

Photo Essay

The Indigenous Art of Pottery Production among the Angami Nagas of Khuzama Village, Nagaland

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Abstract

The Nagas have long been known for making refined, high-quality earthen pots. Among the Angami Nagas, Khuzama village, of the southern Angami group, was particularly renowned, producing pottery in large quantities and with outstanding skill and craftsmanship. Making earthen pots demands considerable physical strength and is labor-intensive work, as the pots were locally handmade without the use of potter's wheels. The village potters used only simple, hand-made tools that were readily available; they had no machinery. Even so, the quality of their work was never compromised, and the potters produced good-quality, refined pots that were renowned, widely distributed, and in high demand. The art of pottery production was primarily managed by women, who shaped and molded the clay into crafted pots; men assisted with some physical labor. The traditional knowledge involved in pottery making has been lost, as the craft is no longer actively practiced in the village, for reasons discussed below. The younger generation is currently indifferent to this craft. Only a few surviving skilled potters are alive at present, and with their passing, the rich cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and craft will be lost forever. The author also participated in pottery production, since photographs, videos, and documentation alone are not sufficient; hands-on experience of learning the craft step by step proved essential. Therefore, documentation of the craft as well as learning it from a skilled potter is necessary to preserve and carry forward the rich culture and tradition of Khuzama pottery.

Keywords

women's craft production; traditional knowledge; material culture; cultural heritage; ethnoarchaeology; Nagaland; Northeast India

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Introduction

Khuzama is one of the Southern Angami Naga villages. It is located on the interstate border with Manipur, neighboring the Mao villages, and 29.4 km south of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. The population of the village, according to the 2011 census, the most recent available, is 970 families, totalling 5,216 people. The people are known for making refined and high-quality earthen pottery of different shapes and sizes serving various functions. The art of pottery production is an age-old and indigenous craft of the Naga communities, and it has a very intimate relationship with the people who make and use it. During the precolonial era, earthen pots were among the most essential household utilities. Pottery serves not only basic utilitarian purposes but also plays a vital role in social, religious, funerary, and cultural activities. It is more than just an art form; it embodies the identity, history, and rich cultural heritage of the people. The importance of pottery among the Angami Nagas is profound. In pre-colonial times, earthen pots were the most basic utensils available, as there were no other metallic options, and people used them for cooking food, storing drinking water, fermenting rice beer, serving the beer, carrying water, and keeping their goods and vegetables fresh for a longer period. Earthen pots were also used in funerary rituals, where a smaller vase *khübanü* was filled with rice beer and kept in the grave to accompany the deceased in their journey. Sekrenyi is the most important and famous festival observed by the Angami tribe, celebrating the cleansing and purification of the soul (*Phousanyi*); during this festival, every household creates a new hearth and cooks food in an earthen pot. It is a taboo (*kenü/nanyü*) to cook food without having the design elements of two protruding spikes on the pot, which represent the breasts of a woman. Even on the *liki*, the large vessel used for fermenting rice beer, there is a motif featuring an appliqué design with crisscross marks on the neck that resembles a woman's necklace. Three protruding spikes were also included on the vessel,

likewise signifying a woman's breasts. "The local interpretation is that it signifies womanhood and fertility" (Vasa 2011:87). The Sekrenyi festival was celebrated after the end of a harvest and before starting the new crop cycle for the next year, and pottery played a profound role in the celebrations. The design motif and elements of the pots represent the socio-cultural belief system and traditions of the community, as they have cultural connotations. Vasa (2014:208) stated that the jar symbolized a fertile woman because one can have a successful harvest only when the soil is fertile, and it is presumable that by using such a motif, it further promotes the concept of fertility. The craft of pottery also fostered trading relationships among villages and tribes, thereby promoting economic sustainability.

The art of handmade pottery production in Khuzama village has gradually declined over the years, and it is no longer actively practiced, for several reasons. The production of pottery has slowly dwindled in the community after contact with the British and with easy access to and availability of a variety of utensils and durable products. The embrace of the new religion introduced by American missionaries also had a significant impact on the decline of pottery making. Like other Naga communities, the Angami Nagas followed indigenous Naga religious practice in the pre-British era. Traditionally, people drank fermented rice beer, considered a staple food, and in order to ferment the rice beer, large vessels (*liki*) were required. Furthermore, a smaller vase locally known as *likhu/Khübanü* was utilized while serving the beer during ceremonial commemorations and festivals. In the celebration of the Sekrenyi festival by the Angami tribe, it is a tradition to make a new hearth and cook food in an earthen pot (*Ranyuoli*) with a motif of two protruding spikes, which is interpreted as signifying the breasts of a woman. Fresh water was used for cooking, which also symbolizes a fresh and new start. The Christian missionaries discouraged practices associated with indigenous Naga religious practice, such as



