The Timeless Art of Pottery by Lango People of Northern Uganda, Looking at the Production and Firing Processes

Ocen Robert

Jingdezhen Ceramic University, China

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ABSTRACT

The history of pottery in Northern Uganda is deeply intertwined with the cultural, social, and economic practices of the region's diverse ethnic groups, including the Acholi, Lango, Alur, and Madi, which has a rich heritage of pottery-making that reflects the daily lives, rituals, and artistic expressions of its people. They (the Lango people) have a rich history rooted in migration, settlement, and cultural development. Their origins in the Nile Valley and subsequent migration to northern Uganda have shaped their identity and social structures. Despite the challenges faced over the centuries, the Lango people have maintained their cultural heritage and continue to contribute to the diverse tapestry of Ugandan society. Pottery in this region has served both utilitarian and symbolic purposes, reflecting the daily lives, spiritual beliefs, and artistic expressions of its people. It's from this background therefore, that this paper seeks to investigate how the Lango people have maintained their cultural heritage, through traditional pottery production practices, and continue to contribute to the diverse tapestry of Ugandan society.

Key words: Traditional pottery, Lango people, Cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Pottery production in Uganda dates back to the early Iron Age, around 500 BCE to 500 CE. Archaeological excavations have uncovered pottery fragments at sites such as Ntusi and Bigo bya Mugenyi, which provide evidence of early ceramic technology used by farming communities.[1] In particular, the Urewe pottery tradition, associated with the early Iron Age Bantu-speaking communities, is notable for its distinctive decorative patterns and shapes. Urewe pottery has been found across the Great Lakes region, including Uganda, and is characterized by its finely executed curvilinear designs and dimple-based vessels.[2]

The Lango Origin and Settlement in Northern Uganda

The origins of the Lango people are deeply rooted in migration patterns and historical events that shaped their settlement in northern Uganda. The Lango are part of the Nilotic group of peoples, who are believed to have originated in the Nile Valley, particularly in the region of South Sudan. "The Lango people are believed to have migrated from the Ethiopian highlands and the Sudanic region, moving southwards into present-day Uganda. Their migration is thought to have occurred in waves, with the final settlement in the Lango region around the 15th century. This movement was part of the larger Nilotic expansion in East Africa."[3] The Nilotes are divided into three main groups: the Highland Nilotes, the Plains Nilotes, and the river-Lake Nilotes. The Luo belong to the river-Lake Nilotes. It's also argued that "The Lango people's oral traditions suggest that they originated from the north, possibly in the region of the Blue Nile in Sudan. Their migration into Uganda was gradual, and they settled in the area now known as the Lango sub-region, where they interacted with other Nilotic groups such as the Acholi and Alur."[4] The Lango sub-region is currently divided into 9 districts of Alebtong, Amolatar, Apac, Dokolo, Kole, Lira, Oyam, Otuke and Kwania District.

