

May 2008

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Recommended Citation

Joe Molinaro. "An Evolving Tradition: Andoa Pottery of the Ecuadorian Amazon" *Ceramics Monthly* (2008): 44-47. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/joe_molinaro/2 -photos by Joe Molinaro, Richard Burkett and Nan coffin

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Andoa Pottery of the Ecuadorian Amazon An Evolving Tradition

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Photos by
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"Indian culture, unlike ours, is a process of accommodation to nature". The words of Alain Greerbrandt from his book *The Amazon: Past, Present and Future*¹ where he describes the Amazon, it's history and people. This statement is particularly true when examining the lives and cultures of indigenous groups inhabiting the Ecuadorian Amazon region. Throughout generations they have developed a symbiotic relationship with nature through the food they eat to the objects they create for daily living such as houses, canoes, blowguns, baskets, necklaces and pottery. But today, with the encroachment of modern times, this "accommodation" extends far beyond nature to now include civilization, as we know it to exist in most societies around the globe. The accommodation to both nature *and* to the 21st century has forced indigenous people of the Amazon to adjust regularly to a new life in the rainforest. Acts of daily living and the objects used in these activities are significant in helping to define and differentiate the people and cultures from which they come. Objects used for the storage, preparation and serving of food provide a unique glimpse into family and community life. In the Ecuadorian Amazon where pottery continues to be produced, one can see the delicate balance between tradition and change in the lives of native cultures.

The upper Amazon basin region of Ecuador², home to nine culturally distinct indigenous groups³, is home to people who are no longer engaged in any meaningful pottery production and those who continue supporting a thriving pottery making tradition. In communities where pottery making continues, functional objects used either daily or exchanged in a tourist market will often influence how the tradition develops or continues. Many women potters of the Ecuadorian Amazon basin have produced a wide range of utilitarian wares using local materials and techniques that have been handed down over many generations, yet of those groups who have a continual pottery making tradition, it is only recently that a newly identified cultural group has been identified as having their own unique style.

The Andoa, a relatively small group of approximately 700 indigenous people inhabiting the Ecuadorian rainforest, have for generations been considered by many to be part of the

¹ Greerbrandt, Alain, *The Amazon: Past, Present and Future*, Thames and Hudson Ltd., London, 1988

² Ecuador is roughly the size of Colorado having approximately 12,000,000+ inhabitants. Four regions comprise the country: Coastal, Andean range, Amazon basin and the Galapagos Islands.

³ Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, Cofan, Secoya, Huaorani, Zapara and Andoa.

Kichwa⁴ people of Pastaza Province⁵. While the Andoa claim their own linguistic roots⁶, as a people they did not receive group recognition by the Ecuadorian government until 2004. And although their normal division of labor is still today similar to other indigenous peoples of the rainforest, it is their pottery that, at first glance, serves to differentiate them from their Kichwa, Shuar and Achuar neighbors. Located along the Rio Bobonaza near the village of Montalvo⁷, the Andoa have claimed their artistic identity in part through the distinctiveness of their pottery making.

In the jungle, the Andoa live in three communities: Pucayacu, Jatun Yacu and Morete Playa, each located either near or on the Rio Bobonaza. The village of Pucayacu, located along the Rio Pucayacu, is the largest of the three communities supporting a population of nearly 600 inhabitants. Because of its proximity to Montalvo, the people of Pucayacu have regular contact with outsiders and subsequently have access to items and supplies brought in through military transport. The other two Andoan villages, Jatun Yacu and Morete Playa, each support a population of approximately 50 inhabitants (less than 10 families in each community). These two smaller villages, which are located further down the Rio Bobonaza, serve as good examples of traditional Andoan life due to their remote locations and infrequent contact with others outside their communities.

While craft production in the area of pottery making is more common in the smaller villages, the opposite is true in the larger village of Pucayacu. Here one can easily see plastic and aluminum pots being used for food storage, preparation and serving. During one festival alone in the village of Pucayacu it was noticed that traditional pottery vessels were only used during a typical dance where the pottery was more symbolic than utilitarian. Chicha⁸, which was served in great abundance during the daylong festival, was delivered in plastic and aluminum pots and served in gourd containers. These are typical indicators of a community that is moving away from traditional pottery use since other non-clay items are so easily obtained. Conversely, the smaller villages of Jatun Yacu and Morete Playa still support the making and using of traditional clay objects for both daily and ceremonial use. It is in these smaller communities that one can more easily find women engaged in the making of traditional Andoan pottery.

The forming and firing techniques of the Andoa potters in the jungle are consistent with those used by other groups in the Ecuadorian rainforest. However, it is the painting and surface decoration that illustrate the different style of the Andoa when compared to other

⁴ 'Kichwa', a more recent spelling reference preferred by many contemporary Kichwa people, is sometimes also spelled 'Quichua'. The more recent term is a native spelling, while the spelling of 'Quichua' is from the Spaniards.

⁵ Pastaza province is one of five provinces of the Upper Amazon Basin region of Ecuador and home to the Canelos Kichwa who are known for their pottery making traditions.

⁶ Their language is considered the same as Shimi Gae.

⁷ Montalvo, primarily a Kichwa community located in the province of Pastaza, which also supports an Ecuadorian military presence, is located deep into the Upper Amazon Basin region of Ecuador. It is accessible from the village of Canelos on the Rio Bobonaza (approximately 2 days by motorized canoe) or by air from the town of Shell (approximately 45 minutes), which is located at the base of the Andes where the jungle begins.

