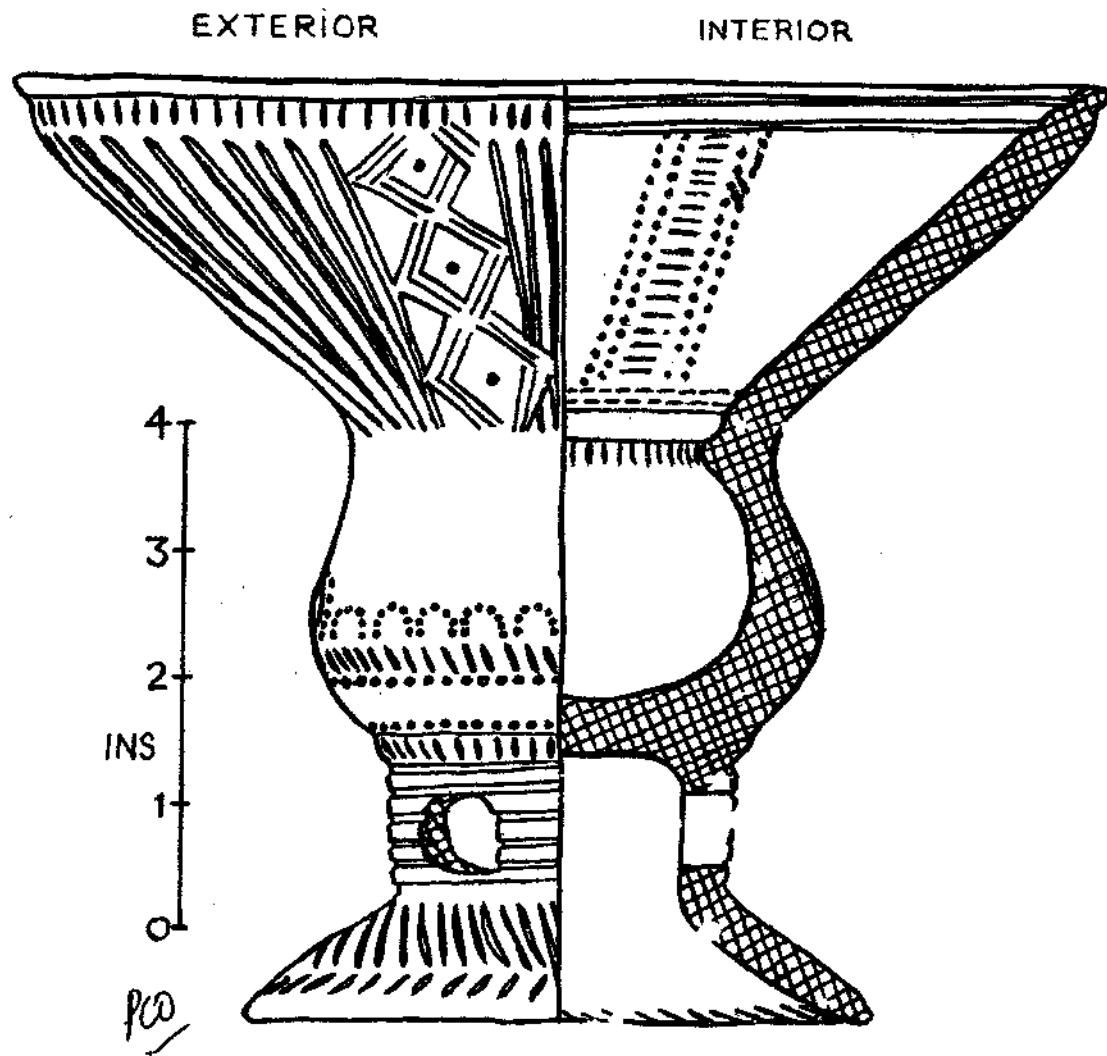


A SHAI TRADITION IN RITUAL POTTERY

1. The earthenware vessel illustrated opposite was found by the writer in November 1962 on a seventeenth century settlement on top of the hill Adwuku, in Shai (the site has been described in Ghana Notes and Queries 7, 1965). It was underneath a small overhanging rock at the head of the steep slope beside the main occupation area, and about fifty yards west of the fortified enclosure. It was inverted, and buried up to the pedestal; the latter had broken loose, and a small part of the base cone was missing. Apart from this vessel, there was nothing under the overhang except many fragments of seventeenth century pottery, such as can be found anywhere on this part of the hill. The pot is now in the collections of the Department of Archaeology, University of Ghana. A beautiful photograph of it, taken by Mr. John Price of that Department, is soon to be reproduced by Mr. Basil Davidson in a school history of Africa, to be published by Longmans.

