Pottery in Nigeria

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Third Year Design April 1978

P O T T E R Y I N N I G E R I A

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INTRODUCTION

I have had interest in Nigeria and it's pottery since childhood. Unfortunately I have not seen actual pots, only in photographs but hopefully I will visit and perhaps work in Nigeria sometime in the future. It was the size, simplicity, use of hands, use of earth which interested me on Nigerian pots in particular.

In this thesis I am going to discuss five processess in detail which a Nigerian potter goes through in order to gain the results he needs to succeed in producing a beautiful work of art.

I know and go through the process of potting in Europian style so that's why I'm interested in finding out the different methods used in Nigerian pottery.

Traditional pottery is realy the same everywhere in the country. The variation comes only from the quality of the materials in any given area and from the artistic approach of the potteries.

An Ivory Coast African legend about the origin of the universe has it that a demuirge, probably a relative of the divine potter of Indo-European myth, fashioned all living beings and all things from a primordial material, the earth. Pottery is one of the earliest crafts, dating back to Africa's neolithic period when man used polished stone as tools. Pottery was discovered in the sixth millennium B.C. in the middle east at Jericho in Palestine and spread to parts of North Africa. South of the sahara the earliest pottery dates back to the fourth millennuim B.C.

Nigerian pottery like all pottery in Africa

is used for cooking. Nigerians use them for storage, as dye pots for fabrics, as tabs for bathing babies. Huge sixty quartz porous unglazed pots are utilized as "refrigerated" water containers. Water keeps cool due to the evaporation of water on the surface of these pots.

Clay in Nigeria is one of the most abundant substances on earth, nature makes it at a rate faster than all potters can consume it. It is cheap, easily acquired and prepared, and does not require extensive processing as do most raw materials. Like most clays in the world clays in Nigeria results from hundreds of centuries of weathering of granite or feldspathic rock. Decomposition of rock is continuous, so is the supply of clay.

Even in it's most simple form, making

pottery requires five distinct processes :

