

Photo Essay

## Cord-marked Pottery in Oinam: An extant craft in the Naga Hills, India

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### Abstract

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Oinam village in the state of Manipur in India, is known for its enduring tradition of pottery, defined by the cord-marked design on the pots. Cord-marked pottery is also found in various archaeological sites in Northeast India. Scholars have argued that pottery remains with cord-marked designs could be traced back to the Neolithic period. However, while these hand-made, earthen pots were once in high demand, they have been replaced by durable plastic and metallic vessels in recent times. Further, once considered a viable source of income, especially for women, today this tradition is seen as labor-intensive and monetarily unrewarding. As such, this tradition is preserved only by a few women of the older generation, as an act of preservation, rather than for income generation. The fifteen recent photographs in this essay document and preserve the surviving pottery-making tradition in Oinam.

### Keywords

Ethnography; Naga Hills; pottery; cord-marked; hand-made

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View of Oinam village with the concentration of settlement on the hilltop. Out of the roughly 500 households of the village, only 6 to 8 still are engaged in pottery making.

**O**inam village (Onaeme), inhabited by the Poumai Naga, is located in Senapati District of Manipur, India. The Nagas are indigenous people settled in the Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, and in northwestern Myanmar. The Nagas are comprised of a conglomeration of 30 or more ethnic groups

(Oppitz et al. 2008: 16-17). Among the Poumai Naga villages, only Oinam is known to have produced hand-made pottery. Oral history accounts claim that after migration from Makhel village (Mao area, Senapati District), the Poumai of Oinam started pottery making (Gachui 2005: 17).





Traditionally, only women are allowed to make earthen pottery. Women of this village, married to men belonging elsewhere are forbidden from continuing the craft. Women from other areas married to men of Oinam are similarly forbidden from pottery making. Oinam pots are entirely hand-made without relying on rotating wheels (Vidyani and ManiBabu 2017). They are imprinted with design features referred to as “cord-marked” (Singh 1999-98, 2008). The usage of the cord-marked design makes Oinam pottery

unique from the ones made by other Naga communities in the Naga Hills (Gachui 2005; Singh and Devi 2017). Today, only a few households practice pottery making as the demand for such earthen vessels has sharply declined. The craft is no longer a viable source of income as more durable plastics and metal containers have replaced the need for earthen vessels. The preservation of the traditional pot-making practices is now left to elderly women with no other source of income beyond farming. Girls and young women that the

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A narrow long descending footpath that leads to the clay source site (kure/khure), located about 4 to 4.5 km from the village. One could see monoliths erected in rows and columns along the footpath.





Village youth and women digging at the clay source site to collect *dunga/dungae*, a special yellowish clay to glue other two types of clays, *nae shung* and *nae hai*, which are readily available. The pots are made of a mixture of these three types of clays. Spades are used to unearth the *dunga/dungae*. This process is highly labor-intensive because this clay type is found enmeshed with stones that require removal.

author interviewed reported a reluctance in engaging with such activities because they consider it a labor-intensive and unrewarding job that makes the skin dry and unattractive.

The usage of simple tools and hand-made methods of pottery production, and the location of Oinam in an isolated area led O.K. Singh (1998-99: 63) to argue that the surviving tradition of pottery making could be traced back to the Neolithic period. Interestingly, ceramic remains with cord-marked designs have been found at various archaeological sites

in Manipur (Singh 1999-98, 2008) and Northeast India (Hazarika 2006). Though ceramic remains with cord-marked designs are widely considered evidence of the Neolithic period in Northeast India, concerns have been raised as the claim is not scientifically substantiated by radiometric data (Jamir 2013; Hazarika 2019). The living tradition of Oinam pottery has implications for the discussion of the Neolithic period in Northeast India. The fifteen recent photographs in this essay document and preserve the surviving pottery-making tradition in Oinam.



