

## POTTERY TABOOS AND SYMBOLISM IN BUKUSU SOCIETY. WESTERN KENYA

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**ABSTRACT** This paper investigates the taboos associated with pottery among Babukusu who predominantly inhabit Bungoma District, Western Kenya. Symbolic analysis is used to provide insights into how the people themselves conceptualize the relationship of pottery to cosmology, nature and culture. Specifically, the creation of the universe and human beings, kinship relations, human fertility and mortality are all implicated in the manner in which pottery is perceived in this society.

**Key Words:** Babukusu; Pottery; Ritual restrictions; Marital dyad; Cosmology.

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Bukusu pottery has historical and cultural significance that reflects many aspects of Bukusu culture today as in the past. This significance is usually inscribed in the manufacturing techniques as well as in the forms, sizes and functions of the pottery vessels themselves (Tsing & Yanagisako, 1983; Hodder, 1986). Most pots in Bukusu society are used to perform vital utilitarian functions, particularly the carrying and storing of liquids and solids which people need for daily sustenance. The pots are also used as containers during the brewing and drinking of ritual and nonritual beer. Potsherds, on the other hand, are used as receptacles for food and medicine by persons perceived to be in a state of ritual impurity. Such people normally thought to be ritually impure and polluting, include widows, the spirits of deceased men, and freshly circumcised young men.

The Bukusu pottery industry is imbued with numerous taboos which are meant to ensure the preservation of one of the oldest, and still surviving, traditional crafts among Babukusu. Although detailed analysis of Bukusu pottery making is beyond the scope of this paper, it has been dealt with elsewhere (Nangendo, 1984, 1994). My purpose in this paper will be to investigate the taboos and symbolism associated with the making of pots and to show how they blend with other categories of taboos in the wider Bukusu society. Finally, I wish to illuminate how Bukusu cosmology, taboos and symbolism compare with those found in other societies in Africa.

### THE SETTING

The research on which this paper is based was carried out among Babukusu who live in Bungoma District, Western Kenya. The Bukusu society is composed of minimal patrilineages which are descent groups related to each other in a system of clans

called *chikholo* (sing. *ekholo*). These clans are land-owning units as well as the foundation of the kinship system in the Bukusu society. However, the pottery industry practiced today, as in the past, is not limited to these particular patrilineages or clans.

Nowadays, Babukusu practice subsistence farming in addition to cash cropping of maize, beans, potatoes, cassava, coffee, tobacco and sugarcane. The cash crops provide much needed vital income to this cash-starved farming community. At the same time, most of the adults engage in wage labour and disparate off-farm activities as a means of supplementing the proceeds from cash crop sales. Also, livestock such as cattle, sheep, goats and donkeys are kept and their products are put to a variety of use.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research strategy used to gather data was a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data gathering techniques (Pelto & Pelto, 1978). Contextual qualitative data were collected through participation, observation, audio recordings, photography and life histories. The more formal quantitative techniques used included household census, structure interviews and surveys. The questionnaire focused on a wide range of data categories, including the acquisition of clay, the forming processes, drying and firing of pots, distribution and marketing networks as well as pottery taboos and ritual restrictions.

A total of 160 female and male potters from several pottery making villages in Bungoma District provided the data described in this paper. The potters ranged in age from 18 to 81 while their mean age was 48.34. The average age of female potters (N=101) was 46.58 while that of the males (N=59) was 52.66. The data indicate that a majority of the potters (N=65) did not have formal education while the highest educational level ever attained was Form Four by a male potter.

## POTTERY TABOOS IN BUKUSU SOCIETY

A majority of the taboos cited by my informants are clearly a reflection of the Bukusu conception of metaphysics. Specifically, this set of taboos centre around the Bukusu cultural beliefs concerning the meaning of the clay reserves or quarries, *biumbwa* (sing. *siumbwa*), and their symbolic relationship to the act of creation of the Babukusu by *Wele Khakaba*, the Supreme Being. This relationship is, in fact, narrated in two creation myths. According to the first myth, *Wele Khakaba* caused the heaven (*likulu*) and the clay (which I loosely refer to here as *liloba* or *waneloba*) to unite and procreate the first life and human being. This union is believed to have taken place at *biumbwa* reserves. In the second myth, *Wele Khakaba* took cosmic dust from the Morning Star (*ya Sulwe*) and mixed it with sublunary clay from the quarry to mould the first human life, a man. Therefore, Babukusu associate *siumbwa* with their own creation. As one elderly informant expressed it, "*Wele nga kabumba omundu kamuhumbila mulukoba lwe esiumbwa, ebung'onelo, ebukabilo,*" (when

God created a person he created him at the Fort of *Siumbwa*. This is the creating, providing place). Ontologically, then, *siumbwa* has become a divine place regarded by Babukusu as the source of all human life. In fact, the term *siumbwa* itself is derived from the verb *khubumba*, meaning, "to create, make, mould." The primacy of this association is such that *Wele Khakaba* and the Bukusu potter of either gender, are both referred to by the same term, *omubumbi* (literally, the creator, maker, moulder): one creates people, and the other, pots (Nangendo, 1994). In Bukusu society, the quarry is axiomatically related to the concepts of life, death, rebirth, procreation, harm, and, of course, the act of creation. As observed by Rasmussen (1991: 760) in relation to the earth among the Key Ewey Tuareg of northeastern Niger, the quarry in Bukusu society is clearly "charged with both positive and negative powers."