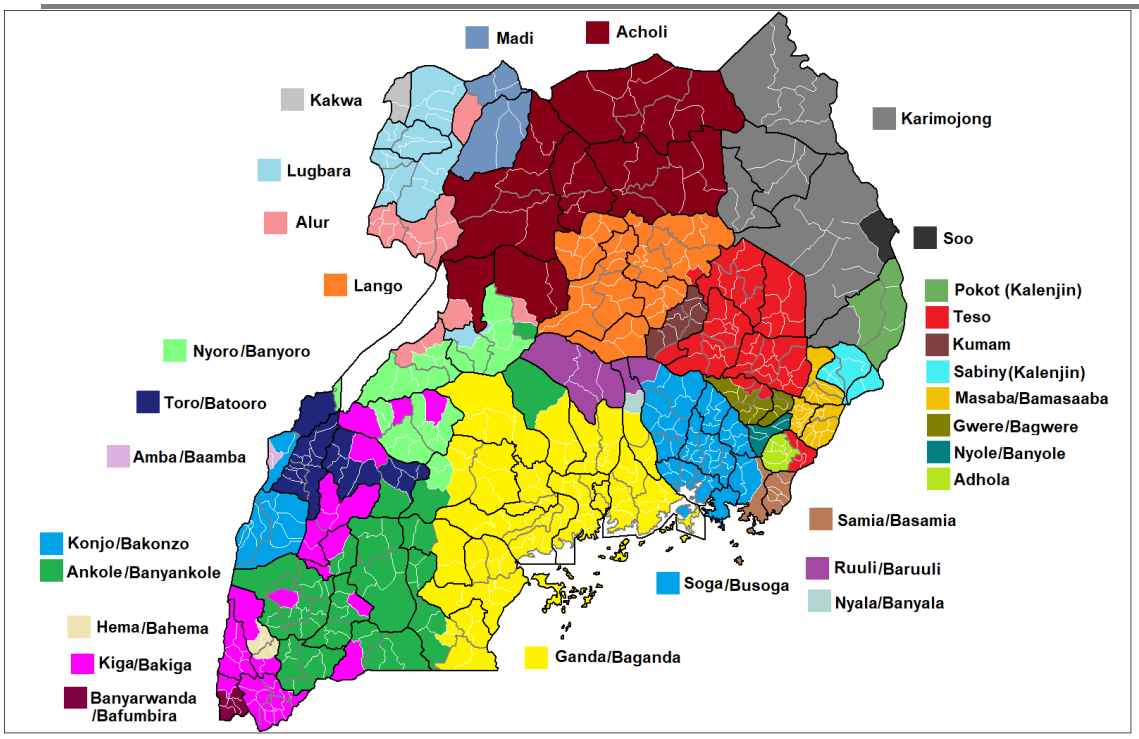

FIG1: Map of Uganda showing tribal distribution

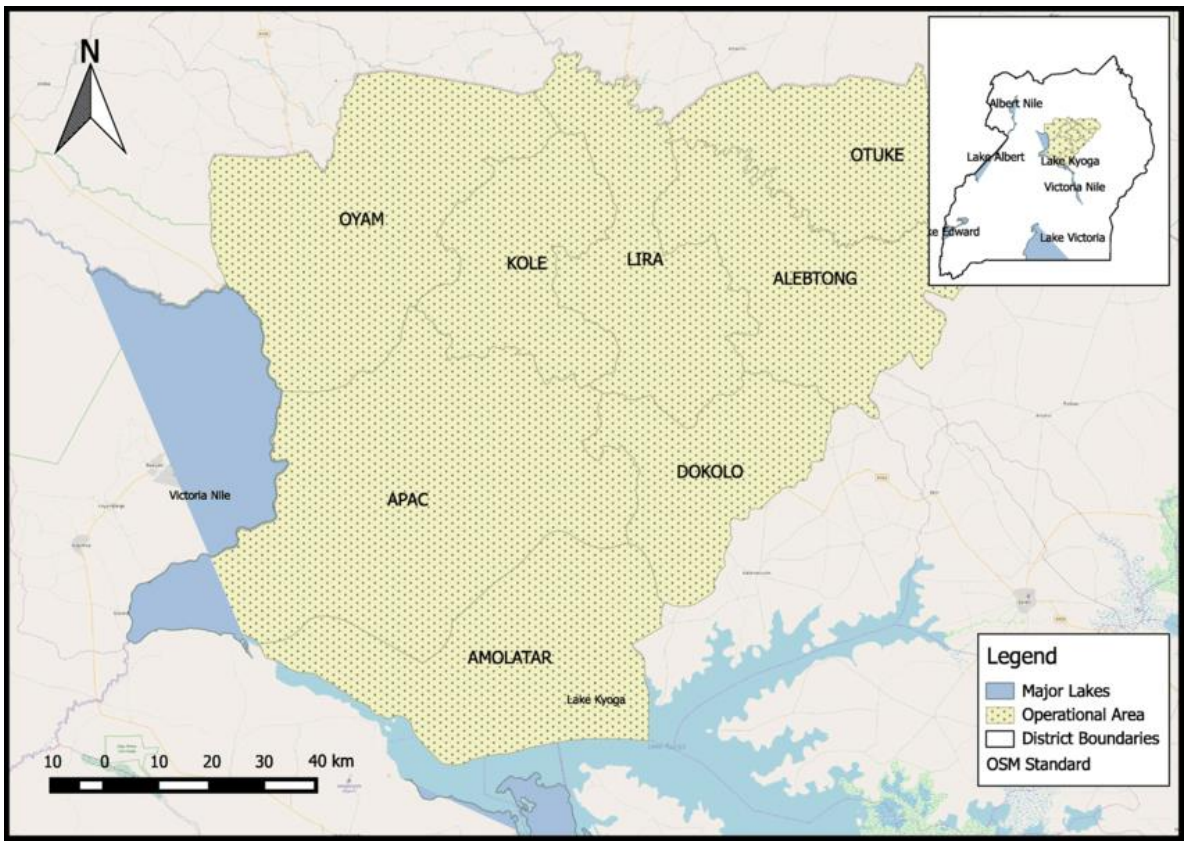

FIG2: Map showing various districts within Lango sub-region

Socio-Political, Cultural and Economical Organization of the Lango People

"The Lango are a Nilotic group whose origins can be traced to the southern Sudan and the Ethiopian borderlands. Their migration into Uganda was likely driven by both environmental factors and conflicts with neighboring groups. By the time of their settlement in Northern Uganda, they had established a distinct cultural identity, characterized by their clan-based social organization."[5] The Lango have a rich cultural heritage,

including traditional music, dance, and storytelling. Their social life is deeply rooted in communal activities, with ceremonies and rituals playing a significant role in their daily lives. Initiation rites, marriage ceremonies, and funeral practices are important cultural events that reinforce social bonds and cultural identity.

The Lango people are primarily agro-pastoralists, relying on both agriculture and livestock rearing for their livelihood. They cultivate crops such as millet, sorghum, and cassava, and keep cattle, goats, and sheep. This is further elaborated that "The Lango are part of the larger Luo-speaking group of Nilotes. Their ancestors are said to have migrated from the Sudanic region, passing through present-day South Sudan before settling in Northern Uganda. Their settlement in the Lango region was marked by the adoption of agricultural practices, particularly the cultivation of millet and sorghum."[6]

Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Period

"In the pre-colonial era, the Lango people were organized into patrilineal clans, each led by a clan head known as the “Won Nyaci”. Their society was egalitarian, with no centralized political authority. The Lango relied on agriculture, cattle herding, and hunting for subsistence, and their social structure was deeply rooted in kinship and communal cooperation."[7] It should also be noted that "Before colonial rule, the Lango people lived in relatively autonomous communities, with a strong emphasis on clan loyalty and mutual support. They engaged in trade with neighboring groups such as the Acholi and Iteso, exchanging goods like iron tools, pottery, and livestock. Their political system was decentralized, with decisions made through consensus among clan elders."[8]