1. DIGGING THE CLAY.

2. PREPARING THE CLAY.

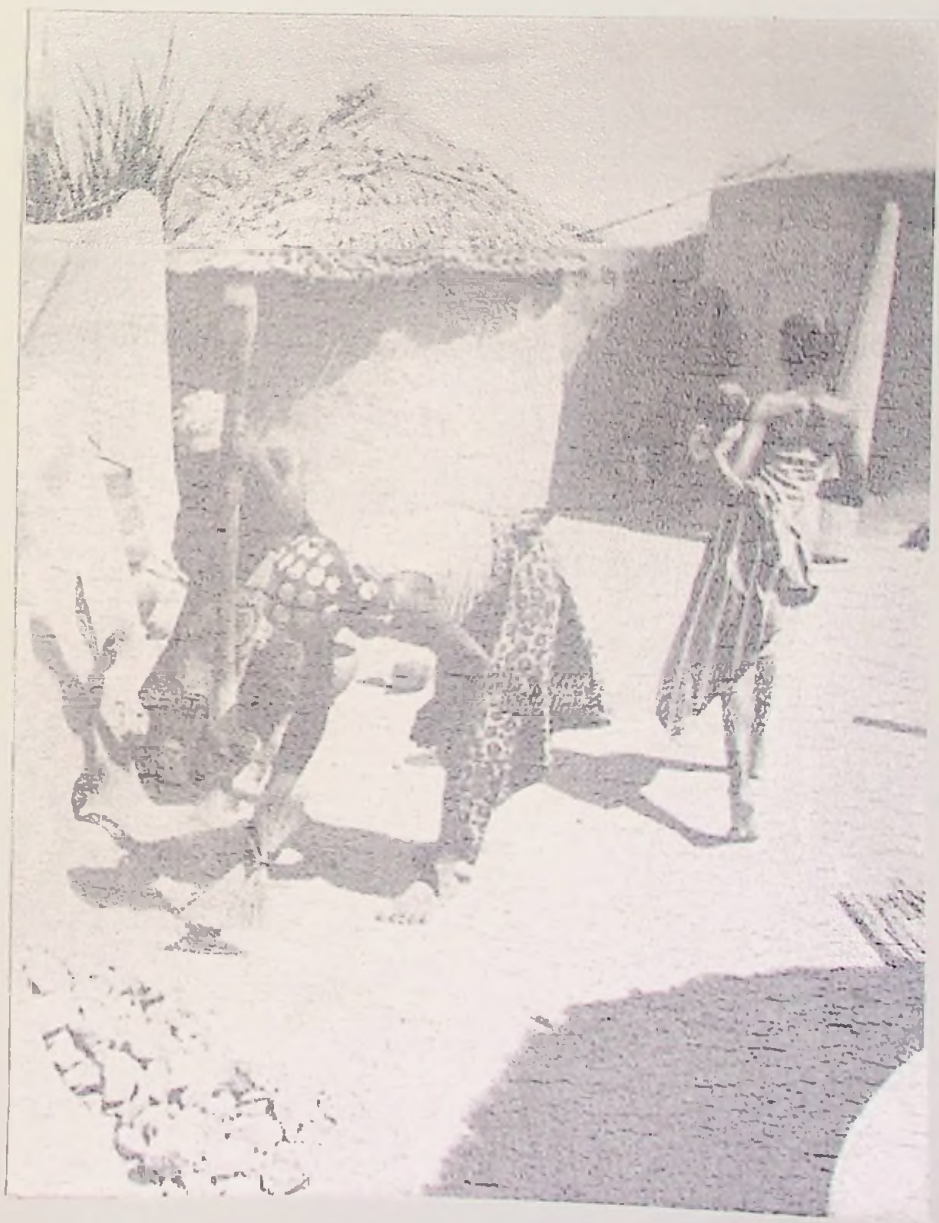
3. CREATING THE FORM AND DECORATION.

4. DRYING THE FORM and

5. FIRING THE FORM.

CHAPTER 1.

DIGGING THE CLAY.



CHAPTER 2.

PREPARATION OF CLAY .

No clay is usable immediately after being dug up. Although clay that has been dredged from the banks of rivers, lakes or ponds may be prepared for forming straightaway. Clay dug from deeper parts usually takes a bit more preparation. In Nigeria the superiority of the clay lies in the clay mixture of a strong sticky clay with a gritty material containing grains up to about four or five milimeters across. In granite areas this is usually a decomposed rock-gravel. In places where there is no rock, sand is sometimes used but in strongest weares the grit is made by roasting clay in bonfires and then pounding it to the required grade. Old

broken pots can also be pounded up and added to the mixture to make the pots very hard. It is not uncommon to see clay spread out on the ground or in shallow troughs and exposed to weather. Weathering breaks down small lumps and ages the clay. The preparation is then helped by pounding or threading it underfoot, then wedging it by hand through pounding, thumping and rolling the clay.

CHAPTER 3.

FORMING, CREATING THE FORM.

After clay is kneaded and prepared it is ready for forming. In Nigeria pots are built in groups. The Hausa pots are moulded by the Hausa speaking people from Sokoto, Katsina, Zaria and Kano. Great traders of Kano city having been at the cross-roads of the main trade routes especially that from Tripoli, their crafts show a certain amount of Arabic influence. Most Hausa pottery is made by men, and on the whole lacks the individual touch of so much of the women potter's work. The larger vessels are more handsome than beautiful and though the everyday utensils such as cooking pots, jars, pitchers

are strongly and smoothly made they remain strickly conventional.

The people of the North-east, the Baza people especially women mingled with the Pabir and Marghi near the Cameroons border, mould cooking pots. The well-made red, wide-mouthed pot with rounded base is lined with black semi-burnished around the everted rim. The closely fitting red lid is deeply concave with a high lug with no decoration. The food bowl, a small red rimless bowl equally well made and lined with burnished black, has no rounded base.