Bukusu beliefs revolving around the quarry, therefore, intimate that it is a place where people come into direct and close proximity with the afterworld. It is conceived that in this place people can actually come into contact with the Supreme Being and other spiritual beings as well as all their ancestors who reside in the subterranean. It is, therefore, imperative that any person who comes into close and regular contact with the quarry should be ritually pure (clean) and culturally mature so as to avoid desecrating it. The Babukusu believe that pollution as well as all other categories of ritual impurity invokes the wrath of the supernatural beings and ancestral spirits. Unless certain ritual precautions are taken, this divine anger always has devastating consequences on the people, the society and the land (cf. Richards, 1956; Turner, 1969; Douglas, 1988). People who are normally regarded as ritually impure and, thus, pollutive in Bukusu society include menstruous women, circumcisers, freshly circumcised boys, murderers, mothers who have just given birth and their newborns, twins, widows and corpses. On the other hand, objects perceived as polluting are the afterbirth, miscarriage blood, menstrual flow, the circumcision knife, murder weapons, and the breath of a dying person.

All of the above are intimately associated with the shedding of one's own blood or that of other people. Blood shed through death or otherwise is regarded as bringing pollution to the perpetrator as well as being a danger to other, innocent, people. This is because, and as aptly observed by Bianco (1991), the circulation of blood in a human being, for instance in pregnancy, is a symbol of vitality. The loss of vital blood makes people and their society vulnerable to impersonal harmful forces, either supernatural or human. In the local Bukusu cosmological notions, poured blood is quintessentially associated with different ritually polluting states known as *bukhuchakali*, *busiku*, *bufulu*, *bubwibo* and *bukhwana* (Wagner, 1970; Nangendo, 1994). Contact with these ritual states leads to a disturbance in the cosmic order. In fact, contact with people and objects in such states will make the skin of a person constantly itch, turn pale and, finally, decay like a rotten banana (Wagner, 1970). The Babukusu believe that such persons will eventually lose physical strength, become emaciated and eventually die. To prevent this from occurring, ritual precautions and observations have to be strictly adhered to because "precautions not taken, prohibitions ignored, all have their effects on the community" (Barley, 1987: 99). Therefore, it is prohibited for women, particularly those still under menarche, to venture into the quarry to dig out clay. It is similarly held that a menstruating woman may not make pots nor may she have sexual intercourse as long as her

menses last. Also, it is held that potters should only fire their pottery from the time when the new moon *ne kubalukha*, appears, until full moon, *ne kuli chelechenje* (see also LaFontaine, 1972 and Roscoe 1923 on the views of Banyankole. Bagisu, Basoga and Bakiga of Uganda). It is widely held that if these precautions were overlooked, all pots would explode during the drying or firing process.

Beyond the pottery milieu, the menstrual flow will also “burn” vegetables and crops should a menstruating woman enter there. Specifically, Babukusu believe that after planting finger-millet, a couple should abstain from sexual intercourse the same night. This is because both the smell of copulation and heat emanating from the menstrual flow have the power of “burning” (literally, *khukhwosia*) the crops (see also Richards, 1956; de Heusch, 1987; Evers & Huffman, 1988; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1990; Douglas, 1991). The same harmful effects occur if one comes into contact with infant twins (*bakhwana*). It is believed that before one sees such twins one has to be adorned with special star-shaped impressions on the forehead, cheeks, breasts, nape, hands and legs. If this is not carried out a person would be “burned” by the *bukhwana* (twins), causing one’s eyelashes to fall off as well as bleary vision. It also makes the entire skin of the victim to develop alternately white and yellow patches as if a person had been scorched by intense fire. In some other victims, this mystical burning by *bukhwana* transforms of the skin to resemble that of an overripe banana (Nangendo, 1996).

Further cultural and symbolic logic embedded in the taboos above are the socio-cultural equation of pregnancy with the celestial bodies and in particular the moon, which Babukusu conceptualise to be female as opposed to the sun which is male. This association is reflected in a narrative collected in the early 1930’s by Wagner (1970: 268):

At the first full moon after the birth of the child she goes to the bush, carrying the child in her arm and, holding a sprig of the *kitatula*-tree in her hand, spits in the direction of the rising moon. Then she hurls the sprig of the *kitatula*-tree with all her strength towards the moon calling out: ‘may the body of my child always be healing!’ As soon as she has called out these words, she must run home with her child as soon as possible without even once turning back to look at the moon.