"The arrival of British colonial administrators in the late 19th century disrupted the traditional social and political structures of the Lango people. The British imposed indirect rule, appointing local chiefs to oversee tax collection and labor recruitment. This system created tensions within Lango society, as the appointed chiefs often lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people."[9] Also, “During the colonial period, the Lango people were incorporated into the British Protectorate of Uganda. The introduction of cash crops like cotton and the establishment of missionary schools brought significant changes to their way of life. However, these changes also led to the erosion of traditional practices and the exploitation of Lango labor for colonial economic projects."[10]

“After Uganda gained independence in 1962, the Lango people, like other ethnic groups, faced the challenges of nation-building. The post-colonial period was marked by political instability, including the rise and fall of Idi Amin's regime, which had a profound impact on the Lango community. Many Lango people were targeted during Amin's rule, leading to widespread displacement and loss of life."[11] It’s also mentioned that “In the post-colonial era, the Lango people have struggled to reclaim their cultural identity and political voice. The legacy of colonialism and the turbulence of post-independence politics have left deep scars, but the Lango continue to play a significant role in Uganda's socio-political landscape. Their resilience is evident in their efforts to preserve their traditions while adapting to modern challenges."[12]

Art of Pottery Among the Lango People

Pottery production begins with searching for the raw material. Clay according to Wikipedia, is defined as a fine-grained natural rock or soil material that combines one or more clay minerals with traces of metal oxides and organic matter. Geologic clay deposits are mostly composed of phyllosilicate minerals containing variable amounts of water trapped in the mineral structure. Clays are naturally plastic due to that water content and become hard, brittle and non–plastic upon drying or firing.[13] “Potters often grapple to improve the characteristics of natural clay, such as its texture, color absorption capacity, plasticity, density and firing temperature; potters blend materials to form clay bodies”[14]

