

photo essay

The Women of Kalabougou (Mali)

Janet Goldner

Kalabougou is a village across the Niger River from Segou, Mali. The village dates from the time of the Bamana Empire, which thrived in the region from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. There are four quarters in the village, each with its own distinct population: one of *numu* (blacksmiths), one of Somono (fishing people), and two of Bamana farmers. Among the *numu*, the women (*numumusow*) traditionally make pottery and the men work with metal and wood. The potters of Kalabougou are major suppliers of pottery to the capital city of Bamako, 150 miles (241km) away, as well as to Segou.

In 1994, I received a Fulbright Fellowship to do research in Mali. As part of my research, I lived in the *numu* quarter of Kalabougou for several months in early 1995. Because my interest was in working with women who make things, I spent my time getting to know the potters and their way of life, documenting it in video and in still images such as the ones in this photo essay. Since I am not a potter, I did not make many pots in Kalabougou. The women work so hard that I did not want to add to their tasks by asking them to teach me the rudiments of something I was not going to use. I have remained in touch with the potters ever since, visiting almost annually. All of the photos presented here were taken in early 1995. ●

Janet Goldner is an artist whose interests include West Africa as well as her own layered American cultural identity. A life-long cultural journey began when she first traveled to West Africa in 1973. During her Fulbright research, she worked with potters, metal workers, and contemporary artists. Since then she has been engaged in an ongoing dialogue and connection with Malian artists and artisans. art@janetgoldner.com



1 CLAY MINE

The potters in Kalabougou operate on a weekly fabrication cycle that culminates with the Monday market across the river in Segou. On Tuesday and Wednesday, the clay mine is full of women and their daughters extracting the clay from the earth using axes (*dabaw*) fabricated by male *numuw* (blacksmiths). Men are not allowed in the mine. The clay is taken back to the village, which is several hundred yards away, on donkey carts often driven by the potters' sons. The women say that the location of the village is due to the superior quality of the clay deposit found in this spot.