Figure 1. Large pots (*liki*) used for fermenting rice beer play an important role because they were considered sacred during the Sekrenyi celebration. The jar has an appliqué design, an incised mark, and three protruding spikes. The motif is more than just an element; it holds cultural value in the community's belief system. Photo credit: Author

drinking rice beer, once people converted to Christianity. The people discarded many rituals associated with the Sekrenyi celebration after embracing a new religion. Funerary rituals also changed, and people no longer place a vase filled with rice beer in the grave. With falling demand, production slowly decreased over time. Many villagers prioritized educating their children over focusing on craft and traditional knowledge. The younger generation, with different attitudes and aspirations, was not keen on learning from the elders. Pottery making is labor-intensive, requiring considerable time and energy for each pot, and is not a lucrative occupation. Many in today's generation prefer less physically demanding work. In addition, frequent landslides at the mining site have resulted from over-extraction, and potters relate



Figure 2. The initial step in pottery production is extracting clay from the location. The mining site is approximately 1 kilometer from the main village settlement. The clay-mining site is named *Tsükhrolo* in the local dialect. Photo credit: Author

that the landowner eventually prohibited heavy extraction of the clay. Suitable clay was not readily available everywhere, and the difficulty of obtaining clay from other locations halted production, clay being the craft's essential raw material. Together, these factors led to the gradual decline of pottery production in Khuzama village.

Among the Angami Nagas, Khuzama and Viswema are the only two villages specializing in pottery making, as Hutton (1921) noted in his monograph on the Angami. Culturally, pottery had a close relation with the people in every stage of their lives, and the design elements on the pots had meaning and connotations, which carried meaning beyond mere ornament. Careful analysis, research, and documentation of pottery offer ethnographers, anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists better insight into the culture and customs of the people. This initiative seeks to safeguard and manage cultural heritage. Since the craft of pottery is no longer practiced in the village, documenting it and learning from experienced potters who have honed their skills over the years is essential. As these skilled potters age and pass away, the traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and intrinsic value of pottery, along with its

connection to both the maker and the user, face significant risk. Therefore, it is vital to record the indigenous traditional knowledge involved in the creation of earthen pots.

Role of Women in Manufacturing of Pottery

Women held a monopoly on pottery production among the Naga tribes (Alemchiba 1968: 79; Yanger 2006: 96). Naga women potters include the Wokha village potters (Ngullie 2006, 2014); the Pongo and Yongphang village Phom potters (Vasa 2023, 2025); the Laruri village of Pochury (Vasa 2014, 2018, 2023; Leyri & Singh 2024); the Wui village of Tuensang District (Vasa 2018, 2023); and the Khuzama village of Kohima District (Jamir & Vasa 2008; Vasa 2011, 2014); only in a few cases did men practice the craft, as rarely found in Rünguzu (Vasa 2011, 2014, 2018). Khuzama's potters were traditionally women, as elsewhere among the Nagas; among Angami villages, as Hutton (1921) noted, Khuzama and Viswema held the monopoly on making earthen pots, since clay was not available everywhere. In earlier times, pots were produced in great numbers, and the demand from other places and villages was also high, as they had high-quality craftsmanship. Traditionally, there were some taboos regarding pottery production in the village, and men were prohibited from engaging in pottery, making it a female-dominated occupation (Aier, 2018:86). Among the Khuzama potters, the craft was taboo for a rich man's household; a person who had performed a feast of merit was prohibited from engaging in it. Even after the feast giver dies, anyone who moves into his house is banned from practicing it. Thus, the art of pottery production is considered a poor man's craft, as "it is a taboo for rich women to take part" (Vasa 2014:213). Not all the poor could take it up, however, as it requires skill that not everyone possesses. Women carried out nearly every stage of pottery production, from bringing the mined clay home to pounding the clay and grog and finally shaping and molding it into usable vessels.



Figure 3. A skilled potter crafts the pot with precision and passion, keeping alive heritage and traditional knowledge. Photo credit: Author

This was not the work of a single day but required considerable time and labor, and alongside pottery the women also handled household chores and agricultural activities. Men helped in firing and trading the pots, though here too women shouldered responsibility alongside their male counterparts. Through the craft, women contributed financially to the family while sustaining cultural heritage, identity, and tradition. The craft became a space of identity, resilience, and economic sustainability. Women have played a profound role in sustaining culture and indigenous knowledge, and are the true custodians of this heritage.

