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Mande Cultural Expression in the Work of Female Potters

ARTH 4750/5750: Critical Issues in World Art

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For centuries, women of the Mande group in West Africa have been creating ceramic vessels using traditional methods passed down from one generation of women to the next. The term “Mande” denotes a large portion of the West African population, including nearly 3 million people residing in areas such as Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (“Mande”). People in these areas have certain cultural aspects in common, including traditions associated with pottery production. While ceramics function in the home as vessels for food storage and preparation, they are also a means by which women earn an income. Mande ceramics, created by skilled female artists, function not only as a means of making money, but also represent broader concepts of Mande social organization and spirituality. The process by which ceramics are created and the forms of the vessels themselves represent Mande cultural ideas, and demonstrate how these ideas continue throughout West Africa.

Within Mande society, female potters are known as *numumuso*. They are typically married to blacksmiths due to the spiritual nature of their abilities to create (“More Than Wives and Mothers” 27). In some areas, particularly in the southern parts of West Africa which border Senufo territory, female potters are wed to griots, however, the majority are the wives of blacksmiths (“Reconstructing the History of African Ceramic Tradition” 385). Both the *numumuso* and their husbands are in some way segregated from the rest of Mande society, which is primarily agricultural outside of cities (Naughton 46). According to Professor Patrick Naughton of Indiana University in his essay “The Semantics of Jugu Blacksmiths, Lore, and “Who’s Bad” in Mande,” West African literature describes blacksmiths and their female potter counterparts as “repugnant outcasts whose incessant and uncontrollable acts of sorcery make them atrocious, as well as terrible and terrifying (46-47).” However, Naughton notes contradictory literature and mythology suggests blacksmiths have special powers, allowing them

to take on roles as heroes or spiritual creators instead of evil sorcerers (50). Professor Barbara Frank of Stony Brook University notes the divide within Mande society between blacksmiths, potters, and others is still maintained today, stating “the issue of identity takes on special significance in the Mande world where artists are separated by endogamy and occupation from the rest of society, a distinctive and persistent social construct (“Reconstructing” 384).”

Evidently, the ability of Mande blacksmiths and potters to create sets them apart from other members of society, and they continue to be both revered and feared. This demonstrates that pottery for Mande people is not just a “craft” – rather, it is part of a larger social system which makes evident Mande beliefs regarding the power to create – something associated with both God and evil sorcerers.

While Mande potters are usually married to blacksmiths, women create their ceramic work independently. However, blacksmith husbands will assist *numumuso* with collecting raw clay. Potters collect the raw clay from underground deposits along with wood for the later firing process between the fall harvest and start of the dry season. Husbands and sons of the potters are not permitted in the mine itself for fear of disrupting the energy of the clay, but they do assist *numumuso* in carrying heavy loads of the raw clay back to their wives’ workshops (Goldner 74). The Mande believe raw clay is extremely spiritually powerful, containing vital energy or *nyama* which dictates it must be harvested in a specific way to ensure both the safety of potters and success of the vessels they create. Without following these guidelines, *numumuso* may upset the spirits that protect the raw clay deposits, which can cause their pieces to break upon firing along with other negative side effects, such as fertility issues (“More Than Wives and Mothers” 28). Professor Olivier Gosselain at the Free University of Brussels notes breaking certain taboos associated with pottery production can disrupt the future clay collection, the drying of ceramic

works, and the firing process (Gosselain 209). He suggests that “symbolic thinking may pervade every single part of a technical process” of Mande ceramic production (206). In some areas, *numumuso* sacrifice chickens to appease spirits which protect clay pits and ensure successful harvest and vessel creation (“More Than Wives” 29). Menstruating women are also forbidden from harvesting raw clay, as it is believed the *nyama* will interfere with their childbearing ability (28). These taboos, which are held today despite Western colonial influence, show how seriously Mande peoples take ceramic creation – it is more than just a money-making venture, it is a way to express belief.

