Pottery at Serra. Aitape sub district. West Sepik. Papua New Guinea

Robert Arnold June 1975.

Serra

Serra is the collective name of three villages, Sarai, Rainuk and Puindu, that are situated about thirty miles west of Aitape on the coast of the West Sepik district. The population is made up primarily of people who claim to have always lived near the coast although until recently they lived up the Sarai river in the sago swamp.

There are two distinct languages.The main one belongs to the swamp dwellers. It is called *Aikser* by the Serra people and is said to be similar to that of Sissano, Arop and Malol to the east. The other language is spoken by people who have migrated under Government pressure from a small village called Nori that was inland to the west of Serra.

Serra constitutes a significant social unit in terms of geography, local government and marriage. It is separated by rivers to the east and the south and by steep hills to the west from other villages. Marriages are arranged almost entirely within Serra itself and only a few occur with Sumo and Sissano, the neighbouring villages. There is a councillor who represents the population of approximately four hundred in the Siau Local Government Council.

A high proportion of the men have worked in centres such as Manus, Vanimo, Wewak, Lae, Madang and Aitape. Although the older men worked as domestics, plantation workers or policemen there is a growing number of men with some training in such things as dock work, plumbing, carpentry and storekeeping.

Acquisition of Pottery

Serra people have had pottery as long as they can remember. There are two sources available to them. Probably the most significant source in the past was by trade with Aitape islanders, particularly from Tumleo. The islands have clay deposits but lack sago palms. There used to be regular sailing expeditions from the islands to the coastal villages as far as Serra. The pottery made on the islands was exchanged for limboms of processed sago.

Alternatively the Serra people have access to a clay deposit in the Serra hills to the south west at a site not far from their old swamp dwellings. Nowadays it is a long and arduous journey by canoe and by foot that is made very infrequently and, as far as I know, by only the one old woman who still has the knowledge and inclination to make pots.

This woman is convinced that the skill will die with her since the young women have taken little interest in learning from her. It is preferable to get money to buy an imported object in Aitape or Vanimo nowadays.

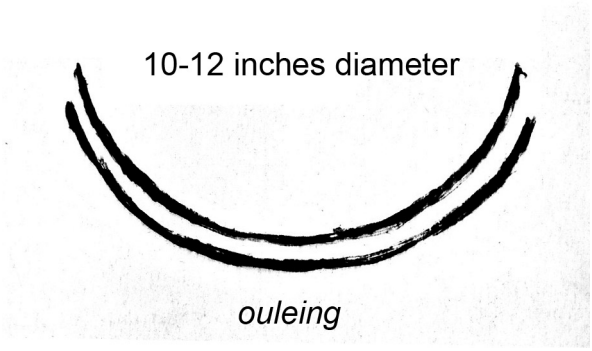
However the islanders still have a need for sago but are increasingly asked for money as payment. What was once a system of interdependence which could be said to have allowed 'self-reliance' is now a system linked to and dependent on the commercial activity of expatriates in Aitape.

The growth in importance of Aitape as a focus of trade although enabling the introduction of new goods has had the effect of making Serra people feel very isolated from the modern economy of the area. Nevertheless the trade with the islands is declining even as a source of cash as the copra industry has grown in the last fifteen years. People travel with their copra bags to Aitape, get their money and spend it on goods including pottery alternatives. The social relations that must have existed

between Serra and the islanders have been replaced by purely financial relations with the trade stores and a few casual relationships with the people of the villages on the coast between Serra and Aitape.

Types of Pottery, that are made in Serra

1) *Ouleing*. (Fraipan in pidgin.)
Function. To fry sago in wafers or pancakes.



ouleing

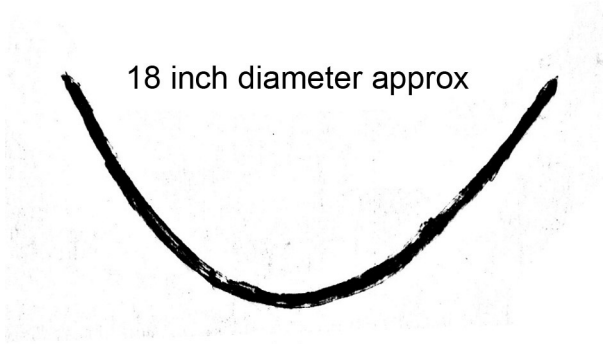
Ouleing means a pair of circular pots in the shape of a small section of a sphere that are made so that they fit inside each other. They are about ten to twelve inches in diameter.

The method of use is to sprinkle the sago sediment that has been extracted by washing sago pith, into one of the pots which is supported by three stones over a fire. The sago is forced through some wire mesh if available. The granules are spread evenly up to the rim of the pot with a piece of coconut shell.

The second pot is placed on top of the sago in the first pot and is also spread with sago granules. After a few minutes the pair of pots are removed to one side of the fire with two pairs of tongs made from the trunk of a betel nut palm. The top one is lifted off and the lower one placed on top of it. The cooked wafer is removed and the pots returned to the fire. While the cooking is taking place more sago is spread on the top pot. The process is repeated until the required number of sago wafers have been cooked. That is usually two or three per person. This food called praim in pidgin (from fry-im) or *lepi* in *Aikser* is the main staple and is eaten at least twice a day every day with greens, fish, pig, vegetables and even dry coconut (when nothing else is available).

There is never any decoration on the surface of *ouleing* and they are not glazed.

2) *0ulatar*.
Function. Cooking greens (often in coconut milk) or boiling pig meat in water. (Pig cannot be eaten with coconut in any form as this is thought to cause illness.)



