



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Anthropological Archaeology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaa

Pottery uniformity in a stratified society: An ethnoarchaeological perspective from the Gamo of southwest Ethiopia



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 June 2013

Revision received 29 March 2014

Available online 2 June 2014

Keywords:

Ethnoarchaeology

Ethiopia

Gamo

Pottery

Standardization

Uniformity

Specialization

Caste

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that there are many factors, such as vessel type, size, and function, producer skill, and market systems, that can influence pottery standardization/uniformity. In this paper, I use ethnoarchaeology to explore how the social and economic organization of the Gamo living in southwestern Ethiopia affects uniformity of pottery form and decoration. I compare uniformity at the community level to test our assumptions regarding potter specialization associated with potters who are full-time craft specialists living in a complex and highly stratified, caste society. In conclusion, I argue that distribution (i.e., market and patron-client) impacts the uniformity of pottery morphology and decoration.

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...one can ask whether the commonly accepted link between specialization and standardization in pottery is well grounded.
[Barbara Stark, 1995:233]

Introduction

Studies exploring pottery standardization indicate that there is not a simple continuum from full-time craft specialists to part-time household based producers in their level of uniformity¹ (Hodder, 1981:231; Roux, 2003; Santley et al., 1989:111; Schleher, 2010:260–276; Stark, 1995). The expectation is that full-time specialists will produce a higher frequency of pots and thereby have the experience and necessary motor skills to produce more standardized pots than part-time potters. However, archaeological and ethnoarchaeological studies reveal that there are a myriad of factors influencing potters regarding their standardization, including the type of clays (Arnold, 2000), production sequences (Costin and Hagstrum, 1995), skill and age (Blackman et al., 1993:75; Costin

and Hagstrum, 1995; Crown, 2007; Longacre, 1999; Roux, 1989), function (Stark, 1995:236), post-marital residence patterns (Kramer, 1985; Sassaman and Rudolphi, 2001), collaborative production (Arnold, 1999:79; Crown, 2007; Kramer, 1985:84, 1997:50–51; London, 1986:511; Wright, 1991:198), and market and the patron-client relationships (Arnold and Nieves, 1992; Birmingham, 1975; Foster, 1965; Stark, 1995:233–263). Furthermore, as early as 1958, Anna Shepard proposed that more standardized pots may be found in areas where the community was self-sufficient in pottery production and when a community is dependent upon trade for their pots this would result in a more diverse assemblage (1958:452). The association between specialization and potter standardization continues to be a topic of concern among archaeologists and ethnoarchaeologists (e.g., Benco, 1988; Costin, 1991:33; Hagstrum, 1985; Hirshman et al., 2010; Kvamme et al., 1996; Longacre et al., 1988; Longacre, 1999; Rice, 1981, 1987:201–204, 1991; Röttlander, 1966, 1967; Sinopoli, 1988; Tosi, 1984; van der Leeuw, 1977). With these factors to contend with, ethnoarchaeological studies can better elucidate what variables may affect and influence pottery uniformity. Thereby, aiding archaeologists in their reconstruction in determining the roles shaping the uniformity of pottery found in the archaeological record.

This paper draws from my ethnoarchaeological research among the Omotic speaking Gamo of southwestern Ethiopia (Fig. 1) to address how Gamo pottery production, distribution, and use are intertwined with craft specialization and uniformity. The majority of the one million Gamo engage in subsistence farming of maize,

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¹ In this paper, I follow Rice (1996:179–180) regarding her use of the term “uniformity” for ethnoarchaeologists, who are conducting synchronic research and are not studying the “process” of standardization. Uniformity is thus the “result of the process”, whereas standardization involves “complex economic decision-making and operation over time” (Rice, 1996:179).

