

# Kabylian Pottery: Secret of Kabyle Women

## Kabylská keramika: Tajemství kabylských žen

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Do redakce doručeno 23. března 2017; k publikaci přijato 12. srpna 2017

### ABSTRACT:

*The paper deals with Kabyle pottery perceived as evidence of traditional Berber craftsmanship and artwork in today's Algeria. The paper describes and analyses the manufacturing phases of Kabyle pottery and its typology and motifs. Special attention is paid to Kabyle women who are the main manufacturers of the pottery. The manufacture of Kabyle pottery is, in many aspects, subject to taboo and it is passed over from mothers to daughters. Women learnt its technology and practical skills through oral tradition and everyday experience. Therefore, Kabyle pottery exhibits a specific female penmanship and reveals mentality of Kabyle women and secret knowledge hidden inside the traditional society*

### ABSTRAKT:

*Předmětem studie je kabylská keramika jako doklad tradiční berberské řemeslné a umělecké tvořivosti na území dnešního Alžírsko. Ve studii jsou uvedeny jednotlivé fáze výroby, formy a motivy keramiky. Pozornost je však kladena i na kabylské ženy, které jsou hlavními tvůrkyněmi keramiky. Výroba keramiky je v řadě aspektů tabuizovaná činnost, která je předávána z matky na dceru. Její technologickou znalost a praktickou dovednost si ženy osvojovaly prostřednictvím orální tradice a také každodenní zkušenosti. Keramika proto vykazuje specifický ženský rukopis, odhaluje mentalitu kabylských žen a tajné vědění, jež je uchované uvnitř tradiční společnosti.*

### KEYWORDS:

Kabyle people, pottery, women, manufacture

### KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

Kabylové, keramika, ženy, výroba

### THE KABYLIANS: AN AUTONOMOUS BERBER ETHNIC GROUP

The Kabyle people are a Berber ethnic group living in the mountainous area of North-East Algeria called Kabylia where they have been exposed to the influence of the Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Spanish, Turks and eventually the French (Alliou 2006). Their territory has been under Islamic supremacy since the end of the 8th century. Arabic migration brought to North Africa the Arabic language, Islamic culture and traditions. Arabic became a generally accepted language for trade and science and later it turned into the language used by educated elites, in opposition to the local dialects (Makilam 1999). After the Fall of Granada in 1492, the Spanish conquered the coastal areas of Kabylia. However, the Ottoman Empire effectively defended its territory in Northern Africa and took over Algeria, having military control over Kabylia from 1671 until 1830. Nevertheless, this territory was not unified in terms of language, religion and culture (Stone 1997, Evans, Phillips 2007). During this period "in the mountains were the Kabyles, more or less independent; in the plains the Arabs, quite incompletely subordinated; in the towns, the Turks" (Tocqueville 2001: 12). As a result of colonial invasions, Kabylia came under the influence of France in the 1830s. After the Kabyle uprising in 1871, France divided this province into two parts: Small Kabylia and Great Kabylia. The identity of the Kabyles was influenced by the fact that they belonged to the Berber culture, while aware of their difference from the Arabian culture. "More broadly, it is fair to say the centuries-old processes of linguistic Arabization across North Africa

had touched the Kabyle heartland far more slowly than in the lowlands" (Maddy-Weitzman 2011: 39). The Kabyle language and Berber culture have significantly contributed to the fact that the Kabyles preserved their specific cultural identity for many centuries. In the 19th and 20th century one sees a significant and continuous emigration of the Kabyles to France (Chaker 1985, Stone 1997, Maddy – Weitzman 2011). The cultural influence of France persisted in Algeria even after the declaration of independence in 1962. France is now the migration destination of the Kabyles who seek education and work (Ageron 1991, Makilam 1999). Despite the pressure of French colonialism and Algerian nationalism, one notes that Kabylia has been an independent territory (Merolla 1996).

