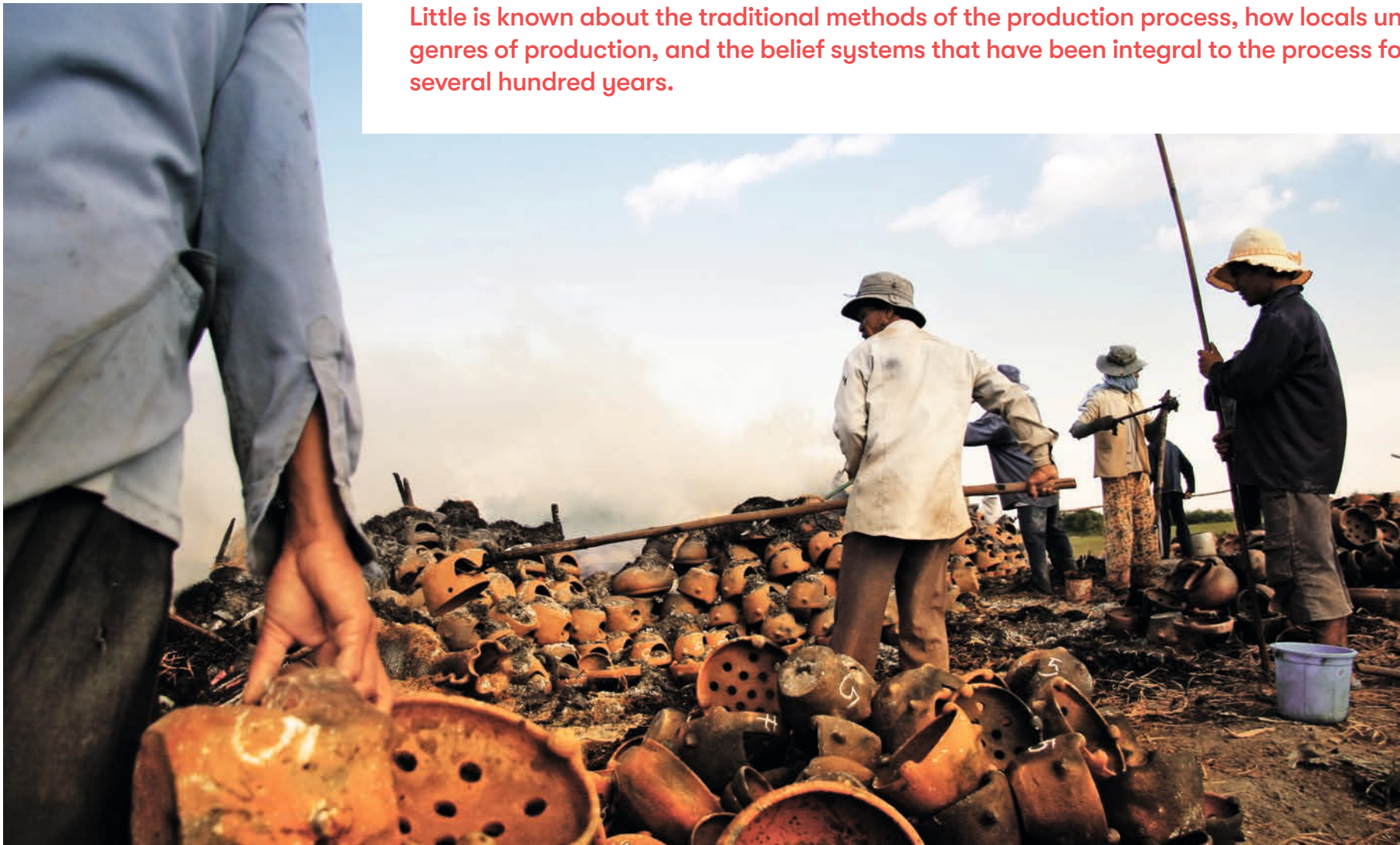


Bàu Trúc: The oldest extant pottery village in Vietnam, and possibly Southeast Asia

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Palei Hamu Craok – mostly referred to by its Vietnamese name Bàu Trúc – is a small village in the town of Phước Dân (Ninh Phước District, Ninh Thuận province, Central Vietnam), internationally known for its production of pottery. The sale of traditional ceramics, including agricultural products, cookware, and even children's toys, brings busloads of tourists to the village every year. Little is known about the traditional methods of the production process, how locals understand the genres of production, and the belief systems that have been integral to the process for the past several hundred years.



Left: Open-air firing of Cham pottery. Photo by Inra Jaya, all rights reserved.

