

by Ann Schunior

Like most Americans visiting the West African nation of Ghana, I fly into the capital, Accra, on the southern coast. I'm interested in visiting potters in the small village of Sirigu, in the north, so I'm psyched for two to three days of driving. The nearest town to Sirigu is Bolgatanga, about an hour to its southwest. Known for its market baskets, Bolga (as it's called) is a small town sporting two traffic lights. From Bolga, I take the main road north for another twenty minutes and turn right at Kandiga Junction. After the first mile, the road is unpaved. The surprise this January was the electric poles along the road, with wires going to the few schools and clinics along the way. The rural houses still don't have electricity.

Sirigu is known for both its pottery and its elaborately painted houses. The society has remained very traditional. Marriages are often polygamous; a woman moves into her husband's compound with his extended family, which includes her sister-wives and three to four generations of kinfolk. The men are farmers who grow sorghum, millet, and groundnuts, and raise cattle, goats, and fowl. Because of economic and climatic changes, their farming income has been less reliable in recent years. Many women are potters; they sell their work at the Sirigu market or through SWOPA, the Sirigu Women's Organization of Pottery and Art. Historically, women have had low economic and social status and low literacy rates. SWOPA's goal is to change that by promoting literacy and providing meaningful income and cultural identity for women through pottery and wall decorating.

When I first went to Sirigu in 2007, I was surprised when my hosts eagerly asked for my empty one-liter water bottles. Clearly, these bottles were objects of value, and it didn't take long

Ann Schunior is a studio potter living and working in Randolph, Massachusetts. Much of her work has been inspired by traditional crafts around the world. She has traveled extensively in West Africa, particularly Ghana, but has also been fortunate to spend time with potters in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria.

84 Gold Street
Randolph, MA 02368
www.AnnsPottery.com
ann@schunior.org

BELOW: Collecting palm-wine sap near Oba, Nigeria.

OPPOSITE: Household pots, Sirigu, Ghana.

Side by Side

POTTERY AND PLASTIC IN WEST AFRICA







see why. Plastic water bottles are used for storing beans and grain, providing much better protection from insects and seasonal dampness than traditional clay storage jars.

This year when I returned to Ghana, I often posed the question: When do you use clay storage containers and when do you prefer plastic? The answers I got were nuanced. Plastic is often better; it's lightweight and does not break easily. But plastic is more expensive than locally made clay pots, and there are some jobs plastic doesn't do as well as clay. In a world without refrigeration, a porous water jar keeps water cool. For storing smoked meat and fish or dried okra, pots with holes allow air to circulate around the stored food, keeping it from spoiling. It's common to see a clay water-storage jar in a household courtyard, with a jerry can next to it that is used to bring the water from the well to the house.

The use of pottery in Africa goes beyond utilitarian cooking and storage vessels. Pottery is widely used in rituals associated with births, weddings, and funerals. It was in reference to these ritual pots that I received a consistent message: only natural materials will do. In Nigeria, men tap palm trees along the river for its slightly fermented sap, much as maple syrup is tapped in New England. This "wine" is carried to shore in huge clay jars. If palm wine is being bought just for enjoyment, customers put it in plastic jerry cans to carry home on their motorbikes. But the Igbo insist that any palm wine used in rituals must be carried in gourds or pots, never plastic; wine destined for a funeral ritual must continue its journey in clay. Similarly, I was told both

ABOVE: Water carried in jerry can and stored in clay jar, Sirigu, Ghana.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Dried beans in plastic water bottles, Sirigu, Ghana.

BELOW: A bit of everything. Sirigu, Ghana.

Photographs by Ann Schunior



in Ghana and in Burkina Faso that *pito*, locally brewed beer, must be made and served in clay vessels if it is to be part of a traditional funeral service.

The entwining of specific pots with the ritual lives of women is striking. Among the Nankana in Sirigu, there are pots that are passed from generation to generation, from mother to oldest daughter. Other pots are given to daughters when they marry, then broken at their funeral. Although these stacked sets of pots are used for everyday storage, their significance goes far beyond this. The food stored in them goes with the deceased to the afterlife. It's hard to imagine plastic being used in place of these clay pots.

What does this say about the future of traditional pottery? For now, particularly in rural areas, clay and plastic are used side by side. The use of one over the other depends on the availability of each, the relative cost of each, and the determination of which is most appropriate for a specific task. Needless to say, whether indigenous pottery can continue holding its own against plastic depends on the ability of people in traditional cultures to navigate political, economic, and environmental challenges. They, like us, have choices to make in deciding what types of objects fill their lives.