The peoples of Middle Niger produce flasks, water pots, cooking pots, lamps, pitchers, water jars, platters, strainers, ritual bowls, food bowls, pottery stands, ceramic moulds and tiles.

The peoples of Central Plateau specialise in cooking pots, flasks, water or beer jars.

The peoples of Niger and the peoples of South-East highlands mould water jars or pots, cooking utensils, cooking pots, flasks, pitchers, cememorial beer bowls, perforated pots, bowls, brewing pots, beer jars and cememorial beer jars.

The women of Anambra and Ino States are among the finest potters in Nigeria, considering their inexhaustible store of invention in form and decoration and the individual touch they give to every article. Even centres lide Inyi or Ishiagu, where pot making is more or less a full-time Industry for generations pottery is still considered an art and their women potters still bring their own home-made pots to some cross-roads markets in the bush to sell.

The women at Ajalli make flasks for storing palm wine. Coolers are moulded in Akegwi area.

Lamps are made at Oji River Leper settlement chapel and sold at Inyi market.

Musical pots with holes on the body are made at Ishiagu, Inyi and Ukpo.

Water pots are make by Edo women at Oja, they also produce black cooking pots with a semi-circular lid with handle. Etsako women produce the heavy black three legged copy of iron cooking pots imported as trade goods for many years. They make large, black perforated pots with lid as well as wide, fairly shallow red bowls at Isokwi. These serve as frying pans. The cult pots made by Edo women are found on

various shrines. Men of this area make crucibles for bronze casting to which ground charcoal is added to the clay.

Potters of Bauchi town, Nigeria, completely unremarked, as it is an accepted part of everyday life, a thriving traditional pottery survives beneath the N.W. walls of Bauchi. There are at least six established workshops. Inside potteries are characterized by those pleasing sounds of rural industry, while outside particularly around mid-week there are large quantities of pots seemingly placed in haphazard ways waiting to be fired. Large water storage jars, smaller jars, coolers, casseroles and butas, these are the pots that will satisfy local needs. When fired they become an attractive brick-red.

The pottery of Mallam Adamu a Hausa man. He specializes in large water storage jars. They are cooled and he makes them to order

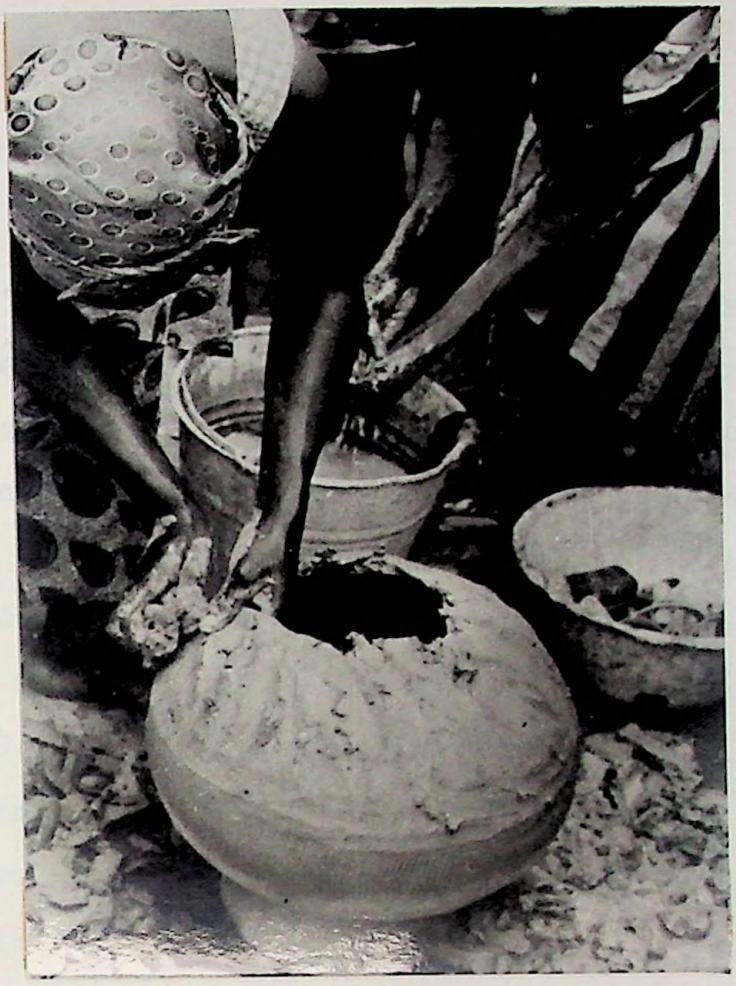
only. There are presentation vessels, given by family and in-laws to brides-to-be. Almost spherical in body, with a diameter of 14 inches - these urns are given a high, flared neck. Decorating the body are two or three annuli which are applied separately as thin wipes of clay. Beneath the high flared neck he mounds a relief pattern, a band which includes, a snake scorpian, mud fish, and lizard, all following each other around the pot. The alert sensitivity of this craftsman to the world around hime showes in his work. His output is not large and his pots are of good quality. They are fired by bonfire method.

