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Change in Small Scale Pottery Manufacture in Antigua, West Indies

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Today, in a handful of Caribbean islands (e.g., Jamaica, Martinique, Barbados, Antigua, Nevis, and St. Lucia), persons of African descent continue to manufacture earthenware pottery, generally somewhat loosely and variously referred to by modern Caribbean archaeologists as Afro-Caribbean pottery or ceramics (e.g., Petersen et al. 1999).[2] These small-scale industries have always played an insignificant role in insular national economies and at present they seem to have a very limited chance for long-term survival. Today they produce largely for the tourist market and are disappearing to varying degrees. Several of these industries have been ethnographically reported over the years,[3] and these reports provide a base line from which to examine the changing demands and pressures confronting local potteries. Diachronic studies of these industries permit researchers to chart changes as these industries decline, and also provide a lens through which archaeologists can understand the ways in which local craft industries have confronted changing economic landscapes. Moreover, traditional locally made earthenware is today found in historical archaeological sites in the West Indies and ethnographic knowledge about local industries helps interpret the archaeological data. The following information on the little-known industry in the small island of Antigua, a former British colony in the Leeward island chain -- today an independent member of the British Commonwealth -- is based on limited field work, published literature, and personal correspondence with persons possessing first-hand knowledge. Synthesizing and comparing different accounts presents some difficulties including inconsistencies in identifying the number of potters, varying attention to manufacturing details, and distinct analytical agendas.

Archaeological Evidence

James Petersen (deceased 2005) with David Watters and Desmond Nicholson (deceased 2006) have provided some of the earliest and most detailed archaeological descriptions of Antiguan hand-built pottery. Data are presented on 65 vessels from 27 archaeological contexts representing military, plantation, and village sites, dating from the early eighteenth to twentieth centuries. The earliest dates Peterson et al. give for Antiguan-produced Afro-Caribbean ware is 1700-1725, and by identifying coil breaks in cross-sections they argue that all of the vessels were made through coiling. All 65 vessels contained the same tempering elements composed primarily of volcanic tuff; 29 were treated with a red slip, 5 were decorated using incision or punctation. Two vessels were griddles which they called "yabbas," six tea pot shaped water vessels were identified as "monkey jars," three were braziers or coal pots; there were also five flower pots, one pitcher, and two possible cooking pots. The remaining vessels were broadly categorized as restricted jars, unrestricted jars, bowls, and so forth.

As an aggregate these analyzed ceramics represent a variety of forms with a relatively consistent fabric suggesting a possible continuity in ceramic recipes with more modern forms. A ceramic recipe is the combination of decisions made by the potter for the kinds of materials used, techniques employed in vessel formation, and methods of firing. In this case Peterson et al. suggest that vessel forms might be sensitive markers for establishing chronologies. The earliest forms represented in the archaeological record include bowls, restricted and direct-rimmed cooking pots, and griddles. Between 1834 and 1981 the authors note that four new forms were introduced into the repertoire of Antiguan potters. These included water goblets, monkey jars, flowerpots, flowerpot saucers, and coal pots; the last three were possibly introduced at the turn of the twentieth century (Nicholson 1985, 1990; Petersen and Watters 1988; Petersen et al. 1999). By the time the Antiguan potters were ethnographically reported in the mid twentieth century, they had already made several improvisations in their wares. These changes were adaptations to changing local demands stimulated by wider economic conditions.

Pottery in the Early 1960s

In August 1961, Handler very briefly visited the village of Seaview Farm, located approximately 6 km from the island's capital, St. John's, and made a variety of observations on pottery manufacture. Since at least the late nineteenth century and continuing up until the

present, Seaview Farm is the only village with pottery manufacturing although pottery has been made on the island since "at least" the early eighteenth century (Petersen et al. 1999: 172; cf. Heath 1988:112, citing Nicholson 1986 [1985]; Earle 1923:25, cited in Heath 1988: 112-113). In 1961, about 20 female potters largely manufactured utilitarian items, e.g., monkey jars or monkeys (for water storage), coal pots (used in brazier cooking), and flower pots (Handler 1964: 150-151).[4] Handler's observations added to a small body of ethnographic literature that documented female manufactured hand-made pottery in the Caribbean (Victor 1949; Merril 1958; McCusick 1960; Verin 1961).

