

## **THE MAKING OF NUNGBI HAM: A STUDY OF NUNGBI POTTERY OF MANIPUR, INDIA**

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**Abstract:** *The Tangkhul Nagas of Nungbi village in Manipur, India, are historically known for their handmade pottery. Named after the village, Nungbi pottery was widely used in the past for barter and trade among different communities of the region. At present there are only a few families that subsist on this craft. Nungbi pottery is said to be unique because only one village has been making it since historical times, and also since serpentinite stone is extensively used in the clay mixture. This paper discusses the various methods of making traditional Nungbi pottery, its significance to the present day Tangkhul Nagas, and its change and continuity.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1960s, a few scholars have studied pottery in Northeast India, from both an archaeological and an ethnographic context. T. C. Sharma (1967) studied cord-marked Neolithic pottery recovered from Daojali Hading in Assam, and stated that it belonged to the Eastern Asiatic Neolithic tradition. S. K. Roy (1977, 2004) described pottery from both archaeological (Garo Hills, Daojali Hading) and ethnographic (Assam) contexts, and emphasised a geo-cultural zone. O. K. Singh (1999, 2008) did extensive fieldwork in Manipur, and opined that the cord-marked pottery tradition of Manipur might have arrived from southern China via Assam. A. A. Ashraf (1990) studied archaeological pottery from Parsi Parlo (Arunachal Pradesh) with respect to present day traditions and B. Medhi (1992) has documented present-day pottery making traditions (Hira and Kumar) in Assam. In recent years, mention may be made of the ethnographic works done on different communities of the region by Ngullie (2008), Manibabu (2010), Vasa (2011) and Gachui (2014), among others.

This paper does not discuss pottery from an archaeological perspective. Rather it presents an ethnographic study of some aspects of the pottery traditions of the Tangkhul Nagas of Nungbi Khullen village, Ukhrul district, Manipur, India. It traces the practice and uniqueness of this pottery-making

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craft. The present study focuses on the making of *nungbi ham* or *nungbi* pottery, named after the village of Nungbi Khullen, as the raw materials for making this pottery are said to be found only in this village.



Figure 1: Map of India showing the location of the studied area

The Tangkhuls are one of the major Naga tribes who inhabit the north-eastern part of Manipur (Figure 1). The Tangkhuls live in a well-defined territory of their own. They generally live on hilltops or hillsides. Nungbi Khullen, where this study is based, is a Tangkhul village in the northern part of Ukhrol District, Manipur (Figure 2). The village is 36km away from the district headquarter. The National Highway 53 passes through the heart of this village. Besides the rich deposits of clay and stone for making earthen vessels, studies in Nungbi Khullen have also indicated ample deposits of chromite in the village. Nungbi pottery is also known as Longpi pottery, as the two villages Nungbi Khullen and Longpi Kajui are often collectively known

as Longpi. However, the present study is focused only on Nungbi Khullen, which is the only surviving potter village. Traditional festivals as well as the cultural practices of the Tangkhul Nagas are still witnessed to some extent in this village. Agriculture, chiefly rice, but also potato, maize, beans, peas, cabbage, mustard leaves, chilli, yam, and pumpkin, is the main source of income.

