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See letter

POTTERY MAKING

Chontal Tabasco

Report of Margaret Harris

for June 1948

Chontal Pottery Making

This article tells about modern pottery making in the State of Tabasco by the Chontal Indians. Every kitchen is well supplied with a large variety of clay dishes and pots. The writer has observed the manufacture of these products in Tapotzingo, an Indian village in the municipality (county) of Nacajuca, and has checked the information with those methods used near the sea coast towns. No special training is given those who wish to learn to make pots other than to observe those who already know. Since Tapotzingo has a yearly flood from September to December, this work is more or less seasonal. The height of the season is February and March because the breeze quickly dries the clay in three or four days. Some potters supply only their own family needs and others make a large supply to sell. The town of Soyotako has made this their industry and sell to many of the surrounding towns. Many individuals prefer to buy pottery from this town because specialization has resulted in better pottery.

The articles of equipment which are generally used are a board to knead and mold the clay, a piece of dried gourd, and a dried seed. One of two kinds of seeds may be chosen-- the large oval black seed from the zapote de agua or a black half-inch seed from the pochote tree about the size of a silver dollar. The seeds are used to smooth the pottery. A small stick is used as an etching tool or to make holes in the lids of pots.

Selection of clay is made by experienced potters. A long stick is stuck into a muddy swamp and if it comes out with smooth sticky clay on it, handfuls are dug up and carried home in a knotted rope bag which is lined with big leaves. White clay is used near the sea coast. Further inland a black and yellow streaked clay is used. The yellow streaks are taken out and used for the less important pottery as for example the six-inch high clay standards used to support pots over the coals. Three such standards are used and the fire is built in the center of these. Some potters use this yellow clay for pots but most avoid it because it makes inferior pottery.

The clay is prepared for use by kneading with the hands or feet. Enough sand and small amounts of water are added to the clay to keep it from sticking to the skin. Sand is obtained from some of the nearby sandy river banks. Kneading and squeezing motions are used to evenly distribute the sand and break up any hard particles in the clay.

There are two general classes of pots distinguished by their composition, shape and use. Class I has a mixture of coarser sand with the clay and consequently has a rougher appearance. The characteristic shape is a rounded outward sloping side which obtains about four or five times the diameter of its narrow base about three quarters the height of the pot. The pot is rounded inward about the width of the diameter of the base or slightly less and is completed with a narrow rim which curves up and outward. These pots except for the religious artifacts are used over the fire.

Clay pots of this class vary in size from eight to thirty inches in diameter. Pots are not used interchangeably. One pot is kept for corn, one for meat, one for candy. The size used depends on the size of the family and the desires of the house-keeper. One big lid made convexly with four holes to allow the steam to escape and molded with a big handle serves for all the pots.

Other pottery made from this same coarser clay mixture include the flat plate-like grill. These are in two sizes, the smaller with a handle is used to toast cocoa beans which are used in the corn drink. The larger ones are used to cook the tortillas. Religious artifacts made are candle holders (sometimes plainly shaped or in the shape of a bird or cow) and incense burner (regarded too sacred to be photographed, consists of a small bowl on a high stand). These religious furnishings are kept on the altar or saints' table in the main room of the house.

Class II has a very fine grain sand mixed with the clay and has a finer, smoother texture. These are used for the most part for storing water. Pots made from this type of mixture have practically the same shape as Class I pots. One general variation includes less of a slope to the sides of the water pot. The characteristic water jug has a narrow base, sides sloping up and rounding out to four or five times the diameter of the base at about two thirds the height of the jug, then rounding inward to almost the diameter of the base. The last third of the jug is finished by a wide rim that curves outward slightly at the rim. The native word for this

is mek'io'-ja' literally meaning "embracing water." The large bowl is carried placing it on the hip and the arm placed around the rim holds the jug firmly. Smaller sizes of the same jug have cord tied around the wide rim and are used to dip water out of the wells.

Other uses for this type of jug are to rinze corn or to make the native fermented drink at fiesta times. Smaller pots hold water to sprinkle on the corn as it is being ground. Bowls about eight inches in diameter whose sides slope outward from the narrow base are used to serve food. One is kept specially for offerings to the images and a very small one for secret offerings to the mischievous dwarf who lives on the earth.

The potter begins with a solid cone shaped lump of clay. The apex is flattened out and becomes a stand on which the molding is done. The right hand hollows out the center of the wide end of the cone. Then placing the left hand on the outside the clay is turned and molded into a large bowl or plate. Using a piece of gourd or dried seed, the inside is smoothed first, then the outside and top. The pot is then placed in a shady spot on the floor to dry. The next day or the day following the pot is turned upside down and the flattened apex is cut off with the use of a piece of gourd. Several taps are given, with the same instrument, on the bottom of the pot to give the pot a firmer base. It is smoothed again and allowed to dry where the clay has just been removed. The water jugs are not allowed to dry quickly. Water is applied daily with a wet rag. This process is continued for four days. Some potters are very careful to keep old pieces of cloth over the pots, especially the larger ones, in order to guard against the evil eye which they believe

may cause their work to be ruined either in the drying or in the firing. A large pot or jug is often propped up with bricks, broken pottery or turtle shells during the drying time. A widow is not allowed to make pots for a year after her husband's death because she would thereby cause more earth to be heaped over his soul.

The pots which are not used over the fire are usually incised with a stick before the pot is allowed to dry completely. The incision is smoothed down with the fingertips. Some pots are given a coating of red earth applied with a piece of cloth. This is sometimes over the entire jar or perhaps just over the design which is near the top. This is applied the last day of drying and allowed to dry well before firing.

Firing is done when there is no breeze. If there is a breeze, a protection from the wind is improvised. The pots are preheated in the sun, especially those of Class II. This is not always necessary however. The desired fuel is the part of the dried palm frond nearest the tree trunk and also small pieces of wood laid in a large enough firebed so as to evenly distribute the heat throughout the inverted pots in the fire. The pottery is allowed to stay in the fire until the clay turns red. The pottery is allowed to cool gradually. White spots found on the pots show incomplete firing and the pots are returned to the heat again until they turn the same color all over. Black spots are only surface stains from smoke. When cool the pots are ready for sale. The usual test of good pottery is to hear a ring when it is flicked by the finger.

Cracked pots are able to be repaired, that is, if they are

of Class II, by melting pitch and allowing it to run into the crack to seal it. In Class I sometimes the pots are too porous and drip water over the fire. This is remedied by giving the outside a coating of lime mixed with fresh blood, and sometimes only lime or only blood.