Handler (1964) briefly described how and where the clay was mined and how it was cured and prepared for vessel formation. The vessel was formed on a small wooden board resting on the ground that served as a tournette -- a horizontal, rotating palette. An initial depression was made in the center of the clay ball with the thumbs and the vessel walls slowly began to be pinched and pulled upwards. The clay was rotated on the board and pulled into a rough shape of the vessel's final form. The technique was modeling (a combination of pinching and drawing), not coiling, the latter being found in, for example, Jamaica (Ebanks 1984; Beckwith 1929) and St. Lucia (Victor 1949) at around the same period.[5] The vessel's interior and exterior walls were then scraped to achieve the appropriate thickness and the vessel was smoothed with a damp rag. After drying for at least a day, a red clay slip was applied. The Antiguan potters did not use kilns. Firing took place in an open clearing covered by ash from previous fires; wood was layered on the ash, followed by the air dried vessels which were then covered with green grass. The firing generally took approximately one hour. Similar techniques of manufacture and firing existed at the time in Nevis, a small neighboring island (Handler 1964: n. 2; Grigsby 1961; Figure 1) where present-day potters still follow these traditional techniques.[6] Antiguan ceramics were sold in Seaview Farm itself or in St. John's, where potters attended the weekly Saturday market; on occasion they travelled to town on weekdays.[7]

Figure 1. Firing pottery in Nevis in the early 1960s (from Grigsby 1962). Handler observed a similar method in Antigua during the same period.

Handler viewed this Antiguan industry with female potters using hand modeling techniques and open-air firing as suggestive of West African influences, in great contrast to the local pottery of Barbados where all the potters were males who employed a wheel-based and beehive-kiln technology of English origin (Handler 1963a, 1963b).[8] The Antiguan industry was more comparable to the hand-built (non-wheel) and open-fired (non-kiln) pottery complexes organized by women in other areas of the British and French Caribbean (Grigsby 1962; Ebanks 1984; Roo Lemoos 1977; Verin 1963; Victor 1949).

The essential technological details and basic ware types such as coal pots and water jugs manufactured in Seaview Farm during the early 1960s were apparently unchanged since the early twentieth century and quite probably since, at least, the first several decades of the nineteenth century (see Flannigan 1844; 2:4; Earle 1923, cited in Heath 1988:112-113).

Pottery in the 1970s and 1980s

In late 1979, the anthropologist Susan Lowes briefly visited Seaview Farm, at the suggestion of Handler, while doing fieldwork for her dissertation in Antigua. She reported that the manufacturing process seemed to be identical to what Handler had observed in the early 1960s save for minor details in the firing. She noted that the "cinder mounds are undoubtedly higher, taking up most of the yard -- but probably less frequent because it's hard to get firewood" (Lowes to Handler, pers. comm., 28 November 1979). The greatest change was in the number of

potters and their sales outlets. Lowes counted two sets of potters in the village. One set included five women -- an older woman potter and what were probably her daughters and granddaughters. Each of these five women worked at a different stage in the process. The second set was one woman and her nephew who mostly produced large flowerpots. Together, the female potters estimated their number to be between six and twenty. This discrepancy in numbers is difficult to resolve and it is unclear exactly what was meant by a potter, i.e., whether it meant only those capable of actually making wares (the definition of potter in Barbados) or all of those involved in some manner in the pottery industry. Whatever the case, it appears that during Lowes' visit the industry was declining even though the techniques of manufacture remained essentially the same. The second change was in marketing and competition. A "more commercial potter" located elsewhere on the island was copying the forms produced by the Seaview Farm potters and selling vessels in town. For their sales, the village potters relied on local hotels, tourists visiting the town, and a market in St. John's.

