

LEARNING PROCESS OF POTTERY MAKING AMONG ARI PEOPLE, SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

Morie KANEKO

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

ABSTRACT Pots of Ari people are considered essential utilities in their daily lives. Women artisans, who belong to the socially segregated group called *mana*, are exclusively engaged in pottery making. In this paper, I describe the forming-technique and the learning process of pottery making among girls by focusing on the fine movement of pottery makers' hands and fingers, the making-stages, the making-processes and the learning orders by classifying the variety of pots.

I found four characteristics of forming-techniques and learning processes among young pottery makers. First, 20 units of processes ('U.P') and four making-stages were common to all the pottery makers. Second, pottery makers do not learn each making stage step by step. From the very beginning, they do all the making stages to form the whole shape of a pot. Third, according to the finger movement analysis, pottery makers could learn how to make different sizes and shapes of pots by using the 20 'U.P'. Fourth, although they say they have a certain degree of difficulty in forming various shapes of pots, young pottery makers do not follow a consistent order of learning. Each maker follows different sequential orders. Even sisters do not seem to pursue a consistent learning order. Pottery making is not just about technology as people attach social, cultural, and economic meanings to it.

Key Words: Forming-technique; Making process; Finger movement patterns; Unit of 'Process'; Learning process.

OBJECTIVES

This research focuses on the techniques of pottery making and utilitarian aspects of pots made by the Ari people of southwestern Ethiopia (Fig. 1). Previous researches have mainly focused on the features and decorations of material culture and illustrated the symbolic prominence of pottery making (Barley, 1993; Berns, 1993). Most researchers have characterized making-techniques by describing the 'making-stage' as differentiated by the change of shape. It has been considered that all the pottery makers in a community hold common sets of techniques.

In this paper, attempts are made to show a unique 'forming technique' that each maker has developed in making pots. The paper analyzes the fine movement of pottery makers' hands and fingers, classifies making-stages into a unit of 'Process' ('U.P') based on their finger movement patterns, and identifies each maker's making-processes. I also describe how girls learn these forming techniques by identifying the learning orders and by classifying the variety of pots.

I conducted my field-research for 18 months in two villages and learnt pottery making. My key informants were some 20 women pottery makers from

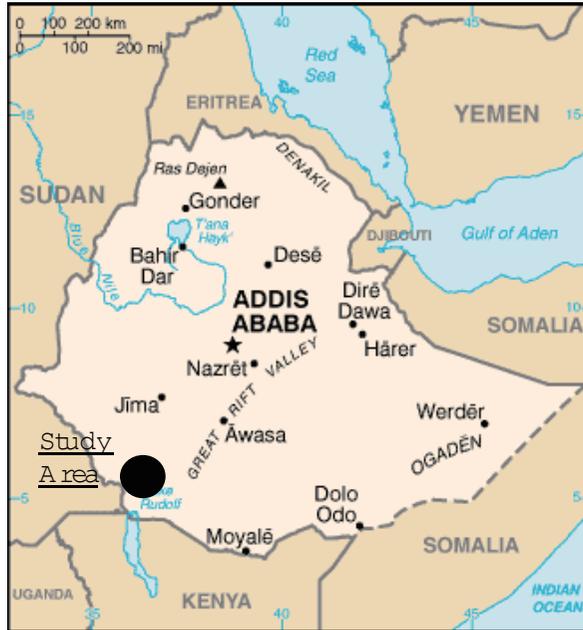


Fig. 1. The Study Area

one village called S and some 60 from the other called G. I also visited 16 pottery makers' villages and observed about 70 makers' techniques.

BACKGROUND

Jinka, the nearest big town to my research sites, is located at about 750 km southwest of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. People can purchase industrial products, such as plastic materials and ironware, as well as local products at Jinka market twice a week. Although the water-jar is gradually changing from a clay pot to a plastic container, people still use clay pots for preparing food and brewing local beer. I observed about 60 different kinds of pots in Ari area.

