Bàu Trúc: The oldest extant pottery village in Vietnam, and possibly Southeast Asia

Palei Hamu Craok – mostly referred to by its Vietnamese name Bàu Trúc – is a small village in the town of Phước Dân (Ninh Phước District, Ninh Thuân province, Central Vietnam), internationally known for its production of pottery. The sale of traditional ceramics, including agricultural products, cookware, and even children’s toys, brings busloads of tourists to the village every year. Little is known about the traditional methods of the production process, how locals understand the genres of production, and the belief systems that have been integral to the process for the past several hundred years.

Bàu Trúc is a short motorcycle ride from Phan Rang-Tháp Chăm city in Central Vietnam; just 9 KM to the south, off National Highway 1A. It would be easy to miss it were it not for the occasional tourist bus. Today, the settlement lies in two of Phước Dân town’s quarters: the 7th and the 12th Quarter. As per statistical measures in 2018, enough people (nearly 3000) reside in the 7th Quarter for it to be considered a small town in its own right, and the current population is 95% ethnic Chăm, with the remainder being ethnic Vietnamese.

Palei Hamu Craok takes its name from the Austroasiatic Cham language of Southeast Asia. The term pamel is a descriptor used to apply to villages and small towns; hamu refers to rice paddies land; and, a craok is a protrusion where two streams meet. The village dates to before the 12th century and even possibly to rice paddy land; and, a craok is a protrusion to where two streams meet. The village dates to before the 12th century and even possibly to rice paddy land; and, a craok is a protrusion.

The characteristics of the area are very similar to many other Cham villages and towns in Ninh Thuân province. There are few large old-growth trees, while rice fields are plentiful, with thanks to irrigation networks. Such settlements are associated with matrilocalism and families living close to one another are generally from the same kinship network. After death, remains are interred in an old grave site, known as a kut. Currently, there are 13 clan groups and each clan has 50 to 60 families. Families tend to own land collectively, sharing rights and obligations, and are thus also responsible for the standard upkeep of the ancestral grave sites and shrines associated with their clan. Houses are built according to customary regulations (adat) regarding the positioning of the buildings. Within a single family complex, there may be several structures, including a sang ye (customary house), one or two sang maug (two-story houses), a sang tua (guest house), one or two sang gar (one-story, horizontal house), and a sang ging (kitchen). Each development also contains a well to the east and a vegetable garden in the southeast. From 2005 through the present, however, such traditionally oriented housing developments have begun to disappear. New houses tend to follow Vietnamese adaptations of European modernist architecture.

Spirits of the place: a divine inspiration for pottery

Although the origins of Palei Hamu Craok are shrouded in history, contemporary residents generally have a common understanding of their past. Most trace their lineages to an ancestral deity: Po Klaong Can. Po Klaong Can was a mandarin of Po Klaong Garai – a king of the Champa civilization who ruled the vicinity from 1151-1205 CE. Po Klaong Can helped the villagers of the area to run out enemy armies and brought them to settle in a new area: Hamu Craok. He also showed them a clay pit and taught them about pottery. Consequently, locals deified him as ‘the God of Pottery’ and built a temple for him. They built the temple (Danaok Po Klaong Can) in the center of the village field (tambok min). In 1967, they moved it from the old village [palei klat] to a new location 2 km west of the new settlement (1. 1964). In 2019, the temple was damaged by weather and the community raised funds to reconstruct the structure. The current building (10x8m) is supported by three trusses, which stretch across two rooms, with the main temple door facing east. The inner sanctum (3x8m) includes the main shrine, which features a stone linga-yoni altar (0.5m tall) with the face of Po Klaong Can on the linga aspect. A second smaller stone altar (0.1m tall), just to the left, features the god’s wife, Nài Hai Halang Tabang Môf (‘Po Nai’ colloquially). On the right-hand side of the entrance to the temple to a small nandini statue represents the steed of Shiva. These statues were repurposed from a 9th-century temple burned by a ‘Jawa army’ in nearby Phước Hậu commune. However, they only came into the current residents’ possession in 1967.

Traditional Cham pottery methods, inspired by Po Klaong Can’s teachings, have consistently been dependent on natural forces, relying upon the proper balance of wind, sun, and rain. Hence, the popular belief that weather events and spiritual forces connected to the weather have a direct impact on successful production. Divine forces in Cham religions have the power to punish or bless an individual, family, or whole community. Thus, some potters even make small offerings of rice wine, eggs, betel nuts, fruit, rice cakes, and other gifts for daily offerings at household shrines. They also prepare more complex, lavish gifts of rice, cakes, soup, bread, fruit, rice wine, eggs, chickens, flowers, and goats to offer at the temple four times annually for ‘The Opening of the Temple’ [Pahkan mbang yang] in the first month of the Cham calendar, the ‘Fire-god Ceremony’ [Yuar yang] during the fourth month of the Cham calendar, the Katé ceremony during the seventh month of...
the Cham calendrical and the ‘Godness Ritual’ (Co-mrub) during the ninth month of the Cham calendar. While these four holidays are performed at many similar shrines and temple sites, for Pol Ha Mu Cam their meaning is localized: the goal of preserving the sacred knowledge of pottery production is a central aim to each. The religious rituals additionally serve as a reminder that younger generations must uphold the profession, remaining grateful to the minds and hands that came before them.  