The pottery of Mallam Inua. Craftsmen of this pottery seem to be concerned with their speed of production. Their finished work is un-decorated except for a line here and there. Potters produce soup bowls, casseroles, water

pots, food bowls, by scopping a hollow in the earth floor, clay is placed to produce the object required. Into this the potter thumps a hollow with a stone pestle. The excess clay is thinned outwards and upwards by batting it with a wooden bat or paddle against a curved stone or anvil which is held inside the pot. While doing this the pot is left partly finished to stand and partially harden while starting another. When the second becomes almost finished revert to the first, smoothing the outside with a scraper, a piece of calabash rind or worn bamboo stick. This completed the potter next rolls out a coil of clay about 1¼ inches thick, presses it onto the top edge of his vessel, smooths and thins it with his fingers until a neat neck-ring or rim is formed. This is finished by revolving the pot with one hand, holding a wet leaf between the fingers of the other hand. Meanwhile the centre vein of the leaf is used to form a

decorative line inside the pot's neck.

Different form of procedure producing larger water storage vessels - an old inverted pot body as a former is used. A Permanent piece of pottery furniture somewhat the worse for wear, it's use is a tendency towards speedier production. After sufficent clay is prepared, several handfuls piled in a heap on a small area dusted with weod-ash. Clay is rapidly flattened by pressing it a number of times with one foot. With heel in the centre the potter presses down, lifts his foot, takes another step presses down again until he has a circular piece of clay about one inch thick and eighteen inches diameter. The top of the former is dusted with weod-ash, the slap of clay is lifted carefully by thrusting both hands beneath with fingers widespread, the clay is draped over the top of the former. Had pressing it to conform



with the spherical contour, the operation is finished by beating it with a circular, flat stone. By continual beating the plastic clay extends downwards, thinning accordingly until the widest part of the former is slightly exceeded. Then bending down walking backwards round the pot, the potter cuts the extended ragged edge smooth with a knife. The finished work is then smoothed with the beating stone dipped in water and finished by being wiped over with a wet leaf. It is then left until hard enough to be lifted off, the next operation is then started. Placing the partly completed vessel into a hollow scooped in the earth water is splashed around the edge from when excess clay was cut. While this is soaking in a rope of clay is rolled about two inches in diameter, this is fixed by pinching it onto the now dampened edge of the pot. Proceeds to smooth it round the circumference at the same time drawing it upwards with fingers to form a shaped

neck. When the neck-rim is formed the pot is finished by smoothing the outside with a familiar leaf. It is then left to harden later to sun-bake.