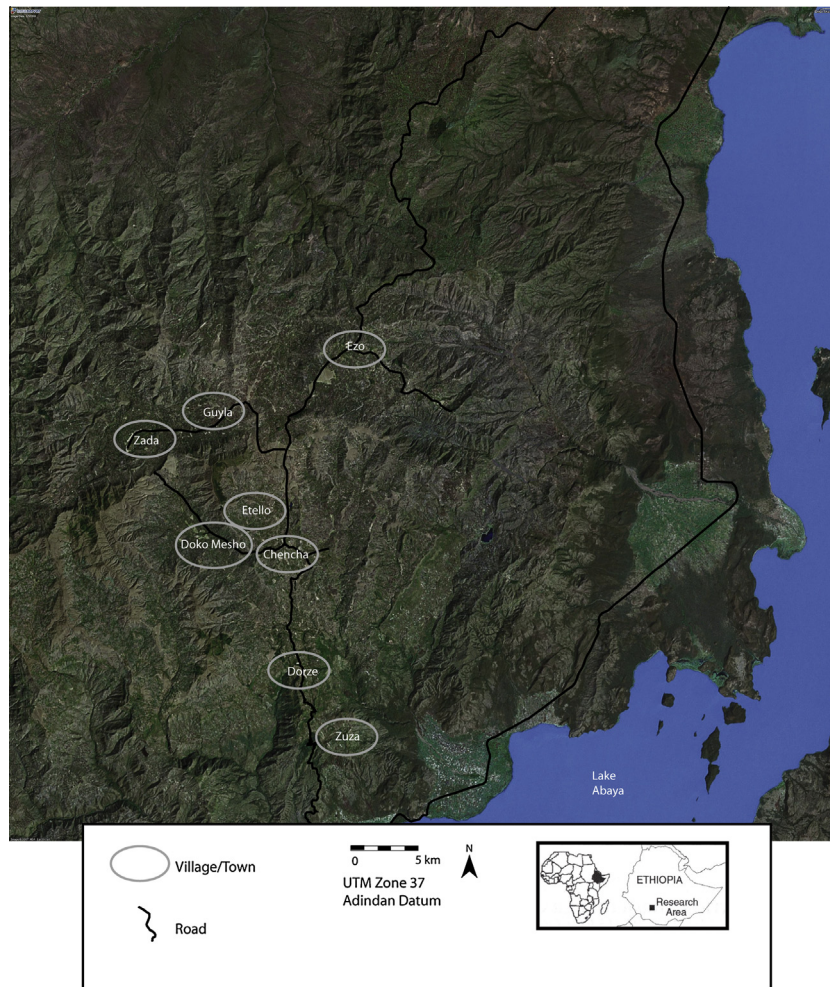


Fig. 1. Map of the Gamo region within Ethiopia and Africa.

sorghum, teff, cotton, and bananas in the lowlands and wheat, barley, potatoes, enset, beans and peas in the highlands. If not engaged in subsistence farming or as a merchant in one of the local towns, then it is most likely the individual is an artisan, working as a potter, hideworker, groundstone maker, or ironworker. Artisans hold technological knowledge for the production of everyday household items including pottery.

The Gamo are patrilineal and practice a virilocal postmarital residence pattern. Most of the Gamo, who live in the central region hierarchically, divide themselves into three caste strata: *mala* [highest prestige and farmers and weavers]; *mana* [potters]; and *degala* [lowest prestige and groundstone makers, ironsmiths, and hideworkers]. It is common today for the Gamo to organize themselves into endogamous caste strata according to occupation and patrilineal descent. Each caste group is usually associated with different levels of prestige, purity/pollution, and power that restrict social interactions (household space, sexual activity, burials, etc.) and access to leadership positions between caste groups. The *mala* caste group makes up the majority of the population with the artisans being a small minority but producing all of the pots, leather goods, and other tools that the Gamo people need. Artisans control all knowledge associated with material production, which in a caste system provides them with their only means of livelihood.

In a society where potters are full-time craft specialists and live within a highly stratified caste system, the expectation would be for them to produce uniform pots. However, some researchers argue against the assumption that specialists produce more standardized

wares than nonspecialists (i.e., Hodder, 1981:231; Roux, 2003; Santley et al., 1989:111; Stark, 1995; Schleher, 2010:260–276). We do not know, at present, the development of Gamo craft specialization over time, but currently we are conducting archaeological excavations to begin to analyze these cultural developments (K. W. Arthur et al., 2009, 2010). This paper explores Gamo pottery production today in relation to how pots are distributed based on their economic and social organization. The Gamo potters of southwestern Ethiopia are full-time specialists, who sell pots at weekly markets that are more uniform in form and decoration than pots they sell to neighbors within their residential community. While Gamo society is unique with regards to their caste system, there are many societies throughout Ethiopia where artisans are restricted in their social, economic, and political access (Cassiers, 1975; Cerulli, 1956; Freeman and Pankhurst (Eds.), 2001; Haberland, 1984; Hallpike, 1968; Lewis, 1970; Shack, 1964; Todd, 1978).

Methods

The majority of the information for this article derives from 20 months I spent (September 1996 to April 1998) living with the Gamo studying factors associated with their ceramic variation, including craft specialization. I also spent six summers with the Gamo since 2005 conducting ethnoarchaeological and archaeological research. Thus, I have seen dramatic changes among the Gamo such as the expansion of their agricultural fields to the lowlands,

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