The traditional pottery-making practices of the Lango people of Northern Uganda have been documented in various anthropological and ethnographic studies. Brian Vincent explained that "The Lango people of Northern Uganda employ traditional methods of pottery making that have remained largely unchanged for centuries. The use of open-pit firing and locally available materials demonstrates their resourcefulness and

deep understanding of their natural environment. The pottery is both functional and symbolic, often used in communal activities and rituals."[15]

It should also be known that; "Pottery making among the Lango people is primarily the work of women. They use locally sourced clay, which is carefully kneaded and shaped into pots, bowls, and other utensils. The pottery is then sun-dried and fired in open pits using dry grass and cow dung as fuel. The finished products are used for cooking, storing water, and serving food, reflecting the integral role of pottery in daily Lango life."[16] This is supported by Trowell, who in her book explained that, "Among the Lango people, pottery has historically been a female-dominated craft. Women potters used locally sourced clay, often mixed with tempering materials such as crushed pottery shards or sand to strengthen the vessels. The pots were hand-built using coiling techniques, a method that has been passed down through generations. The finished pots were typically fired in open pits, a practice that continues in some rural areas today.[17]

J. C. D. Lawrence further states that "Pottery making is an essential craft among the Lango people, with women passing down their skills from generation to generation. The pots are not only utilitarian but also hold cultural significance, often used in rituals and ceremonies. The designs and shapes of the pottery reflect the Lango's connection to their environment and their daily needs."[18] This is supported by J. H. Driberg where he states that "The Lango women are skilled potters, and their pottery is characterized by its simplicity and functionality. The clay is mixed with sand or crushed pottery shards to prevent cracking during firing. The pots are often decorated with simple incised patterns, which are both aesthetic and symbolic, representing aspects of Lango culture and identity."[19]

J. W. Nyakatura explained that "Traditional Lango pottery is made using the coiling technique, where long rolls of clay are stacked and smoothed to form the desired shape. The pots are often wide-mouthed and round-bottomed, designed for stability when placed on the ground. After drying, the pottery is fired in a shallow pit, a process that requires skill to ensure even heating and prevent breakage."[20] The Lango pottery is particularly notable for its functional and aesthetic qualities. Common forms include cooking pots, water jars, and serving bowls. These vessels often feature simple yet elegant designs, with incised or impressed decorations that reflect the cultural identity of the Lango people.

Extraction of the Raw Materials

The pottery village of Oloo, located in Alebtong district in northern Uganda, has an open clay deposit that's easily accessible by the community potters. Here, the clay for making pots is extracted from the swamp by the potters. They worked in small groups, mainly at household level. The clay here has a high iron content and a reddish hue, and presents high plasticity.[21] Together with the apprentices and women, the potters would dig in the Oloo clay deposit using hoes, picks and shovels, following the vein of clay. Some days prior to extraction, it was customary to perform trial extractions in the deposit until reaching the best quality clay.

the potter then removes the sterile layer which is almost 1 meter thick. As the potters extracts the clay, they keep checking it to remove unwanted particles like vegetable matter and sandy clay, leaving what is considered by them to be quality clay, with enough plasticity for forming, but ensuring that its drying shrinkage is not so great so as to avoid cracking. It's noted that as one of the potters extracts the clay, her colleague pounds it using sticks and hoes, and then put it in small bundles to be carried home. The raw material is usually extracted mostly throughout summer, collecting the amount required for the whole year.

Generally, in every area of the African continent, the most frequent prohibitions concern sexual intercourse, menstruation and pregnancy. Menstruating or pregnant women are, often, not allowed to extract or manipulate clay, and sometimes, even to touch unfired vessels. According to Appau et al. in Ghana, women in their menstrual periods were not allowed to engage in clay winning process. Women who broke this rule would suffer premature menopause, which implied a break in fertility. In addition, men were forbidden in participation of winning clay. Failure to abide by this would render the men impotent.[22] Gosselain explains that from a technical point of view, breaching a taboo may affect three stages of the manufacturing process: at clay extraction (clay suddenly disappears, loses its workability or becomes un-exploitable); drying (pots crack even when sheltered from the sun); firing (pots explode during the process).[23]