I suggest here that the association of the female to moon begins with the menstrual discharge and the rite that Wagner described above and only ends upon the death of an individual. Lamp (1988: 218-219), who studied the Temne of Sierra Leone, has provided insight in this regard and noted that the “waxing and waning” of the moon was “associated with the female condition in pregnancy and birth as well as the process of life from birth to maturity to death.” Indeed, the first sighting of the moon in the Temne society is greeted with much hand-clapping as with the birth of a child. On the other hand, the eclipse of the moon “occasions a furious clatter of pan-banging to chase away the cat that has caught it” (Lamp, 1988: 215). The cat, in this case symbolizing the eclipse, is an index of misfortunes as well as death in the Temne society.

Lamp’s observation makes comprehensible the ritual restrictions imposed on a menstruous Bukusu woman in regard to the manufacture of pottery. Because

Babukusu equate the moon with a woman, as the moon waxes and wanes, a woman also has to go through the same phases as the moon does. In Bukusu, the word *kumwesi* refers to a month in a calendric year as well as the celestial moon. This term implicates the synodic lunar cycle conceptualized as “the intervention from one new moon to the next” (Lamp, 1988: 214). This cycle, which was formerly in the form of stick calendars, is still used by a Bukusu woman to comprehend and manage her menstrual cycle, pregnancy, fecundity and procreation. Specifically, a woman who is menstruating is described as *omukhasi ali mumwesi* (in the moon or month), while to menstruate is normally defined as “*khucha mumwesi*” (literally, going into the moon or month). In such a state, a woman and her effluvium are both believed to be polluting and ritually dangerous to society. With a menstruation, a woman has symbolically terminated a human life by bleeding—a metaphor of the waning moon. The effluvium which is “special because it carries a living being” (Gottlieb, 1988: 58), paradoxically as well as symbolically, represents “a dead person that never lived” (Douglas, 1991: 96).

The woman and her discharge (as metaphors of the waning moon and death) are in a diametric contradistinction to the creation of pots which begins at the quarry. Pottery making (both a metaphor of and the creation of life) implicates the growth cycle and life course of human life: Life starts with the digging of the clay (representing the fetus in the womb) from the reserves, the growth process is represented by the forming of a pot vessel, the drying and firing processes symbolize maturity and, lastly, the potsherds (as metaphor of the waning moon) are an index of death (cf. Barley, 1987; de Heusch, 1987). One may not come from a funeral and proceed into the quarry or engage in the fabrication of pottery. This is because contact with the corpse pollutes an individual, who is, consequently in a ritual condition diametrically negating progeny and generative power.

The only category of women who may enter the quarry, according to the ritual precautions of the Babukusu, are those who have reached menopause.<sup>11</sup> Such are women who no longer engage in sexual intercourse: an act associated with the creation of life but which is also symbolically loaded with numerous mystical dangers to society (Richards, 1956; de Heusch, 1987). In fact, it is construed that menopausal women can also come into direct contact with the ancestors and spirit world. In Bukusu society once a woman reaches her menopause, she attains respect and she is in most cases not inhibited by many of the taboos and restrictions that menstruous women have to contend with in daily lives. Such elderly menopausal women are held to be no longer ritually polluting, unclean and vulnerable to impersonal harmful powers. Typically, such elderly women can make two kinds of ritual pots, namely, *namunwaebili* and *kumubende*. The term *namunwaebili* literally means “two mouths” and it is a pot which has two necks and orifices on a single body vessel (Nangendo, 1994). This pot is used in the ceremonies associated with the birth of twins, rainmaking and blacksmithing. The other ritual pot, *kumubende* is a pot with an unusually elongated neck. And, it is normally used in ceremonies associated with barren women and rainmaking. Wandibba (1995) stated that this same pot was used in cleansing ceremonies associated with close agnates who marry unknowingly, although, I was informed that the pot used in such ceremonies was usually an old cooking pot (*enungilo*) which has cracks and holes (Nangendo, 1994). It is, there-

fore, possible that both types of pots are used in this expurgation ritual.

Bukusu traditions maintain that menstrous women and young and middle-aged male potters risk being imbeciles if they make these two ritual pots. They also risk having their skins turn pale and eventually would lose physical strength and spiritual essence (heart, soul, mind, shadow and breath). Accordingly, the Babukusu construe that only elderly male potters should make these two ritual pots as well as come into direct contact with the ancestral spirits. This is because it is understood that men in general constitute the gender associated mostly with purity and spiritual activities. It is, therefore, men who should be the direct intercessors between living people and the spiritual world. Indeed, in Bukusu society it is only a man who can be an "exceptional person [who] may mediate between humans and spirits, since to mediate is also to participate" in the nature of these plural worlds, "to take on simultaneously their contrary qualities of sweetness (*onyinyo*) and bitterness (*ngwonin*)" (Peristiany, 1975: 175 cited in Bianco, 1991: 775). This means that in Bukusu society it is only males who are leaders in ritual activities such as funeral eulogization (*khuswala kumuse*), rain magic, dream prophecy, circumcision and divination (Nangendo, 1994).