About 400 women artisans in Ari area, who belong to the socially segregated group called *mana*, are engaged in pottery making. Similar artisan groups are found in neighboring ethnic groups, such as Gofa, Basketo, Maale, Oyda, Gamo, and Walaita (Freeman & Pankhurst, 2001). Pottery makers use locally available clay for making their pots, and they sell their pots directly to users in the local markets.

Occupationally, there are two categories of people in Ari: *Qantsa* and *Mana* (Gebre, 1995). Inter-marriage between these two groups is culturally prohibited. Although pottery makers and blacksmiths belong to the same *mana* group, they cannot intermarry either due to cultural prohibition.

SHAPES AND SIZES OF POTS

I conducted an intensive survey in five households. Each household had more than twelve pots of different sizes and shapes. The most frequently found are pots of what may be called *tila*⁽¹⁾ shape. *Tila* shape pots have a rounded bottom, a cylindrical upper part, and a handle for holding.

In Ari, there are about 20 different kinds of *tila* shaped pot. Housewives identify each kind of *tila* by its size. I have measured the size of 100 *tila* at ten different points: height, circumference of the widest point in the bottom part, diameter of the mouth, and so on. There are six different kinds of pots in height between 10cm and 50cm, and circumference from 30cm to 130cm. Users are concerned that each kind of pot has an ideal size. Pottery makers are also concerned about the amount of clay for each kind of pot when they start making them.

FOUR MAKING STAGES

Pottery makers divide the making process of *tila* into four making-stages (Fig. 2).⁽²⁾ They make the pot from the round-shaped bottom part to the upper part. In the first stage A, pottery makers form a shallow bowl. In the second stage B, they expand the bottom part to a ball-like shape. In the third stage C, they add some clay to the surface and form the narrow-necked upper part. In the final stage D, they put clay again on the surface of the upper part and put the handles on it. In all stages, they dry the pots in the shade.

All pottery makers in village S followed these four making-stages and used

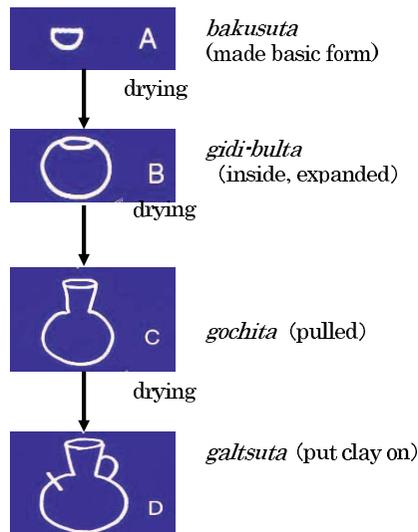


Fig. 2. Four Stages of Pottery Making

these terms. When I intensively observed the finger movements in each stage, I found unique combinations of finger movements for each maker, which I designated as a unit of 'Process' or 'U.P'.

UNITS OF FINGER MOVEMENT PATTERNS

Observation of the finger movements in each stage reveals that the combinations of finger movements are unique for each maker. The finger used and the direction of finger movement can be used to distinguish finger movement patterns (Fig. 3). 'U.P' is defined as a continuous finger movement pattern before shifting to another finger movement pattern.

I observed the patterns of finger movements for more than one hour for 13 pottery makers in village S. By examining the patterns of finger movements carefully, I found 20 'U.P' common to 13 pottery makers. In one set of four making stages, I counted a total of 34 to 37 'U.P'.

When the pottery maker A puts the clay into the pot, she used two different 'U.P' (Fig. 4). In 'U.P' 1, she used the thumb cushion and moved it back and forth at an angle, and in 'U.P' 2, she used the side of the forefingers and moved them back and forth at an angle.