Clay Preparation

Women were also involved in preparing the clay. First, the raw material is cleaned and any impurities removed, then it is crushed and screened in order to isolate any remaining impurities. The crushed clay is then immersed in a tank filled with water, and stirred with the aid of a shovel. The most common procedure is to leave the clay to soak for a few hours or keep it underwater for about twenty-four hours until it obtains the correct consistency.

the clay is then moved to the workbench, where sometimes the potters and their wives work on the clay until it acquired the homogeneity and plasticity necessary for shaping. if the clay body retains too much moisture, the potter spreads it out on the workshop floor so that excess water is absorbed. Alternatively, some of the sieved, dry clay is added until the correct moisture content is obtained. wedging or Kneading is done by lifting the clay with the hands and smacking it down onto the workbench repetitively, dividing it into portions that are joined together again by the pressure exerted. This process is usually done by men since it requires a lot of energy.

Temper is another basic raw material potters do consider to improve the clay quality. Both Lizee et al. and Blandino agrees that it(temper) is added to clay in the formation of vessels or other objects in order to reduce rapid shrinkage and/or expansion during the firing process. As Uneven heat distribution can result in cracking and failure during the manufacturing process, Temper allows for a more even distribution of heat energy through the ceramic paste during firing hence helping to reduce the risk of cracking during firing.[2425]

In Lango, like many areas, potters mix different proportions of grog from crashed potsherds with clay, before pounding it. They spread a mat on the ground, sprinkles powdered grog on it and spread the clay over the grog and pound it with big sticks. They turn it several times as they add water, until it is properly crashed. The potters trod on it with their heels to ensure that it is homogeneously mixed. The clay is later put in a container and then covered well to keep it moist. potters prepare the clay in bulk and put it in large container and cover it well for a few days.

FIG3: Black and Brown clay mixed together,(Photograph by the Author)

FIG4: Pounding the two clay bodies using wooden tool,(Photograph by the Author)

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Pottery Formation Processes

The potters in Oloo village make their pots using the coiling method. The potters get a mat and an old woven disc, with the assistance of other potters, who make coils; they cover their coils with leaves to keep them moist. they then start making pot with a single coil in their hands, which they place on a clay mould to keep it firm during the forming stage. Those moulds are mainly platters from old broken pots, or are specially made to serve the purpose. However, potters without enough moulds always improvise by using metallic basins especially when making large pots. They then sprinkle grog on the mould to ensure that the new pot does not stick to it.

The potters use their hands to turn the pot, they place the coils which they use to build the walls higher. When coiling, the clay is rolled into long, thin strands which are coiled upon each other to build out a unique shape. The potter also uses fingers to blends the coils up together until there is no trace of the ropes of clay entwined, to form the pot, with no deviation in the thickness of the walls, therefore no weaknesses. different sizes of moulds are used by the potters depending on what they want to make. they also use a piece of a gourd, shaped like a kidney to model the inside as the pot enlarges. The gourds have an advantage because of their convex shape which can make them ideal to finish the bulb-shape of the pot.

More and more coils are added until the favorable and satisfiable height and shape are achieved. When making the neck, the circumference of the coils is then narrowed and the inside is curved. The shaping of the pot was done simultaneously with the forming, using a kidney shaped piece of gourd and fingers as the major tools.

FIG5: A potter starting the base of the pot, (Photograph by the Author)

FIG6: A potter pressing the ball of clay to form the pot base,(Photograph by the Author)

FIG7: A potter coiling a thread of clay and blending the coils up together (Photograph by the Author)

FIG8: Mould from old broken pot used for support (Photograph by the Author)

Surface Decoration on Pottery

On the subject of pottery decorations, Barley emphasizes that "decorated pots are considered more beautiful than the un-decorated".[26] According to Gosselain and Tite, pottery vessels were subjected to a range of surface treatment which served as decoration and, in many instances, to reduce permeability of the vessel to liquids. The surface treatment used include incised patterns, roulette impressions, and burnishing, application of slip and mineral pigments and post firing treatment with soot or with an organic coating.[27] However, David et al. believe that decoration on ceramic wares is an essential attribute to almost all pots worldwide. It is carried out as part of the craft rather than an art.[28]

