is cooked, is called the *ekibula* (stomach);
- the upper bulbous section of the *ekibula* of the vessel is called *lumonde* (sweet potato);
- and finally, the process of firing is compared to roasting, e.g. 'I go and check by poking in small holes to see through then I can look out for the unburned ones and change them just as you would roast your *gonja*' (roast banana).

Kaggwa ([1907] 1934, 159) suggests that for Ganda, ‘pots were looked upon as the source of food, which sustains life’. Thus, the production of pottery becomes a metaphor for the production of food and, by extension, for the maintenance of the health of the population.

Pots are medicine and potters are medicine men

Ganda traditions suggest that potters and pottery have long been associated with concepts of health and medicine since *Kabaka* Kintu changed the first potter’s name, *Ssekayala* (chief-decorator), to *Sseddagala* (chief medicine man). Indeed, fired clay is itself a Ganda medicinal ingredient. Fired *ebbumba* (clay) vessels that break produce *olujjo* (pot sherds). *Olujo* are crushed down to a powder, either to be used as *ensibo* (temper) in the production of a new vessel or to be used as a medicinal ingredient when they are mixed in an *ebibya* (dish) with water and herbs to make a medicine called *emmumbwa*. This medicine has many uses, for example, ‘when someone is sick, say cough, stomach ache, they can mix that *emmumbwa*. There are some *emmumbwa*’s that they sell for other purposes, that you yourself might be aware of say like in the prevention of a miscarriage’ (royal ritual specialist at Buddu Hill Coronation Site in 2003). This later application, to prevent miscarriage in expectant mothers, was the most frequently reported to us. For example, in answer to the question what happens if a pot breaks, we were told that:

‘They keep it and they break off some pieces which may be used in preparing *eddagala* [medicine], like *eddagala* for pregnant women.’ (King’s Wife at Kasubi Tombs in 2003).

Medicinal herbs are also used in the production of a particular royal pot made by the Nakigalala royal potters, the *ekyogero*. The *ekyogero* is the most ceremonially important pot that the Nakigalala potters produce for the *kabaka* and it is created out of clay mixed with an infusion of herbs and water. The *ekyogero* is used to bathe the *kabaka* in his infancy when he will also be washed in a similar herbal infusion. Bathing in this liquid is believed to imbue the person bathed with special qualities during life, such as good luck and good health. The potters suggested that they enhanced these benefits for the *kabaka* by including the medicinal herbs in the clay.

A pot for life

‘A pot never wears out. It still keeps serving its purpose. It does not rust.’ (Kabaka’s Wife at Kasubi Tombs in 2003)

‘A pot doesn’t grow old, it’s me the person that grows old.’ (*Namasole* (queen mother) Muteesa I in 2003)

The above statements are examples of a recurring response that suggested that pots are immortal. This belief may be unsurprising in a material sense because pottery does endure, demonstrated by its persistence on three thousand years of archaeological sites in the region. However, a pot as a container is not immortal and through use can break. A functional explanation for this association should not

therefore be assumed. Although the users of the royal pots recognise their fragility, this is often presented in terms of misuse. For example:

‘The pots last a long time unless they are handled badly. If handled badly they break but they take a long time.’ (Keeper of Wamala Tombs in 2003)

‘We used to take great care. One would get a very good beating for breaking a pot.’ (Namasole Muteesa I in 2003)

The immortality of pots and the taboo associated with breaking them is repeated in Kagwa’s and Mair’s accounts of life in Buganda:

‘Cooking pots too, had an almost sacred value — were they not as a man’s mother? — For from the time he leaves his mother’s breast a man will eat of food from a clay pot for the rest of his life.’ (Kagwa [1907] 1934, 160)

‘Anyone who broke one before the maker was a fool for breaking the people’s nurse.’ (Kagwa [1907] 1934, 159)

‘To break a pot was an action that had to be formally atoned.’ (Mair 1934, 98)

Thus, pottery in Buganda was not simply an expensive resource that it was foolish to break, but also had an important symbolic association with life. This belief is not unique to Buganda and variations of it exist elsewhere in Africa. For example, broken pottery symbolises death in some African societies (Thompson and Cornet 1981; Smith 1986, 61) and has been suggested to have ritual significance elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ghana (Insoll 2009).

Discussion

The above examples suggest that pottery production and use in Buganda were not simply a functional concern separate from the social and symbolic values of society. Instead, menstrual, sexual and gender taboos, more commonly, but not only, associated with the production of iron, alongside issues of health, are also, at least in certain cases, visible within Buganda’s pottery traditions. We therefore suggest that pottery was conceptually linked with human reproduction as a heat transformative technology in a similar fashion to iron smelting. However, due to its association with food preparation technology it took on added symbolism as a medicinal source of health and life, which was intensified within the royal sphere where the *kabaka*’s health was symbolically linked to the health of the kingdom.