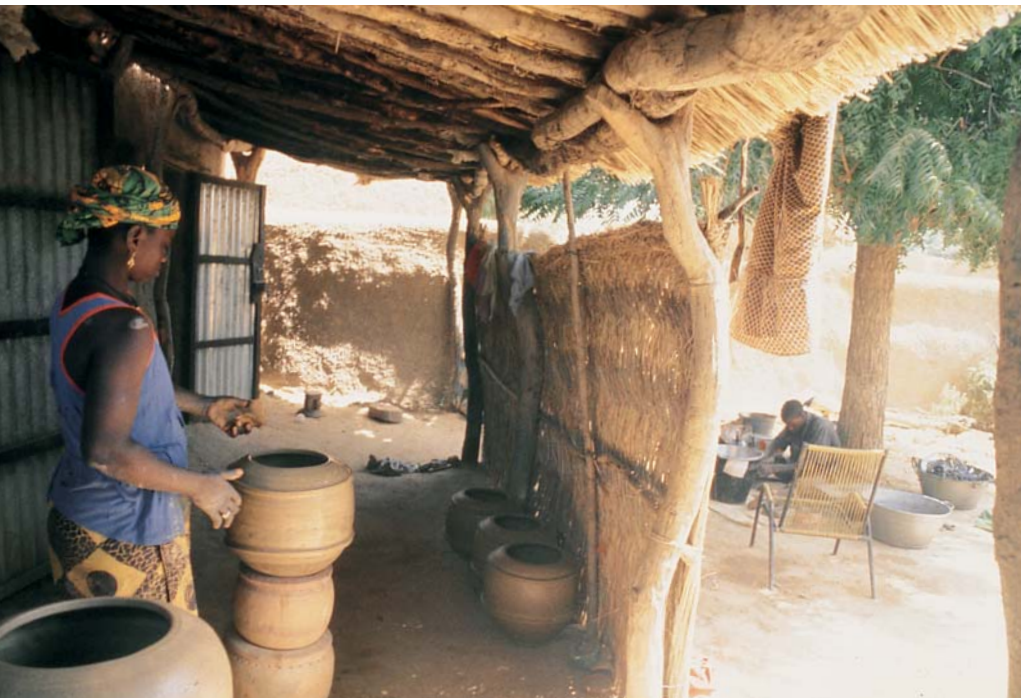
2 BOH'S FAMILY

A potter's life is more than just making pots; she also has domestic responsibilities. Early one cool January morning, my family in the village gathered around the ceramic brazier for warmth. The older woman with her back to the camera is Boh (since deceased), whose house it is. She was the president of the potters and my mother in the village. Alima—the first wife of one of Boh's sons—is giving her infant son Bagardi some medicine while the rest of the family watches. The girl in blue at center is Mai Sita, one of Alima's daughters. The woman in the yellow hat is Rolokia, Alima's co-wife (although the second marriage was not complete when this picture was taken). Abdoulaye, the man in white (also now deceased), is another of Boh's sons. Bahumu, the young woman partly seen in the front left of the image, is his daughter. The boy on the right is the son of another of Boh's children.

3 KADIA'S FAMILY

Women work singly or in groups in the vestibules of their compounds. Here, three generations of a family work side by side. The older woman in the yellow head wrap is making the long neck to be used on one of the pots that can be seen behind her. This is the only family in Kalabougou that I have seen making these pots. The woman in orange and the girl in the background are making the grog (small, pebble-sized pieces of fired clay) that is mixed into the clay body to help it withstand the thermal shock of both firing and the subsequent heating for cooking. The grog is made out of old pots that were damaged in the firing or from newly mined clay that is fired unworked for this purpose. The grog content of the clay can be as much as 40 percent.



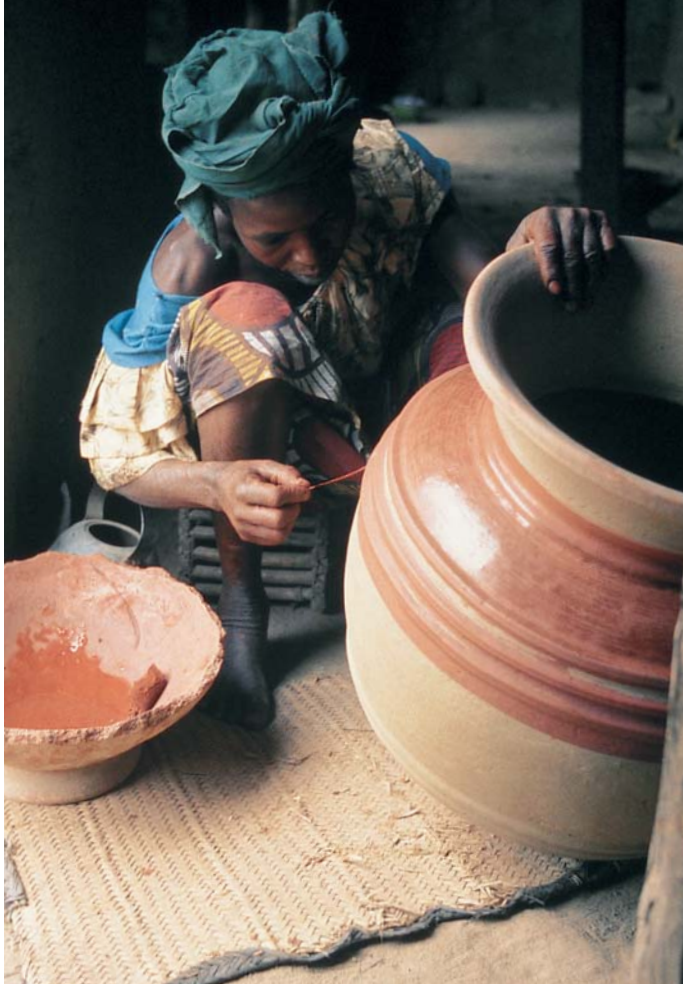


4 WASA'S FAMILY

Working in the vestibule of her compound, the woman in the pink shirt is beginning to make a pot by forming a slab over a mold. She will use the clay tool at her foot to tap the clay down the mold, making uniform walls of the desired thickness. When finished, the bottom of the pot will be removed from the mold. When it has dried to the correct hardness, coils will be added to form the upper portion of the pot and the lip. The other women are making grog. The purple plate contains peanuts for snacking. Next to the woman in yellow is a plate with glasses for making tea. Behind the woman with the blue head-tie is a clay jar covered with black plastic that contains wet clay ready for use.