Once clay is harvested, *numumuso* must prepare it for sculpting. Raw clay is mixed with finely crushed pieces of fired clay, or grog, which makes vessels more stable and less likely to crack during the extreme temperature changes of the firing process (31). Some Mande potters use clay which contains up to 40% grog, making it very gritty, but highly stable (Goldner 77). To prepare clay, women mix it with grog in large batches using their feet, often in a communal setting (“More Than Wives” 30). Once clay is prepared, potters store for use throughout the entire season, though they may return and harvest more if necessary to fulfill demand for their vessels. Upon initial consideration of Mande ceramic vessels, one may believe they have been wheel thrown. However, Mande potters create their vessels – even those substantial in size – with hand building techniques. Working alone or communally (Goldner 76), women begin by pounding processed clay into a circular mold to form the base of the vessel, and then build it up to the appropriate size and shape for its function using a coil method (“More Than Wives” 30). When the vessel reaches the desired form, potters begin a process of smoothing and burnishing to create a smoother, shinier finish after firing. Potters often use small stones to burnish pieces, and textured materials such as rope and shell to add texture (31).

While *numumuso* do not throw their vessels on a wheel, they do use a turn-table like device in order to trim the vessels once they are leather hard (30). Frank notes that while ceramic techniques in the Mande diaspora across West Africa vary slightly based on region-specific factors such as clay availability, they have not changed much over time (“Reconstructing” 388-389). The strict adherence to techniques indicates the importance of ceramic tradition within Mande ideology – even in regions bordering other cultural groups, Mande potters adhere to common taboos and techniques (389). For example, due to the association between ceramic creation and fertility, premenopausal women are not permitted to create specific vessels which are pierced with holes for cooking techniques such as steaming. Mande people fear that premenopausal women piercing vessels will cause complications in pregnancy, as the ceramic vessel is associated with the womb (383). It appears that the link between ceramics and pregnancy exists in that they both are created by women, and both contain material vital to life – in the case of a womb, the potential for new life, and in the case of a vessel, the food which sustains it.

When a potter is satisfied with the shape and finish of her vessel, it is allowed to dry and is then fired, often in a communal firepit. Many vessels will be fired at the same time, though each woman is responsible for looking after her own pots (Goldner 77). Though *numumuso* often sign their work, Frank notes that most women assert they could tell their pieces apart from the rest of the group’s without any signature or indicator (“Marks of Identity” 30). Vessels meant for public display or ceremonial use are often coated in a colored slip (“More Than Wives” 31). Artist Janet Goldner notes that, in her conversations with Mande potters in Mali, the slip designs were based on the artistic whims of the potter, and did not typically reflect a greater spiritual meaning (Fig. 1, Goldner 77). Large vessels are often burnished to a shiny black color (“More Than Wives”

32). Before firing, texture is added to the base of many vessels, especially those made for cooking – this allows for greater stability when the vessel is exposed to heat, and in some cases, allows for more even heat distribution (31).

When the potters decide to fire, vessels are arranged in large pile and covered in wood, typically a longer-burning hardwood. Dry grass and leaves are mounded up over the wood and lit in order to trap the heat and keep wood burning longer (Fig. 2, 77). Because of the variable temperature of wood firing, vessels are at a higher risk for cracking than if fired in a kiln, however, Barbara Frank notes that during her trips to West Africa, she rarely saw any ceramic pieces break during firing unless they were made by young and inexperienced potters (“More Than Wives” 33). Frank notes in her 1993 article, “Reconstructing the History of an African Ceramic Tradition: Technology, Slavery and Agency in the Region of Kadiolo (Mali)”:

“In the case of pottery production, although tools and materials may appear to be rudimentary, the technical knowledge required to successfully form and fire is anything but simple. It is not a craft that someone could simply take up upon seeing a skilled potter work, much less upon being presented with the finished product. This product reflects specialized knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next and augmented by individual experience (387).”