The firing of pots is another area of ritual concentration in Bukusu society.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it has a number of ritual restrictions which are directed at both the potters and non-potters alike. For instance, a couple may not engage in sexual intercourse at night and proceed to fire the pots the next day. The couple who did this is similarly restricted from entering the quarry and making pots. When pots are ready for firing, no person, apart from the potter of either sex who has not engaged in ritually polluting acts, may touch or fire the pots. Wagner (1970) observed that no person, potter and non-potter alike, should approach the firing pit whenever another potter is firing pots. It is believed that if a person unknowingly obtrudes while others are firing pots and does not maintain a proper distance, he must willingly pay them with a chicken or a basketful of grain or else both parties will fall under a curse. This curse can make a person impotent, sterile, barren and insane.

The technical method that Babukusu use in pottery manufacture illuminates further cosmological beliefs in Bukusu society. Bukusu potters use the spiral coiling technique (Rice, 1987) to manufacture their pots. In this method, the potter takes a cone-shaped cradle and places clay coils on it. The clay coils are usually put on top of one another to form a cone and as the potter works she (he) moves in a counter-clockwise direction, or, from the right-hand side to the left-hand side, until the entire pottery vessel is finished (Nangendo, 1984; 1994). In the local cosmology of the Babukusu, it is construed that the act of creation (of human beings and the universe) started from the right-side towards the left-side and it took a counter-clockwise direction culminating once more on the right-hand side. In the Bukusu conception, the right-hand side is associated with the cardinal east and this direction, like the quarry, is always regarded as being the source of all life, health, wealth and milk. The cardinal west, on the other hand, is symbolically equated with the left-hand side and it is held that this is the direction of illness, evil magic, misfortune and death (Wagner, 1991; see also Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Lamp, 1988; Barley, 1989; Volkman, 1990; Griaule & Dieterlen, 1991). Conversely, the cone-shaped cradle which a potter uses is believed to be a symbol of the primordial universe that *Wele*

*Khakaba* created. Babukusu believe that this primal world was also in the shape of a cone. Therefore, this counter-clockwise technique symbolically links pottery making to the very primordial existence of life—the creation of human beings and the universe in the conception of Babukusu. This notion, thus, rationalizes why menstruous women and persons who have recently engaged in sexual intercourse, viewed as polluting, should not enter the quarry. Also, the notion culturally justifies why an individual coming from a funeral may similarly not enter the quarry nor make pots.

The counter-clockwise direction used by the potters is furthermore related to one particular phase of the male circumcision rites of Babukusu. This phase is known as *khuminya* and it is a public, moon dance which is normally enacted on the eve of the actual circumcision operation. During *khuminya*, the initiate and entire procession sing and dance while moving from east to west (that is, right to left) in a full oscillation. Babukusu believe that all the phases of the circumcision rites are charged with the cosmological powers of creating and regenerating life. More specifically, in these rites not only the uncircumcised male youth is thought to be akin to vessels which are about to be fired (de Heusch, 1987) but the girl about to have her first menses (Barley, 1987; Wembah-Rashid, 1992-1993). For example, early in the morning of the circumcision day, a young man is taken to the river, (*eluchi*) or a swampy place, (*esitosi, sietosi*), where he is smeared (*khulonga*) with mud (*liloba*). Every part of his body, except the eyes and genitals, are smeared with the mud. The initiate (*omusinde*) is then taken home where circumcision takes place on the courtyard (*luyia*) of his father, father's father or any other close agnate. In the belief system of Babukusu, the mud-smearing of an initiate is analogous to the act of burnishing and smoothing a pot while the initiate himself is a symbol of an unfired pottery vessel.<sup>19</sup> The firing process, on the other hand, is likened to the circumcision procedure itself because one constantly hears Babukusu say, "circumcision is *embalu kumulilo* (circumcision is fire)." Conversely, it is construed that the person who normally smears the initiate with the mud is a symbol of *Wele Khakaba* as well as a Bukusu potter.

Babukusu also believe that *khuminya* reflects the direction which the sun takes while moving to the east after sunset. According to one Bukusu myth, the sun has to travel underneath the earth in a counter-clockwise direction back from the west to the east at night (Wagner, 1991).

## THE SYMBOLISM OF POTS AND POTTERY DECORATION

Many potters, and other informants, gave no specific reasons which could adequately account for pottery decoration in Bukusu society when asked about it. Also, interviews carried out on different market centres further revealed that no buyer was interested in the decoration *per se* as an important attribute for the choice of a vessel to buy. All informants expressed the view that a beautiful pot, which is also perceived as a good pot, is a decorated one (Nangendo, 1994; see also Omollo [1988] on the Luo of Kenya). Furthermore, all informants admitted that they would not dream of buying a Bukusu pot which is not decorated. One is typically told that an undecorated pot is not beautiful. Therefore, it would seem that traditionally pottery

decoration is an essential and integral attribute of Bukusu pottery (see also David et al., 1988), although, it has no immediate functional orientation.