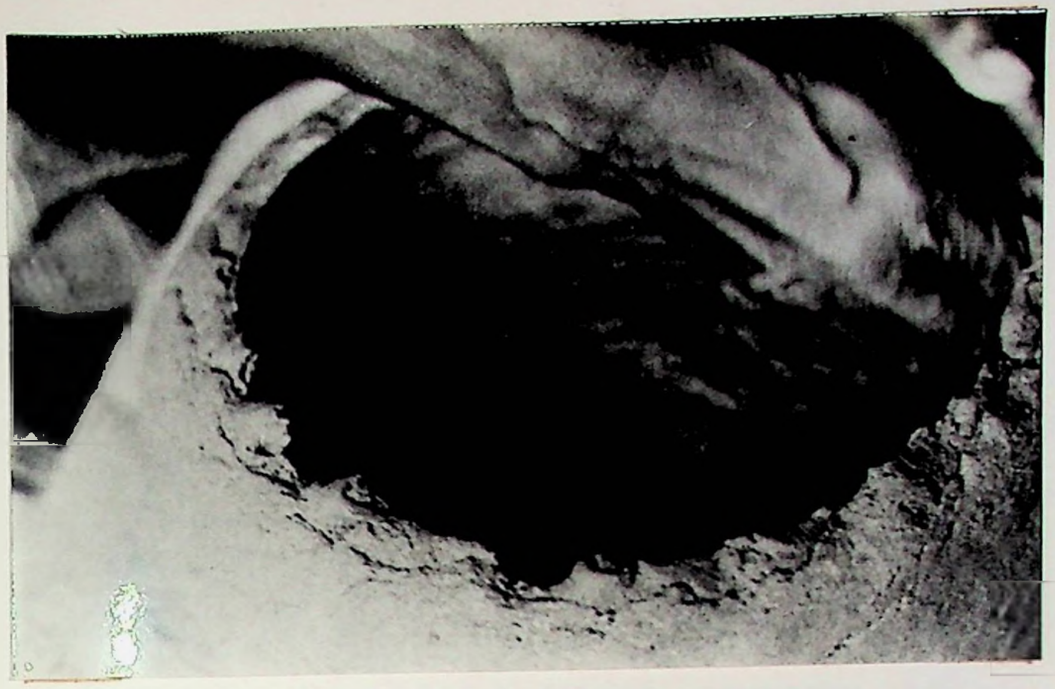
DECORATION :

Pots when thoroughly sun baked are burnished by women. Sitting in the shade with a vessel on their left hand side, they have on their right a small pot containing a red exide wash, the consistency of milk. Soaking a cloth in this, they wash the outside of the vessel allowing the water to soak in, leaving a thin film of exide on the surface of the pot. While still damp this is rubbed well into the clay with a sKein of beads, which at the same time removes any high spots of particles on the surface. It

is left smooth dully burnished.