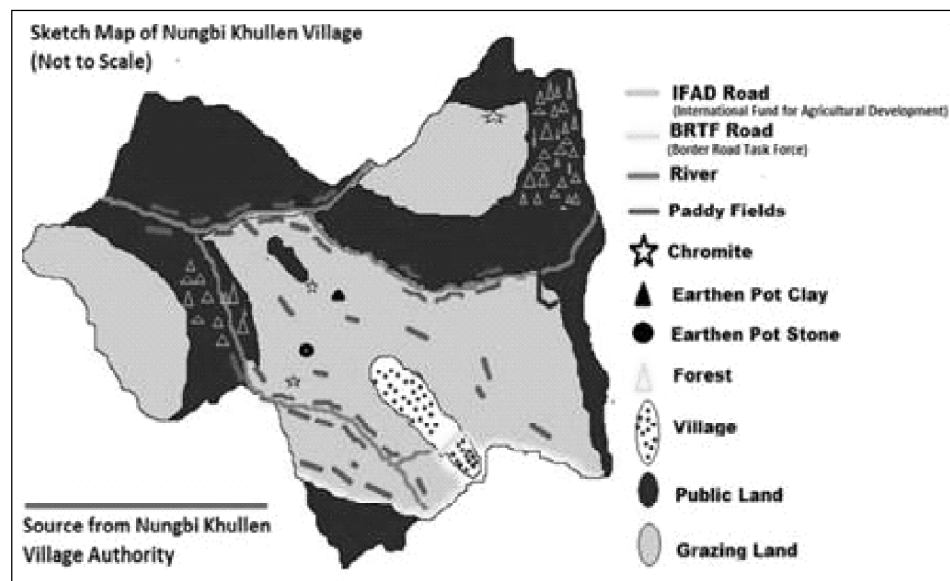


Figure 2: Sketch map of Nungbi Khullen village

The craft of pottery developed among the Tangkhuls in the distant past, although no definite date can be given regarding its origin. However, it is beyond doubt and argument that Tangkhul pottery is one of the oldest industries of the people of the region (Shimray 2001). Hodson, in *The Naga Tribes of Manipur* (1911), the earliest monograph on the Tangkhuls, noted that the village of Nungbi Khullen made earthen pots from beds of clay close to their village. These earthen pots were found to be strong and well-suited for their requirements though they had very little ornamentation.

### MAKING OF NUNGBI POTTERY

Nungbi pottery is made of clay and stone, with water to mix the two substances. The use of sand as a temper in the making of pottery is known among many communities; however, the use of large chunks of stone, broken down into fine granules, and then used as a raw material is not commonly witnessed in other communities of the region (Northeast India). Nungbi

pottery is made from a mixed paste of soft-ground black serpentinite stone and brown powdered clay. This combination of brown clay and black serpentinite is a unique characteristic of Nungbi pottery. Traditional knowledge states that clay, when mixed with other types of stone (in a greater proportion) to make a pot, can never be made as it will burst when heated in fire. However, this fact seems to have been challenged culturally by the Tangkhuls of this village. Once the pot is shaped, heated, and polished with the leaves of *cherona* tree (a sub variety of *Cheronia*) which is locally called *machithing*, it can be safely used not only as a storage receptacle, but even to cook at high heat.

### Procurement of Raw Materials

The raw material (i.e. clay) for pot making is collected only from November to April, i.e., during the dry months. In this season, they collect the clay required for the whole year. The dugout clay is dried for a week at the source for easy transportation as it has to be carried home on one's shoulder. At this stage, they usually enlist help from relatives, neighbours, and friends. In return, they provide cooking pots, or work in their field during the peak period of paddy cultivation, especially at the time of ploughing. The potters procure sufficient clay during this season for their projected annual usage. There are potters who make pots occasionally, but most make them throughout the year.

In the rainy season, the area from where the clay is collected gets eroded, and the excavated hole is thus naturally refilled with soil deposition after two to three years. Possibly, the top soil turns into brown clay and the cycle continues. This naturally evolving clay is classified into two broad groups. The outer-layer clay, locally called *akeinali*, is light brownish in colour and dry, in comparison to the other variety. *Akeinali* is considered to be of cheaper quality and people often abstain from using it. The second variety forms deep within the ground, and is locally called *leshonnali*, which means "original clay" or "pure clay", and is dark brown in colour. It has a slightly softer touch and is damp. It is locally known that any pot or vessel made of this "pure clay" is better in quality and likely to be stronger. Elasticity is comparatively higher and it is more flexible in designing different shapes, and there is a reduced chance of its breaking while heating. This brown clay is found only in the site of Sala Hill bordering Nungbi Khullen, which is around 45 minutes' walk from the village.