Some makers explained that users liked to buy pots that last longer. Other pottery makers do not put clay inside the bottom part. Pottery maker A mentioned that her customers prefer pots that are light to carry. The same pottery maker uses the same set of two 'U.P' when she puts clay on the surface of the bottom part. Some makers put clay on the whole bottom part. Other put clay only on half of the bottom part, and later on, before putting on the handle, they put clay on the rest of the bottom and upper parts. The same informant explained that there is little chance of cracking at the joint between the bottom part and the handle if she puts clay on the surface of the bottom part and fixes the handle at the same time.



Fig. 3. Definition of Finger Movement Pattern Finger used direction of finger movements
*This maker is using her thumb cushion, and she is moving it back and forth at an angle.

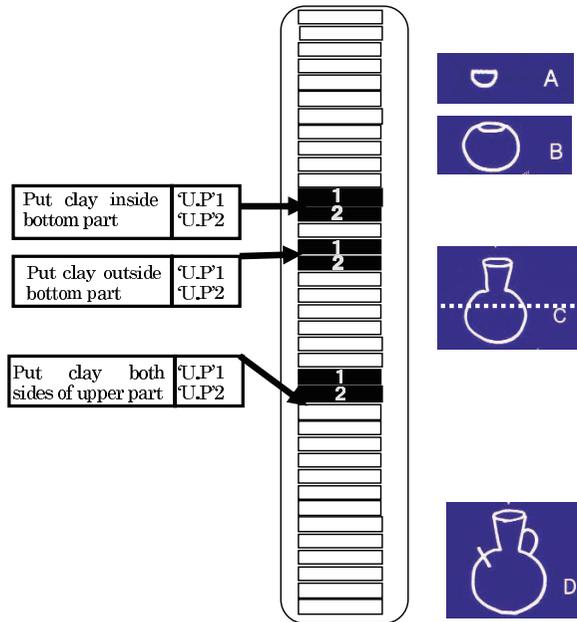


Fig. 4. Unit of “Process” of *Tila* Making. (The Case of Pottery Maker A. 37 “U.P”)

I extended my observations to 60 pottery makers in nine other villages, and I found two characteristics of forming techniques by analyzing finger movement patterns. Twenty ‘U.P’ and four making-stages were common to all the pottery makers. On the other hand, some makers develop a unique ‘U.P’ from others such as putting the clay inside the bottom part. Or some do the order of ‘U.P’ differently from others, for example, they add clay on the bottom part after forming the upper part.

Users are concerned about the differences in pottery makers’ techniques as well as the place of the clay. Ari people are eager to buy durable pots. Hence, they look for a ‘good’ maker who makes long-lasting pots. When users find ‘good’ makers, they try to develop special relationships, which are much more than seller-buyer relationships.

LEARNING PROCESS

The learning process of pottery making may be regarded as part of the background pottery makers have in common in forming techniques and developing their unique order of ‘U.P’. I observed and interviewed 12 pairs of mothers and daughters in village S and village G.

The pottery makers take care of their infants and children in their pottery-making huts. Their children often play with clay, sometimes mimicing their mothers. Children gradually know how to make pots by themselves.

Pottery makers explain that girls, at the age of six, start making pots. Kariya started making pots in October 2001. Her first work was *bun-til*, for boiling coffee leaves. Eleven other informants reported to have started with *bun-til*. Most pottery makers explained that the first work should be *bun-til* because girls could learn to make different shapes and sizes of pots by themselves after making *bun-til*. Some pottery makers mentioned that girls could not learn to make other shapes, such as *tila*, *dist*, and *jebena*, if they started by making *aksh*, clay pan.

At the very beginning of making *bun-til*, the mother forms a pot in front of her daughter for a few minutes, and leaves it unfinished for her daughter. From this point, girls do all the making processes by themselves. Pottery makers and their daughters make pots in the same working place. But they do not always work at the same making stage. Mothers rarely show their daughters how to make the pots.

SEQUENCE OF LEARNING CONTEXT: *TILA*

Learners often make one *bun-til* at a time, but gradually they make two or three *bun-til* at the same time. Finally, when they can make five or more *bun-til* at one time, they can start making the next *tila*, which is *ekena til*.