Bàu Trúc is a short motorcycle ride from Phan Rang-Tháp Cham city in Central Vietnam; just 9 KM to the south, off National Highway 1A. It would be easy to miss were it not for the occasional tourist bus. Today, the settlement lies in two of Phước Dân town's quarters: the 7th and the 12th Quarter. As per statistical measures in 2018, enough people (nearly 3000) reside in the 7th Quarter for it to be considered a small town in its own right, and the current population is 94% ethnic Cham. By comparison, the 12th Quarter houses just around 2000 people and only 45% ethnic Cham, with the remainder being ethnic Vietnamese.

Palei Hamu Craok takes its name from the Austronesian Cham language of Southeast Asia. The term *palei* is a descriptor used to apply to villages and small towns; *hamu* refers to rice paddy land; and, a *craok* is a protrusion of land found just upstream of the conflux where two streams meet. The village dates to before the 12th century and even possibly before the 9th century. During the reign of Minh Mạng [r. 1820-1840 CE], the Vietnamese annexed the area and gave it the name 'Vinh Thuận', which is still used by Vietnamese who reside in the area. However, in 1964 there was a massive flood in the province, and the people of Palei Hamu Craok were forced to move the center of their settlement to a nearby area, adjacent to a lake called Danaw Panrang – Panrang being the original Cham

name for the largest city in the area, and Danaw being the Cham word for 'lake'. Since another meaning of *panrang* is 'area of many bamboo trees' the local Vietnamese came to call the new settlement 'Bàu Trúc' or 'Bamboo Lake'.¹

The characteristics of the area are very similar to many other Cham villages and towns in Ninh Thuận province. There are few large old-growth trees, while rice fields are plentiful, with thanks to irrigation networks. Such settlements are associated with matrilocality and families living close to one another are generally from the same kinship network. After death, remains are interred in an old grave site, known as a *kut*. Currently, there are 13 clan groups and each clan has 50 to 60 families. Families tend to own land collectively, sharing rights and obligations, and are thus also responsible for the standard upkeep of the ancestral grave sites and shrines associated with their clan. Houses are built according to customary regulations [*adat*] regarding the positioning of the buildings. Within a single family complex, there may be several structures, including a *sang yé* [customary house], one or two *sang mayau* [two-story houses], a *sang tuai* [guest house], one or two *sang gar* [one story, horizontal house], and a *sang ging* [kitchen]. Each development also contains a well to the east and a vegetable garden in the southeast. From 2005 through the present, however, such

traditionally oriented housing developments have begun to disappear. New houses tend to follow Vietnamese adaptations of European modernist architecture.

Spirits of the place: a divine inspiration for pottery

Although the origins of Palei Hamu Craok are shrouded in history, contemporary residents generally have a common understanding of their past. Most trace their lineages to an ancestral deity: Po Klaong Can. Po Klaong Can was a mandarin of Po Klaong Garai – a king of the Champa civilization who ruled the vicinity from 1151-1205 CE. Po Klaong Can helped the villagers of the area to run out enemy armies and brought them to settle in a new area: Hamu Craok. He also showed them a clay pit and taught them about pottery. Consequently, locals deified him as 'the God of Pottery' and built a temple for him. They built the temple (*Danaok Po Klaong Can*) in the center of the village field [*tambok min*]. In 1967, they moved it from the old village [*palei klak*] to a new location 2 km west of the new settlement (f. 1964). In 2014, the new temple was damaged by weather and the community raised funds to reconstruct the structure. The current building (10x8m) is supported by three trusses, which stretch across two rooms, with the main temple door facing east. The inner sanctum (3x8m) includes the

main shrine, which features a stone *linga-yoni* altar (0.5m tall) with the face of Po Klaong Can on the *linga* aspect. A second smaller stone altar (0.4m tall), just to the left, features the god's wife, *Nai Hali Halang Tabang Măh* ('Po Nai' colloquially). On the right-hand side of the entrance to the temple a small *nandin* statue represents the steed of Shiva. These statues were repurposed from a 9th-century temple burned by a 'Jawa army' in nearby Phước Hữu commune.² However, they only came into the current residents' possession in 1967.

Traditional Cham pottery methods, inspired by Po Klaong Can's teachings, have consistently been dependent on natural forces, relying upon the proper balance of wind, sun, and rain. Hence, the popular belief that weather events and spiritual forces connected to the weather have a direct impact on successful production. Divine forces in Cham religions have the power to punish or bless an individual, family, or whole community. Thus, some potters even make small offerings of rice wine, eggs, betel nuts, fruit, rice cakes, and other gifts for daily offerings at household shrines. They also prepare more complex, lavish gifts of rice, cakes, soup, bread, fruit, rice wine, eggs, chickens, flowers, and goats to offer at the temple four times annually for 'The Opening of the Temple' [*Péh mbang yang*] in the first month of the Cham calendar, the 'Fire-god Ceremony' [*Yuer yang*] during the fourth month of the Cham calendar, the *Katé* ceremony during the seventh month of

the Cham calendar, and the 'Goddess Ritual' [Ca-mbur] during the ninth month of the Cham calendar. While these four holidays are performed at many similar shrines and temple sites, for Palei Hamu Craok their meaning is localized: the goal of preserving the sacred knowledge of pottery production is a central aim to each. The religious rituals additionally serve as a reminder that younger generations must uphold the profession, remaining grateful to the minds and hands that came before them.