Despite the apparent lack of function, the pottery decoration is, nonetheless, both analogically potent and socially rich in symbolism. The idea that a pot, with its decoration, is rich with cosmological and social metaphors was alluded to by the informants themselves. Accordingly, one is told that decorating (*khusara*) a pot gives it character. And, an undecorated pot, claimed the people, was “weak, loses its soul, spirit, durability and shape” (cf. Nangendo, 1994). Accordingly, all the pots, except for two kinds of miniature bowls, are decorated.

In Bukusu society, potters use roulette decoration, a series of continuously impressed patterns or designs executed by a tool made from a piece of stick, plant, or synthetic fibres. The roulettes made by a piece of stick are called carved wooden roulettes and those made by a plant or synthetic materials either form knotted or twisted cord roulettes (Soper, 1978 [1984]; Nangendo, 1994). In Bukusu society, pots are decorated with knotted, also plaited or braided, cord rouletting as well as the carved wooden roulettes or punctates. The decoration is in two bands. The first band, consisting of knotted roulette impressions, covers the whole neck from below the rim to the neck-body junction. This decoration is executed by a tool known as *enjililo* that was formerly made by plaiting grass reeds, *kamakololwe* (Wandibba, 1980). It could also be made from a maize cob with the grains removed (*lisokoro*) as well as from a miniature sieve (*sikote*) attached to long wooden tubes (*chisekhe*) used by the Babukusu during the drinking of their traditional *busaa* or *kwete* beer. Today, this tool is made by interweaving two or three strands of fibres into an oval or rectangular shaped cord whose thickness is less than 1 cm and whose length is less than or equal to 5 cm. The second band of wooden carved punctates is made by a tool known as *esariro* or *lusariro* (derived from the word *khusara*, to decorate), is executed on the shoulder and body of the vessel. This tool is made by carving a series of rectilinear and geometric punctates that stand out as wheels on a piece of a stick. This stick could measure anything between 1 cm in thickness and 4 cm in length (Nangendo, 1994). These two bands of decoration may be delineated by a shallow groove, although it is not unusual to find vessels with the groove missing. Symbolically, this shallow groove represents the beads which were formerly worn by Bukusu women.

Much of the wooden carved punctates may be interpreted as a symbolic equivalent of the body adornment which is today still visible on elderly Bukusu females. This female body decoration is known as *chisale*, a word derived from the verb *khusala* which, like *khusara*, also denotes “to decorate.” Thomson (1968: 281) found that for all the married women in Bukusu society “the abdomen is tattooed without any attempt at design.” However, another colonial source, which saw design in the tattoos, gave a more concise description. It stated that “a custom prevails where the majority of the women have their bodies ornamented below the breasts, by rows of raised wart-like welts, artistically spaced one or two inches apart. They cover the front and sides of the body, but the neck is left plain” (Kenya National Archives, 1905-1906). The same decoration was also executed on the brow and on both of the cheeks.<sup>41</sup> At puberty, which Babukusu believe to be between 10 and 14 years of age, a girl was decorated with *chisale*. This period marked for a girl a tran-

sition to womanhood and occurred at the time when the girl was just about to be married. It was believed that a good (and, therefore, beautiful) woman, just as the pot, in Bukusu society was one who had *chisale*. Therefore, an undecorated pot was, and still is, considered to resemble a woman without cicatrization. In the past such a woman could not yet marry and an undecorated pot could hardly be bought.

A 90-year old female ex-potter was only too aware of the relationship between female body embellishment and pottery decoration. She stated that both bands of roulette decoration resembled "how women used to wear *chisinga* in the traditional past." *Chisinga* (sing. *lusinga*) is a generic term for different types of necklaces made out of a variety of plant, animal, earth and metal elements and which are loaded with different symbolic meanings. These necklaces included *chindili* which women made from the black-red coloured hard seeds of a fruit plant. In Bukusu society the colour black connotes good health, long life and success. Red stands for several symbols at the same time and these include the colour of blood, fertility, life, joy and health as well as death, impurity, sterility and barrenness. Therefore, this binary combination of the black and red colours on the necklace is a cultural acknowledgement of the nurturing and maternal support of women in Bukusu society. *Chisimbi* (cowrie shells) were another form of necklace that women wore. The white colour of the shells is a symbol of fertility, purity, semen, milk, supreme being as well as barrenness, impurity and sterility. This necklace, thus, also implicates the motherhood of women in society. The third type of necklace was *burare* which was made from a type of grass now extinct in most parts of Bungoma District. Therefore, this elderly female informant cognitively perceived a correlation between the structure, content and organization of pottery decoration and female embellishment. Both decorations occur on women and pots covering their brows, cheeks, chests, and stomachs.