In the 1970s and late 1980s, the Antiguan archaeologist Desmond Nicholson also made observations at Seaview Farm. His report indicates that many of the same ware types described by Handler were still being made, and he recorded the same manufacturing and firing procedures described by Handler and repeated by Lowes (Nicholson 1984:4-5). For example, potters employed a "red ocherous" soil for the slip (probably laterite), a practice "of smearing of red clay to give it a varnish" reported in the early twentieth century (Earle 1923:25, cited in Heath 1988:113). Some minor differences in his reporting probably reflect details overlooked or not mentioned by Handler and Lowes. For example, after the clay was mined and before being pounded, it was "felt out" for stones; vessels were decorated using finger indentation, and they were sold in St. John's or "by special order from the tourist industry" (Nicholson 1990:437). After 1981, the potters primarily made ashtrays, flowerpots, and coal pots. Although manufacturing and firing techniques had not fundamentally changed, the most notable change was the significant decline in the number of potters to no more then a dozen. By the 1990s, when James Petersen visited Seaview Farm, there were "fewer" potters than the dozen or so reported by Nicholson (Petersen et al. 1999:167). Nicholson (1984) explained the decline in the number of potters by the decreased market for traditional pottery, as iron and plastic vessels were replacing pottery in the lives of Antiguans. This decreasing market also impacted on the recruitment of new potters, as younger members of the village were not stimulated to learn the

craft. Similar forces have been at work for years in, for example, the small-scale industry in Barbados, which Handler has been observing from the early 1960s to the present.

Around the early 1980s, the Antigua Museum in St. John's began highlighting the potters of Seaview Farm with an exhibit that used the notes and wares collected by Nicholson (Rebovich to Hauser, pers. comm., 16 September 2009). Significantly, the exhibit displays many pieces of pottery that were produced in Seaview Farm between 1970 and 1980; these vessels include the above-mentioned forms.

Barbara Heath briefly visited Seaview farm during the summer of 1987. Although she only "spent an afternoon with the potters" and "another afternoon" with the women in the marketplace in St. John's, she provides relatively detailed information on the potters, their workshops, technology, methods of manufacture, and the wares they produced. Heath describes essentially the same tools (e.g., "tournette," calabash and thin iron scrapers, polishing stone and finishing rag), manufacturing and firing procedures as in earlier reports, sometimes in much more detail, and her account of marketing in St. John's does not vary in significant details. She describes at least ten ware types, including "water jars," "monkeys," coal pots, "jugs," "dishes," "Yabba's," "flower pots" (with coal and flower pots being most "in demand by all segments of Antiguan society"), and their methods of manufacture. She does not mention such ornamental items as ashtrays, but this might be of little significance since she was apparently looking for "traditional" wares. Health also made similar observations about the decline of the industry and the difficulty in recruiting new potters, and estimated around ten potters in the village at the time of her visit (Heath 1988: 111-124; Heath to Handler, pers. comm., 12 October 2009).

Pottery in July 2009

On July 1, 2009, over twenty years after Heath's visit to Seaview Farm, Hauser very briefly visited the village with a view to gathering information on how the pottery industry had changed since Handler's visit forty-eight years earlier.[9] The houses of Seaview Farm still straddle a small road that connects to the main road leading to St. John's. About two hours were spent in the village, forty-five minutes of which involved interviewing a middle-aged female potter. The visit was very informal and not planned systematically, but it provided some data on changes in the Antiguan pottery tradition over a period of close to five decades. Vessels were

observed in various stages of completion and the potter demonstrated some of her techniques in forming a cooking pot (vessel shown in Figure 2; see also Figures 3-5).

Figure 2. A mound of processed clay approximately 1 by 2 meters covered by tarpaulin and plywood, weighted down by several fired cooking pots. In the lower left is a cooking pot in the drying stage (Figures 2-6, photos by M. Hauser, July 2009).