They clearly recognize which kinds of *tila* they have already mastered (Fig.5). In the case of *tila* shapes, girls have to start making them from small size to bigger sizes. Once they have had a long learning period, girls can make more kinds of *tila*.

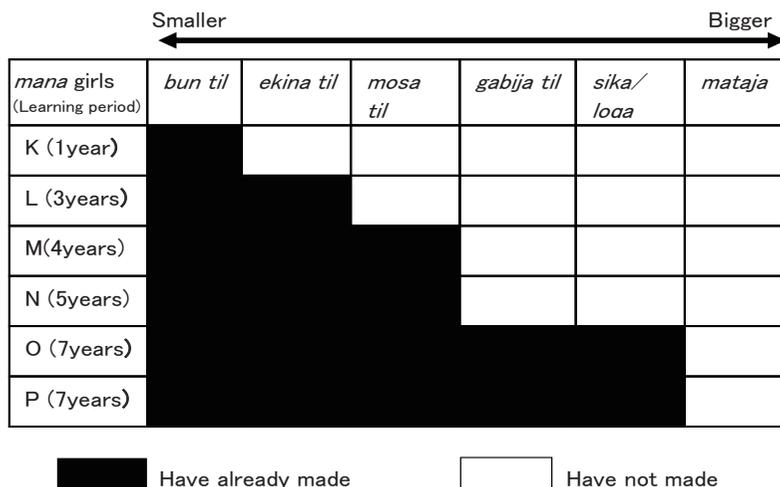


Fig. 5. Sequence of Learning Context 1 *Tila* Shape (2001. June)

I analyzed the making processes of two different sizes of *tila* by observing the finger movement patterns. When I observed the making process of informant O, she had 36 'U.P' for making *bun-til* and 40 'U.P' for *gabija til*. I found increased 'U.P' between making stage A and B where she expanded the bottom part to a ball-like shape more than double the size of stage A. When O made *gabija til*, she stopped expanding the bottom part completely. After she dried it, she started putting clay on the rest of the bottom part to form the ball-like shape. She had already acquired these increased 'U.P' when she mastered making *bun-til*. I also found these increased 'U.P' among other pottery makers in village S and village G.

POPULAR POTS

In Ari, there are four popular kinds of pots (Table 1). Twelve pottery makers in the two villages explained that *tila* is the easiest shape to make. *Disti* is more difficult than *tila*, and *jebena* is more difficult than *disti*, and finally *aksh* is the most difficult shape. I identify each shape of forming techniques by analyzing 'U.P'.

In the case of informant O, in the 'U.P' of making *tila*, *disti*, *jebena*, and *aksh*, the total number of 'U.P' in making *aksh* is 15, less than what is needed for making *tila*. There are 'new' patterns of finger movement in the making process of *disti*, *jebena*, and *aksh*.

Table 1. Name, Shape and Philological Derivation of Ari Pots

Name	Shape	Philological derivation
<i>Til</i>		Ari
<i>Disti</i>		Amharic derivation
<i>Jebena</i>		Amharic
<i>Aksha</i>		Ari

