

Traditional Pottery of Bhaktapur

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Abstract: In 2014, I conducted fieldwork studying traditional pottery making in Bhaktapur, Nepal. The pottery, which is made for commercial purposes today, is still produced with a traditional ash firing process. My fieldwork consisted of interviews, observations, and interactions with a traditional family of potters. I found that, while pottery production is still continuing among the Newar community, it has changed in recent years to adapt to technological advances, including the electric wheel and the availability of resources such as clay, plastic, and electricity. The increasingly wide variety of economic opportunities available to the younger generation poses challenges to the continuation of this occupation.

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In the summer of 2014, I had the opportunity to travel to Nepal to conduct research for the Matson Museum of Anthropology at Penn State. I chose to study the pottery of Bhaktapur, a small city located in the Kathmandu Valley. The city is considered to be one of the Kathmandu Valley's cultural centers. It is home to approximately one hundred thousand people, most of whom are of the Newar ethnic group. According to the last census, there are about one hundred homes of potters within Bhaktapur.



A view of Bhaktapur

My research consists of observations and interviews of the Prajapati family, one of the many potting families of Bhaktapur. Newar Pottery production is mainly done in family units; the family consists of a mother, father, daughter, and two sons. Within the Prajapati family, only the mother and father actively participate in the craft as their livelihood. During the days that I was observing, they worked simultaneously: the father worked at his wheel making pots, while the mother crafted very small elephants completely by hand.



Electric wheel



Traditional wheel



Crafting elephants by hand

It is important to explain the production methods that are employed in Bhaktapur. A traditional potter uses a large wheel, about one meter in diameter, which he spins with a large wooden stick. The potter can usually make one or two objects before he must spin the wheel again, making the traditional method more challenging in a physical sense. In the last few decades, more and more potters have begun to use more modern production methods. Krishna, the father of the Prajapati family, primarily uses the electric wheel. There are several reasons why this is being used more frequently. Production is much faster with the electric wheel, and it also does not require as much human energy to spin the wheel; in the most basic sense, it is simply easier and faster to use. On the other hand, there are many reasons why potters choose to continue using the traditional method. The electric wheel is far more expensive, and electricity in the Kathmandu Valley is unreliable and nonexistent at some points throughout the day. In addition, the electric wheel must be plugged in inside the potter's home. Many families do not have enough room in

their home for an electric wheel, so the traditional wheel is a better option, as it can be used pretty much anywhere, including in the streets or town square.



Hakuchha, black clay

Clay is another aspect of pottery production that is important to discuss. The type of clay that is used by the Newar is called *hakuchha*, which means black clay. This type of clay is very soft and flexible, so it can be easily blended and shaped. The malleable quality of the clay allows the potters to shape their objects with great ease and at a very fast pace. The clay is obtained from a place about three kilometers away from Bhaktapur, which is one of the only places in the area where the potters can collect clay of this quality. In order to get the clay, the potters must dig a minimum of five meters into the ground. They then load it into tractors to take back to their homes, where it is stored until it is used. The Prajapati family completes this process twice a year, and every year they bring home between four and five tractor loads of clay. For perspective, it is important to note that Krishna uses between 100 and 150 kilograms of clay each day.

One of the main problems the potters of Bhaktapur are facing has to do with the clay. Portions of the land from which the clay comes are privately owned. The potters used to be able to take clay freely from this property for religious reasons, as most religious statuary and other objects are made from clay. Now, younger generations are not as religious as past generations, and they do not see this as a valid reason to take clay freely from this piece of land. In addition, portions of this land are currently under town planning, making it even more difficult for the potters to have access to this clay. If they cannot get clay from this location, they must search for other mines. Unfortunately, the potters have found that the clay from other mines has not been as good. If they use bad clay to make pots, the clay

will break down more easily before the pots are even fired. Clay is quickly becoming a prominent issue for the potters of Bhaktapur.

Another important aspect of the production method is the firing. The potters of Bhaktapur are somewhat unique, in that they are some of the only potters to use an ash kiln. In this type of kiln, the pots are stacked between layers of hay, and then the entire stack is covered in a layer of ash. The pots are fired for about four days, during which the kiln must be tended to frequently, sometimes throughout the night. After each firing, the ash from the kilns can be reused. It is stored in small sheds nearby and used again for future firings. The city of Bhaktapur has a communal firing area, which can be used by any of the town's potters. They share a mutual understanding of the shared space, and most families only fire once or twice a month. They wait until they have enough pots to make kilns that are about five or six layers tall before firing. Because firing takes so much manpower and attention, waiting until they have enough pots ensures that time and energy are not wasted.