From what was reported by Handler, Lowes, Nicholson, and Heath there are some continuities in vessel forms, such as the cooking pot, the monkey jar, and the coal pot. The Antiguan archaeologist, Reg Murphy later reported that this potter still makes a "really thick cooking pot they call a 'yabba'[10] in which local Rastafarians and "naturalists" cook their vegetarian food" (Murphy to Hauser, pers. comm. 22 September 2009). No flowerpots were visible during Hauser's visit, and no information was obtained on how frequently these are made. A form that apparently has been introduced in relatively recent years, which is not mentioned by earlier observers, is a small conical shaped pipe used for smoking ganja (Figure 6).[11]

Heath, Nicholson, and Petersen et al., described a combined coiling and modeling technique in their accounts of Seaview Farm pottery. In 2009, the potter demonstrated to Hauser the modeling technique observed by Handler in 1961 but with some minor differences in the sequence of manufacturing steps. These differences could have been the result of the informal demonstration given Hauser in which coiling was omitted. Similarly different observers might

have seen potters making different vessel forms for which different techniques were utilized. If, however, the demonstration given Hauser was an accurate reflection of choices made by the potter, it provides evidence of significant change.

One possible index of change in manufacturing techniques and ware formation is the thickness of the pottery. The vessels observed by Hauser in 2009 are very thick walled. While no measurements were taken in the early 1960s or in a July 2009 visit to the Antigua museum's ethnographic collection, the vessels seen by Hauser at the potter's house in Seaview Farm were noticeably thicker than ethnographic specimens collected in the 1980's and displayed at the museum as well as archaeological ceramics recovered from a nearby plantation. Samantha Rebovich, a graduate student at Syracuse University, has estimated the average thickness of body sherds of local coarse earthenware. She recovered these sherds archaeologically from her 18th-19th century dissertation site, and reported that locally produced pottery averages between 7 to 10 mm in thickness (Rebovich to Hauser, pers. comm. 27 August, 15 September 2009). The

Figure 3. A bucket filled with water and potter's tools, including a calabash for scraping, a corncob for leveling, a cloth rag for wiping, and polishing stone for smoothing.

Figure 4. The potter holding a calabash for scraping and a polishing stone for smoothing.

Figure 5. The potter demonstrating how a coal pot is smoothed with a polishing stone.

Figure 6. Clay Ganja pipe. In Jamaica it is called a chillum. See endnote 11.

pottery made by the Seaview Farm potter averages 15 to 17 mm in thickness, but some vessels examined by Hauser were as thick as 25 to 30 mm. Such thick-walled vessels are much heavier to transport, and thick walls also have the potential for partial firing and an increased number of internal imperfections.

The single greatest difference between July 2009 and what was reported in earlier years is the number of potters. In Seaview Farm today only one woman is making pottery and she appears to be the last person to take up the craft. No children or family members are assisting the potter in clay gathering, vessel formation, firing, or selling. The pottery made by this potter seems to have two sales outlets: the tourist market, which is interested in "traditional" vessels (the monkey jar, the coal pot, and the cooking pot); and local sales of cooking pots, coal pots, and clay ganja pipes. It appeared that the potter has a rather hefty trade in the latter.

Conclusion

Although there is evidence for substantial continuity in technology, methods of manufacture, and firing over close to half a century (and possibly much longer), several key changes have occurred. With a considerably diminished local market in utilitarian wares and a marketing outlet only modestly sustained by tourists seeking objects of local manufacture, the number of potters has declined significantly. While the reports discussed above agree on the

decline of the industry and its precarious economic position, it is difficult to ascertain from these reports the precise number of potters at different periods. In fact, the reports sometimes conflict with one another. As suggested above, this may be a function of the definitions used for identifying potters. To some observers, the word "potter" may have been employed to refer to all of those involved with the pottery industry in whatever phase, from clay collecting to making to firing; in other cases, the word "potter" may have referred only to those who actually made the wares regardless of their participation in other phases (a definition employed in Barbados, for example). Whatever the case, it is apparent that new potters are not being recruited and the wares currently being made, except for ganja pipes, appear to be rougher and cruder than in earlier times. While Seaview Farm continues to be promoted by the Antiguan tourist industry as the center of a thriving pottery industry that dates back to the eighteenth century, it is a craft that has all but vanished. Despite Reg Murphy's assurance of a local demand for 'traditional' vessels such as coal pots and cooking pots, the fear that potters expressed to Barbara Heath over twenty years ago "that the craft will die within the next generation" is rapidly coming true (Heath 1988:111). Moreover, as Heath also learned in 1987, this productive enterprise does not appear to show signs of any invigoration by recruitment of new potters and an expanding market for its wares. The recent history of Seaview Farm reflects what is apparently typical of small-scale traditional pottery manufacturing in other areas of the Caribbean. Martinique, Nevis and Barbados offer excellent examples of such a change. Documenting such change is important as it reflects the impact of wider social and economic forces on local industries. It also provides crucial evidence for the interpretation of archaeological ceramics--which may soon be the only material evidence that these industries ever existed.