Mande pottery goes beyond just a means of earning an income – it is a craft which is inherited matrilineally through generations of *numumuso*. The passing down of techniques ensures consistency in vessel form and purpose, and having trained since a young age, Mande potters are

extremely skilled in this area of cultural expression. In some cases, even the signature symbol for different potters are passed down from mother to daughter (“More Than Wives” 30).

The numumuso created vessels are so culturally significant that they continue to be highly valued in West Africa. The selling of ceramic goods often provides the main source of income for a potter’s family (27). Experienced potters will often sell their pots only on commission, rather than in the market. Oftentimes, potters in rural villages accept exchanges of goods such as rice, millet, or cloth for their vessels, as many women in rural, agriculturally-based villages do not have the cash available to purchase ceramic goods. Despite the expense, Mande women or their families will purchase handmade ceramic vessels to be used in their bridal trousseau. When entering a marriage, women are responsible for bringing everything they may need to care for their future family into the union, especially if they are the second or third wife in an already established family compound (Cunningham 280). Jerimy J. Cunningham, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Lethbridge notes “women are expected to possess at least two cauldrons, a large basin for washing clothes, pails for hauling water, and an assortment of pottery, including water jars and wash pots (281)” in his 2009 article “Pots and Political Economy: Enamel-Wealth, Gender, and Patriarchy in Mali.” Cunningham notes that many women are now making use of less expensive imported enamel-ware in their bridal trousseaus, however, many still retain a few hand-made ceramic vessels, especially larger wares for the storage of water and dry foods (281). Because of the increased use of enamel-ware, Mande women sometimes have difficulty selling their ceramic pieces (285). It is now not unusual for Mande potters to travel great distances in order to sell their goods in urban marketplaces (“Marks of Identity” 31). *Numumuso* family groups, made up of the co-wives of a blacksmith, will often transport their goods together to sell in markets (Goldner 79).

Despite the influx of enamel-ware, the continued demand of Mande ceramics for new brides shows their importance culturally and suggests the connection of *numumuso* to other areas of their culture. The association between ceramic vessels and the womb indicates pottery is integral in ensuring the fertility of new brides who would not be able to support a family without the proper vessels for food and water storage. Furthermore, Mande potters are involved with marriage ceremonies, funeral ceremonies, and have been responsible for performing female excision rites because of their ability to handle the *nyama* power (“More Than Wives” 27). Vessels created by *numumuso* can be used, in some instances, as containers of bodies for burial, particularly in the event of a death of a *numumuso* child (Gosselain 215). Gosselain notes that potters can function as midwives in some cases, and also craft vessels for fertility rites (207). The various jobs of potters outside of pottery production indicate their immense spiritual power within Mande society. However, many young Mande women have goals outside of their *numumuso* identity. While they learn ceramic tradition from their mothers, they also go to school and many desire to have careers outside of pottery (“More Than Wives” 34). Despite this, Janet Goldner noted that in her most recent visit to Mali, the population of Mande potters had increased enough to create a need for more frequent firings (Goldner 77).

While pottery provides a way for Mande women to earn an income and support their families, the ceramic process is also deeply ingrained in Mande culture, and reflects certain cultural ideas. The association between ceramic creation and fertility designate *mumumuso* as more than just craftswomen – they protect and further Mande cultural values and practices. Mande people perceive a direct link between the production of ceramics and pregnancy, as both concern a woman’s power to create. For this reason, *numumuso* and their blacksmith husbands are powerful, revered, and often feared outsiders in the larger Mande rural agricultural village

framework. Despite their separation from society, Mande female potters play a vital role in passing down the rich cultural and spiritual tradition of Mande people despite Western influence. Despite changes in the globalizing world, and the influences of other cultures on West Africa, Mande ceramics continue as an example of a rich, significant cultural tradition handed down through generations of women.



Fig. 1: Goldner, Janet. *Pots Ready for Firing*, 2005.



Figure 2: Goldner, Janet. *Tending the Fire*, 2005.

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