Po Klaong Can's methods: perfected through practice

As mentioned above, villagers may believe Po Klaong Can, who lived in the 12th and 13th century, was a historical figure who became a god and taught them pottery. However, according to the research of art historians, historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists, many characteristics of the pottery methods practice at Palei Hamu Craok are from earlier Champa methods and possibly even the pre-Champa Sa Huỳnh culture (around 3000 BP). Shared production process, types of vessels, and methods of firing pottery outdoors can be found at Sa Huỳnh sites. This has led some academics to suggest that the methods of Palei Hamu Craok are the oldest in Southeast Asia.³ Although this assertion has not been confirmed through comparative work, it appears safe to claim that Palei Hamu Craok is the oldest extant production center in Vietnam today. Older sites of production are no longer producing pottery using traditional methods, even though materials necessary for making Palei Hamu Craok pottery are simple. One only needs access to clay, sand, firewood, straw, and rice husks for firing. The sand, mixed with clay collected from the nearby Quao River (3 km northwest), includes lithium particles, collected from nearby streams and rivers during the flooding season. The natural characteristic of this particular clay source is extraordinary in that it has a high degree of adhesion. Furthermore, the supply never runs low. Residents take from the pit sparingly and the supply regenerates every six months

with natural flooding cycles. To retrieve the clay, potters dig holes 0.5-0.7m deep, across an area of 1m². After the collection the hole is filled and rice can be planted on the spot. Within another six months, there will be new clay to harvest.

After the clay is collected, it is dried, then soaked in water in a hole for about 12 hours. Next, the clay is mixed with sand at a 1:1 ratio. The potter uses their feet and hands to knead the clay [juak halan] until plasticity is achieved. Some hand-tools are used for working the clay, yet they are minimalist traditionally made tools, such as a big bamboo loop used to curve the glossy raw clay [kagoh], a smaller bamboo loop used to thin the clay body [tanuk], a knife for cutting and etching decorative patterns [dhaong], a stick to poke holes in the clay [tanay], a small cloth used to smooth the surface of the clay when wet [tanaik], and a comb used to create wave patterns [tathi].⁴ The tools are used variously in four stages. The first is creating the primary form [padang gaok], wherein the clay is shaped into a 'pumpkin' [kaduk] and then set upon a clay 'anvil' [taok jek]. Starting at the base of the kaduk, the potter uses their hands to create the basic shape of the ceramic piece (20-30cm high). Next, the potter expands the size of the shape, connecting the base and working the sides upwards. They use the kagoh to brush around the body in order to rub out the fingerprints, smoothing the body and mouth, before rubbing the body with the cloth (tanaik), thus making the clay glossy. In the second stage, the potter rubs the piece smooth [tanaik uak gaok]. The potters wrap the tanaik all the way around their hand and gently touch it to water before rubbing the body of the piece over and over, to roll across the mouth of the piece, creating a bell-shaped or cupped mouth, with a standing rib, around the whole outside of the lip of the mouth of the piece. In the third stage, decorative motifs are added [ngap

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bingu hala]. The potter might use another piece of cloth, seashells, plant flowers, or even leaves to create patterned motifs. Traditional motifs include jagged, sharp lines, waves, patterns of vegetation, and numerous sea motifs created with shells. As a result of market demands, these patterns have become much more sophisticated in the past decade. Human and animal motifs following classical Champa art styles have increasingly been added to the repertoire. In the final stage [kuah gaok], pieces are left on a forming platform to dry and then brought to a shady place to prevent cracking. When completely dry, the potter will shave the bottom of the ceramic from the platform using a tanuh and the firing stage can begin.⁵

Cham pottery is only fired outside, and thus there are no kilns involved. Materials for firing include wood collected from the forest during the dry season, and straw along with rice husks collected from rice fields after harvest. Potters stack the pots according to size, with the largest items at the bottom and the smallest at the top, forming a giant cube structure. The pieces are then surrounded by slabs of very dry wood (20-30cm high). The pile is covered with a combination of straw with husks mixed in. Husks ignite better, but straw burns more consistently and helps ignite the wood, so this combination ensures that the fire will light quickly, burn hot, and burn consistently for about two to three hours. After firing, a natural drying plant-based glaze can be added to the pieces for extra decoration if desired. Hence, the production process is a form of traditional pottery that is virtually timeless, as the potters use many sophisticated techniques, but they are all worked by hand. From clay preparation and gathering to shaping the pieces, to firing, the potter works entirely with their own hands, only with the aid of very simply hand-tools. A Palei Hamu Craok potter's skills must be finely tuned through years of training, to correctly follow the stages of production day in and day out, from one year to the next.