At another symbolic level of analysis Bukusu pottery decoration is directed at, and addresses, the structure and ethos of solidarity. This ethos is, moreover, expressed in the idiom of kinship which is also the basis of the Bukusu social structure. In analysing the articulation between pots and the idiom of kinship, I shall deal with only one type of marital dyad in Bukusu society. The cultural logic dramatized in this articulation is the belief that pots are important indices of proper kin relations in the broader social universe of the Babukusu. The customary laws of exogamy stipulate that a man should not marry his cross cousin (father's sister's children, FZC or mother's brother's children, MBC) nor his parallel cousins (father's brother's children, FBC or mother's sister's children, MZC). In short, a man may not marry any girl from his maternal and paternal clans nor where his close relatives have their affines. A culturally accepted marriage is formally recognized by the enactment of a ceremony known as *sitekho* which is derived from the verb *khutekha* (literally, to cook). This ceremony is carried out at the homestead of a woman by her agnates. The expressive aim of this ritual is to bestow and enhance the status of a woman as a wife, cook, breeder and feeder, that is, her procreative and conjugal roles in Bukusu society. Thus, when a woman departs for her home at the end of this ceremony she is normally given several household related gifts and particularly a cooking pot (*enungilo*). A cooking pot unites individuals when they eat from it. But eating, which translates to *khulia*, in one sense is a metaphor for sexual intercourse.

One frequently hears in all-male company boasts of *khulia omukhasi* ("eating a woman"), meaning "making love to a woman." In terms of a further imagery of the cooking pot (Pandolfo, 1989) the phrase "open a cooking pot" is devoted to a girl of her virginity. Cooking food in a pot is then analogous to the manner in which male paternal "urine" (semen) mixes with the maternal "red fluids" (placenta) in the womb of a woman to form a child during conception. Eating in the sense of ingesting food and in that of sexual intercourse is what makes a marriage individually possible and culturally legitimate. This legitimacy is encoded in the cultural logic behind the enactment of *sitekho* ceremony. If one of the spouses should die before this ceremony is performed, it is imperative the ceremony is conducted before the deceased is interred. In fact, the surviving spouse may not even view the body when it is laid out until this ceremony is performed as the surviving spouse would also die soon thereafter.

In this symbolic field, then, the cooking pot symbolically expresses significant relations between two individuals, kin groups and clans in the Bukusu society. A whole (complete) pot symbolizes unified and, therefore, intact relationships. This is essentially because it is held that an unimpaired pot signifies coalescence and continuity and, thus, cements marital bonds. On the other hand, a smashed or cracked pot is a symbol of an end to a relationship.

Therefore, when two related people unwittingly marry, or even engage in sexual intercourse, Babukusu maintain that the couple's marriage is both doomed and cursed. Any offspring of such a union would be weak, abnormal, and even die. However, if such an incestuous dyad cannot be dissolved a purification rite has to be performed. The express purpose of this ritual is to appease the evil deity known as *Wele Ebimbi* or *Wele Kumali* (Wandibba, 1972), evil ancestral spirits, *bimakombe* (also *hamakombe*) or *bisieno* as well as *emongo*, loosely referred to here as bad luck (Nangendo, 1994) so that they do not bring misfortunes to the couple and their children. In this rite old agnates of the man should slaughter a cow (sometimes a sheep or goat could suffice). All the innards are removed and the couple is smeared with greenish chyme (*buse*) from the animal's stomach. The couple is made to step inside the carcass and lie down facing each other in an embrace. This laying together is described as *khukona mwikhokho* (sleeping *mwikhokho*, although there is no equivalent English word for this term). Both of them are then required to make copulation gestures towards each other and thus execute symbolic sexual intercourse. Next, the wife in such an incestuous union should procure an old and frequently used cooking pot, *enungilo*, (Nangendo, 1994) or the *kumubende* ritual pot (Wandibba, 1995). If it is a cooking pot, it should not, under any circumstances, be a new one. Soon after darkness has set in, the wife's brother should climb on to the roof of the house in which the couple live and place the cooking pot upside down over the rod, *lusili*. This rod, which usually protrudes from the apex of the roof of all grass-thatched houses, is considered a symbol of the phallus of the male owner of the homestead (Wagner, 1970). Secondly, *lusuli* is a representation of the husband's harmful procreative powers, which in this incestuous union, brings forth the curse and other misfortunes which affects parents and their offsprings.

The pot in this context also stands for its own separate symbolic field but which resemble that found among the Mafa and Bulahay of Cameroon. Specifically, in

Bukusu society the neck and orifice of a pot are associated with the cervixes of woman (David et al., 1988; Evers & Huffman, 1988). On the other hand, the body of a pot is a symbol of the womb of a woman which receives the seminal fluid (*butiu*) from the phallus (*lusuli*) of the man for proper gestation and procreation to take place. By putting the pot upside down (reversing the cervix) on the rod, it is being stated that the incestuous marriage is not a normal marital dyad in Bukusu society. And that despite the fact that such a marital union is potentially dangerous, its menace can be tempered. Specifically, the cracks and holes on the upside down pot have the powers to 'break' (temper) the relationship (*bulebe*) that exists between the husband and wife. Also, the cracks and holes on this pot have the powers to make the seminal fluid lose its harmful virility once it enters the womb of the wife thus leading to the birth of normal and culturally accepted offsprings. Finally, the cracked pot is itself a symbol of the female organ. The placing of this pot over the rod is a reenactment of the incestuous (reversed) sexual act itself and it is, therefore, held that the cracks and holes on the pot will annul the polluting and dangerous generative powers of the husband.