Methodology

The study employed observation, participation, documentation, and interview methods. The author observed, participated, and collected firsthand data. On 7 January 2026, the author documented a demonstration of the process of indigenous handmade pottery making by one of the few surviving skilled potters in the village. The author learned the oral narratives and techniques of traditional handmade pottery from skilled potters with direct, hands-on experience. The demonstration was conducted



Figure 4. After digging up the fresh clay, the next critical step was to sun-dry it for a week or longer, depending on the weather conditions. When the clay is completely dried, it hardens and is ready to be pounded. Photo credit: Author

by one of these skilled artisans, a potter 88 years of age from Khuzama village. Despite her advanced age and fragility, she willingly agreed to demonstrate the art of pottery production when requested by the author. She recognized the importance of pottery as a cultural heritage and understood the challenges it faces in today's advanced and modernizing world. Subsequently, the author practiced pottery through January, February, and March, as the craft is typically carried out during the dry season, when the weather is favourable for shaping earthen ceramics.

Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge Involved in the Craft

During the mining of clay, men also participated and helped women, as it involved a lot of physical strength and labor. The clay was dug with the help of a spade called *odüh*, and the dugout clay was passed from

one deep underground hole to another and was carried back home safely with the help of a traditional basket locally called a *khori*. At this stage, non-potter families were also involved, bringing clay from the mining site to the potters and selling it in exchange for pots, goods in kind, or cash. The potters related that they preferred not to use clay dug the same year, instead using the previous year's preserved clay, which is more pliable for shaping and molding. The main reason behind this preference over freshly dug clay was because "it has dried completely and is free from any moisture" (Vasa 2023:6). Clay (*ranyuo*) sun-dried for seven to eight days was thoroughly dry and ready to be pounded and crushed. Sun-drying is an important step, as it produces a sturdy earthen pot.

The process of making earthen pots involves many small and detailed procedures, and if a potter fails to mix the clay in the correct ratio, the result is significant loss and failure, typically during firing. The skilled potter never rushed; instead, she meticulously attended to all the small details during the initial stage of clay mixing. Making new earthen pots required pounded fresh clay and old broken pieces of fired clay, finely pounded and mixed together in a ratio of 2:1. The old broken pieces of pots were called *tsükro* in the local dialect, and they played a vital role in the making of new pots.

Potters all over the world adopt and use a variety of techniques, models, and styles when making pottery. The traditional Naga pottery-making techniques fall into two categories: paddle-and-anvil and slab-building (Vasa 2011, 2023). The potter from Khuzama village used the slab-building method, and the different parts of the pot (the base, body, and neck) were made separately and joined together at a later stage. The potter then used her hands and locally made wooden tools such as beaters to smooth, compress, and level the vessel, achieving a uniform texture and a refined earthen pot. Khuzama Village (Angami) and Rünguzu Village (Chakhesang) share the same pottery manufacturing techniques (Jamir & Vasa 2008: 332). The two villages



Figure 5. Sun-dried clay was pounded in a wooden mortar with the help of a pestle and was sieved with a bamboo net to remove coarse, unwanted particles and make a refined powder. The more refined the clay powder, the better it will be while molding and shaping the structure. Photo credit: Author



Figure 7. Mixing the proper ratio of clay is the most important part of pottery-making. The right amount of clay is needed, which consists of one sack of *tsükro* (grog) and two sacks of dried clay (*ranyuo*) kept in a bowl to make a dough. Photo credit: Author



Figure 6. The burnt, old, broken pieces of pots known as "grog" (*tsükro*) were pounded and crushed finely and employed in making new clay pots. Two flat anvil stones were used in pounding old broken pieces and were mixed together with dried crushed unburnt clay. It serves as a tempering material and is considered a non-negotiable item in pottery production. Photo credit: Author



Figure 8. The clay was mixed with water using bare hands to ensure thorough mixing, and all impurities were removed and detected during this process. Photo credit: Author



Figure 9. Clay mixed with water by bare hands was again pounded by a wooden beater (*mavü*) to properly mix the material and make it sticky and soft. When the process is done, it will be more pliable and elastic for shaping and molding into the pot the potter desires. Photo credit: Author



Figure 11. Ash was applied to the wooden board so that the clay would not get stuck on the board while working, and a wooden spatula, paddle, and beater were used to beat the clay to form a uniform texture. Photo credit: Author



Figure 10. The clay pastes, after they were properly pounded with a beater, were made into a lump depending on the size of the pot. The potter made such different sizes of lumps and kept them ready to be used according to their needs. Photo credit: Author



Figure 12. The base of the pot was made and kept on a separate wooden board known as a *lisa* while working on the other parts of the pot. Photo credit: Author



Figure 13. The potters of Khuzama village employed the technique of slab building in the production of earthen pots. Photo credit: Author



Figure 14. Different styles and shapes of earthen ceramics have been sun-dried for more than a week and are yet to be fired. Photo credit: Author

share the same history of ancestry and migration, and much of their culture and custom is similar, especially with regard to pottery motifs and interpretation in relation to their cultural beliefs and ideologies.