Kabylia is one of the most densely inhabited areas of Algeria. Kabyle villages are located on the ridges and slopes of fertile valleys and are characterized by high population density and a lack of direct paths. Each house is made up of two parts: an illuminated public part and a dark private part. The illuminated part is space for men and serves as a reception or meeting room. The dark private part is designated for women and their domestic activities. While men control the public space of the village, women have under their control the private part of the house, separated from the outer world (Genevois 1962, Bourdieu 1965, 1972). "In contrast to man's work, which is performed outdoors, woman's work is essentially obscure and hidden" (Bourdieu 1990: 276). Behind the stone walls of villages are pastures and gorges. Farming requires irrigation channels that distribute water to the



Kabyle village of Kalâa des Beni Abbès in the Bibans Mountains. © Isabelle Mandraud, 2012.



Kabyle woman using pottery when doing housework, 1927. © Barbora Pütová.



Kabyle woman in a French regroupment village Ain Terzine in Kabylia. Photographic essay *Femmes Algériennes* (Algerian Women), Marc Garanger, 1960. © Marc Garanger, 1982.

terraced fields on steep slopes. Life in the mountains is complemented by nomadic shepherding and seasonal migration of herds and people.

#### KABYLIAN WOMEN: POTTERY MAKERS

Kabyle women organize handicrafts and artworks. There is an established relation between women and art in the Kabyle society. In the traditional interpretation, Kabyle pottery is not art, but a craft (Ionas 2007). Women are also linked to the ground, since the Kabyles believe that their fertility influences the fertility of the land. It is the duty of each woman to help the ground and to ensure the continuity of human and animal life. Production of Kabyle pottery accentuates respect for the ground and by supporting the fertility of the ground ensures the continuity of life. In Kabyle society, knowledge and skills are orally transmitted, and through everyday experience (Chaker 1984, Makilam 1999). The process of pottery making is a taboo and know-how is passed from mothers to daughters – the same applies to weaving and other

household activities (Bourdieu 1990). In Kabylia, it is exclusively women who “devote themselves to the entire activity and process of pottery-making: from the extraction of clay to the finished product of the molded object” (Makilam 2007b: 26). Kabyle pottery shows a specific female calligraphy that reveals the secret knowledge of Kabyle women hidden within the traditional society. Each spring before sowing, Kabyle women start with a new pottery cycle (Makilam 1999). Although handicraft art skills are continuously passed from mothers to daughters, the production of traditional Kabyle pottery is on the decline. This may be due to young women leaving the country for cities, or shifts to modernization and the loss of traditional Kabyle values.

#### KABYLIAN POTTERY MAKING

In Kabyle society, pottery making is compared to the lifecycle of plants. Clay needed for pottery making is said to be a living essence. An artefact made of clay waits for a favourable climatic period that will enable its vegetative growth just as is the case with wheat in the spring. Pottery may only be decorated and fired after the harvest. Motifs applied to pottery are analogically applied to house walls. The production of Kabyle pottery consists of three stages: 1) preparation, 2) modelling 3) and decoration including firing and/or glazing.

During the preparation stage, clay is dug in the spring when the temperatures are mild, sufficient for drying and preventing from cracks caused by heat (Makilam 2007b). Clay-pits are situated near villages. Obtaining and delivering this raw material is subject to secrecy, as it is an act that disquiets the dark potential of Mother Earth – the source of fertility. Clay is first washed and impurities are removed. Then the soaked clay is mixed with crushed potsherds that give the matter cohesiveness (Lacoste-Dujardin 2005). Preparation of new clay from old pottery is perceived as the support of the continuity of life after death and as a traditional attribute of Kabyle mentality. Old pottery symbolizes the birth of the new (Makilam 2007a). In the eyes of Kabyle women, the ground is inhabited with invisible life and water attracts mysterious



Kabyle pitcher, pottery, Algeria. © Indianapolis Museum of Art.

entities that wander about. For this reason clay must not be soaked for more than three or four days, certainly not longer than three nights. The magical importance of the number three is linked to the lunar phase.

The phase of modelling includes hand moulding and kneading of the clay. Women use a flat round surface made of cow dung and clay, reinforced with a layer of straw and sifted clay. They do not use a static wheel because it would take away the regenerative force. This process involves specific body movements, especially direct manipulation of the material. Pottery making is not only practical, but psychological and healing. An artefact is moulded from the source material in the form of belts of clay. The object is then evened with two small plates and it can be moulded and shaped on the outside as well as on the inside. Afterwards, handles and spouts are attached. Finally, the moulded object is smoothed with a small stone, shell and then air-dried (Lacoste-Dujardin 2005, Makilam 2007b).

