

# Conservation and Export Development of Mon Pottery in Central Thailand

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## Abstract

The development of Mon pottery in central Thailand for export purposes can be achieved through community participation and development guidelines where 1) local craftsmen and potters transmit their knowledge to community youths and junior craftsmen, provide hands on training and action learning where the trainees can visualize the process and techniques, 2) Produce innovative products according to market trends and consumer demands. The products should be extended to decorations and art such as fashioning the earthen pottery into lamp bases, clocks, aroma therapy burners and tableware products, 3) Community pottery producers should form a group and network with exporters in determining fair trade agreements and reasonable pricing so that the business and cooperation is sustainable by all sides, 4) Pottery products should be distributed and dispersed to markets in other provinces. The products should always be displayed and ready for export at national and foreign product exhibitions. Earthen pottery producers should work with other producers of similar products such as porcelain and ceramic producers and display their products together and 5) Promote the advantages and benefits of earthen Mon pottery.

**Keywords:** Conservation, Development, Mon, Pottery, Export, Thailand

## Introduction

Ethnic Mon potteries in the past were unglazed earthen pottery that was created through the indigenous knowledge of Mon ancestors which were passed down through the generations. Earthen pottery is a unique identity of Mon ethnics and exists in Mon communities throughout Thailand, especially in central Thailand. The origin of Mon pottery can be traced back to the Mon's ethnic homeland in which is now Southern Myanmar and the heritage and indigenous knowledge has continuously been inherited by subsequent generations as more and more Mons relocated into Thailand. Making Mon pottery was a primary occupation in the past and provided a steady source of income and trade. The skills and knowledge of making Mon pottery

was only kept within the family. Initial production of Mon pottery was for family consumption and personal use such as for storage of water supply, drinking water vessel, planting pots, children's toys and floating lamp cups during Loy Kratong festival. There are many other products that the Mon's produced and in some communities have grown into commercial production centers that cater to local and foreign customers.

Currently, many Mon's prefer to do something else because making Mon pottery is a difficult and laborious profession. The decline of Mon potters is also due to the fact that there are fewer sources of high quality raw materials such as clay and that consumers have many other alternatives such as porcelain, ceramics and plastic which is cheaper and has garnered the market share away from clay. The purpose of this research study is to study the indigenous knowledge of ethnic Mon pottery in central Thailand, study the problems and obstacles in the export of Mon pottery and also the conservation and development of Mon pottery in central Thailand.

### **Research Area and Methodology**

Research area includes ethnic Mon communities at Koh Kret district of Nonthaburi Province, Sam Khok district of Pathum Thani province and the Mon community at Klong Sa Bua district of Ayutthaya province. The sites were chosen due to the density and continuation of ethnic Mon pottery which is distinctive and originated from their ethnic homeland. This research is a qualitative research study and the sampling group was purposively chosen due to ethnic Mon background and also ethnic Mon pottery production. The sampling group included 45 key informants, 90 casual informants and 90 general informants who contributed the with research data obtained from document analysis and from field studies. Data collection methods and tools included interviews, surveys, observations and focus group sessions where the data was collected onto forms for further analysis and data triangulation. The study was conducted from October 2011 to April 2013.

### **Research Results and Discussion**

#### **The Origin of Mon Pottery in Central Thailand**

The Mon are one of the earliest ethnic group which inhabit Southeast Asia and have their origins in southern Myanmar. The cultures and indigenous identity of Mon's continue to be passed on to younger generations even though the independent Mon state has ceased to exist since 1756 in which the Mons lost the final battle against the Burmese. Throughout the conflict, many Mons relocated and brought with them their rich cultural heritage into Thailand. The Mon community in central Thailand is most prominent of both sides of Chao Phraya River and is one the oldest and wealthiest ethnic communities since the Ayutthaya Kingdom of Thailand. Distinct cultural trades include the making of earthen, unglazed pottery or better known locally as "Mon Pottery". Before globalization and the industrialization of Thailand began, the Mons' prefer to follow in the footsteps of their ancestors and there were many Mon pottery

producers in central Thailand. But there are currently very few Mon pottery production centers today because many Mon youths have chosen other professions and relocated to industrial jobs and communities. Central Thailand pottery and especially Mon pottery was created through indigenous knowledge and skills of foreign craftsmen who relocated or visited communities in central Thailand. The transmission of knowledge within the community is the direct result of cultural diffusion as suggested by Rogers<sup>1</sup>, where it is highly likely that the skills and knowledge in making pottery have origins from outside of the community and inherited by local individuals and craftsmen. The continued inheritance of pottery making through the generations eventually incorporated the skills into the community's indigenous culture. This is in agreement with Natsupha<sup>2</sup>, where the culture of the community comes from the growth and combination of the knowledge of smaller groups to become recognized as the culture of the community. Each Mon community has their own distinct type of pottery where the community at Koh Kret is the carved earthen pottery called "monam lai wichit" (Figure 1). The Mon community at Sam Khok have a pottery called "tum sam khok" (Figure 2) and the "mo tom ya" (Figure 3) is the distinct product of Klong Sa Bua community. The types of potteries produced suggest that communities produced their pottery with the emphasis on the functions and beauty of the product. The presentation of simple aesthetics, inexpensive and is useful to the livelihood of the community is consistent with Sinlapamethakun<sup>3</sup> which the aesthetics of indigenous products are the results of the skills, dedication, love and creativity of the community.

The development of ethnic Mon pottery in central Thailand have also expanded into making other consumer items such as the integration of Thai line paintings into the pottery decorations and developing larger pottery products for gardening, water reservoirs and mortars. The expansion of the product lines and decorative features analyzed from the 3 communities is due to the increased consumer demands and trends. There has also be an increase in the use of electric power tools and LPG Kilns, this is in agreement Sisantisuk<sup>4</sup> in the acceptations of innovations as a necessary means to improve efficiency which stems from discovery, invention and finally diffusion of the innovation or idea. Earthen pottery is a community culture that has been practiced for hundreds of years and is an indigenous knowledge that has been beneficial to Thai communities from past to present. The value and usefulness of pottery is still strong even in modern times where society is heavily influenced with commercialism. Making pottery is still a healthy source of extra income and a successful export item. Pottery continues to be adapted according to each era. Pottery has been used as decorations, souvenirs, miniaturized and exported to other local communities and foreign countries.

Ethnic Mon pottery requires multiple craftsmen where each individual has their own responsibility and action to perform. If one of the craftsmen is missing, then the pottery is left unfinished at that stage. The responsibilities of each craftsmen and each production stage is clearly defined and no one in the groups will perform someone else's task. The respect of responsibility in making ethnic Mon pottery is similar to other ethnic groups and is consistent with Wannasiri<sup>5</sup> where everyone follows the system and there is no intrusion of responsibilities

in a community with a strict systematic process. The highly systematic process of making ethnic Mon pottery stems from the inheritance of the indigenous knowledge which was also systematically passed down through relationships within the blood line. The inheritances of skills were orally passed down from elders to youths and sometimes from employer to employee. This method of teaching or education is consistent with Prasatnok<sup>6</sup> where it is similar to the production of alms' bowls for monks which was also only inherited through the family. The inheritance of ethnic Mon pottery is now an action learning process and has been extended to employees and trainees who are willing to learn and practice. The extended circle of inheritance and action learning has provided an opportunity for interested individuals to take part and hone their skills. This is consistent with Sukuan<sup>7</sup> in which action learning was more effective in the transmission of knowledge from senior craftsmen to trainees and is an effective method of education. Similar conditions were also observed by Mankhatitham<sup>8</sup> in which the arts and crafts of metal workings endured a long transition and vocational inheritance since the Ayutthaya kingdom through action learning.

### **Export Obstacles for Ethnic Mon Pottery in Central Thailand**

Research results from all 3 communities revealed that they all were confronted with many changes in the community because of globalization. Similar obstacles that they all faced are a shortage of skilled craftsmen and lack of inheritors. These are serious problems because the process of making ethnic Mon pottery is a detailed and time consuming craft. The indigenous knowledge requires a lengthy period of learning and requires focus and patience which has discouraged youths and children from taking up their indigenous craft. Younger generations prefer to embark on a direct line of occupation that correlates with their degree and education that they received in colleges and universities. Successful graduates were able to find employment and share their earnings to help their families back in the community. In many circumstances, the income that youths receive from their company is greater than what their parents or relatives made from making ethnic pottery and so they try to persuade their family to quit because they can supplement the income instead. The lack of inheritors is also because many elders and senior craftsmen do not want their spouses to follow in their footsteps. This is because pottery making is labor intensive and the potters believe that youths can make a better living doing something else. These factors have contributed to the lack of inheritors and has become a long term challenge to the inheritance of ethnic Mon pottery in central Thailand. If these obstacles are not challenged, then there will be no one left to inherit the indigenous craftsmanship of their ancestors. The number of ethnic Mon pottery makers have been in decline where the trend started in 1996 where Thailand was engulfed in an economic crisis which later evolved into the "Asian Economic Crisis of 1997". Contributing factors to the decline of inheritors is also because during the crisis, consumers changed their consumption behavior in favoring plastic and aluminum utensils which were cheaper. The increased competition from cheaper alternative products greatly lowered the exports of ethnic Mon pottery in central Thailand because they couldn't compete with mass produced products from factories. There were also many imitations and counterfeits that lowered the popularity of traditional earthen pottery. Even though ethnic Mon pottery was more expensive than other forms of utensils, but

it was still popular with consumers who prefer the beauty and aesthetics of the indigenous product and continue to use them in garden decorations and decorative arts.

Another important obstacle that is common among the 3 ethnic Mon communities is the social value of modern society. The value and application of local indigenous products changed dramatically from historic times because they were affected and replaced by technology, innovation and thrifty products. The result of the acceptance of technology and materialism created a trend that gradually lowered the importance of hand made handicrafts and indigenous trade crafts. The trend of consumerism continued even though government and private agencies initiated a series of promotional and revitalization efforts to produce commercial indigenous products for export and tourism. During the promotional projects, there was an increase in productivity of indigenous products but the results turned out that the products were being bought only as souvenirs and gifts. The indigenous products such as ethnic Mon potteries were not being bought for their applications but were chosen for their aesthetics and were now categorized as "cultural commodities"<sup>9</sup>. Others choose indigenous products because they see a commercial opportunity. These factors have contributed the alteration of ethnic Mon pottery to be produced for purely commercial purposes.

Another factor which has contributed to the decline of exported ethnic Mon pottery is the rising price of raw materials. This is in agreement with Thinanon<sup>10</sup> where other indigenous Thai handicrafts saw a sharp rise in raw material prices and the materials available were of low quality. The sub-standard raw materials only created low quality products and is confirmed by the research of Mekhum<sup>11</sup> which revealed that the rising price of raw materials only delivered low quality raw materials. Imitations and counterfeits are also another issue where fake ethnic Mon pottery and fake indigenous products are sold cheaply and are understood to be genuine. The popularity of counterfeits is also because there is no dedicated center for commercial sales of ethnic Mon pottery in central Thailand besides the communities in which they were produced. The reason behind this is because ethnic Mon pottery makers are community producers and have limited distribution channels. There is also no marketing research done to determine product and commercial development. Local producers contribute these adversities to the lack of funds, management and lack of information. The adversities of ethnic Mon pottery producers are the same factors that hinder the competitiveness of Thai industrial products that can't compete with others because of the lack of research and development. This is consistent with Wanson<sup>12</sup> where the lack of marketing research is the primary factor hindering community products. The lack of marketing also forces community producers to make commercial trades through middlemen. These outcomes were also attributed to the fact that there was minimal networking between indigenous product producers and marketers.

Only the Mon community at Koh Kret produced innovative products and development where the other two communities relied on classic forms of pottery. The noticeable development at Koh Kret is due to the fact that the Mon community at Koh Kret is equipped with qualified pottery designers and receives many orders for exports. The Koh Kret pottery makers have

experimented with the development of new products in the past and they were mixed results and concluded that producing products without market research only increases capital investment and increase the risk of losses. To lower risk factors, the pottery makers relied on middle men to determine their production which improved efficiency but they couldn't control the price of their products. The inability to control the cost and value of indigenous products exists in many ethnic product producers.

### **Conservation and Development Guideline of Ethnic Mon Pottery of Central Thailand**

Conservation of the indigenous knowledge of Mon pottery can be achieved by including the ethnic pottery making process and knowledge into local primary education, secondary education, college and non formal education systems. The addition of a curriculum on Mon pottery will nurture and promote awareness and value of the indigenous knowledge of their ancestors. The conservation of indigenous knowledge through mandatory education is consistent with Soothipont<sup>13</sup> and should be extended to all levels of education and also include courses with hands on training and practice. The teachings and courses should also include how to properly use and maintain tools and materials and document the knowledge in text and electronic forms such as CDs' and DVDs'. The Mon communities at Koh Kret district, Sam Khok district and Klong Sa Bua district have no documentation and records of pottery making process and knowledge. There are no photographs and there are no reference models of the pottery that they produce. All products that were made are sold and no samples are kept for references. Local ethnic museums should be created and should collect local ethnic artifacts such as raw materials, tools, patterns and processes in making Mon pottery. The museum should be located within the community and be center for the inheritance and transmission of Mon ethnic heritage. Local ethnic museums will provide pride and benefit for local community members in the preservation and revitalization of their indigenous knowledge and will also be a source of knowledge for visitors and guests. Other practical methods that will contribute to local ethnic museums, is to create or organize an exhibition or display of Mon pottery making during important events of the community and celebrations which is more effective in creating conservation momentum and participation from the community. Community learning centers must be created before the ethnic Mon pottery knowledge is forgotten. The success of creating ethnic pottery center relies on the cooperation and participation from the potters. The voluntary use of their kiln and knowledge is vital to successful inheritance of Mon pottery and to the community learning center. Utilizing the community's production center as a learning center is effective in relations to the academic and practical knowledge of Mon pottery. Hands on training or action learning are far more effective than theoretical studies and will encourage more people to participate and the potters will receive recognition and acknowledgement of their skills and crafts. The necessity of acknowledgement among Mon potters is consistent with Kraisin<sup>14</sup>. Websites should be created to promote public relations and advertisement in the conservation, development and export of Mon pottery. The websites should be translated into other foreign languages and be consistent with the prospective export market. Pottery makers in Koh Kret district, Sam Khok district and Klong Sa Bua district should create their own websites

and also form a link and network with each other to exchange ideas, experiences and knowledge. Development of ethnic Mon pottery in central Thailand can be achieved through public relations, pottery design centers, development of pottery market, creation of Mon pottery showroom and retail centers, e-commerce, training and innovative products.

### ***Public Relations***

Marketing should be targeted at creating awareness and promotion through a variety of media formats such as radio, television and newspapers. The publication and broadcasts of the indigenous knowledge of ethnic Mon pottery should also utilize all forms of multimedia such as audio, video, television programs, internet, advertisement and radio broadcasts. The information publicized to the public should also promote the benefits of using ethnic pottery and encourage exports. The primary target groups should be the general public and also include commercial businesses such as hotels, resorts, restaurants and tourists destinations.

### ***Pottery Design Centers***

The centers should be created through the cooperation and collaboration between public, private, educational and community organizations. The inclusion and participation of external organizations and members besides the potters themselves is vital to bring innovation to pottery products. The participation from all parties will provide needed development and market research to produce products that are in demand by consumers, lower production risks and sustain the indigenous knowledge of pottery making.

### ***Market***

Dedicated markets for ethnic pottery should be fully supported by public and private organizations so that there is a committed center to establish fair trade of pottery. A central pottery market will regulate the fluctuations of raw materials, price and standard of ethnic pottery.

### ***Exhibitions***

Pottery producing communities in central Thailand should organize regular display and exposition of their pottery products and the processes. The display of the hand crafted techniques and skills used in making pottery will indirectly inspire and promote consumers in their purchases.

### ***E-commerce***

The internet can provide an alternative commercial channel and also aid in the public relations of ethnic Mon pottery on a global scale. An extra benefit of e-commerce is the direct sale of pottery products and other indigenous handicrafts of the community to consumers.

### ***Field Training and Research***

Educational research and training at the community pottery production center from educational institutions should be supported and encouraged. Pottery producers in central

Thailand should allow and invite local schools and education institutions to visit and conduct research at the pottery production site. Vocational schools must make it a priority for field trips and studies at local indigenous production centers so that there is continued inheritance of indigenous knowledge.

### ***Innovative Products***

The reason for declining sales of ethnic pottery is that the pottery is still being produced only in the traditional form and style. Classic types of ethnic pottery should still be produced but new products should be created to cater to the demands of modern consumers and trends of the products. The current trend for buying earthen pottery is for decoration and as souvenirs (Figure 4). The innovative products should also be miniaturized or adjusted to the market trend.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence of the unity of indigenous knowledge is most visible at the Mon community at Koh Kret district where community members have developed close relationships with one another. Progressive features of the community's administration include having community leaders who acknowledge themselves as public servants, have a committee that is comprised of elected individuals representing each group's interests in making pottery and also locally designing their own pottery. This is consistent with the theory of "Symbolism" in which the community members of Koh Kret united together in making ethnic pottery which symbolized the unity and structured nature and organization within the community. The development of Mon pottery in central Thailand for export purpose can be achieved through community participation and development guidelines where 1) local craftsmen and potters transmit their knowledge to community youths and junior craftsmen and provide hands on training and action learning where the trainees and successor can visualize the process and techniques, 2) Produce innovative products that are according to market trends and consumer demands. The products should be extended to other contemporary uses such as decorations and art pieces such as fashioning the earthen pottery into lamp bases, clocks, aroma therapy burners and tableware products. 3) Community pottery producers should form a group and network with exporters in determining fair trade agreements and reasonable pricing so that the business and cooperation is sustainable by all sides, 4) Pottery products should be distributed and dispersed to markets in other provinces and into Bangkok. The products should always be displayed and ready for export at national and foreign product exhibitions. Earthen pottery producers should work with other producers of similar products such as porcelain and ceramic producers and display their products together, 5) Promote and publicize the advantages and benefits of earthen Mon pottery in various media channels such as radio, television, internet and publications.

### **Suggestions and Recommendations**

Southeast Asia is in the process of creating an economic and cultural network through the AEC (Asian Economic Community) and ethnic handicraft products should be systematically studied



and research extended to other ethnic products so that local producers are prepared to enter the Asian market. Extended research topics should include product packaging, foreign and local market research guidelines and survey of ethnic products and commercial groups in ASIAN.

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Figure 1. "Monam Lai Wichit" Mon pottery products of Sam Khok Community.



Figure 2. "Tum Sam Khok" Mon pottery products of Sam Khok community.

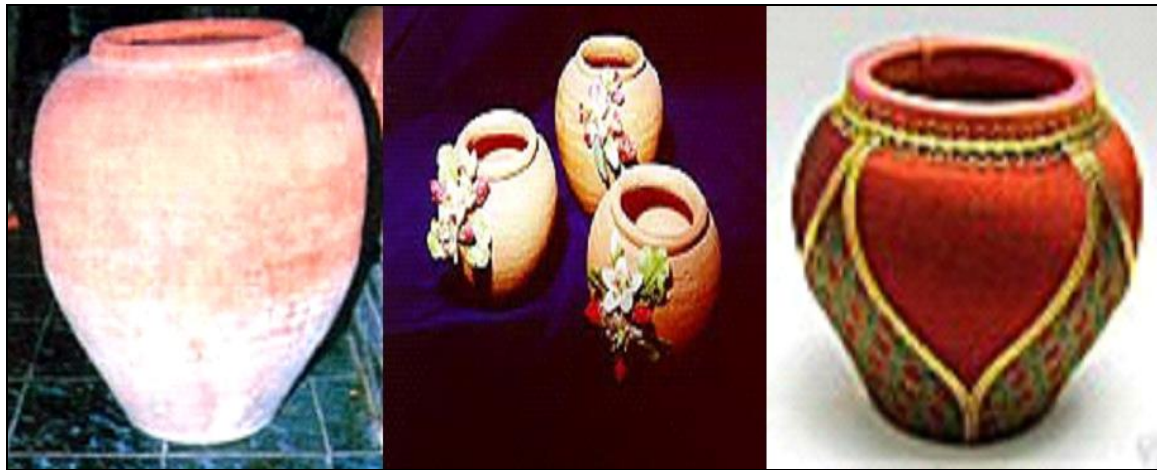


Figure 3. "Mo Tom Ya" Mon pottery products of Klong Sa Bua community.



Figure 4. Exported Mon pottery products from central Thailand

