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focus | **pots and function**

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Comment | the akal exchange: from our hands to yours by Linda Hillman

Four of us in a Mercedes "grand taxi" round a curve and pull off the tarmac into an open dirt area after an hour's drive from Marrakech. Pots are drying in the sun everywhere; there is a flurry of activity from a throng of children as Dominique, a Peace Corps volunteer in a Tashelheit Berber neighborhood of Amizmiz, greets us. We marvel at the colorful tent that has been erected in our honor on the square. We are a Pied Piper parade being led into Dominique's house, also on the square. After many introductions and a brief sharing of our work, our long-awaited potters' exchange would begin.

Dominique Ellis, a former BFA ceramics student at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln (UNL) had been accepted into the Peace Corps after graduation and her assignment was small business development to work with a community of potters in Amizmiz, Morocco. She had written Gail Kendall, professor of ceramics at UNL, saying that the group of potters couldn't believe that there was such a thing as an American potter. Kendall wrote back asking if they would like to meet some. She then invited me to accompany her to Morocco as a writer and documenter of a special exchange of potters. She also invited Liz Quackenbush, a ceramics professor at Penn State University, and Autumn Cipala, a third-year graduate student in ceramics at the University of Nebraska.

A Week in the Life of an Amizmiz Potter

In Morocco, clay tagines are made in all sizes—glazed and unglazed, rimmed in a pewter-looking metal, and sometimes carved, and painted with glaze in traditional Moroccan patterns. Potters may use black glaze or stain for line drawings on colorful glazes, then the whole pot is covered with a high-gloss clear glaze.

For the most part, the village potters in Amizmiz produce the everyday unglazed tagines for market, earning anywhere from 2–3 dirham (DH)—or US$.42—up to 8–10 DH (US$1.40) for larger, more refined tagines. Most are sold to middlemen, but during the summer, some potters have a stand of their own. The challenge comes during the rainy season (late December through mid March) when the potters are unable to make work, so they get caught in a cycle of living on credit.

A cycle of work for an American potter who makes her living from her pots might be three to four months from making to firing, whereas an Amizmiz potter's cycle is a mere single week. Wednesday through Sunday is for throwing, trimming, and drying the tajines and bottles, which are the mainstay of production, with each potter making between 100 and 300 items per week. All the trimmed pots dry in the sun until Monday afternoon, when the kiln is stacked.

Most potters enlist their sons or other local boys to help with gathering the wood chips, chopping wood, and loading the kiln. Plastic, garbage, and olive pits are also used for fuel, a vast improvement over using old tires, an environmentally hazardous technique that is no longer implemented in this village, but is still used in others.

The firing usually takes 1½–2 hours, reaching temperatures of 500–900°F (260–480°C). Between 4:30 and 6:30am on Tuesday, the kiln is unloaded and the middleman's truck picks up the pots. Tuesday is the local *souk* (market) so the potters do not work, but take the day to purchase food for the week. Then the cycle begins again.

Tagines (left) are the primary production item for potters in Amizmiz, Morrocco. They have a useful life of about six months, but potters can only produce them during the dry season. A viable livelihood is very elusive, but Peace Corps volunteers are working to change that.

The Exchange

Ellis named our expedition the Akal Exchange (akal meaning dirt before it is made into clay). Three days of demonstrations were to spotlight our techniques as well as those of the potters she had been working with for over a year—seven in her immediate surroundings and 55 in Amizmiz itself. She said her job was to "help these potters improve their work so they can make more money." Improvement also means developing better clay and firing techniques. The Akal Exchange not only brought potters and the community together to share techniques, it drew help for Amizmiz potters by attracting representatives from the Ministry, as well as an expert from Guemessa, a nearby mine, which produces nickel and cobalt oxides. He collected samples of Amizmiz clay in hopes of figuring out how to improve it and make it more plastic.

Nathaniel Krause, the Peace Corps volunteer who arrived after Ellis, reports that "On a recent visit to one of the potters, I noticed a large pile of cardboard boxes and scrap paper sitting next to the kiln. I inquired about this and learned that the potters obtain, for free, these scraps from local businesses in order to burn in their kilns, and that they have ceased using badly polluting materials like rubber tires."

At the same time, he says, "The potters are competitive and private, preferring to work separately, having little patience for each other and especially for those who want to alter their stable system. . . . [but] my service does not stand on its own; it is a step in a cycle of volunteers, and succeeding in tangible things is not the point of being here.

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Sure, I tell myself to fend off envy when others are perhaps putting fresh paint on the walls of their artisana or exporting carpets to far-off lands, and I am stumbling along learning about where dirt comes from. But each person and his or her situation are unique, this is mine, and I'm in the right place. I have no clue what will happen in the next year, and probably wouldn't even come close with a guess. There are always things brewing out there that I can't see."

Returning Home

We each are wondering what our presence in Amizmiz meant to the Moroccans and to us. Kendall found an interesting parallel between what she calls "the pottery dilemma" with the Moroccan potters' economic situation and the American potters' economic situation. "Both of us are selling work at such a low price that we can't fulfill the basic lifestyle expectations of our two very different cultures." (The Moroccans make about US$30 a week selling 150 pots to local middlemen.)

In Kendall's comparison, the American potter works equally hard in hopes of sustaining a lower-middle class lifestyle. She doesn't think that level of success will be enough for the current generation of young American potters, who, for the most part, are the children of affluence. We aren't exactly comparing oranges and oranges when we look at American and Moroccan potters. Moroccan potters look at their work as ephemeral—a tagine's lifespan is six months of constant use. We want our pots to last longer—and they do; our clay is better and our firing temperatures higher, to say nothing of our cleaner fuel. The American potters' challenges reside in things like creating a collecting class of users who wants to buy and use pots, and imbuing what we do with more value so that we can earn more money.

The author, pictured here with a plaque she made to commemorate the cultural exchange and a local woman who inscribed it for her.

We Americans are not village potters, but to share a table making pots with Moroccan potters was to remind me of an opinion by a professor of folklore at Indiana University, Henri Glassie, who wrote, "Dedicating themselves to the creative task, cooperating and concentrating in the midst of common work, potters invest clay with value, bringing the old and the new, the personal and social, the useful and beautiful, the material and spiritual into presence and connection."

We are all these potters.

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