

RIGHT: Sirigu houses are built of mud and intricately decorated with geometric design. The patterns are composed of a visual vocabulary understood by the villagers. The top band symbolizes that someone has many cattle, i.e. wealth.

BELOW: A potter in the courtyard of her compound adds decorations to her pots.



by Ann Schunior

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Much of her work has been inspired by the traditional crafts of western Africa.

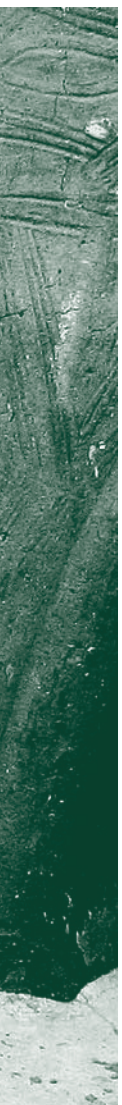
She was in Sirigu in 2007 and 2009.

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I was in Sirigu, in northern Ghana, buying an exquisite pot called a *pilogo*. About fifteen inches tall, it has a lid attached by rope looped through holes in the lid and pot. Its surface has crosshatched designs in an iron slip, incised lines, and applied relief. Additional ropes hang from one side. It's stunning. The young man working in the art center looks at me apologetically and tells me that he has to charge me seven dollars. "Because of the rope," he says. "It'd be less if it didn't have the rope." "Potters never get paid enough, do they?" I commented. "No," he said, "But that's still more than potters could charge in the market."

For generations the women of Sirigu, Ghana, have been making the pots of daily living – large storage jars for water, grain, and *pito*, the locally made beer – as well as pots for ritual use. They would sell their wares at the local markets. Often, at the end of the day, if their pots had not sold, they lowered their prices or bartered for beans and millet to feed their families.

Tourists have come to visit northern Ghana, but not to buy pots. Instead, they've come to see the village houses, especially after the 1990 publication of Margaret Courtney-Clarke's *African Canvas*. To a potter's eye, the people of Sirigu appear to live in large, painted pots. Each house is a series of connected round rooms in a compound

THE POTTERS OF SIRIGU, GHANA

bound by gracefully curving walls. All the walls, inside and out, are decorated with bold, earth-toned geometric designs and animal motifs. The walls and houses are made of mud, a medium not unlike clay, and are painted with pigmented earth in designs that are symbolic. Many of the local pots are decorated with the same patterns, using the same earth-pigments used to paint the walls. Like potting, wall-painting is done solely by the women of the village. Until recent developments, there was no infrastructure to allow Sirigu's potters and house decorators to profit from their more wealthy visitors, so the limited tourism had no impact on the economics of the village.

In 1997, Melanie Kasise, the daughter of a Sirigu potter, returned to the village after retiring from a career in education. She saw that fewer women were painting their houses and that the house-decorating tradition, in many ways the backbone of their culture, was at risk of dying out. The potters were still working very hard for very little income.

Kasise gathered her aunt and several other senior potters and started talking to them about how they might work together to develop more income. The outgrowth of those meetings was the formation of SWOPA, Sirigu Women's Organization of Pottery and Art. The hope of the organiza-



tion was to provide better incomes for the women through pottery and wall-painting, even though the latter had never before been an income-generating activity.

Historically, Sirigu women had little control over their lives. The little money they made came from selling pottery, baskets, or pito in the market. Increasing their income through tourism and higher prices for their pottery would give them more economic independence, make them better able to feed their families, and keep their children in school longer. The lack of rain and poor harvests over the past ten to fifteen years made this even more important, because their husbands were earning less from growing millet and other crops. More of the men were leaving Sirigu to find jobs in larger cities in the south.

SWOPA now has more than 400 members. With the help of Friends of Ghana/Sirigu, in Holland, and the Felix Foundation, in Belgium, SWOPA constructed a tourist center, with a gallery and guesthouses built

The twice-weekly Sirigu market is still the major regional focus for buying and selling pottery.

in the traditional style. The village women's pots were originally sold on consignment, but later the need to reimburse the women more quickly became apparent, so SWOPA now buys the pots outright. The organization pays the women about 150 percent more than they would get in the market (a pot that would sell for twenty pesewas in the market can be sold to SWOPA for fifty pesewas). SWOPA then doubles the price before selling it in the art center. Occasionally tourists who know the market prices complain that SWOPA's prices are high, but more often they comment that the prices are still far lower than what they're used to paying at home. Still, SWOPA is reluctant to raise prices more, in part because leaders lack the confidence that their pots could bring higher prices, and probably also because they are wary of an even wider price differential between pots bought in their center and the pottery in the Sirigu market a couple of kilometers away.