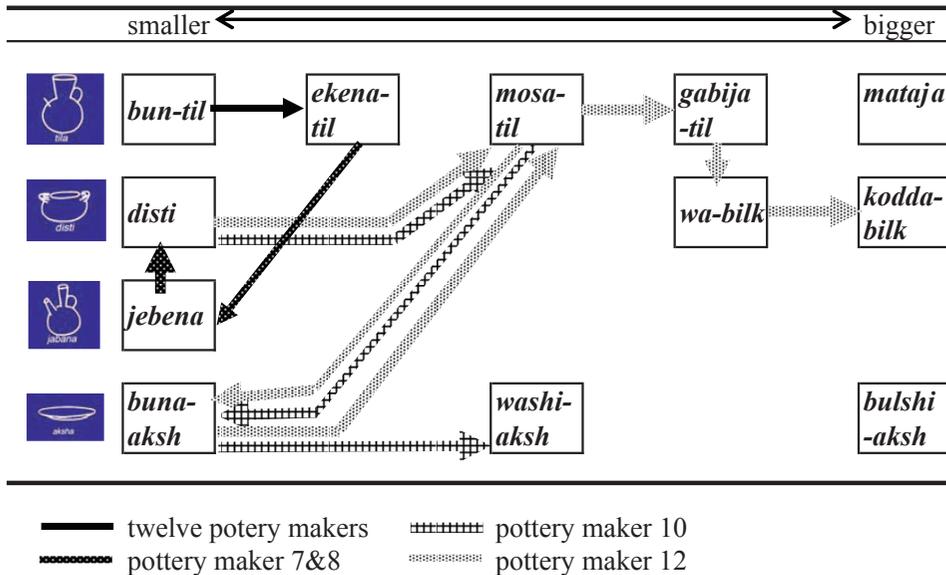


Fig. 6. Sequence of Learning Context 2: Various Shapes (2002. Feb, Village G)

*When both mothers and daughters in village S and G explained their learning order of various shapes, they mention these names in each box.

SEQUENCE OF LEARNING: POPULAR POTS

Although pottery makers mention certain difficulties in forming the four popular pots: *tila*, *disti*, *jebena*, and *aksh*, there exists no consistent learning order. After mastering *bun-til*, all twelve girls started to form *ekena-til*. After mastering *ekena-til*, ten girls moved to *disti*, while pottery makers number 7 and 8 from village G started to make *jebena* and then *disti*. This illustrates that no sequential learning order is necessary. Pottery makers number 10 and 12, sisters from village G, learnt *disti*, *mosa-til*, and *buna-aksh* (in that order) before learning how to make *jebena*. According to interviews, their mother, who often made *aksh* for sale in the local markets, was not good in making *jebena*. Pottery maker number 12 moved from *gabija-til* to *wa-bilk* and *kodda-bilk* after learning how to form *buna-aksh*. On the other hand, her sister (pottery maker number 10) moved from *buna-aksh* to *washi-aksh*. The experiences of the two sisters show that the kind of pots their mother made influenced what they learnt, though not necessarily in a consistent order.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING PROCESS

Three characteristics of learning processes could be identified. First, pottery makers in Ari do not learn each making stage step by step. From the very beginning, they do all the making stages to form the whole shape of a pot.

Second, girls move from small size to bigger size by using the same finger movement patterns. They use the same finger movement patterns for *tila* making while acquiring 'new' finger movement patterns in the process.

Third, pottery makers could not make all kinds of pots even after acquiring the finger movement patterns of *til* making. For example, one maker who could make *aksh*, the most difficult shape, could not make a coffee pot, *jebena*, which is considered easier than making *aksh* by pottery makers. Not all makers create a new shape of pot when their customers ask them to do so, even when those new shapes are based on finger movement patterns for *til* making (Kaneko, forthcoming).

Pottery making is not just about technological methods for shaping the clay into pots. It has much more to do with the social, cultural, and economic situation of the pottery makers. They could acquire and create making-techniques, which are stimulated by the characteristics of social relationships between the various participants: mothers vs. daughters and users vs. makers. The social role of pottery makers as daughters, wives, and mothers influence their choice of making techniques.

NOTES

- (1) In Ari, *tila* is interchangeably used with *dah*, another generic term for pots. *Tila* is often used in combined words, such as *ekena-til* (cabbage-pot), *gabija-til* (taro-pot) and *gola-til* (beer-pot).
- (2) I sometimes observed different ways of making pots because pottery makers would like to make their pots immediately to sell in a local market the next day, but I did not include them in my analysis.

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Author's Name and Address: Morie KANEKO, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-8501, JAPAN.
E-mail: kaneko@jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp

