



Women, Craft, And Culture: A Study Of Thongjao Pottery In Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Thongjao pottery is one of the most distinctive and enduring traditional crafts of Manipur, deeply rooted in the cultural history and social life of Thongjao village. Practiced primarily by women, this indigenous pottery tradition is characterized by hand-moulding techniques, the absence of the potter's wheel, and the use of locally available natural resources. The present study examines Thongjao pottery as a living cultural practice shaped by indigenous knowledge systems, environmental conditions, and changing socio-economic realities. The study adopts an ethnographic and qualitative research approach, drawing on primary data collected through field observation, semi-structured interviews with potters, and oral histories, supplemented by secondary sources such as scholarly literature, government reports, and archival materials. The objectives of the study are to document the historical evolution of Thongjao pottery, analyze the processes of knowledge transmission and production, examine its socio-cultural significance, and assess the challenges affecting its continuity and sustainability. Findings reveal that Thongjao pottery has evolved as a women-centered subsistence craft closely linked to household needs, ritual practices, and settlement patterns. Indigenous knowledge related to clay selection, shaping, drying, and firing is transmitted informally through generations and remains largely experiential. The craft depends heavily on local environmental resources, making it vulnerable to ecological change and restricted access to traditional clay sources. Despite declining demand, competition from industrial products, and reduced participation of younger generations, pottery-making continues to survive due to strong cultural attachment, ritual relevance, and localized demand. The study concludes that Thongjao pottery represents an important form of intangible cultural heritage that embodies cultural identity, social cohesion, and indigenous ecological knowledge. While the craft demonstrates cultural resilience, its long-term sustainability remains uncertain without supportive measures that respect local traditions, encourage intergenerational transmission, and address environmental and economic constraints. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive strategies for documentation, preservation, and sustainable development of traditional crafts in Manipur

Keywords: Thongjao Pottery; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Cultural Heritage; Women-Centered Craft; Traditional Livelihoods.

Introduction

Thongjao pottery is one of the most well-known and distinctive traditional crafts of Manipur. Practiced primarily by the women of Thongjao village, this pottery tradition (Thongjao Village Village and People Land of Pottery Part 2, n.d.) is unique for its hand-moulding technique, in which earthen vessels are shaped without the use of a potter's wheel. The craft has been transmitted orally and practically from one generation to another, forming an integral part of the cultural identity, subsistence economy, and indigenous knowledge system of the region. Even today, Thongjao pottery occupies a significant place in the everyday life of local communities, particularly in cooking, storage, and ritual practices. The fame of Thongjao pottery lies not only in its aesthetic simplicity but also in its functional efficiency and cultural symbolism. The pottery items, such as cooking pots, water vessels, and ceremonial wares, are made using locally available clay and tempering materials, reflecting a close relationship between the community and its natural environment. The firing process, carried out in open kilns or hearths, further underscores the traditional and sustainable nature of this craft. As a result, Thongjao pottery represents a living example of cultural ecology, where environment, technology, and social organization are closely intertwined (Singh & Devi, 2023).

Despite its historical importance and cultural value, Thongjao pottery has been facing significant challenges in recent decades. Rapid modernization, the availability of metal and plastic alternatives, changing lifestyle preferences, and limited institutional support have contributed to the gradual decline of pottery production and the reduced number of active potters. Younger generations are increasingly reluctant to adopt the craft as a primary livelihood, leading to concerns about the continuity and survival of this traditional knowledge system. In this context, an in-depth academic study of Thongjao pottery becomes both timely and necessary. The present dissertation seeks to systematically examine the historical evolution, production techniques, socio-economic organization, and cultural significance of Thongjao pottery. It also aims to analyze the contemporary challenges faced by potters and to assess the prospects for sustainability and revival of the craft. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines cultural geography, anthropology, and rural development perspectives, the study attempts to contribute to the broader discourse on traditional crafts and indigenous livelihoods in Manipur.

The objectives of this dissertation are to document the traditional methods of pottery production practiced in Thongjao village, to analyze the socio-economic profile of the pottery-producing households, to examine the role of pottery in local culture and rituals, and to identify the factors responsible for the decline or transformation of the craft. The study further seeks to suggest measures for the preservation and promotion of Thongjao pottery in the contemporary socio-economic context. The scope of the study is limited to Thongjao village and focuses primarily on traditional pottery practices as they exist in the present period, while also drawing upon historical narratives and secondary sources. The significance of this research lies in its potential to serve as a comprehensive academic record of Thongjao pottery, which may be useful for scholars, policy makers, cultural organizations, and future researchers interested in the preservation of Manipur's intangible cultural heritage.

Objectives

1. To document and analyze the traditional pottery practices of Thongjao village, including indigenous techniques, tools, raw materials, production processes, historical evolution, socio-economic organization, and cultural-ritual significance within the local community.
2. To assess the contemporary challenges, sustainability, and future prospects of Thongjao pottery, with particular reference to production, marketing, livelihood viability, modernization pressures, and to suggest measures for its preservation and revitalization.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative and descriptive research methodology to examine Thongjao pottery as a traditional craft deeply embedded in the social, cultural, economic, and environmental context of Thongjao village in Manipur. Given the indigenous, experiential, and largely undocumented nature of the pottery tradition, an ethnographic approach was considered most appropriate for capturing the processes, meanings, and lived experiences associated with the craft. The study is designed as an in-depth case study of Thongjao village, enabling a holistic understanding of pottery practices within their natural setting.