The other raw material, i.e., serpentinite stone, locally called *leshonlung* used in Nungbi pottery is found to be used only in the village. This is of bluish-black colour, even though people often refer to it as the "black stone" (Figure 3). The serpentinite used in the pottery is found only in the site of

Kaphungrim, which is about 30 minutes' walk from the village. It is collected or quarried out from this hill. The time of collection of serpentinite stone is more flexible when compared to that of clay. Here the potters can collect throughout the year, but the potters prefer to collect during dry seasons. When asked why, a few of the potters said, "It is easier to carry and clean during the dry season, and why would we wait for the wet season when the task becomes more difficult?" This stone is soft to the touch, and as such, the potters use only wooden pestles and mortars to grind it into fine powder.



Figure 3: The black serpentinite stone



Figure 4: Dark brown clay

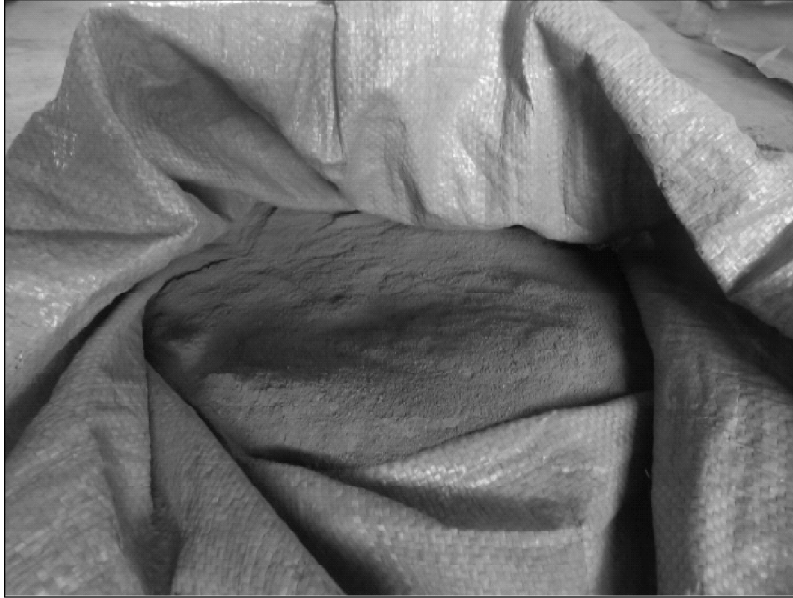


Figure 5: Fine powdered clay

### Clay and Stone Processing

The clay used in Nungbi pottery requires some form of preparation before it can be used. Clay preparation follows the following steps. Firstly, the dugout clay is spread out and dried in the sun for at least three days, or sometimes more, depending on the weather (Figure 4). Secondly, the dried clay is ground into fine powder with the help of a wooden mortar and pestle. Finally, the ground clay is sieved with a bamboo sieve (Figure 5). The preparation of stone is slightly different from the clay preparation. Here, the first step is cleaning the stone of unwanted mud. Then, it is crushed with a stone hammer and later placed in a wooden mortar and ground with a pestle into fine powder (Figures 6 & 7). This is then sieved in a bamboo sieve. The resultant fine powder of clay and stone is then kept in a secure place free from contamination of unwanted materials. It is carefully guarded because the potters believe that if dust particles get mixed with it, it will make the pots fragile, and they may burst when heated.

### Paste Preparation

Clay powder, stone powder and water are mixed in a proportion known to the potters alone, which they do not want to reveal. This is of utmost importance because if the mixture is inappropriate, then the pot shape and



Figure 6: Serpentinite stone being ground in a wooden mortar.