Clay collection is usually undertaken in groups comprising women and mostly young men on predetermined days. Young men are involved in such undertakings to ensure safety, and to dig and transport clay.

A woman potter packing the collected clay in bamboo baskets while other participants rest over some food. The packed clay is equally distributed in each basket and transported back to the village.

Men share the burden of the transportation of the collected clay as women find it difficult to traverse on narrow hill slope footpaths.

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A woman potter drying her clay in the sun placed over a stack of firewood in the courtyard, which is the preferred way of drying clay.

Clay is dried for as long as 10-12 days in the winter and 6-7 days in the summer. The clay needs to be adequately dried to produce good-quality earthen pots.

Sufficiently dried clay is conservable for several years and can be used to make vessels at any desired time. Unused, but properly dried clay is usually stored in the backyard or kitchen.





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A woman pounding dry clay into powder in a wooden mortar using a pestle while the other two prepare for pottery making.

Three clay types, namely, reddish (nae shung), slightly reddish (nae hai), and yellowish clays (dongae) are mixed in the mortar in a ratio of about 2:2:1.

Women engaged in pottery making are mostly married and experienced elderly women (aged 50 years and above) often assisted by younger women. In pounding the clay, experienced women are usually assisted by family members, relatives and friends.





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A woman sieving pounded clay powder using a netted bamboo basket to separate finer clay powder.

The remaining coarse clay is often repeatedly pounded in a mortar to break them into a usable fine powder.

Unwanted clay granules in the clay paste make the shaping, designing, and smoothing process uneasy.



Clay balls drying under the sun. The fine clay powder is mixed with water in the wooden mortar to form a clay paste.

The clay paste is pounded again to rule out any clay granules, and then the paste is thoroughly mixed with hands for about ten minutes to form a desirable paste.

Depending on the desired pot size, the paste is rolled into balls of desirable size, with each clay ball making only a single pot. The clay balls are usually dried for about ten minutes to be perfectly moldable.

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A woman potter on a wooden seat (*pheng*), rolling a clay ball to form a cylindrical clay paste with a wooden roller (*hu*), which takes at least five minutes.





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The potter shaping the mouth portion of a pot. The wooden roller is removed after shaping the clay ball into a desirable cylinder.

It is then supported vertically with one hand while the other shapes and enlarges the mouth.

The fingers are inserted into the cylinder to enlarge the mid-section of the cylinder. Afterwards, the lower end of the cylinder is closed.



The potter paddling the outer body of a crude-shaped pot with a lightweight wooden paddle (*titu*), while the other hand supports the pot.

Small wooden paddles are used to gently beat the surface to bring about desired thickness and smoothness. Fingers are inserted into the pot to provide support while paddling on the outer surface.

A bucket, half filled with water, is used for dipping the wooden paddle to wash away stuck clay. The rim and base portions are mainly left untouched; wet fingers shape them in the final production stage.

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Shaping and smoothing the pot, using a wooden smoother (*zha*). The wooden smoother is then dipped in the half-filled water bucket to wash away stuck clay.

Sometimes, hands and fingers are also used to smoothen the surface. Then the smoothened pot is kept in the shade for ten minutes to partially dry.





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To smoothen out the interior, the potter inserts an oval-shaped stone ball (*tuta*) into the mouth of the partially dried pot to be used as an anvil.

Before inserting it into the pot, the stone ball is first cleaned. The stone ball supports the pot while paddling on the outer surface to smoothen the interiors.



The potter uses a wooden paddle wrapped with a coarse cloth to imprint the cord-mark designs on the smoothed outer surface while the pot is still wet. The Potter's hand slowly rotates the pot while gently paddling around the outer surface. This is to ensure a regular pattern of cord-marked design.

A normal potter can make two small pots per day, while experienced ones can scale it up to five. But for larger pots, an experienced potter can make only one a day.

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The unfired pots are dried and stored in the shade, usually in kitchens as decorative items placed on shelves to be fired later whenever they find a buyer.



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