

# **Promotion of Traditional Pottery Making practices in Eastern Kenya**

## **Mid-Term Report (10 July 2017)**

Submitted to UNESCO

By

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### **Introduction**

This Mid-term report is in accordance with the terms of the signed contract with UNESCO, who agreed to generously fund the National Museums of Kenya to implement the project under review. The aim of this project is to safeguard and revitalize traditional pottery making practices of Mbeere, Tharaka and Tigania communities of Eastern Kenya, through 'potter capacity building' 'research and documentation' 'diversification of pottery forms and decorations' 'enhancement of transmission methods' and by creating awareness through circulation of video and print documentation to the public and schools.

This mid-term report is limited to the implementation and success of the first phase of the project whose aim was to carry out the first three activities in all the 3 localities. The project implementation did not start in August as envisaged. Due to logistical issues. Money was not received by the implementers until mid-November of 2016. November being the rain season, it was hectic to bring together potters from various communities as most of them were busy in their farms. Pottery making is done only in the month of August up to early October of each year. Only one group of potters in Mbeere engage more actively throughout the year although not completely full time. This notwithstanding, we are happy to report that we were able to carry out all the activities by maximizing on both the time and the allocated funds.

### **Project Preparation and potter capacity building**

Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of November, we visited potters of Mbeere, and Tharaka but we were unable to visit Tigania during the same period due to bad weather and poor roads. This coupled with the festive season of December it became extremely difficult to get potters' attention until after Christmas. We therefore postponed to the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of December. With all the groups, and community leaders we discussed the project program and logistics. We informed them about the project and available funding, what and for whom it was intended and the expected outcomes. We received overwhelming support from both the potters and the participating community leaders. We laid down structures on who and how to work with the potters. To the potters this was not new as we had earlier informed them of our intentions and as we actually had interviewed them on what kind of help they would need for them to continue with the pottery making.

### **Potter Capacity building activities**

After UNESCO's acceptance to fund this project, we spoke to some prominent potters that we were familiar with and asked them to look into possibilities of organizing themselves into

groups to make it easy for the project implementation. This made our work much easier when we went to meet them and to register the groups. Some members of the potter groups belonged to other social self-help groups and so they understood very well the dynamics of a group and requirements. We were able to form 5 groups as opposed to the earlier proposed 6 groups. This is because the 6<sup>th</sup> group which was to be based in Mitunguu was very difficult to come together. Mitunguu is a very productive farming area and as such, potters kept giving us appointments which they were unable to honour due to their daily activities. Each time we had a meeting, we were unable to get a quorum. We therefore decided to do this during the second phase of the project. We discussed the purpose of making the group with the groups that we formed. That is to try and promote traditional pottery making through shared experiences and joint activities. As a group, they would be able to discuss and help each other with techniques, sales and get empowered to tap into women's fund to promote the craft. It would also enable them work together and encourage each other during times of need. The Kiriri group comprises 25 potters, Ngararigeri (Kigwamba) 20 potters, Marimanti 17 potters, Katithine 15 potters and Ngonga aka 20 potters. Of the 5 groups, three from Mbeere and Tharaka got formally registered with government social services department, while the last two are still waiting to complete all the provisions before they can be registered. The Ngararigeri potters are so inspired that they have now made themselves a uniform as can be seen below. This they wear whenever they have a group meeting. To help with their economic base, we also encouraged these groups to engage in table banking, (this is where each member contributes some amount of money and puts in a common kitty) there is also what they call 'merry go round' – where each potter contributes a small amount of money during the weekly meetings. This money is usually given to one of them (on rotational basis) to take home for her use. These activities were found useful as they are expected to provide extra income to the potter and hence accord them more time for pottery making.