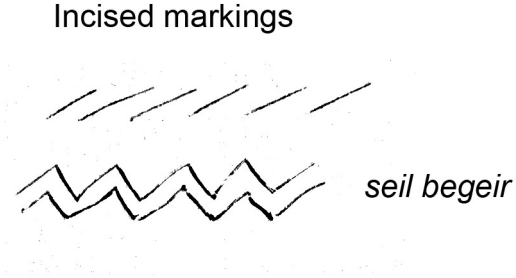
oulatar

An *oulatar* is formed in the same way as one half of an *ouleing* but is built up around the edges until it is about 18 inches in diameter and the sides in cross section are almost straight and at 45 degrees to the horizontal.

This type of pot is also sometimes used to make *'lepi manus*', sago dish which is supposed to have originated in Manus. lt is made by heating sago in the pot over a fire and slowly stirring in coconut milk for about half an hour until it is small glutinous lumps.

The pot is usually plain with no decoration.

3)*Sein* or *Sei*l.
Function. To mix sago and hot water to form sago jelly.



seil begeir

Sago is only occasionally eaten in this manner by Serra people. There were only broken pieces of this type of pot in Sarai at the time of investigation. However I gather that it is a larger version of the *oulatar* with decoration incised around the rim in the form of short strokes or zig zag lines. The latter type of mark is to be found on the blades of paddles where it is referred to as *seil begeir* (sago pot mark).

Modern alternatives to pottery

The *oulatar* cooking pot has been superseded by the aluminium pots with handles that are common throughout Papua New Guinea. These are usually imported from China. Occasionally a four gallon kerosene drum with the top cut out is used to boil large quantities of food.

The *seil* type of pot is replaced by wide enamel 'washing up' bowls which are also used for washing plates or clothes.

People were pleased with these alternatives for two reasons. Firstly the new vessels are less easily broken and so have a longer life, and secondly it is regarded as less of an effort to earn money by copra or sago trading and then buy a metal container from Aitape (or Vanimo) than to collect clay and make a pot. This obviously does not explain why the pots made by the Aitape islanders are not very popular nowadays. To a certain extent there is an unquestioned assumption, that 'European' goods are inherently superior to anything that can be produced by the people themselves.

The modern alternative to the *ouleing* is a pair of heavy cast iron pans in the same shape as the pottery type but slightly smaller. These can be bought in Aitape and are in great demand. They also have the advantage of durability but surprisingly the wafer that can be cooked in them is said to be very inferior. Probably the pan reaches a much higher temperature than the pottery equivalent and the sago is made excessively dry. The sago wafer that is produced becomes very leathery after about half a day whereas the original type could be kept for up to a week before it became inedible. As this food is used on journeys and is highly convenient for carrying, this factor is of great importance. Nevertheless most people would rather have or a already possess iron frypans despite the high cost (ten kina per pair) and the culinary disadvantages.

Technique

The pottery in Serra is made by women exclusively. It is done seated on the floor of a house and the construction of the three types is by the technique of coiling.

Equipment used consists of a water pot (enamel in the cases that I observed), a wooden round ended pounding instrument celled *ai bepek* (wood-ground/clay), a sheet of limbom to put the clay on, a sheet of sago pangal to roll the clay on and a stand for the half finished or finished pot made from tree bark or plaited cane. This is called *so piwang* (something-bottom) and is a ring about three inches high and eight inches in diameter.

1. The clay is pounded for about ten minutes with the *ai bepek* which is moistened occasionally on its end. Any small stones are removed by hand. When the clay is flattened it is rolled up into a lump and beaten again until the potter is satisfied that the clay is ready for working, *'i tokoing'* ...em i faitim.

2. A long cylinder is formed by squeezing the clay in the hands and pieces about six inches long are broken off and piled up. *'i tokung'* ...em i bangim.

3. When there are about ten such pieces the next stage is commenced. A short piece is taken and its end dipped in water and then placed onto the sheet of sago pangal. lt

is then rolled on the darnp area with one hand until it is about two feet long and haIf an inch in diameter.
'i tomom' ...em i wilwilim.

4. When one piece has been rolled it is coiled. The coil is formed by squashing the clay spiral between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand while holding the unused clay in the right. In this way the curve of the base is formed.
'i tolei' ...em i rounim.

5. The clay is rolled and coiled until the pot base is about seven inches across. At this stage the pot is cleaned up and strengthened by scraping radially towards the centre of the underside and then on the inside. The smoothing is done with the fingers opposed to the thumb. This is repeated only this time scraping around the pot. Finally small imperfections are smoothed out with the forefinger.
'i toryei' ...em i stretim.

6. Onto the firm base new coils are added and smoothed until the pot reaches its final shape. lt is then carefully smoothed all over and checked for cracks. It is then placed on the *so piwang* and the rim is cleaned up using the thumb and forefingers opposed. The *so piwang* is covered with large dry leaves to cushion the pot.

7. In the case of the *ouleing* a second pot of identical dimensions is made and carefully adjusted so that it fits inside the first one.

8. The completed pots are left to dry for several days until a suitable time for firing, any decoration is incised after about half a day.

The time taken by the potter who was observed was approximately 30-40 minutes to fabricate one vessel after preparing the clay.

The firing is done with dry coconut leaves and firewood on the ground. As production is low only one or two pots are fired at once. After firing ash is rubbed onto the inside of an *ouleing* and a sago wafer cooked in it before it is considered finished. I was told that there is a method of boiling up a soup of small black swamp fish in the other two types of pot to seal them.

There are apparently no ritual precautions to restrict the potter other than not washing in sea water before handling clay as this would cause the clay to crack on firing.

This description is of the production of pots in Serra and it is clear that the products are not very sophisticated relative to the island products. The pots that are made in Serra have not been traded in the past and the skill and knowledge about pottery is quite evidently going to be lost soon with no real regret on the part of the villagers.