

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### NOTES ON POTTERY MANUFACTURE NEAR LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

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The pottery making hamlet of Ban Phan Luang, across a tributary river of the Mekong from Luang Prabang, on the road to the airport, was visited on the 9th of March 1964. Numerous houses on either side of the road were the homes of potters and several potters were working at their trade. One potter was watched and questioned about pottery manufacture and a second was questioned to see whether her method of manufacture varied to any extent from the first. No firing of pottery was observed.

The clay is gathered by the women, sometimes helped by the men, from a field near the airport. Two carrying baskets full are gathered at one time and brought back to the potter's home using a shoulder pole. The clay is available to any one who wishes to gather it and nothing is left for the spirits, or otherwise, at the field from which it is gathered.

The clay is left in the baskets to dry or is dumped out on the ground to dry. When it is dry it is pounded in a foot-power rice mortar. A mortar used to pound clay is never used to pound rice. After pounding the clay is sifted in a basket sieve.

Preparing it for potting, the dry sifted clay is mixed with water on a flat board. As she mixes the clay the potter adds river sand until it feels right. Enough clay for about 15 medium sized pots is prepared at one time.

When the clay has been prepared the potter takes a mass of clay and with her hands alone forms a thick walled, hollow clay cylinder. This she places on a sack under the house and covers with a large cloth to keep it damp while she does the same with the rest of the clay that was prepared. The manufacture proceeds in stages. At each stage the vessel to be is modified and put aside as the next vessel is attended to. Only when all have been completed is the next

stage begun. Pottery at several different stages is usually present under or near the house.

The next stage makes use of a wheel. This is not a true potter's wheel as it is not spun rapidly so that the pot can be thrown. Instead, it is turned slowly using the toes of either foot. The wheel is made of wood with a disk, on top, fastened to a solid bowl-shaped piece below. In the bottom of this lower piece is a slightly tapered hole in which fits the pivot (figure 1). The pivot is set firmly in the ground and the lower wooden piece turns on this pivot.

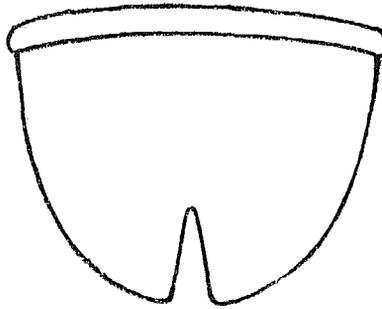


Figure 1  
Cross section of the slow wheel used by  
a potter in Ban Phan Luang, Laos.

The hollow clay cylinder is firmly set on the wheel by pressing some of the clay at the base of the cylinder onto the disk. Using a plain bamboo paddle and a stone anvil the potter first evens the top (plate Ia) and then expands and forms up the upper portion of the vessel. She hits with the paddle on the outer surface while holding the anvil against the inner surface opposite the spot hit by the paddle. To keep the clay from sticking, the paddle is frequently dipped in a pot of water kept near at hand; the anvil is moistened using the wet paddle. The lower third of the vessel is not formed or expanded at this time. When the upper portion of the vessel is at about the desired size the top edge is gently patted even with the paddle, the stone anvil is put down, and, using the hand on the inside and the paddle outside, the top two to four centimeters is formed slightly outwards (plate Ib). A small strip of wet fabric is then placed between the thumb and the

other fingers and while the wheel is turned the rim is formed further outward, making an everted rim. The final slight ridge on the inner edge of the rim is formed using the fingers of both hands while the pot and wheel are being turned by the foot (plate IIa). When the rim is completed the potter smooths the upper portion of the vessel with the wet strip of cloth in one hand on the outside and the fingers of the other hand against the inside as the vessel goes around. When this is done the vessel is placed on a burlap bag under the house and allowed to dry until the next day.

The upper two-thirds of the vessel is now finished but the bottom portion is still the thick open cylinder of its first form. After it has dried for the day the top, thin portion is leather hard but the bottom thick clay is still plastic. The potter sits cross legged under the house, takes the partially completed vessel in her lap, and with the same paddle and anvil as used before, closes over and forms the rounded bottom of the pot, turning it around in her lap as she works. When this is done the new completely formed pot is placed in the sun to dry for a day.

The group of pots that was formed together is fired together. The firing area is a flat spot across the road from the house. There are many different firing areas in the village. Two logs, about 15 cm in diameter, are placed parallel on the ground. If logs are not available, two pieces of bamboo of about the same size will do. The pots are placed upside down, in one row, on top of the logs. This is then covered with grass and fired. This burns slowly, with little flame, for an hour to an hour-and-a-half. No fuel is added after the fire is started. The vessels are left in place after the firing and allowed to cool for two to three hours and then are carried by hand and stored under the house. According to reports it is rare that pots break during firing but sometimes one or two may break. This is explained to be the result of poor mixing of the clay and sand.

Several different forms and sizes are made, some with a simple applique handle on the rim, and in rare cases a small applique ring foot (plate IIb).

Comparison of the methods used by the second potter to those of the first showed only one minor difference between the two. The second potter occasionally used a paddle with numerous small holes drilled into one side instead of with two plain surfaces. This left small knobs on the surface of the vessel on which it was used.

All potters in this hamlet are women. The men may help in the gathering of the clay and in the firing, but that is all. The potter questioned learned how to make pottery from her mother. She had been born in this hamlet and was married to a man from the same hamlet. According to this woman, pottery was invented by a local woman over 100 years ago.

The apparent complete lack of superstition connected with pottery manufacture here and the straightforward explanation for any breakage that might occur during firing is unusual. It could be that such superstition has recently disappeared or it may be the knowledge of pottery manufacture was only recently acquired by these people. The fact that the origin of pottery is placed back only about 100 years could mean that a potter from elsewhere married into the village and introduced pottery manufacture only three or four generations ago.

There is very little specific difference between the pottery manufacture of Ban Phan Luang and that described for Nong-Ane, several hundred kilometers to the southeast in Laos.<sup>1</sup> While generally similar to pottery manufacture at Ban Nong Sua Kin Ma in northeastern Thailand<sup>2</sup> there are several specific differences. It appears that the pottery manufacture of Ban Phan Luang is more closely and directly related to that of Nong-Ane than it is to that of Ban Nong, even though the latter is closer.

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- 1) Colani, M., Procédés de Décoration d'un Potier de Village (Cammon-Laos) *BEFEO* vol 31, 1931 pp. 499-501.
  - 2) Solheim II, W.G., 'Pottery Manufacture in Sting Mor and Ban Nong Sua Kin Ma, Thailand' *Journal of the Siam Society* vol 52 no 2, 1964 pp. 151-61.



*a* Beginning the first forming of a hollow clay cylinder into a pot.



*b* Starting to form the rim of a vessel, while turning on the wheel.



*a* Completing the rim of a vessel (not the same vessel as pictured in Plate 1*b*).



*b* Several different forms and sizes of pottery made by one potter in Ban Phan Luang.