5 METAL/POTTERY

This woman is finishing the lip of a water pot, which is held at the proper height atop two clay molds. She is working in the shade of the veranda of her house while her husband works just outside under a tree. He is making the recycled-metal pails and basins that surround him. Although traditionally the husbands of potters are blacksmiths, in Kalabougou, very few of the men practice their inherited profession due to economic and other factors; this is one of the few families where the potter/blacksmith equation was functioning in 1995. Although a non-*numu* can make basins and pails, since making them does not involve fire, working with metal was this man's daily occupation, and he was the only person in the village who did this. Blacksmith men in Kalabougou more often cultivate rice, millet, or small garden plots of tomatoes and lettuce for the market in Segou. Evidence that blacksmithing once flourished in Kalabougou remains, however, including anvils and other remnants of forges. There was one forge, just outside of this compound, where men worked on occasion during my stay.



6 GLAZING

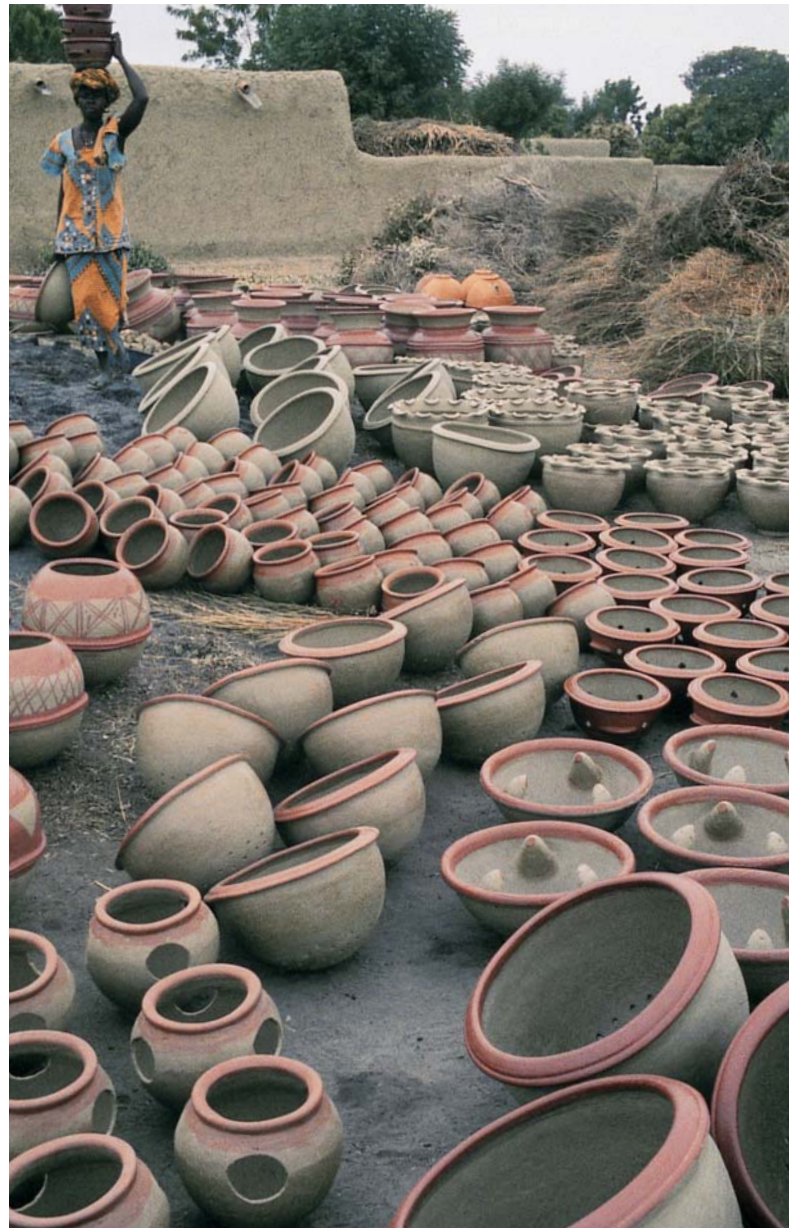
A red stone slip, purchased in the market, is applied to the formed and dried pot before firing. The color is applied to the large areas with a sponge that can be seen in the bowl of slip. They are then burnished to make them shiny. The potter is applying a decorative pattern with a shaped feather to make a line of the desired thickness. The potters told me that the painted designs were of their own choosing and had no particular meaning.