Figure 7: Fine powdered serpentinite stone

texture will be flawed. However, the proportion of clay and stone powder depends on the types of pots to be made. For cooking pots, for instance, our observation revealed that the quantity of stone powder is almost double the amount of clay powder. This is possibly done to make the pot strong enough for cooking. Stone powder determines the hardness of the pots: the larger the amount of stone powder, the stronger the pot is. These types of pots were the

ultimate utensils used in the past for brewing rice beer, storing water and cooking. Even today, it is used as the prime pot especially for cooking meat. For making decorative vessels, the proportion varies. The mixture is then thoroughly mixed, after which water is added and kneaded till the desired consistency is achieved. This dough is kneaded until it is soft and pliable, and formed into a long cylindrical shape which is further moulded into a block (Figures 8 & 9). After this, a required dimension is cut out of this strip and its edges are trimmed accordingly. The mixture is then ready for shaping with hands into any shape and size the potter requires.



**Figure 8: Clay is kneaded and rolled out into flat sheets**



**Figure 9: A series of strips are then cut out with the help of a bamboo sliver**



### Hand Forming

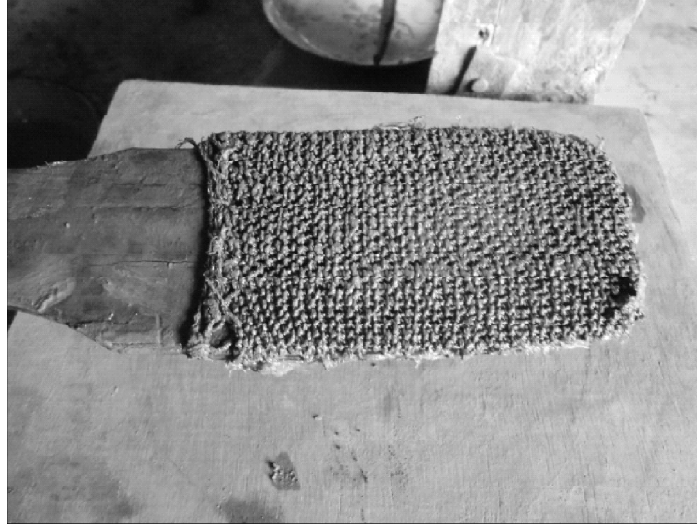
In the making of Nungbi pottery, the forming of pots takes 2 to 3 days, or sometimes more during wet weather. Complete forming requires four steps: firstly, the potters manually mould the dough into desired shapes and sizes with the help of moulds, slabs and other different tools to get the primary model on the first day (Figure 10). Secondly, it is further shaped with hands on the second day by using a wooden paddle made of bamboo and well knitted with thread, with which it is patted into the desired thickness, shape and style (Figure 11). Thirdly, levelling is done with the help of a bamboo wand. Finally, it is retouched repeatedly until the desired shape comes out. On getting the final shape, the outer surface is scraped with a bamboo wand and smoothed (Figure 12). The pot is given shape with hands, and the potter's wheel is not used at all. Paste preparation and hand forming normally is completed in two days.

### Polishing and Drying

The pots are left to harden for a few days (2 to 3 days) after forming, and later they are given the finishing touch with the help of smooth solid stones (polisher) or animal bones. The potters call it the first polishing. After this, they are dried further under the sun or near a fire and polished again with the above tools as a second polish. The final touch usually takes place after two or



Figure 10: The potter places a strip of clay on an aluminium pot as a base



**Figure 11: Wooden beater to give shape to the pot**

three days. This finishing touch or polishing is time consuming as it is done by rubbing every part till it is smooth and shiny enough. In a day, one man can accomplish one step polishing of 15 to 20 beer mugs on an average. How much polishing a person does in a day is very difficult to estimate as it also depends on the size and design of the pots or vessels. The more one polishes, the better the outcome is.