Iron smelting ethnographies from sub-Saharan Africa have commonly found that ‘hot’ women, i.e. those who are sexually reproductive, and ‘hot’ men, i.e. those who have had recent sexual contact with women, are prevented from taking part (Collett 1993; Herbert 1993; Rowlands and Warnier 1993; Reid and MacLean 1995). The identification of these taboos in royal pottery production in Buganda supports Herbert’s (1993, 215) suggestion that pottery, as a heat transformative technology, may occupy a similar symbolic and conceptual space. Indeed, this paradigm is not unusual in the region: for example pregnant Banyoro women were not allowed to look at a pot until after firing for fear it would break (Roscoe 1923, 228), and

McLeod (1984) suggests that it is a symbolic characteristic of all sub-Saharan African pottery production.

MacLean (1998, 174) suggests that the initial association of women with food preparation was biological, because the first provision of food comes from breast-feeding. Subsequently, this powerful role was extended to the feeding of the family for life and maintained through gender division, leading to the association of women with pots through their control of cooking technology. In Buganda the gender divide is reinforced by the belief that men are clumsy and thus unsuitable for handling pots, a symbolic source of life that must be conserved. However, it is suggested that potters balance their exclusion from food production technology by comparing the pottery production technical process to food preparation.

Precolonial Ganda subsistence economy was based predominately around agriculture, a female activity, and much less on the raising of livestock, a male activity (Fallers *et al.* 1964, 82; Reid 2002, 21, 24, 26). Men may therefore have felt excluded from the food production process, because they were neither the producers nor preparers of food. For example, 'girls were taught to cook and to cultivate as soon as they could hoe; to be a successful manager of the plantation grove and to be an expert cook were regarded as a woman's best accomplishments' (Roscoe 1911, 79). Although men did contribute to the agricultural process, their stereotypical roles were those of politics and war (Reid 2002, 24). From this perspective women appear to have a powerful monopoly over food preparation, which potters may have mitigated by associating their technology with food preparation.

This situation allowed both men and women to exert control over one of the most important social facets of the kingdom, health, which was a serious concern within the moral community of Buganda (see Schoenbrun 2006; Kodesh 2010). In societies reliant on ceramics for food storage and preparation, pottery production and use has a clear association with health because pottery is the immediate source of cooked food. In Buganda this association was very pronounced, for not only was pottery production associated with human reproductive health, but, in terms of the royal potters at least, was also associated with the maintenance of human health through its association with medicine. In general Ganda terms, an example of this is the mixing of *ensibo* with herbs and water to make a medicine to protect reproduction by preventing miscarriage. Within a royal context, this is highlighted further by the tradition that recalls how *Kabaka* Kintu renamed the first potter *Sseddagala* (medicine man) and by the practice of the royal potters when they mix herbs into the *ekyogero* for the benefit of future *kabakas*.

Significantly, with the exception of the *ekyogero*, there is no material difference between royal pots and ordinary pots. Thus, it is suggested that the office of the royal potter existed both to provide the best pots for the royalty and also to provide the *kabaka* with symbolically healthy and unpolluted pots. The royal pots from Nakigalala and Kibumbiro are perceived to be clean because the royal potters are known to have observed the necessary taboos during the pottery production process. The production of healthy royal pottery was of considerable importance for Buganda because the *kabaka* was the symbol of the kingdom and the health of the two were tied together. For example, in Buganda a royal fire burned constantly outside the royal enclosure to show the people that the *kabaka* was alive but when the *kabaka* died the fire was extinguished and Buganda would fall into chaos until a successor was installed (Ray 1991, 204–206). Thus, the health and vitality of the kingdom

mirrored that of the *kabaka* and it was crucial that a symbolic source of life, pottery, was not polluted for fear that it jeopardise the health and fertility of the *kabaka* and the kingdom. Precisely this concern was expressed when we asked the Nakigalala potters in 2003 about what would happen if the *kabaka* used pots from the wrong potters: ‘things in Buganda would go very bad!’ Pots had therefore to come from potters who could be trusted to observe the necessary taboos whilst making pots fit for a *kabaka*.

Conclusion

This paper presents an important case study that contributes toward our understanding of the technical, social and symbolic context of pottery production and use in Buganda. However, in addition to its significance as a historically particular empirical study, it also implicitly challenges normative ceramic ethnoarchaeologies that focus solely on socio-functional concerns.

We have demonstrated that Ganda pottery was not only a technical and socio-functional product but was also socio-symbolically constructed by the moral values of Buganda society. In Buganda pottery was a symbolic source of food, and thus life, which became associated with the health of the *kabaka* and the kingdom. This situation resulted in the establishment of royal potters, who were attached to the kingdom to make ritually clean pots that were free from menstrual and sexual pollution. This was achieved by following strict taboos, something more commonly associated in sub-Saharan Africa with iron production.

The archaeological implications of this work are that it may be the intangible and archaeologically illusive activities of royal potters that make their pots royal and not necessarily the tangible ones. Thus, if ‘royal’, or other ritually significant, pots are to be identified at Ganda archaeological sites in the future, our research suggests that the context of their deposition, such as at shrines, royal enclosures or within burials, may be more revealing than typological concerns. Likewise, where apparently ‘utilitarian’ pots are identified archaeologists must remain aware that their tangible utility does not necessarily negate their intangible social and symbolic importance.

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