In the last stage of pottery making, white (which is considered to be the colour of rebirth and renewal, as the dead are buried in white grave clothes) or ochre engobe coating is applied on the artefact. Analogically, pottery is white since it prepares for its extinction in the following stage of making and subsequent rebirth (Makilam 1999). Women apply paint with their fingers or brushes made of goat hair. Warm colours prevail in Kabyle pottery: they are obtained by crushing pigment mixed with water. White or ochre colour is obtained from kaolin. Red colour comes from red ochre or hematite. There are also some shades of brown. Black colour is from manganese. Painting on pottery is fixed with a final paint of resin, which gives it a shine and makes it waterproof (Vincentelli 1989, Barley 1994, Makilam 1999, Graves 2009, Mauss 2009). Pottery and house walls are painted for aesthetic reasons as well as a protection that safeguards a happy married life and ensures happiness. Therefore, the motifs applied are protective and reconciliatory at the same time. Once the paint is applied, the pottery is fired in a kiln



Kabyle jug, pottery, Algeria. © Michel-Georges Bernard.

that is embedded in the ground. The heat penetrates and pervades the structure of the pottery. When baking pottery in fire, it is necessary to concentrate silently on the process, since the degree of firing might result in crop failure so the heat must be carefully controlled. The Kabyles also believe that excessive heat may have a negative impact on a woman's fertility. Just like the sun, also fire gives life as well as death. Creation of a pottery artefact is seen as a birth of child. Hot fired objects are taken out of fire. Glazing is not made universally and some Kabyle tribes do not actually glaze pottery. Some artefacts, e.g., *akufi* container, once fired, are taken inside the house (Lacoste-Dujardin 2005, Makilam 1999, 2007b, Vivier 2007).

#### FORMS OF KABYLIAN POTTERY

Everyday use of Kabyle pottery, especially in households, is reflected in its forms. Kabyle pottery includes objects for preparation, cooking, preserving, serving and consumption of food, either meals or liquids. Ceramic pots and jars served for transporting water, milk or oil and for keeping it cool. *Gargoulette* jars with a spout made drinking easier. Shapes of the jars are expressions of the woman body. *Akufi* represents a large container placed inside a house (on a bench or in a closet) used for storing corn, dried fruit, nuts, pods and other dried food. *Akufi* could be round, angular or of a rectangular shape (Lacoste-Dujardin 2005). *Chafing dish (chauffer)* is a device for serving warm food and keeping it at a particular temperature. A container is placed inside a *chafing dish* under which hot water is poured in order to provide continuous heating. *Couscoussier* is a pot for preparing couscous and consists of a lower part where food is made and an upper steam part which should fit tightly so that steam aromatizes the food on the steamer (Genevois 1969). There are also other different types of pots, pans, colanders, casseroles, plates, deep and shallow bowls or sauce bowls and dishes. Important artefacts are oil lamps with trays, chalices or on trivets (Vivier 2007). Pottery usually includes children toys, mostly animals such as chickens, roosters, sheeps, ducks, cats, camels or turtles. In addition to containers and dishes of everyday use, there are also festive containers. Pottery is part of ceremonies such as celebrations of birth or weddings (Makilam 2007b).