**Figure 12: The potters using bamboo sliver to smoothen**

### Firing

Finally, the dried pots and vessels are taken to the jungle for firing for five to eight hours. Firing is done during the early morning or early evening hours, and takes place when several pots are completed (Figures 13 & 14). Potters frequently pool their resources and efforts and fire 15 to 30 pots together. There is no specific place for firing, as the potters usually choose to fire in the jungle where they can get enough wood to heat the kiln, usually within 500-1000 m of the village. Sometimes, firing is also done in the house garden, but after making sure they have enough firewood. Firing is done in an open area in a shallow pit so that all pots get heated properly and the surrounding bushes are also cleaned so that the fire does not spread out.



Figure 13: Pots being fired before dawn

### Post Firing

Soon after they are taken out from the fire, the still warm pots are cleaned and polished with the fresh leaves of the *machi thing* (chirona tree). This is the final stage after which the pots are ready for use. The colour of the pot, either black or brown, is determined while firing and polishing with the leaf.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF NUNGBI POTTERY

Pottery was one of the main economies of Nungbi Khullen village in the past, and for some of its inhabitants, the only income-source, especially for those who did not own sufficient land to cultivate. The art of pottery is an age-old profession for the people of Nungbi. It was one of the most important items during the barter system of trade, which was prevalent in the area.



Figure 14: A man takes out the fired pots



Figure 15: Katur ha, the largest traditional rice beer brewing pot.



Figure 16: Cham ha, rice beer pot



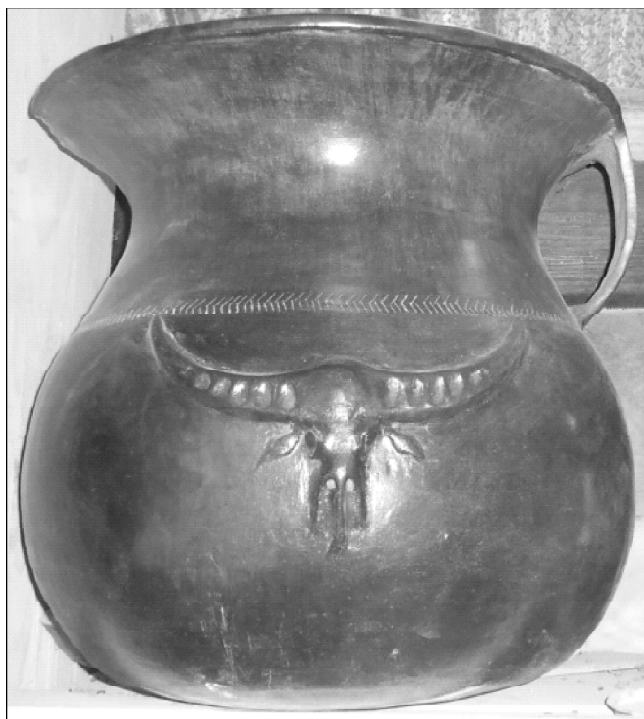
Figure 17: A traditional rice steamer

In the past, Nungbi pottery met the needs of the Tangkhuls and other neighbouring people like Meitei, Mao Naga, Kom, Paomei and so on. Traditional Nungbi vessels were used for storing salt, chilli powder, food grains, collectively called *ham hu* (bowl), and also water. For brewing rice beer, they used two types of pots, the bigger pots called *cham ha* which are used daily, and the biggest rice beer brewing pot locally called *katur ha* (Figure 15 & 16). The latter is occasionally used at the time of a feast. People believe that brewing rice beer in clay pots gives it a better taste than in aluminium pots. Primary cooking pots are *ham koklei*, a short flat pot with handle used for cooking rice and dry dishes, *ham vamnaoa*, round deep pot with a small mouth used for cooking gravy/curry, and *laasot ham* (proud pot), a shallow and flat pot with a large mouth. The latter is called so since the shape of the pot is such that it openly reveals whatever is being cooked. The special *hamlei ham* (biggest pot with engravings) is used for cooking meat during the tribe's most prominent festival known as Luir, which marks the New Year and seed sowing rituals (Figure 19).