Po Klaong Can’s methods: perfected through practice  
As mentioned above, villagers may believe Pol Klaong Can, who lived in the 12th and 13th century, was a historical figure who became a god and taught them pottery. However, according to the research of art historians, historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, many characteristics of the pottery methods practiced at Pol Ha Mu Cam are from earlier Champa methods and possibly even the pre-Champa Sa Huỳnh culture (around 3000 BP). Shared production process, types of vessels, and methods of firing pottery outdoors can be found at Sa Huỳnh sites. This has led some academics to suggest that the methods of Pol Ha Mu Cam are the oldest in Southeast Asia.3 Although this assertion has not been confirmed through comparative work, it appears safe to claim that Pol Ha Mu Cam is the oldest extant production site for pottery in Vietnam today. Older sites of production are no longer producing pottery using traditional methods, even though similar methods are necessary for making Pol Ha Mu Cam pottery simple. One only needs access to clay, sand, firewood, straw, and rice husks for firing. The sand, mixed with clay collected from the nearby Quoc River (3 km northwest), includes lithium particles, collected from nearby streams and rivers during the flooding season. The natural characteristic of this particular clay source is extraordinary in that it has a high degree of adhesion. Furthermore, the supply never runs low. Residents take from the air spontaneously and the supply regenerates every six months with natural flooding cycles. To retrieve the clay, potters dig holes 0.5-0.7m deep, across an area of ten. After the collection the hole is filled and rice can be planted on the spot. Within another six months, there will be new clay to harvest. After the clay is collected, it is dried, then soaked in water for about 12 hours. Next, the clay is mixed with sand at a 1:1 ratio. The potter uses their feet and hands to knead the clay [vak halan] until plasticity is achieved. Some hand tools are used for working the clay, yet they are minimalists traditionally made tools, such as a big bamboo loop used to curve the glazy raw clay [kagali], a smaller bamboo loop used to thin the clay body [tanak], a knife for cutting and etching decorative patterns [daohoa], a stick to poke holes in the clay [tana], a small cloth used to smooth the surface of the clay when wet [tanak], and a comb to use for creating wave patterns [tath].4 The tools are used variably in four stages. The first is creating the peripheral form [phong gak], wherein the clay is shaped into a ‘pumpkin’ [kaeduk] and then set upon a clay ‘hill’ [lak jik]. Starting at the base of the kaeduk, the potter uses their hands to create the basic shape of the ceramic piece (20-30cm high). Next, the potter expands the body of the piece, connecting the base and shaping the sides upwards they use the fingers, to form the side of the pot. The clay is rubbed out the Fingerprints, smoothing the body and mouth, before rubbing the body with the cloth [tanay]. The potter expands the body, in order to create patterned motifs. Traditional motifs include jagged, sharp lines, waves, patterns of vegetation, and numerous sea motifs created with shells. As a result of market demands, these patterns have become much more sophisticated in the past decades. Human and animal motifs resemble traditional Champa art styles and have increasingly been added to the repertoire. In the final stage [kush gak], pieces are left on the kiln for more time than usual to ensure a smooth transformation to a shady place to prevent cracking. When wet, the potters feel the pot: If the potter has the bottom of the ceramic from the platform first to tanak and the firing stage can begin.3

Thus the potter’s method is only fine-tuned and thus there are no less involved. Materials for firing include wood collected from the forest during the dry season, and sometimes rice husks collected from rice fields after harvest. After the clay is dry, the potter will have the bottom of the ceramic from the platform first to tanak and the firing stage can begin.3

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Style & form: the contemporary art
There are roughly five general categories of production for Pol Ha Mu Cam’s pottery, which we can organize according to type and function of the pieces. The first are large pots [gak gao prang] and small pots [gak goi] that are generally used for cooking the size of a platter, for gathering and storing drinking water. They have round bottoms, small mouths, and conical bodies. These large round body pots are generally at least 20cm high, and the diameter near the base of the pot is an average of 15cm wide. The small pots 5cm in diameter, breaking the clay glossy, walls of these pots are generally around 0.8cm thick. The pots in the second category – called kielat or gauh – have a full bell mouth, short neck, drooping shoulders that flow downward, and a full middle body with a smaller round bottom. They are limited in their use for cooking and quite standard in size: 20cm high, 10cm in mouth diameter, and wall an average of 1cm thick. The pots of the third category – jak and khang – are commonly used to store all kinds of substances, from water to salt, to rice. These are slightly rounded at the bottom, with a standing cupped mouth, a standing neck, sloping shoulders, and a round body. They are mostly 10cm high, have a 15cm diameter for the mouth, and an even thicker walls, generally 1.2cm thick. The pots in the fourth category do not particularly have standard measurements, but are mostly comprised of ceramics that might have slips attached to them, with two to three ‘legs’. They have full cupped mouths and flat bottoms. They are predominantly used in big storage vases [wau] or braziers [wau lao than] on which cooking pots can be placed for heating. They are generally shallow. Individual water storage pots [kadat] also fit into this category. Finally, the last category includes purely decorative pieces and toys. These might be for children, or to hang in the home, and commonly take the shape of animals or include animal motifs, such as water buffalo [kabaw], cattie [limoaw], fish, and trumpet-like instruments [halan pade].

Although the first through third categories have historically grown more popular, new designs that are simultaneously creative and evocative, mostly produced by a new, younger generation of artisans, have also been popular. These new designs certainly represent the desire to establish niche markets for the production of Pol Ha Mu Cam ceramics. In addition to traditional motifs, the revivalist interests of artisans themselves, who have grown increasingly connected to classical Cham art production, have taken off. This is turning many new designs that are simultaneously creative and evocative, mostly produced by the younger generation of artisans, have also been popular. These new designs certainly represent the desire to establish niche markets for the production of Pol Ha Mu Cam ceramics. In addition to traditional motifs, the revivalist interests of artisans themselves, who have grown increasingly connected to classical Cham art production, have taken off. This is turning many

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