

The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia.* [DVD] Tara Belkin, producer. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2006. 25 min.

Reviewed by Mary S. Thieme

The Potters of Buur Heybe, Somalia was originally issued in 1991 as a 25 minute video in VHS format by the University of Southern California. It was reissued as a DVD in 2006 in the series *Archaeological Methods and Practice*, an educational film series edited by Steven Brandt of the University of Florida that introduces students and practitioners to the contemporary methods and practices of world archaeology, ethnoarchaeology, and cultural resource management.

Tara Belkin shot the film during the summer of 1989 as the documentary component of the Burr Ecological and Archaeological Project (BEAP). While the main focus of that project was archaeological excavations at Burr Heybe, excavations of rock shelters suggested that pottery had long been produced. This, along with the importance of the town as a contemporary pottery center led BEAP to conduct ethnoarchaeological studies of pottery production in the town and to the making of this film.

The film opens with a view of a potter forming a pot and the narration of a myth telling how pottery was first discovered. A map locates Somalia, Buur Heybe, and the granite hills from which the potters get their materials. This is followed by a description of the two ethnic groups who share the area: the nomadic pastoralists who come during the dry season and the settled subsistence farmers. The lifestyle and house construction of the two groups are shown and contrasted. With this background provided, the film moves to the pottery, showing the division of labor in its production. Buur ('granite hills') Hebe ('potters' sand') had a population of about 400 at the time of the filming, with 21 male potters working full or part time. Only men form the pots. The clay pits are located one half mile west of the village and are available to all. Women, usually the potters' wives and daughters, dig three kinds of clay from stratigraphically distinct levels and pound it. Some go daily, except Friday, others several times a week. The work is strenuous and the women are shown working side by side, pounding, mixing, and sifting the clay into a fine consistency which is then transported by camel, donkey, or by the women themselves to the village for the men to form into vessels.

After mixing the clay with water and dissolved clay from previous vessel forming, the potter wedges the clay while the narrator explains the importance of this task. The film then moves to the forming of the pots on a revolving wooden plate mounted on a stone pivot. The narration follows the process of forming flat and round bottomed vessels and the addition of decoration. The tools and the vessel forms are shown, and the function of the cooking pots described. The potters practice open or above ground firing and both women and men participate. In the film the skill required is emphasized as is the interest of villagers, who are welcome to observe. Previously potters had made three to four pots per day to sell to other villagers; however, with increased transportation available the pots were being distributed to other towns by truck and each potter was producing up to 30 per day.

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The final portion of the film focuses on the use of the vessels in daily life, with a particular focus on use by women in food preparation. This leads to showing sorghum preparation and cooking. Another task is getting water in the large water pots. Emphasis is placed on women's friendships, sharing of tasks and passing on of knowledge and skills to their daughters. Shown, too, are the uses of the pots by the nomadic women. The film ends with a segment in which a potter transmits his knowledge to a boy, and a comment that broken pots will become sherds for the enlightenment of future archaeologists.

The camera work in this film is excellent and the narration by Surer Noor is clear and adds to the quality of the presentation. The four page liner notes co-authored by project members Steven Brandt, Hussein Suleiman Ahmed, and Osman Yusaf Mohamed provides detailed description and additional information to that found in the narration, as well as additional references. The film interweaves descriptions of pottery production with geographic and ethnographic information and therefore would be useful in introductory anthropology classes as well as to students with a particular interest in pottery. Finally, given the violence that has occurred in Somalia in recent years this film might now be considered a historic document.

Mary S. Thieme is a museum anthropologist and ethnographer with extensive experience studying the pottery traditions of Mexico. In the 1960s she spent two years in Western Nigeria. In addition to assisting her ethnomusicologist husband in his Yoruba music research, collecting and documenting musical instruments for the Smithsonian Institution and the Nigerian National Museum, she studied drum making and researched and collected pottery and textiles for the Smithsonian. After a 30-year career working in museums, including the Smithsonian and the Museum of African Art, she is now retired and lives in Panama City, Florida.