## **Research and Documentation**

Research and documentation, and the building of kilns were done between the 13<sup>th</sup> of January and 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2017. The researchers and kiln makers worked during the same period as follows: From 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> of January, research and 1<sup>st</sup> kiln were done among the Ngararigeri potters; we then took a break for two reasons firstly it was raining heavily and secondly the bricks had to be made for the second kiln so neither the kiln makers nor the researchers could continue until the 5<sup>th</sup> of February when the rains subsided. After the second kiln we came back with more bricks on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February to do research and to construct the 3<sup>rd</sup> kiln in Tharaka. The rains continued so we could not proceed and left after a period of 6 days. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, we travelled to Tigania with the kiln makers after the potters informed as that the rains had subsided there and it had not rained for almost 2 weeks so we took our chances and drove there. When we commenced the work, it started to rain so we had to halt the work and go back to Nairobi. We went back on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March to finish the 1<sup>st</sup> Tigania kiln before we went back to Nairobi. We travelled back to complete the second kiln here on the 16 of April and stayed up to the 29<sup>th</sup> due to interruptions from the rains.

Due to the delay in starting and various activities which potters have to do besides potting in their farms, we had to carry out several activities simultaneously. Research and documentation as well as the making of kilns had to be done at the same time. Since kiln making did not require full time presence of the implementers or even potters, the researchers worked with potters to collect data on historical pottery making, social networks and detailed account of its intangible aspects and how it is passed on from generation to generation. To achieve this we used a prepared questionnaire to ask each potter questions such as: Oral histories of the community, who her tutor was, who and where did the tutor learn from, who else has the tutor taught, did the apprentice learn together with anyone else if "yes" who, what kind of pots did they learn to make and what was the forming technique, is there another way of forming, where did they learn how to get the clay and its location, why did they decide to learn, how do they decide on how to decorate their pots, is she aware of any taboos if "yes" does she practice them. On the potter network, we sought to understand how the potter links have been maintained especially after noticing that with time pottery forms and decorations have changed. It was clear that not all the potters agreed to adopt the change and even for them that adopted, they continued to make the new and old forms together. To understand who changed and what compelled them to change, another researcher asked questions related to kinships and networks such as: the relationship between the potter and her teacher, how she relates with other potters (those who have changed and those who have not), where they usually meet (church, market, social gatherings, weddings, funerals, etc,) and how often. For those who have changed, we sought to understand the motivation for doing so. The archaeologist on the other hand, did surface collection of all the archaeological pottery found in these project areas so as to compare their forming technique and to understand how they relate to the current communities. All the findings from this research will be availed in the final booklet whose purpose is to document the pottery making techniques and history of these areas for posterity.



Making the spherical pot



Making of the flat based pots

### Fuel use and energy conservation

Pottery making in these areas is usually restricted during the rain seasons for three reasons: firstly, the clay is usually too wet and soggy for use, secondly, the firewood is also wet and firing is done in the open (which can only happen during the dry season) and thirdly, potters engage in farming activities making it difficult for them to engage in pottery making. When we talked to the potters before writing the proposal to UNESCO, kilns were the first items they asked for. Use of kilns was understood to help them to fire their pots during the rainy season, with kilns they will not need grass which is a main ingredient for firing (as shall be seen in the final report), and also, since the kiln uses less firewood, this reduces time taken to fetch the firewood and it also conserves it. Also doing several activities simultaneously, helped us to save on fuel and coordinator allowances as will be seen in the financial report. All the savings were added to the kiln production. Materials for the new kiln included pots of various sizes, bricks, cement and sand while the pottery sheds were made from timber and iron sheets.

#### a) Location of kilns

Each of the groups decided where to have a common kiln made for them. In some places, for example among the Tharaka potters, there is a space that has been put aside by the government for community use and projects which the potters got an allocation. This is where the group meets for their activities and they all felt that it was the best place to put

the kiln and a pottery making shed. However, other places like Mbeere where there are also places put aside by the government for communal use, the potters were very suspicious of it because they thought the government might want it back. Mrs. Madris Wangari (the group leader) decided to donate part of her land to be used for that purpose. A member from the second group in Mbeere Mrs. Ruth Embu also donated a small area of her land. It must be noted that even before the building of the kilns, the potters still met in these areas. In addition to these two areas in Mbeere, we noted that there were many other potters from another village who come to collect clay from the communal clay source which is located in the community land. So, we decided to build another kiln there although this was not originally in the project. In Tigania there was no communal land and so the kilns were built in potters' farms. Building of the kiln required that we also build a shed where the potters could work from, and also a roof over the kiln to avoid rain water. These two activities had not been budgeted for and therefore, we were only able to build a working shade. The kiln roof was still impossible to make within the budget but we bought plastic covers to ensure their safety until a more permanent solution is found.