Once the pots had been thoroughly sun-dried for about seven or eight days, depending on the weather, they were ready to be fired. Pots were also placed above the hearth so that the smoke would dry the clay. This method was also practiced by the Wokha village potters (Ngullie 2006) and Pongo of the Yongphang village of the Phom tribe (Vasa 2023). The cooking pot on the right was made by the skilled potter and is of a traditionally common type, whereas the rest of the earthen ceramics were made by the author, incorporating contemporary trends and ideas and following step-by-step the traditional knowledge involved in pottery production. Traditional knowledge is the knowledge passed from one generation to the next through oral or often written traditions. It also includes practices based on observation over time but not substantiated by technical experiments or statistics (Medhi & Borthakur 2016:1). The author therefore experimented with the craft directly, which allowed it to be examined more holistically. Documentation alone is not sufficient to sustain and carry forward the legacy of these techniques. However, beyond observation and documentation, firsthand experimentation with making earthen pots has deepened



Figure 15. The author participating in pottery production, following step by step the traditional knowledge acquired from a skilled potter. From drying, pounding, and mixing the clay to making a paste, molding the desired shape, and the final stage of firing, every step was carried out by the author. Photo credit: M. Kera

our understanding of the hard work, labor, patience, and resilience involved in producing this craft, as well as its social and cultural expression, implications, and significance as a marker of cultural heritage and identity.

The firing process plays a crucial role in pottery production, as it converts the clay into a solid object that is ready to be used for different purposes. The firing was done



Figure 16. The final stage is firing the pots at high temperature. Pots may be fired singly or several together. Firing was done on 31st January 2026; the author, with help from her sister, fired the pots, as the skilled potter was not in a position to go to the field for the task. Photo credit: Author

in an open space in the forest, and a large quantity of timber was essential for the firing. The Lotha potters of Wokha village follow the same pattern, and the open-firing process is practiced in the morning or evening to avoid strong sunlight (Ngullie 2006:308). To prevent forest fires, earthen pots were mostly burned in the morning or after sunset. It takes about two to three hours to burn the pots, and during the burning process, the fire must be kept burning throughout and not die down before the pots are fully fired. Bamboo, reeds, and firewood were used, and there are some specific types of wood required for firing purposes, such as *medo*, *mecho*, *tzhu* (Vasa 2011:88), alder (*npü*), and silk tree/*Albizia chinensis* (*mewoh*). The potters determine that the pots have been burnt well by observing their color, which turns into a red hue; then, a long pole made of bamboo is used to remove the pots from the firing spot and place them in a designated safe area to cool down slowly. No artificial coloring or tempering was applied to the pots. Men also assisted in the processes of firing the pots and transporting the burnt pots home. The pots were washed with water or boiled in rice broth to remove dust, impurities, and

smoke odour before use. Unfired pots could also be stored safely in a storeroom or by the kitchen hearth and fired later, whenever convenient.

Conclusion

The urgent need to revive and transmit traditional knowledge to future generations is crucial not only for preserving the craft itself but also for safeguarding the cultural heritage, identity, and values it embodies. Exploring pottery production and documentation enables communities to reconnect with their history, offering both scholars and locals a meaningful and engaging perspective on their roots, values, and collective past. “The dynamic nature of development in research concerning material culture thus provides an understanding of the variable relationships between material culture and cultural boundaries” (Vasa 2025:70). It has also helped preserve cultural heritage and traditional knowledge about the people’s technology and ingenuity. Arnold (1985:237) further asserts that “ceramic classification needs to reflect behavioural significance in a way that can be used to identify cultural processes in the past.” In this context, ceramics transcend their role as mere functional artifacts; they also act as tangible records that encapsulate tradition, identity, and cultural change. Through careful study of pottery, researchers can uncover hidden histories, reconstruct past lifeways, formulate hypotheses, and trace the evolution of technological and artistic practices. The knowledge of the craft was passed down from generation to generation; some potters share their experiences of mastering the art, which they learned from their grandmothers, elder women, and by observing others. “Communities that have practiced this craft contribute invaluable insights into cultural customs and their transmission across generations” (Kera 2025: 286). Pottery thus acted as a rich repository in which traditional cultural values and beliefs were stored in the absence of written records. The earthen pots made in Khuzama were famous and sought after by many people, not only from the Angami tribe;

other tribes also purchased them due to their quality, craftsmanship, and functionality. Therefore, the pottery produced in Khuzama village was historically, culturally, and socially impactful and significant to the Angami tribe specifically and Naga society in general. The craft of pottery is a cultural hearth and connecting thread through which Naga society can be understood more broadly, with great potential for tracing cultural evolution and diffusion.

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