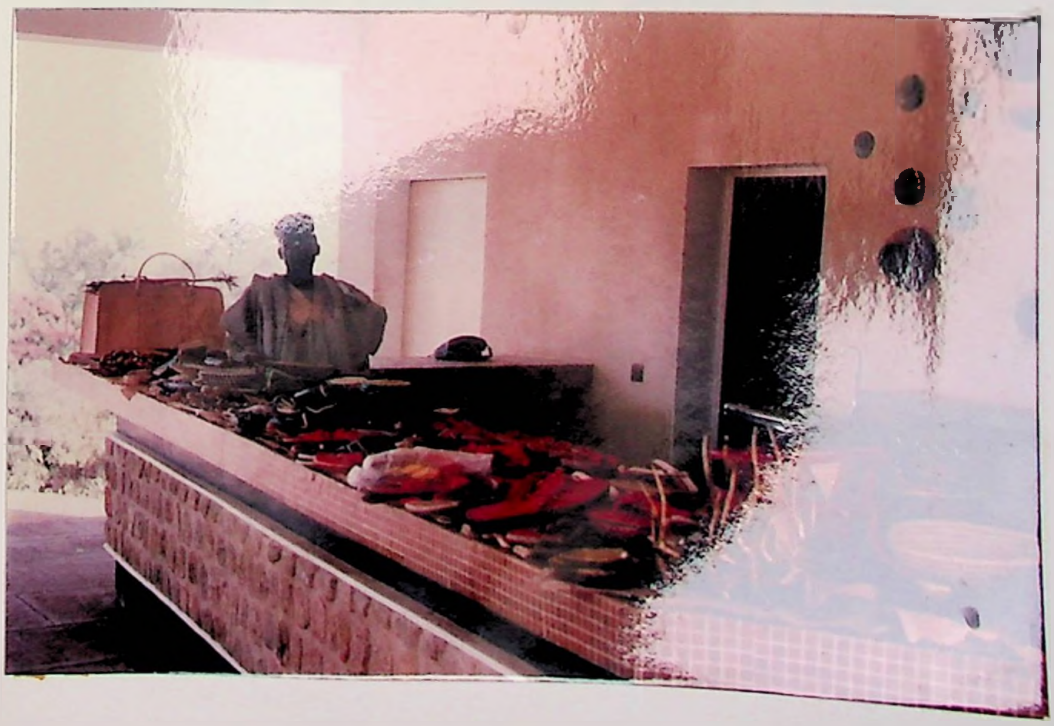
ANOTHER METHOD OF FORMING :

A simple wheel is used for forming, namely a board loosely mounted over a polished stone. The clay is hollowed out from a lump, working from the bottom up. A coil form is used later on just to modify the contours. Corncobs, bits of wet leather and stones are employed to supplement versatile, skillful fingers. Pots in Nigeria are often worked from the top down creating pots in two halves while working backwards around the lump of clay. Body stiff-kneed, bent in half, the potter rotates around the clay, while is on the ground and the entire pot is hollowed out and dragged up from a lump.



After building up a form a domelike bottom is built over a leather hard top by patting flat cakes of clay and attaching them but by bit over the top. Finishing is completed using a bamboo ring as a scraper and then bits of wet fabric, corncobs, and polished stones to finish the surface.

A friend of mine visited Nigeria earily 1978 and brought back photographs of Nigerian pots which are used only as decoration. As you can see the trade's man is selling his leather work and the pots are used as decoration built into the wall.



CHAPTER 4.

DRYING THE FORM

Pots after being formed are allowed to dry in open air under the shade of trees, under roofs in some areas, under leaves or under larger pots turned upside down. Where clay is full of organic and mineral fillers, it is dried directly in the sun. Drying is necessary, otherwise when fired steam would form in the walls of pots and cause them to burst. When pottery is dry it is called greenware.

CHAPTER 5.

FIRING.

When sufficent numbers of vessels have accumullated a firing is arranged. The average firing would include some thirty five pots. The same site is used time and time again and is covered with ash accumullated from countless previous firings. First the ground is covered with a layer of dried cow dung. Taking larger vessels first a potter starts in the centre with a single pot. Working outwards the potter leaves behind him a pattern of vessels resembling a huge anmonite each conical base entered into the neck of it's neighbour. On the top of this pattern when completed are placed small vessels, until a rounded heap is stacked. This

original stacking position allows all the vessels so positioned to accomplish their linear expansion constantly in an ever widening circle, precluding cracking as the heat becomes more intense. Another way of stacking pots is by separating them one from the other with two or three potsherds, limiting the expansion of each pot to that one alone.

When the stacking is completed, faggots of dry grass are placed round the circumference of the stacked pots leaning inwards towards the top. So arranged the grass forms a wall about two feet thick, leaving an open space at the top with the enclosed pots still visible. This is then completely covered with layers of dried grass fuel, thrown on to form a complete dome.