Style & form: the contemporary art

There are roughly five general categories of production for Palei Hamu Craok's pottery, which we can organize according to style and function of the pieces. The first are large pots [gaok praong] and small pots [gaok asit] that are generally used for cooking food or gathering and storing drinking water. They have round bottoms, small mouths, and comparatively large round bodies. They are generally at least 20cm high, and the diameter near the base of the pot is an average of 15cm with a mouth roughly 5cm in diameter. The walls of these pots are generally around 0.8cm thick. The pots in the second category – called klait or glah – have a full bell mouth, short neck, drooping shoulders that flow downward, and a full middle body with a smaller round bottom. They are limited in their use for cooking and quite standard in size: 20cm high, 10cm in mouth diameter, and walls an average of 1cm thick. The pots of the third category – jek and khang – are commonly used to store all kinds of substances, from water to salt, to rice. These are slightly rounded at the bottom, with a standing cupped mouth, a standing neck, sloping shoulders, and a round body. They are mostly 40cm high, have a 15cm diameter for the mouth, and an even thicker walls, generally 1.2cm thick. The pots in the fourth category do not have particularly standard measurements, but are mostly comprised of ceramics that might have straps attached to them, with two to three 'legs'. They have full cupped mouths and flat bottoms. They are predominantly used as portable stoves [wan laow buh njuh] or braziers [wan laow dhan] on which cooking pots can be placed for heating. They are generally shallow. Individual water storage pots [kadhi] also fit into this category. Finally, the last category includes purely decorative pieces and toys. These might be for children, or to hang in the home, and commonly take

the shape of animals or include animal motifs, such as water buffalo [kabaw], cattle [limaow], humans [manuis], and trumpet-like instruments [halan padet].

Although the first through third categories have historically been the most produced, styles have gone through significant changes in the past two decades. Around the late 1990s, to keep up with production demand, more and more men began to turn towards pottery, which had traditionally been a predominantly female profession. Furthermore, while the most common pots in the past were small pots [gaok gom, klait] used to cook soup over the larger stove pots, and large pots for containing water [buk], more and more decorative pieces in the fifth category have begun to be produced. Now, the fifth category is beginning to blend with the others, as the more 'traditional' pots are also growing increasingly ornate. Flower vases, variations of water pots, light boxes, statues of classical deities of Champa associated with Champa temple-tower complexes such as Shiva and Nandin, Brahma, Vishnu, and Apsara dancers have also become more popular. These new designs certainly represent the desire to establish niche markets for the production of Palei Hamu Craok ceramics. However, they also represent the revivalist interests of artisans themselves, who have grown increasingly connected to classical Champa through their works. The result is new designs that are simultaneously creative and evocative, mostly produced by a new, younger generation of artisans, whose works have become popular in urban areas across southern Vietnam and are now used to furnish homes, cafes, restaurants, hotels, and seaside resorts.⁶ These works have grown in popularity to such an extent that by the 2010s somewhat regular shipments of Palei Hamu Craok pots were being sent internationally as well. Indeed, the centuries-old process of traditional pottery, inspired by the god Po Klaong Can, represents an intangible heritage of the global community.

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Notes

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- 2 Parmentier, H. 1948. *Description of monuments in Central Vietnam*. Paris: EFEO, p.89; Majumdar, R.C. 1965. *Champa-Hindu Colonies in the Far East (book III - Inscriptions Champa)*. Calcutta, p.71.
- 3 Vũ Công Quý. 1991. *Sa Huỳnh Culture*. Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House; Trinh Sinh. 2018. 'Từ gốm Sa Huỳnh đến gốm Chăm' [From pottery of Sa Huỳnh to pottery of Cham], from the international conference on *Traditional Arts of Cham people in Ninh Thuan*.
- 4 Sakaya. 2007. 'Gốm truyền thống của người Chăm Bàu Trúc' [Traditional pottery of Cham people in Bàu Trúc], *Xưa & Nay Magazine*, Vietnam Association of Historical Sciences 275-276:27, 28 and 30.
- 5 Ibid., Văn Môn (2001)
- 6 Văn Môn & Phạm Thị Tinh. 2013. 'Sự phát triển làng nghề gốm Bàu Trúc trong bối cảnh xây dựng nông thôn mới hiện nay' [The development of Bàu Trúc pottery village in the context of new rural construction today], *Proceedings of scientific conference in improving the effectiveness of emulation movement "The whole country jointly build new rural areas"*, Ho Chi Minh City National University – Dong Thap Province People's Committee", pp.192-206.



Above: Artisans work the clay predominantly by hand. They use only the most simple tools. Photo by Inra Jaya, all rights reserved.