Decorations on a pot is symbolic and serves to transmit culture; it encodes, meditates and reinforces the pattern of social relationships. David et al. Further emphasize that design on pottery, far from being "mere decoration", art for art's sake, or messages consciously emblematic of ethnicity, are low technology channels through which society implants its values in the individual – everyday at meals.[29]

FIG9: The potter decorates the surface by applying incised patterns (Photograph by the Author)

FIG10: Finished pot with the surface fully covered with incised patterns (Photograph by the Author)

The Firing Processes

Open firing in African pottery is generally characterized by the absence of a kiln, with pottery being exposed to flames or smoke in a fire pit or over an open flame. The results are often unpredictable, and the firing process plays an important role in shaping the pottery's aesthetic features, such as surface texture and color. Gbaguidi also argue that; "Open firing is a common method in many African pottery traditions. It involves placing the pottery in a pit or over an open flame and surrounding it with combustible materials like wood, straw, or leaves. This method is more primitive than kiln firing but allows for unique surface effects and a deeper connection to the environment, as the potter works in harmony with nature's elements"[30]

FIG11: A fire pit where the pots are stacked and fired (Photograph by the Author)

FIG12: Open flame surface being cleaned after firing, (Photograph by the Author)

"The open firing technique is a more sustainable option for potters in rural Africa. It requires fewer tools and materials compared to kiln firing and uses organic fuel sources such as wood and straw. Furthermore, this technique has a minimal environmental footprint, especially when compared to industrial methods of firing"[31]. "The process of open firing typically begins with placing the pottery in a shallow pit or on the ground. The potter then surrounds the pottery with wood, straw, and other materials that will combust. Once ignited, the fire can burn for several hours, sometimes overnight, with the pottery exposed to both the direct heat and the smoke. The result is often unpredictable, with the pottery being marked by scorch marks, blackened areas, and occasional cracks".[32]

FIG13: Wood and Straw being arranged (Photo by the Author)

FIG14: A bundle of firing woods at the burning site, (Photograph by the Author)

FIG15: Stacked pots of various sizes in a fire pit (Photograph by the Author)

FIG16: Potters covering the pots with grasses, (Photograph by the Author)

Open firing produces distinctive surface effects, including natural color patterns, burnished areas, and cracks. The pottery's surface may be affected by the intensity of the flames, the type of materials used, and the potter's skill in managing the fire. Margaret Young-Sánchez discusses the aesthetic qualities of open-fired pottery as "Pottery fired using open methods often has a raw, earthy aesthetic. The surface may exhibit cracks, scorched marks, and color variations that range from rich reds and browns to black and gray tones. These results are prized for their unpredictability, as no two pieces can ever be identical, making each piece a unique work of art"[33]

FIG17: The already fired pieces cooling down(Photograph by the Author)

FIG18: The potter picking the pots from the pit to cool(Photograph by the Author)

This open fire practice often holds deep cultural and spiritual meaning. For many African communities, the process is ritualistic, with certain precautions and ceremonies associated with it. Potters may use specific prayers or gestures to ensure the success of the firing and the intended purpose of the pottery. As Barbara W. Fash discusses in her article that; "The open firing technique is often tied to ritual practices. For instance, among some African potters, the act of firing pottery outdoors is seen as a form of communion with the spirit

world. Potters may use offerings, chants, or prayers during the firing process to ask for protection or good fortune, ensuring the success of the pottery-making process"[34]

The Offloading Processes

The offloading process in open firing techniques for African pottery is a crucial part of pottery production occurs after the pottery is fired, and involves carefully removing the fired pieces from the pit or fire, allowing them to cool, and then inspecting them for quality. W. Fash says that; "The offloading of pottery after an open firing can be a communal and ritualistic activity, where the potter, often with the help of family or community members, removes the pottery from the pit. In some African traditions, this moment is accompanied by prayers or chants to ensure that the pottery has successfully been completed, free from any flaws or damage. This sacredness of the offloading process reflects the deep connection between the potter and the spiritual world".[35] Bernard H. K. L. Gbaguidi further emphasize that; "After the pottery has been fired, the offloading process is one of the most delicate stages in traditional African pottery. The potter must wait until the pottery has cooled enough to be safely handled, as removing it too early can result in cracking or damage. Once the pottery is removed from the pit, it is often cleaned and sometimes polished to reveal the intricate designs left by the firing process".[36]