Adwuku was almost certainly abandoned in 1702, and we may confidently date the pot to the preceding ten or twenty years. The type was clearly quite distinct in the seventeenth century. Several fragments of the wide expanded rim, with closely similar decoration, have been found at Adwuku, and at Ladoku (also probably abandoned in 1702) and Wedokum (abandoned in 1677-81). The pedestal design is common in seventeenth century Shai pottery, but may have been applied to a variety of types of vessel; at Ladoku, it is found in the M3 'Ladoku ware' of the fifteenth or sixteenth century (see Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria 3, No.1, 1964, p.10, for a description of this ware).

P. Ozanne



*A vessel from Adwuku*

11. A photograph of this pot, shown to the present Paramount Chief of Shai and to two of his hunters, was immediately recognised as a lalaka, a type of ritual pot no longer made.

The pot was described to us as a combined plate and table, for ritual use; it was used to re-heat food which had been left for a time, often overnight, for the use of the spirits; the re-heated food would be served the next day to priests.

The chief informed us that potteresses still living in Doryumu knew how to make such a pot. The photograph was left with him, and on our next visit we were shown a number of pots which they had made. None of these pots showed the hollow interior to the lower part of the bowl, (which is of course not seen in the photograph), nor did they have the characteristic open base with holes -- the hole shown in the photograph was rendered as a depression in a solid base. The chief, however, had interpreted this base in terms of placing fire in it, and therefore as hollow. It may be noted that the chief's grandfather, who lived to a great age, was an important priest rather than a chief, so the chief would be familiar with the traditions of his cult.

An elderly priest of Laloi, at Agomeda, who examined the pot itself, seemed somewhat puzzled by the hollow centre of the lower part of the bowl; he suggested that a dish might have been placed upon it containing the food, and that fire might have been placed in this hollow lower bowl. He declared that a pot decorated in this way would only have been used by a very important priest. Pots of this type were no longer made; he suggested that this one must have been made by a woman past the menopause (Shai women below this age do not make decorated pots or ritual pots).

A group of accomplished women potteresses in Agomeda, including one elderly woman locally well-known as a maker of decorated pots, examined this pot with interest, but evidently had no tradition of manufacturing pots of this type.

The potteresses of Doryumu produced pots with a decoration similar to that of the seventeenth century pot. They had scribed the lines with the tool which they use for roughening the surface of modern pepper-grater pots -- the "pot-writing-stick", a piece of wood with very short square-ended teeth cut in it; another form of the tool has a series of parallel flat-topped ridges cut into a flat surface; lines scribed with these tools therefore occur in groups of five or six parallel lines close together.

It is clear (a) that the pot is recognised, at least by the inheritors of the priestly tradition, as a familiar type of ritual pot.

(b) that no tradition of the making of a pot of this form exists among present-day potteresses.

(c) that the decoration can be approximately reproduced by present-day potteresses.

Few decorated pots are made at the present time; such as are made are mainly of a quite different style of decoration; with rather heavy lines and symbols applied to the surface of the pot. One late nineteenth century pot preserved in Doryumu (though made in the hill-top town before 1892) combines decoration of this type with incised line decoration more like that of the earlier pots.

We were informed that pots used now as lalaka were of a different type, similar to those used for domestic purposes. One which we saw is much like the top part of the old lalaka but rather more rounded, and without decoration; the pedestal is absent. Another type resembles the abodo bue ritual pot.

It is hoped shortly to publish an account of present-day Shai pottery types and their method of construction, together with the history and social organisation of the Shai pottery industry.

P. Ozanne

A.K. Quarcoo

Marion Johnson

---