SWOPA also conducts paid guided tours



LEFT: These eight-inch plates are new to Sirigu and are made for tourists. The designs, however, are similar to the designs on traditional pottery. The crocodile, a protective agent, is in relief and is a common element on both pottery and house designs.

BELOW: The stack of five pots, called a *kemaninga*, is important in marriage and funeral celebrations. The top pot with the ropes is a *pilogo* like the one the author describes purchasing, and is used for food storage. The pots are given by a mother to her daughter when she marries.



of the members' compounds, teaches workshops in pottery, canvas-painting, and basket-making to tourists, and has occasionally done wall paintings for restaurants and hotels as far away as Accra, hundreds of kilometers to the south. The organization also has started a program that provides art education to middle school children and trains young women to be potters. The older generation of potters was illiterate, never having had the opportunity to go to school. SWOPA is trying to change that pattern, with the hope that educated potters will not feel the need to leave Sirigu for other work.

The organization's success has resulted in more pots being made and the need to develop larger markets. SWOPA has joined with other organizations to promote ecotourism in the region, but there will never be enough tourists to support the growing number of potters. The organization has tried selling work at the larger markets in Bolgatanga and Accra, but this strategy has problems familiar to potters in the United States. It's expensive to establish a market stall, and more so in faraway Accra. The group is now looking to develop a wholesale market, with an eye toward exporting its members' work.

The pots themselves have changed. Generally, traditional pots are large storage vessels. Kasise, now general director of SWOPA, thinks of the new pots as "small, small," or miniatures, of the storage jars. Tourists, no matter how much they might like to, cannot take large pots home with them on an airplane. The women also have learned to make shapes that are new to them but familiar to Americans and Europeans: dishes, cups, saucers, small covered jars, oval plates, and vases. The pots are all nicely decorated – some with geometric slip designs, some with incised designs – and fired black or brown, but the designs are simpler than the bigger pots made in earlier days. This is not to say that the newer pots for tourists aren't good, beautiful, and distinctive. I've carried many home on the plane, and they're among my favorite pots.

Up until now the pots have all been fired in a bonfire. With the help of a consultant from Kumasi, SWOPA is now building a wood-fired kiln. Bonfires produce low-fired pots, and firings can be very uneven. The women realize that if they're going to export pots, the ware needs to have the strength of a higher firing, between 800 and 1,000°C, or cone 012 to 06. One downside of this is that Sirigu has few trees. The bonfires make use of millet straw as fuel, but the kiln will make it necessary for the women to buy wood. Ever thinking of the future, SWOPA has planted acacia and kapok trees, but it will be a long time before these can be used to fire pottery, and it will take a lot of trees to make this sustainable.

Nevertheless, the success of SWOPA is remarkable. Although by American standards the pottery is still underpriced, SWOPA has raised the prices significantly over those in the local markets. Potters are providing significant income for their families at a time when the income from the men's agricultural work is dropping. Women's increased economic power is significant enough that Kasise says that men are helping with tasks that only women would have done in the past, such as taking care of children and carrying water from the well. SWOPA has revived traditional house-decorating, and that, combined with the gallery and tourist facilities, has drawn more tourists to the area.

Sirigu's approach to preserving its culture and furthering its pottery tradition is not without a certain amount of irony. In welcoming tourism and broadening its markets, Sirigu becomes more entwined with the global economy and more subject to the influences of the modern world. But these women, who have neither running water nor electricity in their homes, who in the past have had no chance to read or write, understand that a better future for themselves and their families lies with tourism and selling pottery to wider markets. Their hope is that they can have the best of both worlds: an intact culture and improved economic lives.

More information about SWOPA can be found at www.swopa.org. See also Anna Craven's article "Pottery of Northern Ghana" in *Interpreting Ceramics*, Issue 10, 2008. www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue010/articles/03c.htm.