From the technical side of the offloading process, "Once the pottery has been removed from the fire, it is essential that it is allowed to cool slowly and evenly. In many African traditions, the potter will not rush this process; the pottery is carefully set aside to cool in a shaded area, often covered with straw or cloth to prevent the sudden exposure to cold air. This ensures that the pottery retains its shape and integrity"[37]

FIG19: The already fired pots awaiting removal from the pits, (Photograph by the Author)

FIG20: A potter removing the fired pots with wood stick (Photograph by the Author)

FIG21: Potter places the pots under the shade (Photograph by the Author)

After the pottery has cooled, it is usually cleaned to remove any ash or soot that might have accumulated during the firing. Mohammed Zaki describes the cleaning and inspection process by stating that "After the pottery has been removed from the pit and cooled, it is carefully cleaned. In Morocco, for example, the potter uses a cloth or soft brush to remove the ash and soot left from the firing process. The final inspection is a critical moment, where the potter evaluates the quality of the firing. Cracks or defects may be repaired, but if the damage is extensive, the piece may be discarded. The result of this offloading process is a piece that is ready for use or display".[38] It is also argued that; "In various parts of Africa, particularly in rural areas, offloading the pottery is a communal activity. Family members, friends, and even neighbors may participate in the process, sharing the burden of handling and inspecting the fired pieces. This communal aspect strengthens social ties and emphasizes the importance of pottery-making as a collective activity. The act of offloading is seen not just as a technical task, but as a community celebration of the completion of the work".[39]

FIG22: Pots under the shade, once cooled they are ready for sale, (Photograph by the Author)

The potter's experience in managing the cooling and handling process plays a significant role in ensuring that the pottery retains its intended quality. "The offloading process is critical to the final quality of the pottery. A skilled potter understands the importance of waiting for the pottery to cool to the right temperature and then removing it gently. If mishandled, the pottery can crack or break, and the decorative surface effects may be lost. In many African communities, the offloading process is as important as the firing itself in ensuring that the pottery meets the desired standards of beauty and functionality".[40]

FIG23: Potter displays cracked pot during firing , (Photograph by the Author)

FIG24: The pot cover with the cracks from the edge, (Photograph by the Author)

In conclusion, traditional pottery production by the Lango people of northern Uganda is a testament to their rich cultural heritage and artistic ingenuity. From its historical roots to its contemporary practices, Lango pottery remains a vital link to the past and a dynamic expression of cultural identity. Economically, pottery has played a vital role in the local economy. Lango pots are often traded within the community and with neighboring ethnic groups. They are exchanged for goods such as food, livestock, and other essential items, highlighting the economic importance of this craft.[41]

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Robert's Biography

Ocen Robert, born in 1990. A young and talented artist who hails from Akany Village in Otuke District, Uganda. Robert holds a Bachelor's Degree in Ceramics from Makerere University and a Master's Degree in Ceramic Design from Jingdezhen Ceramic University. Robert is currently pursuing a Ph.D. program in design at Jingdezhen Ceramic University. In 2017, he joined I.A.C (International Association of Ceramics, UNESCO) as a member, becoming the first member from Uganda. He is also currently the International Student's Union president at International School of Jingdezhen Ceramic University.

Robert has participated in many exhibitions and conferences such as 2024 Shuitu-Water and Clay around the world, 2023 Wenlin art museum-Kunming, 2023 Guangdong Foshan ceramic art museum, 2018 Liling International Ceramic Industry Expo/Exhibition, 2017 China Liling International Ceramic Industry Expo, 2017 People's Daily Ceramic Art Gallery, Jingdezhen-Taoxichuan, 2017 Jingdezhen International Ceramic Studio/Exhibition Hall, 2013 Makerere Art Gallery, Makerere University Kampala.

Contact: +256788553434/ +8613097180015, E-mail: rocen88@gmail.com

ADDRESS: Xianghu Campus, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen City, Jiangxi Province- China