The next operation is to dampen the crown of this heap of fuel. Water is splashed on

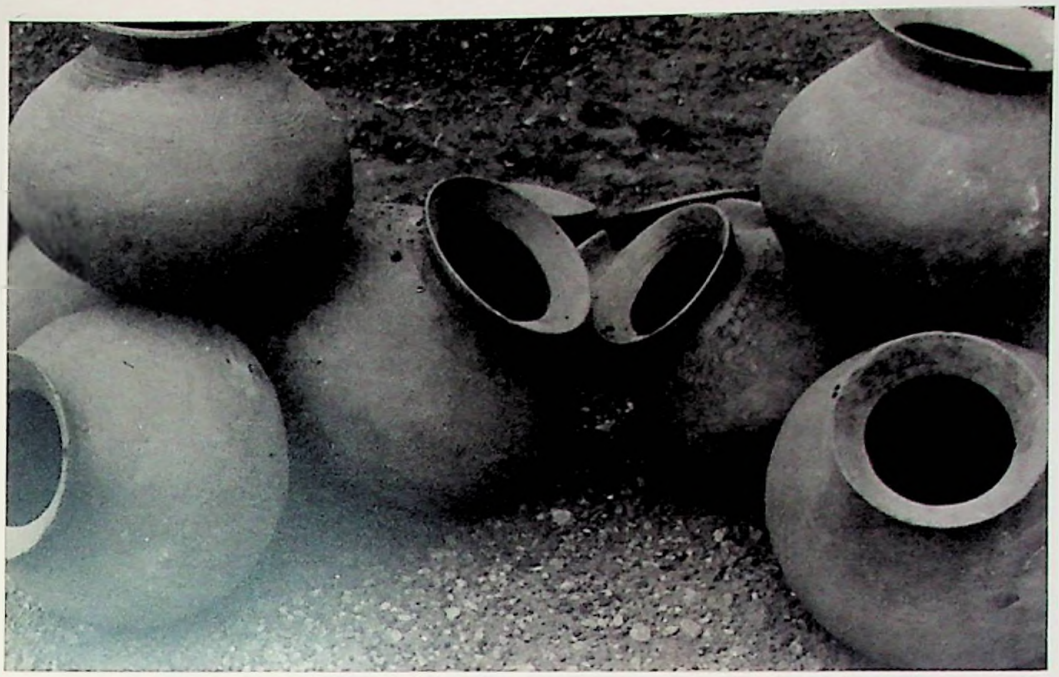
in small quantities with a small calabash or else water is sometimes splashed on by the mouth. In each case potters leave about two feet up from the base undampened.

While this dampening process is taking place, the person performing the operation is followed immediately by another worker with a container of weod-ash. The weod-ash is flung onto the dampened area, into which it both penetrates and adheres. Virtually sealing the crown when firing takes place, it has the effect of partially clamping the pots within a more concentrated heat source, until after a while the dampened covering of fuel itself catches light.

Ignition is done by a gas torch. Touching off one position, the potter hastens to ignite that opposite. By the time all is alight, the carpet of cow dung beneath has added it's contribution to the firing. Finally all the

fired pots rest within a heap of hot carbon and dust ash, to cool slowly and evenly. An actual firing lasts about half an hour.

Then the finished pots are carried off on the women's heads and taken to market, which often means a hot dusting walk of many miles.



CONCLUSION.

Nigerians are not likely for a long time to come to cease from laying down culture at their feet, for although enamel and plastic basins have become disfiguringly common and are indeed more efficient for some purposes, it is probable that more traditional pots than ever before are been made, given the increase in population. They are still remarkably cheap, so much so that they are reguarded as expendable and needless to say each pot is more beautiful than the last. It is probably more to the point to say that they are excellently adaped, through long trial and error, to be indigenous cooking methods and other purposes of which they are used.

The vast mojority of the potters are women, practising variations of coil-building technique in which new clay is continuoudly added to form the walls and the mouth of the pot.

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