#### POTSHERDS AND RITUAL POLLUTION

Pottery breakages are usually a result of constant use and accidents. However, such potsherds (*bikolonjo*) are not always thrown away because they serve many useful ritual and nonritual functions. In particular, potsherds are used as receptacles for food and medicine by persons perceived to be in a state of ritual impurity. Persons who are normally conceptualized to be in such a state, at least in this case, include widows, freshly circumcised male youths and spirits of recently entombed males. For example, a few months after the death and subsequent entombment of a male person, the widow (*namulekhwa*; literally, one who is left) is supposed to offer food to the spirit of the deceased. This food is required to be proffered on potsherds. Also, during three or four days of the mourning period, all the food the widow eats should be prepared on a potsherd. Similarly, she is required to partake of such food directly from potsherds. The potsherds in these two mortuary contexts indicates that death has caused an isolation and rupture in a particular marital relation. The once intact relationship is broken the same way potsherds are in pieces. Significantly, potsherds implicate the Bukusu notion that the spirit of the deceased and the widow are both in a liminal status. They are "placeless...their status is undefinable...[and their] present position is ambiguous" (Douglas, 1988: 75).

Another "liminal persona" (Turner, 1974) in Bukusu society is a newly circumcised young man, *omufulu* (plur. *bafulu*). Therefore, the traditional medicine (*enguu*) with which the youth is required to dress the wound on his penis is traditionally ground on potsherds. This medicine is normally derived from a plant known as *nalulwe*. The mature green and yellow leaves of this plant are wrapped up in banana fibres and hang above the cooking fireplace. Thus these leaves are dried; alternatively, they could simply be dried in the sun. The leaves are then placed on a potsherd and ground into a fine black powder. This powder is finally applied on the wound with a chicken feather. Babukusu hold that circumcision is itself a form of

symbolic death. It imbues the male youth with a ritual pollution, and therefore, the preparation of the medicine has to be done on potsherds to indicate the ritual impurity of the initiate.

## CONCLUSION

This paper had two interrelated aims. Its primary aim was to show the taboos associated with the pottery industry in Bukusu society. The second major aim was to deal with how pottery decoration and taboos relate to other aspects of culture among Babukusu. Babukusu themselves hold the view that certain aspects of their pottery industry are intricately related to their views of the cosmology, nature and culture. Because of the many associations between pottery manufacture and the supernatural, persons engaged in this art should be ritually clean. Babukusu believe that if this taboo is broken misfortunes will occur to the affected individual, the society and the land.

In the local cosmology of Babukusu such misfortunes are brought about by the Evil Deity (*Wele Ebimbi* or *Wele Kumali*) as well as evil ancestral spirits (*banakombe* or *bisieno*). The third agency of magical harm is *emongo* (bad luck) which does not embody evilness par excellence. It is believed that *emongo* originates from impersonal forces which corresponds neither to a supernatural nor to a human being (Galt, 1991). However, Babukusu believe that *emongo* only harms people who have committed wrong or anti-social acts, for instance, incestuous sexual unions. The harm can take the form of imbecility, wasting, sterility, barrenness, illnesses, insanity and, even, death.

One of the taboos which, if broken, can bring about misfortune concerns a menstruous woman and her monthly discharge. The woman may not enter the quarry, make pots, engage in sexual intercourse nor even enter vegetables and crop fields because she is ritually polluting and, therefore, harmful to other people and things.

Menstruation, once an avoided topic, has seen an increased number of studies in recent years (de Heusch, 1987; Buckley & Gottlieb [eds.], 1988; du Toit, 1988; Douglas, 1988; 1991; Rasmussen, 1991). These recent researches have indicated, among other things, that many of the beliefs present in Bukusu society concerning menstrual injunctions are found elsewhere in Africa. For instance, in Kiria sublocation, Murang'a District, Central Kenya, I was informed that in the past a woman could not make pots when her daughter was having her first menses. This is because the Agikuyu believed that such a girl was "ceremoniously taking care of a child." The same menses were equated to rain; or rather, the girl was described as having a shower of fertility when menstruating. In Bukusu society this belief is constituted of the moon, rainfall and menses. Babukusu believe that during the dry season (*mu simiyu*) and on the day when the new moon is expected to appear (*ne kubalukha*) freak rains will fall. This rain is called *efula esinga kumwesi* (literally, rains which wash the moon, the month). Symbolically, when a girl has her first menses she is also described as being washed by *efula esinga kumwesi*. This washing, Lamp (1988) noted, represented a state of transition to a new beginning; a beginning for the month, moon, girl, rebirth and a regeneration of life. Until menopause, the erst-

while dry prepuberty girl will always be wet (washed) every month (moon) by her menstrual flow.