7 COLLECTING GRASS

Firing consumes an enormous amount of grass and branches. When I was in Kalabougou, I tried to document every step of the pottery-making process. One evening I realized that I did not know where the grass came from. I asked Alima if I could go with her when she went to collect it. She agreed so I got up early the next morning. We walked to a field a few hundred yards outside the village, where we met other potters also collecting grass for the firing. The potter grabs a handful of grass and cuts it with a small scythe. As in all the other steps in the pottery process, there was nothing about this one that was simple. There is a system for piling the handfuls of cut grass into large mounds almost as tall as the women themselves and then binding the mound of grass with a rope twisted on the spot from the cut grass. With the aid of other women, the potter then hoists the completed bale onto her head so that she can carry it back to the village. The branches used in the firing are gathered by the sons of the potters.

8 POTS READY FOR FIRING

Firings take place in Kalabougou every Saturday and Sunday in the late afternoon. By mid-afternoon, many women and their daughters have brought unfired pots from the compounds where they were made to the firing place, a process that takes many hours. On each trip, a woman carries two pots on her head and one in her hand. Here wavy-lipped flower pots, along with pots for storing water, cooking, and carrying embers, can be seen. In 1995, there were four mounds at each firing, each containing the pots of different large extended families in the village. In 2005 when I was in Kalabougou, there were five mounds. The population of potters has increased.





9 MAKING THE MOUNDS

When the women and girls have brought all the pots to the firing place, they begin to construct the mound by placing a layer of branches on the ground. The pots are positioned on and amid the branches and then grass is piled high to complete the mound. Although the mound contains the pots of many women, who are related through their husbands' extended families, each woman is responsible for her own or her immediate family's pots within the mound.

10 LIGHTING THE FIRE

When a mound is completed and the ground around has been swept clean of residual combustible material, a senior potter lights the fire. A handful of grass is lit and the woman runs around the circumference of the mound touching the burning torch to the dried grass. Some mounds are still being constructed as others are already burning.

11 TENDING THE FIRE

During the firing, each woman tends her own pots within the mound. The woman in red is throwing more grass on the mound to keep the fire around her pots burning longer. The firing takes about thirty to forty minutes.





12 REMOVING THE POTS

The potters pull their vessels from the still-smoldering mound using a long wooden pole with a metal hook on one end. Balanced on the hook, the pot is then immersed in a mixture of water and berries that tempers the vessel and adds a reddish finish. There is a pan of the berries in the foreground. The immersed pot makes a tapping noise when it touches the side of the vessel and is turned on the hook.

13 QUENCHING

Steam rises from a burning hot pot that has been immersed in the berry mixture. The older woman behind is picking up a smaller pot with a pair of tongs.

14 POTS TO MARKET

The end of the weekly cycle is the Monday market in Segou. The pots are loaded onto carts at the firing place and brought to the edge of the river, where they are transferred to large canoes for transport to market. The potters are being aided by their sons. Many canoes are loaded high with pots each week.