#### b) Kiln materials

Since it was impossible to commission anyone to produce bricks for building the kilns during the rainy season, we visited other places where they are using traditional kilns to observe and see if there was a different way of making a kiln. In two of the places where they make flower pots, we were advised to use damaged/unusable pots which according to them, were more efficient than the brick kilns. We observed these kind of kilns in these workshops and we therefore, collected damaged pots from the flower pot makers and transported them to Mbeere. We made the first kiln among the Ngararigeri potters. However, we were unable to get more damaged pots for other kilns and so we commissioned the potters to make bricks which would be enough to produce kilns in other localities. We made an arrangement with the people who make bricks to work with the flower potters to produce the bricks. This was done and kilns were built within the specified time.



Setting the kiln base with pots

Erect kiln before cementing



Finished kiln(back view)



Potters inspecting the finished kiln (front view)

### **Diversification of forms and decoration through youth factory attachments**

The purpose of this exercise was a result of the potters' reaction towards time and livelihoods. We are much aware of UNESCO'S commitment to conserve and to preserve culture and the articles that prohibit commodification/commercialization of culture. We therefore carried out this strategy as a form of safeguard towards the disappearance of the craft as a result of potter apathy. The potters felt that making of traditional pots, as much as the pots are part of their identity and as much as their functions cannot be replaced by plastic and metal containers, they needed to go out there to do something extra to earn them a living because they were not earning from the craft. The remaining functions of pots such as cooking of various dishes could be satisfied easily either by buying what was available in the market or replacing them with aluminium which was more durable and cheap. As a result of this, traditional functions of pots such as specific rituals and pots for specific communal functions started to disappear.

The aim of this activity was therefore, to introduce something which would earn the potters a living and keep them interested in making the traditional pots as they would continuously be working with the clay. It was therefore found necessary to send them to factories or workshops where a diversity forms of pots are being made although they bear no traditional importance. These are to act as economic base for the traditional pots. The potters were very pleased with this idea and they are now starting to make both types of pots. It is interesting to note that although we took them to places where wheels are in use, they have maintained their hand making techniques to produce new forms in addition to the community ones. Although we had indicated during our earlier meetings with the potter groups that we would take the younger potters for this training on diversification of forms, when this time came, it became apparent that the youthful potters of below age 40 would not be allowed to leave home by their husbands as most were nursing children of between a few months and 8 years. As such, women who had less family commitments were able to attend. The advantage to this also, is that there was no danger of tampering with the traditional forming technique which is actually a form of motor skill for these women. It was interesting to see how the trainers struggled to teach them how to make huge flower pots using coiling technique, and the potters insisted on using the drawing technique which they have used all their lives. 6 women were taken to Kibichiko pottery making factory for attachment. 6 potters from different groups were trained each for 1 week. Since one group

had not been formed yet, we took an extra potter from Mbeere with the hope that they would teach the Mituguu potters later. The skills learnt were the basics of making huge flower pots as well as different decorating tools and methods. Kibichiko potters are the same people who had been given the contract of building the kilns. So, the potters were quite familiar with them and this made the learning much easier. As will be seen in the final report and the documentation booklet, forms and decorations have been evolving since archaeological times but the forming techniques have been maintained. The evolution of forms and decorations did not result in discard of the old technologies but they were made for additional functions. Both the potters and the tutors were made aware that the purpose of the activity was not to be used as a replacement for the traditional forms and decorations but was only to help in boosting the income of the potters to enable them continue with the traditional production. It was needless to over emphasize this point since they themselves embrace their identity and expressions of their valued cultures. However, it is worth noting that this experience rekindled their interest in a big way. The exposure made them to better appreciate their skills and their untold usefulness in the society which they had started to take for granted. The Kibichiko potters are all men who were using the wheel and kept lamenting that their women have stopped playing their traditional role of making and supplying the community with the valued traditional pots which they themselves could not make. They therefore made requests to some of the trainees to make them traditional pots for various functions.