Among the Beng of Côte d'Ivoire, if a menstruating woman were to touch or fan a corpse, she runs the risk of being polluted by perpetual menstruation (Gottlieb, 1988). My data among Babukusu is not very clear on this belief, although it is possible that the same belief may be present. This is because a similar restriction is found in a male mortuary ritual carried out three days after the entombment of an elderly male. This mortuary ceremony is known as *khuswala kumuse* and its audiences include both human and nonhuman beings. Menstruating or pregnant women, any person who has recently engaged in sexual intercourse, as well as men who know that their wives are pregnant are all prohibited from attending this mortuary rite. This is because such categories of people are very vulnerable to the breath and smell of death.

The belief that if menstruating women were to make pots they would explode in the drying or firing process is widespread in Africa (cf. Roscoe, 1923; LaFontaine, 1972; Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). My exegesis of the Bukusu data is in sympathy with the tenor of the arguments set forth by Richards (1956), de Heusch (1987), Evers and Huffman (1988), Douglas (1991) and, most recently, J. and J.L. Comaroff (1990). These writers have variously argued in other contexts that the fecundity and menstrual bleeding of women exudes dangerous heat or force. This force is dangerous to the males and all their activities, virility, fertility, beer-brewing, cooking, fire, crops, rainmaking, initiation and ancestral veneration. Referring to this force in the context of pottery production, Evers and Huffman (1988) observed that this force which also caused the first menses as well as the tearing of the hymen, was the one which made pots to crack. Among Babukusu this force is set in motion a year before a prepuberty girl is washed with *efula esinga kumwesi*. But as long as the force is confined in the body of a girl it is not destructive but only potentially so. For instance, in its positive aspects it is held that the force is the one which leads to the formation of breasts on a girl. However, on the discharge of the first menstrual flow, and thereafter, the force is charged with negative, polluting powers. Culturally, the force is associated with two significant concepts in Bukusu society. First, it is axiomatically identified with the odour and breath of a corpse and, thus, the affiliated overarching terrors of the ultimate loss as well as sentiments of blame and anger to avenge death (cf. Abu-Lughod, 1986). Second, it is intimately identified with the placenta (*engobi*) and the aftermath and, therefore, the inevitable related reactions of joy, pride and praise to the Supreme Being for providing life. This dialectical opposition of life and death constitutes for Babukusu "both sides of the face of humanity" (Goodale, 1985) as they apprehend it. However, the menstrual blood represents a paradox. It has the impossible status of not-human being, not-human corpse. It only "embodies a symbolic principle that makes possible human fertility in the form of babies" (Gottlieb, 1988) and later a corpse at the time of passing. Therefore, one should give the menstrual blood the same treatment one accords a corpse found lying by the roadside. One is supposed to pluck a particular kind of grass (*nabonga*) and throw it on the cadaver. At the same time one should say that one had nothing to do with the death of the dead person. Should this symbolic gesture be neglected one runs the risk of spiritual vengeance from the enraged corpse of

the dead person (cf. Wagner, 1970; Heald, 1989).

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#### NOTES

- (1) Aronson (1984: 122) reported that in some certain African societies, for example, the Ifo of Nigeria and the Senufo as well as the Poro of Côte d'Ivoire, women are the ones associated with spiritual activities because "of their close ties with the spirits, gods and ancestors, women are thought to have easy access to their requirements."
- (2) The quarry as a focus of ritual activity is found in many other societies in Africa and elsewhere and is thus not limited to Babukusu alone. For instance, the Shai in Ghana and Barikiwa in Eastern Africa reportedly have a priestess in charge of each quarry pit with the responsibility of ensuring that each pit is not polluted (Aronson, 1984: 129; Cross-Upcott, 1955: 25 in Aronson, 1984). On the other hand, it is reported that among the Azera of Morobo province, Papua New Guinea, only married women who have not had children can gather clay but at particular times only: "They must wear traditional dress while gathering the clay, and they cannot smoke, chew betel, or speak pidgin; in addition, outsiders are forbidden to witness the activity (May & Tuckson, 1982: 136; quoted in Rice, 1987: 115). The Kwoma in the Sepik area of New Guinea associate good blood, good health and ability to procreate to good potting clay and agricultural success. Adverse events, for instance, bad blood and sickness, affects their good performance and hence their success (Rice, 1987: 115).
- (3) This interpretation is largely owed to Richards (1956) who suggested the same for female youths who undergo the *chisungu* (*cisungu*) initiation rites among the Bantu matrilineal Bemba who live in Zambia.
- (4) Among the Bagisu of eastern Uganda similar tattoos were encountered by Roscoe (1923) who, subsequently, interpreted them as clan marks.

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