Ash kiln

After the firing, the pots are sold to agents—the middlemen—who then sell the pottery in their shops. These middlemen are part of the reason why many of the potters are no longer able to rely on pottery production as their sole source of income. The shopkeepers are able to sell the objects for much more than the purchase price, which creates a problem for the potters. This problem could be avoided by cutting out the middleman and selling the objects on their own, but most families do not have the manpower to both produce the products and keep up a shop on their own. One solution that the families have implemented collectively is to fix prices for their products. Under these constant prices, the agents are not able to undercut prices from one potter to another, and whenever someone wants to raise the price of pots, the whole potting community gets together to discuss the

change. This idea seems to be working quite well for the potting community of Bhaktapur.

Although tourists often buy the more decorative items—such as the elephants and other small statues, locals are the primary market for this pottery. While the market for “souvenir” items has increased slightly in the past few years, the primary market for the local people has declined. Aluminum and plastic are replacing pottery because they are more reliable, lighter to carry, and cheaper. This change was quite obvious from my perspective. There were many flower pots in the area that were made of plastic; after pointing them out, the daughter of the Prajapati family mentioned that those same flowers used to be in her father’s pots instead of the plastic ones.

One theme that was very evident throughout my time in Bhaktapur was that the craft is slowly declining. Some of the reasons for this have already been mentioned, such as the introduction of new materials that are cheaper and more practical, but there is another major reason for its decline as well. Within the Newari caste system, the production of pottery is a family occupation. Children begin learning this craft at a very young age, as early as four or five years old. Family occupations have been very important within their social system, but they are becoming less important today. It is now more acceptable for a family member to leave their family’s profession to pursue another. This change was very obvious to me within the Prajapati family. All three of their children have attended college and are pursuing careers outside of their traditional one. I spoke with one of their sons, who is currently working towards a master’s degree in engineering. He explained to me that he will not continue with his father’s craft as his main livelihood. He will continue it as a hobby, but, because the market is not good right now, he cannot depend on this as his main source of income. He mentioned that it is always an option for him, but his interests are more within the field of engineering. At this time, therefore, they are unsure of the future of this profession in their own family. This uncertainty extends to many families in Bhaktapur. The increasingly wide variety of economic opportunities available to the younger generations poses serious challenges to the continuation of this occupation in years to come.



Pottery in home

In a very recent conversation with Beena, the daughter of the Prajapati family, I learned about the effects of the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit Nepal on April 25, 2015. The village of Bhaktapur was greatly affected by the earthquake and its aftershocks, and the earthquake took a particularly hard toll on the potting community. The communal kiln that was used by most of the potters in Bhaktapur was destroyed when the buildings around it collapsed. Now, it has been rebuilt, but the potting community was unable to fire for more than four months. Most of the houses in Bhaktapur were damaged, if not completely destroyed, making them uninhabitable. As a result, most of the potters had to move to new houses far away from the Pottery Square or to temporary cottages and refugee camps outside of the village, meaning that the potting community is now very widely distributed.

In general, the productivity of the community has declined substantially. This is partially because of the lack of resources, the lack of space in refugee camps and other relocation settings, and the wide distribution of the potting community; however, the health of the potters is another concern for the productivity of the community. One of the major effects of the earthquake has been a decline in the health status of the population due to increased pollution, the spread of disease, and the heavy rainfall that came after the earthquake. Beena told me that her father, who used to fire about twice a month, has only fired his work four times since the earthquake in April.

In addition, since the earthquake, the market demand for ceramic materials has declined significantly. For example, in 2014, Beena's family sold over two million *diyo* (small light pots) for Bhaktapur's annual festivals of lights, Dashai and Deepawali; this year, less than forty thousand were sold. Beena suggested that the

decline in demand could be partially attributed to the repeated aftershocks that the country has experienced. People are concerned about using clay materials because they break so easily, especially during aftershocks. For these reasons, people are currently using more plastic and aluminum materials in their homes.

Despite the challenges that this community has faced, the potters of Bhaktapur are recovering along with the rest of the nation. The potters and their families are working to rebuild their homes and their professions. Chandra and Surya, the sons of the Prajapati family, are working with some other families to raise funds to rebuild Pottery Square. They are planning to build an electric kiln for the potters to use instead of the traditional ash kiln. This type of kiln would be more environmentally friendly, easier to use, and would increase the speed at which materials could be fired. The potters have started working again as well, and are working to attract more tourists, both local and foreign, to Bhaktapur once again. Although the earthquake took a significant toll on this potting community, these families are showing their resiliency and dedication to their craft through their efforts to rebuild and continue their way of life.



Elizabeth Anne Rothenberger graduated from The Pennsylvania State University and Schreyer Honors College in May 2016 with Bachelor of Arts degrees in anthropology and Jewish studies. Her undergraduate research focused primarily on gender roles in traditional pottery production across the globe.