Figure 18: Seed storer

Today, people make different types of pots for different purposes, like cooking pots, pressure cookers, jar, frying pans, kettles, plates, bowls, tea trays, jugs, cups, beer mug, flower vases and all kinds of decorative items (Figures 15-24). Since its inception, the people believed that the art of pottery does not make a person rich or wealthy, for it was said that by patting the pots while moulding into the desired shape, the wealth of the potter is being patted out. Nungbi pottery, named after the village, now can be seen in different Tangkhul villages and other parts of Manipur. It is a common experience that whenever people of Nungbi village introduce themselves to strangers, the reply they receive is, "Oh, you are from the pottery village!"



**Figure 19: Motifs on Hamlei ham**

Pottery was one of the most important items of trade for the people of Nungbi before the use of aluminium, copper, steel and plastic. Until the 1990s, earthen pots constituted the chief item in the barter system of trade within the village, as well as with other villages of the Tangkhul Nagas and the Meiteis, the non-tribal plains people. They exchanged, among other things, traditional shawls, rice, chillies, sesame seeds, soya beans etc. for pots. Sometimes they

also bartered domestic animals, though it is difficult to say at what rate the exchange was done, for this exchange rate varies and is contextual. The aged still possess vivid memories of the vibrant barter. Even today, in some villages, barter system can still be witnessed. In December 2012, on our visits to Shangshak and Khambi villages, cooking pots were exchanged for a hen and a bamboo basket.



Figure 20: Contemporary clay plate



Figure 21: Pumpkin coin box





Figure 22: Flower vases

Recent ceramic studies examine gender as part of the potter's social identity (Costin 2000; Kramer 1997; Rice 1991). In North East India too, there are communities in which only the men make pots (among the Kumars) or where only women make pots (among the Hiras) (Medhi 1992). In Nungbi Khullen, the general perception is that the making of pottery is a man's job, and it is considered unseemly for women to engage themselves in pottery. The reasons behind not allowing women to make pots are rather one-sided. For instance, it is believed that if a pot is made or moulded by women, the pot is not strong enough and tends to break easily. However, interestingly enough, women play an important role in the pre-fabrication and post-fabrication stage. They help in transporting the raw materials, in cleaning, drying, grinding, and sifting the stone, and finally in the marketing of the finished product.

## CONCLUSION

Traditionally, Nungbi pottery was simple and there were only a few designs engraved on the pots signifying socio-cultural conditions. Shapes and sizes of the vessels varied since they were meant for different purposes - storing salt,



Figure 23: Rice beer mugs



Figure 24: Tea cups and tray

chilli powder, drinks, and food grains, as well as for cooking. The latter again varied in size and dimension depending on what it was used to cook. Only the *hamlei ham* had engravings on it signifying prestige to the owner.

At present, people make different types of designs for different purposes, like cooking pots, pressure cookers, frying pans, kettles, plates, bowls, tea trays, beer mug, jugs, cups, flower vases and all kinds of decorative items. They now engrave pictures by choice, and no longer attach significance to traditional depictions.

However, the art of pottery in Nungbi village has significantly gone down. Once, only clay utensils were used in Nungbi, but today utensils of different raw materials are all noticed in every household. Barter trade was the only means of exchange in the past between Nungbi and other villages. Today, even though barter exists (in connection with pottery), it is no longer significant. Market and cash economy has had an impact on their traditional craft.

Interestingly, the same reasons (i.e., market and cash economy) have also impacted positively in some manner. These pottery items can today be seen sold in nearby towns and cities. Some potters have won state and national pottery awards, and to some extent, people have started selling the pottery in Indian metro cities like Delhi and Mumbai. Despite its popularity, the art of pottery is disappearing. Hodson (1911) in the early twentieth century had remarked that three clans of Hundung and the village of Nungbi make earthen pots. Today Nungbi village is the only surviving village of potters in the region.

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