Notes

1. Mark Hauser is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University and Jerome Handler is a Senior Scholar at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities in Charlottesville. For their assistance with various issues and comments on an earlier draft, we are grateful to Barbara Heath, Samantha Rebovich, Reg Murphy, Alan Moss, Kenneth Bilby, Douglas Armstrong, David Watters, and Sylvanius Walters.

2. Petersen et al. (1999:164) confine the term to "hand-built, open-fired earthenwares" and specifically exclude "wheel-made, kiln-fired wares." For purposes of this article, we see no need to enter into a discussion of terminologies and apply the term to local, or cottage, industries wherein the participants are of African descent.

3. Beckwith 1929; Taylor 1938; Victor 1941; Merril 1958; McCusick 1960; Gigsby 1962; Verin 1963; Handler, 1963a, 1963b, 1964; Roo Lemos 1979; Platzer 1979; Ebanks 1984; Heath 1988; Beuze 1990; Olwig 1990; Peterson et al. 1999; Vincentelli 2004.

4. Handler visited Seaview Farm in August 1961, not August 1962 as mistakenly published in Handler 1964.

5. In 1988, Heath observed a combination of modeling and coiling in Seaview Farm (Heath 1988; 119), an observation also apparently made by Petersen in the 1990s, although his reportage is unclear (Petersen et al. 1999: 167). If, indeed, both techniques were employed, it probably reflects an inadequacy in Handler's original account, rather than changes in manufacturing techniques over time; although only modeling may have been used for certain, smaller, vessels.

6. The pottery is still being made at Newcastle, today organized as a co-operative serving as a training center to "preserve and enhance this local craft" and fired in open air pits with coconut husks. The market for traditional wares is largely oriented toward tourists and local hotels, guest houses, and restaurants where it is used "for the preparation of culinary delights during Culturama," an annual summer cultural festival (Alan Moss to Handler, pers. comm. 23 June 2008; Anon. 1999: 35; cf. Heath 1988:89-94).

7. As of the late 1950s, there was a commercial, privately-owned pottery which utilized Antigua clays mixed with imported ones and produced a variety of wares, e.g., vases, ash trays, figurines, and lamp bases for an export market and sale in local shops. Wares were made in molds and fired in a kiln (British Colonial Office 1960: 27). The pottery was still functioning in the early 1960s but we have no further details (Handler 1964; Fentem 1961:15).

8. Ironically, the landmark indicating the location of the Seaview Farm pottery in 2009 is a concrete sculpture of a beehive kiln.

9. Douglas Armstrong of Syracuse University and Sylvanius Walters of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust accompanied Hauser.

10. The term"yabba" is also used in Jamaica and Nevis (Hauser 2008; Heath 1988; Petersen et al. 1999).

11. This pipe is merely a bowl, without a stem. It closely resembles what in Jamaica is known as a "chillum," a hollow clay or wooden cone with a small hole at the bottom. The ganja is placed in the bowl, and "a small portion of the narrow end is inserted through the middle fingers (while the hand is formed into something like an upward-facing fist), all the fingers are held tightly together to form an almost airtight seal, and the smoke is sucked through the hole formed by the thumb and index finger" (thanks to the anthropologist Ken Bilby [pers. comm. to Handler, 17 September 2009] for this information).

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