Jerusha and Paulina inside the workshop in Nairobi

Jacklia Getting instructions from the Kanja

After the attachments, the trained potters went back and transmitted their learnt skills to the group members. This is going to be a continuous process until all of them are able to diversify. In addition, we asked the potters to invite other members of the community through a series of workshops to teach them how to make pots the traditional way. Several women of between 35 and 50 years turned up and were willing to learn. They set separate days for collecting clay and for making pots. Some of these community members were so enthusiastic such that they enrolled in the potter groups.



Madris learning from Kanja\_Kibichiko pots



Potters practicing how to make flower pots



Madris training other potters of her group

### **Enhancement of transmission methods**

In the past, the pottery making skills were transmitted easily through kinship as will be seen in the report. Children learnt from their parents during their tender age as they helped with fetching of clay, water and fire wood. This has now changed due to modern way of living where children are engaged in several activities including going to school from age 6 onwards. Interaction with parents has become minimal and this only happens in the evenings during which time children are busy doing their homework and other family chores. It is therefore for this reason that our third activity meant to have workshops for village children to learn the traditional ways of production. This activity is supposed to be conducted for 3 days in each pottery making locality. However, we were only able to realize

this in Mbeere region and only for 2 days as described below since this is what the first instalment was able to support.

#### **i) Workshops**

In conjunction with the potter groups, 2 day workshops were conducted in Mbeere. The potters were asked to announce in their churches the dates and their intention to teach village children how to make pots. During this exercise, children from both target villages and any other within the vicinity were allowed into the workshop. A central place between the two groups was chosen in order to have potters from both pottery groups participating. We hired a marquee and chairs for people to sit and listen to potters as they delivered theoretical teaching before embarking on practical exercises. During the first day, we started by introducing the children to the purpose of the exercise and giving them a short brief of traditional craft and its value to the society. We then added over to the potters, who started by teaching them how to collect clay, traditional requirements and how to transport it to the potting area. They then demonstrated by making the pots as the children watched and asked questions. Since the process for the traditional spherical pots is in two parts, (as will be seen in the documentation) the participants could not start to practice immediately. The second day was the big day for the participants.



Children learning how to mix clay

Children watching a demonstration

They were all required to bring with them their own clay, which meant that they had to do the mining themselves before coming to the workshop. They made both flat and spherical traditional pots as they had observed from the potters. As such, the program started a bit later than anticipated. Most of the participants arrived after 11am but nevertheless, they managed to do some practice. By the end of the morning, most participants had finished making the upper body of their pots awaiting to do the second half which they did in the afternoon after lunch.



Potter helping a learner

Drying the pots for the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage just before lunch

We worked with three professional potters who guided the children through all the processes, including holding their hands as they went about shaping the pots. As it was getting late we closed the workshop at 6pm. We hope to continue from here when the second phase commences. This exercise did not make any of the participants an expert, but it served as an introduction to traditional pottery making and an inspiration for future engagements.

### **Limitations**

The only limitation was the fact that the activities started during the rainy season but that did not stop the implementation processes although it happened at a lower speed than anticipated and a lot of things had to be done simultaneously while others were not done. For example, one of the potter's group in Tharaka which was supposed to be formed in Mitunguu was not formed successfully but this will be done in August during the second phase of the project implementation. Costs of forming this group and implementation of the activities have been factored as follows; the kiln materials have already been purchased, training will be done by the potters from the other Tharaka group for free, and since research and documentation for Tharaka has already been done, this will not need to be done here.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Most activities of the 1<sup>st</sup> phase were completed smoothly. The potters were very appreciative of the activities and owned them since they had expressed a desire to have them done even before learning that anyone would be willing to help them. Children have been introduced to pottery making in Mbeere and this was received very positively by both the children and their parents. We witnessed renewed interest in many adults who had stopped making for various reasons, who have now formally joined the pottery groups because the workshops and our activities have rekindled their interest.