⁸ Chicha, typical to Amazonia, is a masticated yuca (manioc) root beverage used to replenish bodily fluids.

indigenous groups. These markings, mostly on the outside of the piece and in the form of scratching and carving into the raw clay, are unique compared to the traditional painting with pigments on the clay surface. This surface treatment appears unique in comparison to other cultures in the jungle that produce ceramic objects. The production of typical Andoan pottery remains active in the more remote locations of the rainforest, with the threat of extinction becoming visible in the larger village of Pucayacu. And with the steady migration of inhabitants from the larger village to more urban and accessible regions of the jungle, the continuation of pottery making takes on different challenges for the Andoa.

A new location where the Andoa have more recently settled outside the remote areas of their territory is near the urban region of Puyo, located at the base of the Andes where the mountains meet the jungle floor. Puyo, a town of approximately 25,000 inhabitants, is a bustling commercial center where jungle products can be easily exchanged and where the indigenous receive both education and medical care. The city is home to many Andoan people, who as a result of seeking either jobs or better education for their children, have chosen to relocate from their jungle villages. Approximately 30 families, or nearly 300 Andoa live in the Puyo region of Pastaza⁹. It is also the place where the Andoan organization NAPE¹⁰ (Nacionalidad Andoa Pastaza del Ecuador) is located, and where Cesar Cadena, former president of NAPE and one of the finest, and rare male potters¹¹ of the Andoan people, resides.

Cesar Cadena, 30, lives outside Puyo with his extended family in the financially depressed area of Plaza Aray, where he and his sisters, still produce a wide array of ceramics. Cesar claims to have learned how to produce pottery from his mother at the young age of 16. Today, Cesar Cadena produces some of the finest examples of 'contemporary' Andoa pottery with work that appears to be a slight departure from Andoa pottery traditions. His delicate line paintings on the surface of the forms using brushes made of human hair and representing a wide array of animal and insect imagery has been part of the Andoa cultural landscape for generations. Boa constrictor snakes gently encircle the interior of bowls with sgraffito patterns etched into the rim's edge, along with carved geometric patterning on the exterior representing mountains, paths and birds. This combination of painting and sgraffito is unique in design and serves as an example of how contemporary Andoan potters, in particular those residing near Puyo, have further refined the distinct Andoan style of carving that separates their pottery from that of other indigenous people of the Amazon. With the change of location from inside the rainforest to cities like Puyo at the edge of the jungle, a fusion of new ideas and techniques may have begun, therefore setting in motion a new look for Andoa pottery.

⁹ The 300 Andoa living in Puyo, together with nearly 700 living in the jungle region create a total Andoan population in Ecuador of approximately 1,000.

¹⁰ NAPE is the governing body that assists with a variety of projects and sets regulations for the Andoa territory.

¹¹For many indigenous groups it is generally taboo for males to make pottery within their individual cultures since it has always been part of the domestic responsibilities of the women.

Cesar's work area, located outside the rear of the house, is scattered with leaf-shaped trays with simple design decorations and very large puinu forms used for the storage of chicha. Children of all ages play around the potters as they work throughout the day often stopping from time to time to receive basic instruction on how to work in clay themselves, therefore providing insight into the first stages of their own development as young artists. It is no mystery how the pottery making tradition is transmitted from one generation to the next, and by an early age these young children have already observed the entire process of working in clay. Both boys and girls are afforded the opportunity to work in clay, again supporting the notion that gender plays less of a role in pottery making for the urban Andoa. It is here one can see how Cesar may have first begun making pottery, and how a valuable cultural tradition is passed on to the next generation.

As the clay work progresses throughout the day and week, the pottery dries evenly in the hot sun and humid air of the jungle and slowly becomes ready for the fire. The firing of Andoa pottery is similar to other indigenous groups in the rainforest who produce clay objects, with the smaller forms fired in open-bottomed bowl-shaped containers, each of which serve as a type of kiln. Ash is scattered over the top of the piece being fired, filling the container in order to insulate and hold in heat during firing. Pieces are fired individually over an open flame for approximately 30-40 minutes as the stoking of a few pieces of wood completes the heating process. After the firing is complete and while the piece is still hot, a tree sap coating is applied to the form that seals the surface, enhances the colors and adds a glaze-like shine to the finished form¹². This sap coating, while fairly durable and waterproof, is more like a varnish than a glaze, and over time and continual use will deteriorate in the intense jungle heat and humidity.

While the ceramic pieces created by Cesar Cadena and other Andoan potters exhibit great skill in both design and technique, the Andoa people have not yet found reliable markets for their wares beyond normal daily use. This creates a difficult situation for the urban potter since the objects are no longer used in daily life, therefore making the sale of the work necessary for continued production¹³. As more Andoa relocate from villages located deep in the jungle to more urban areas such as Puyo, it is likely the need for their pottery will diminish and with it the continuation of a valuable cultural tradition. Tourists appear to be unaware of contemporary Andoan pottery and little effort has been made to create markets. Sale venues in Puyo and the capital city of Quito have not yet been pursued or cultivated for the Andoa, and in many cases shop owners are completely unaware of their work. In an age where much of the traditional arts and crafts of the Ecuadorian Amazon landscape are being pushed to extinction, the road for the Andoa to establish tourist markets is difficult. The threat of extinction looms large for Andoan pottery even as Cesar and his sisters continue to produce high quality work that represents the contemporary Andoan people and their culture. As young Andoa stop seeing the relevance of pottery in their individual lives, their pottery making tradition

¹² This tree sap material, called 'shilquillo' in Kichwa, is a common surface treatment for pieces fired in the Amazon region of Ecuador.

¹³ The author has identified two reasons necessary for pottery to remain active within any cultural group. These are: a) pottery is still used daily within the community or, b) a tourism/sales market has been established.

slowly dies. With this the world will experience the loss of ceramic objects that help to culturally identify a small group of Andoa living in both urban areas and along the Rio Bobonaza in the Amazon region of Ecuador.