**MOTIFS ON KABYLIAN POTTERY**

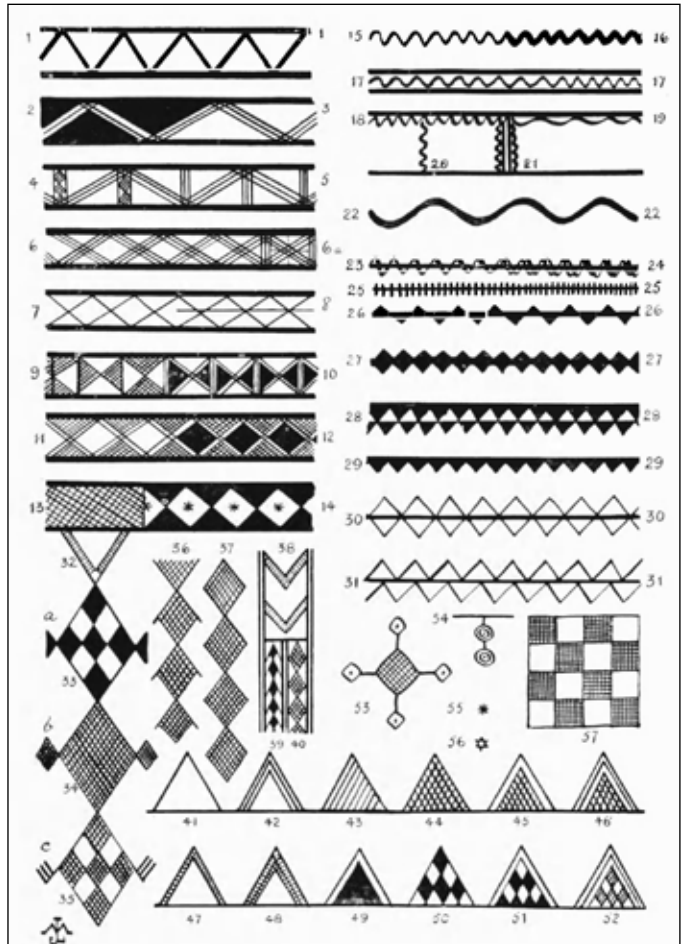
Kabylian pottery was created in hard-to-get-at, isolated areas, villages and small settlements developing the local style, morphology and typical motifs (Makilam 1999). The basic motifs, which appear in most Berber tribes, are geometric shapes – squares, rectangles, diamonds, crosses, zigzags, waves, lines or rosettes. These geometric motifs are usually combined (Strel Locke 1974). Diamonds, based on triangles, often appear in configurations with triangles, filled, empty or latticed. At the sides of diamonds one often sees tiny diamonds, later also lizard claws. Motifs are usually inspired by phenomena such as the sun, moon, stars, mountains, trees or caves. Some motifs are anthropomorphous (e.g. dancers, palms) or zoomorphous (birds, butterflies, lizards, frogs, snakes or scorpions). Clear shapes and balanced give evidence of creators' effort to achieve equilibrium between function, form, colouring and ornamentation. Motifs of Kabylian pottery testify of the influence of weaving or jewellery making (Camps 1962, Strel Locke 1974, Vivier 2007).

Motifs and colour decoration are not chosen haphazardly. But they do not represent inspiration or original artistic expression of a female artist. They are rather traditional cultural elements, the product of long shared handicraft tradition (Moreau 1976). Motifs of Kabylian pottery may be read as a specific semiotic text testifying to traditional female values existing within a Kabylian culture. According to one hypothesis, it is actually a form of phonic writing or a secret language shared by women, with protective symbolism linked to the fertility of women and Mother Earth (Makilam 2007b). Generally speaking, decoration on pottery fulfils three symbolic functions: ornamentally aesthetic (the pottery is a message about the Kabylian aesthetic sensation and conception of beauty), territorially identifying (each village has its own palette of patterns) and protective symbolical (decorations include magic and protective signs and symbols).

**CONCLUSION**

Since the 1960s, modernization in Kabylia incorporated technological innovations pulled from Western culture. In Kabylian households wooden dishes were replaced with plastic ones, ceramic water containers were replaced with water cans and traditional silver and enamelled

jewels were more often replaced with imported golden necklaces and ear-rings (Lacoste-Dujardin 2005). Despite this, the production of traditional pottery has not perished. One of the reasons why Kabyles are still interested in traditional objects is the desire of these tribes to preserve their cultural identity and revitalize their cultural roots (Doumane 2004, Goodman 2005).



Traditional motifs of Kabyle pottery. © Barbora Pütová.



Kabyle oil lamp, pottery, Algeria. © National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.



Kabyle silver, enamel and coral necklace from Algeria. © Linda Pastorino.



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