

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 11
Issue 3 *September 2008*

Article 24

9-1-2008

The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia

Tara Belkin

Steven Brandt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

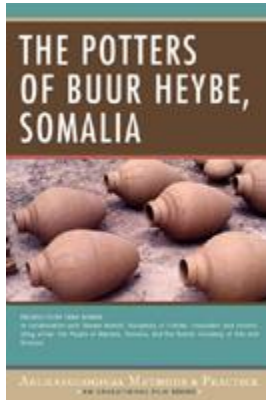
Recommended Citation

Belkin, Tara and Brandt, Steven (2008) "The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol11/iss3/24>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Review



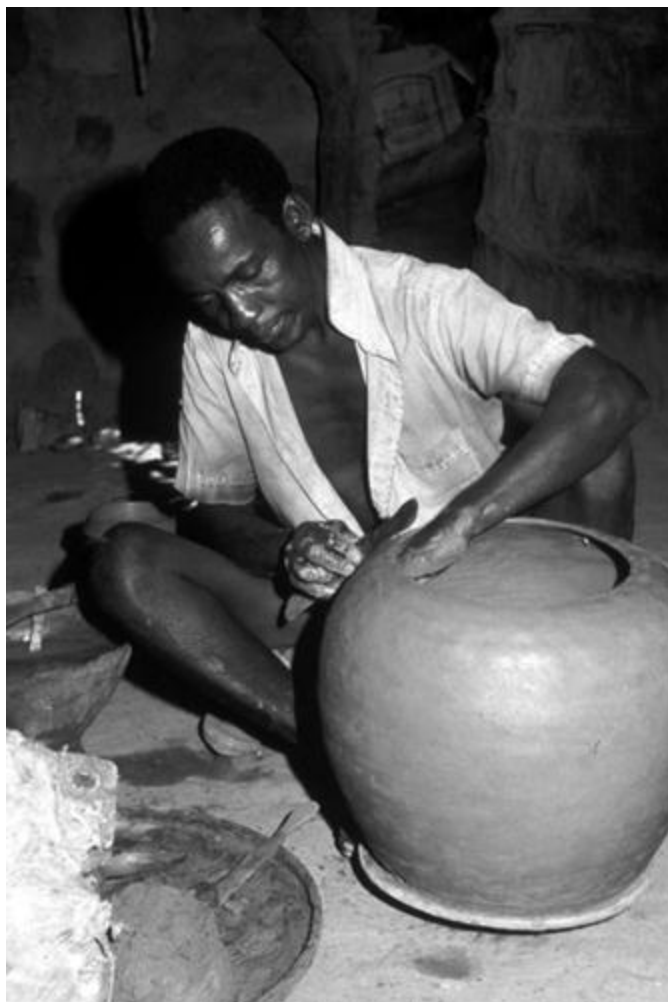
The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia, 2006 DVD. Produced by Tara Belkin, in collaboration with Steven Brandt, the people of Bardale, Somalia, and the Somali Academy of Arts and Science. Part of the DVD Series, *Archaeological Methods & Practice: An Educational Film Series*, from the Left Coast Press. Available through the University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 25-minute video on DVD, plus four-page insert. \$49.95. (Images courtesy of Left Coast Press).

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Chris Espenshade, New South Associates.

I am an unabashed potter groupie; I could sit and watch a skilled potter work all day long. As I have traveled about the Southeast and Caribbean, I have been lucky on occasion to be rained out of archaeological fieldwork when a traditional pottery shop was nearby. You know my perspective, so let's talk about the excellent DVD, *The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia*.

In 25 minutes, this DVD takes us from clay pits through finished vessels in use. Women gather the clay from a communal clay bed, a half mile from the village. The potters, 20 of the 400 people in the village, are all male. They mix dry clay powder, water, and leftover clay slip, and then knead the clay. There is no aging of clay; it is mixed and then used immediately.

The production process varies with the type of vessel. Round bottomed, cooking pots are built inverted, starting with the rim. Flat-bottomed pots begin with a flat, basal disk. Coil construction is the rule, and a small turntable is used to help even the pot on all sides (but this is not wheel-thrown pottery). The local clays are exceptionally forgiving, allowing significant thinning and shaping as the vessels reach different points in their drying. A wooden scraper, a seashell, and a wooden paddle (but no anvil) are the major potting tools. The DVD is a little jumpy through the construction process; I would have preferred to see one form taken through the entire process, rather jumping form to form.



Decoration is applied to leather-hard vessels. Incising is the only mode of decoration depicted, and a combination of longitudinal lines and sets of parallel obliques are the dominant motifs. Specific designs are named, but have no particular meaning. When asked what the decoration of a pot denotes, the potters and users say, "they mean Buur Heybe."

The pots undergo firing in expedient stacks of dead wood and grassy weeds. After pre-heating of the large pots, a stack of 40-50 pots is created. Dead wood is stacked around the outside, and gaps are filled with weeds. The typical firing takes one hour, and the potter knows the desired temperature has been reached when the pots turn red. A firing temperature is not specified, but temperatures of 500-600 degrees centigrade might be expected from such firings.

Once the pots enter the use realm, males rarely ever touch them again. Eighty percent of their production is sold outside the community, including vessels traded to seasonally mobile herders. Within the village, women do all the cooking and water collection. The clay pot continues to be used because it is less expensive than metal pots, and because clay vessels make the food taste better.

The book *Smashing Pots: Works of Clay from Africa* (Barley 1994) warned us not to treat African pottery-making as a single tradition, and the potters of Buur Heybe underline that point. Although the vast majority of non-wheel potters in Africa are female, all the potters of Buur Heybe are male. Throughout Africa, clay is typically dug and processed by males, but the women do such work in Buur Heybe. Although we typically think of a coil-built pot progressing from the base to the rim, the potters of Buur Heybe reverse the process. While we generally think of vessel decoration as a post-production process, in Buur Heybe the potters decorate the round-bottomed pots before completing and closing the bottom.

There are very few complex activities that can be addressed in detail in a half-hour. It was not Belkin's intent to offer a comprehensive video documentation. Instead, she and her team sought to touch on the major processes of ceramic production, distribution, and use. The DVD nicely piques interest in a number of anthropological issues, and underlines the complexity of the ceramic culture of Buur Heybe. It is a natural stepping-stone for a range of potential class topics and discussions, including: household and community specialization; decorative style and information content; teaching/learning paths; the relationship of vessel form and function; and ceramic exchange between the sedentary Buur Heybe potters and the nomadic herders. *The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia* will serve as a suitable teaching tool for undergraduates and graduates alike, and would be at home in courses on cultural anthropology, ethnography, African culture, economic anthropology, ceramic technology/ecology, and art history. The four-page insert includes citations for theses that promise to flesh out the ceramic information provided in this DVD.

This is not a flashy DVD. There is only a limited music track, maybe a minute at either end of the DVD. The narrator is competent, but not overly expressive. However, this is okay, because the potters speak for themselves. The film crew has done an excellent job of capturing all the key elements of the manufacture, firing, distribution, and use of the pots. Pottery-making is an intricate and dynamic process, and video is well suited to its documentation. Similar potting processes were well documented in still photographs, drawings, and text by Richard Krause in Africa (1985, *The Clay Sleeps*) and by Owen Rye and Clifford Evans in Pakistan (1976, *Traditional Pottery Techniques of Pakistan*). However, as a medium, the video is much more engaging.

For those of us unlikely to stop by Buur Heybe on our next rain day or when our next project is finished early, this DVD is as close as we will get to a visit with these potters. I enjoyed my visit, and I recommend this DVD to readers of this Newsletter.