Both primary and secondary sources of data were used to achieve the objectives of the study. Primary data were collected through fieldwork in Thongjao village using methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, oral histories, and informal discussions. Participant observation allowed direct engagement with various stages of pottery-making, including clay collection, preparation, shaping, drying, and firing, thereby providing first-hand insight into indigenous techniques and tools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pottery-producing households, with particular emphasis on women potters who are the primary practitioners of the craft. These interviews focused on production processes, skill transmission, socio-economic conditions, cultural significance, and contemporary challenges. Oral histories obtained from elder members of the community were used to reconstruct the historical evolution of Thongjao

pottery and to understand changes in practices over time. Informal discussions with village elders and community members further helped to contextualize pottery-making within broader social and cultural frameworks.

Secondary data were collected from a range of published and unpublished sources, including books, research articles, government reports, census data, gazetteers, and previous academic studies related to traditional crafts, pottery traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and the cultural geography of Manipur. These sources provided theoretical perspectives and comparative insights that supported the interpretation of primary data. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select respondents for the study. Households actively engaged in pottery-making and those with long-standing involvement in the craft were intentionally chosen to ensure the authenticity and depth of information. Elder women potters were given particular importance due to their extensive knowledge and experience. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive and thematic analysis. Information from interviews and observations was systematically categorized into themes such as indigenous techniques, resource use, socio-cultural significance, economic aspects, and challenges faced by the craft. Triangulation of data from multiple sources was employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and respect was shown for cultural values, community norms, and intellectual property related to traditional knowledge. The study is limited to Thongjao village and relies primarily on qualitative data, which may not fully capture variations beyond the study area. Additionally, the lack of written historical records necessitated dependence on oral sources, which may involve subjective interpretations. Despite these limitations, the methodology adopted enabled a comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of Thongjao pottery and effectively addressed the objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Thongjao pottery has a long and continuous history that is intimately connected with the settlement pattern, cultural evolution, and everyday life of Thongjao village in Manipur. The emergence and persistence of this craft cannot be understood in isolation from the physical environment and social organization of the community. Oral traditions preserved among the potters suggest that pottery-making developed as a localized and specialized occupation primarily due to the availability of suitable clay deposits in the surrounding landscape. The presence of fine alluvial clay in nearby low-lying areas, wetlands, and riverine zones provided the material basis for the development of pottery, while the domestic and ritual requirements of the community created a sustained demand for earthen vessels. From a historical perspective, pottery in Thongjao evolved as a response to everyday necessities rather than as a commercial enterprise. Earthen pots were indispensable for cooking, water storage, grain preservation, and ritual practices. In a predominantly agrarian society, these vessels formed an essential component of household infrastructure. Cooking pots made of clay were preferred for their ability to retain heat and enhance the taste of food, while storage vessels were valued for their durability and suitability for preserving grains and liquids. Ritual use of pottery during festivals, religious ceremonies, and life-cycle events further reinforced its importance within the social and cultural fabric of the village.

A distinctive feature of Thongjao pottery is its development as a women-centered craft (Hanghal, 2023). Unlike many pottery traditions in India where production is associated with specific caste groups or dominated by male artisans using the potter's wheel, Thongjao pottery is traditionally practiced by women using hand-moulding techniques. This gendered division of labor reflects unique social and cultural arrangements within the community (Crafts, n.d.). Women not only shape and fire the vessels but also serve as the primary custodians of technical knowledge and cultural meaning associated with the craft. Men generally play supportive roles, such as collecting clay, fuel, or assisting in transportation, but the core production process remains firmly within the domain of women. The women-centered nature of Thongjao pottery has significant implications for understanding its historical continuity. Pottery skills are transmitted informally within the household, primarily from mothers to daughters, through observation, participation, and repeated practice. This mode of transmission has enabled the craft to persist over generations without formal training institutions or written manuals. The stability of this knowledge system points to a strong cultural attachment to pottery-making, where the craft is perceived not merely as an economic activity but as an inherited responsibility and marker of identity.

Historically, pottery production in Thongjao was largely subsistence-oriented. Households produced earthenware mainly to meet their own needs and those of neighboring communities. Surplus production, when available, was exchanged through barter systems or sold in nearby local markets. Market interactions were limited in scale and scope, reflecting the localized nature of the economy. Pottery was not produced for accumulation of profit but for sustaining household livelihoods and fulfilling social obligations. This subsistence orientation allowed pottery-making to coexist harmoniously with agriculture and other livelihood activities. The continuity of pottery practices over generations indicates a stable and resilient system of knowledge transmission. Despite changes in political, economic, and social contexts, the fundamental techniques of clay preparation, hand-moulding, drying, and firing have remained largely unchanged. This continuity suggests that Thongjao pottery has successfully adapted to environmental and social constraints

while maintaining its core traditional character. The persistence of traditional forms and techniques also reflects a collective commitment to cultural preservation within the community.

However, the historical reconstruction of Thongjao pottery relies heavily on oral histories, as written documentation is largely absent. Elderly potters and community members serve as key sources of information, recounting narratives of how pottery was practiced in earlier times, how clay sources were identified, and how production cycles were organized around agricultural seasons. These oral accounts, while subjective, provide invaluable insights into the evolution of the craft and the lived experiences of the potters. They also highlight the dynamic nature of tradition, where practices are continuously reinterpreted and adapted while retaining their cultural essence. The absence of written records is itself indicative of the marginalized position of traditional crafts within formal historical documentation. Pottery, being a household-based and women-centered activity, rarely found representation in official records or colonial ethnographies. As a result, much of its history remains undocumented, emphasizing the importance of field-based research and oral testimony in reconstructing the past. The reliance on oral tradition also underscores the vulnerability of such knowledge systems, as the loss of elder practitioners can lead to irreversible gaps in collective memory.

Over time, the historical trajectory of Thongjao pottery has been shaped by both continuity and change. While the basic subsistence-oriented nature of production persisted for long periods, gradual exposure to external markets and modern goods introduced new challenges. The availability of metal and plastic utensils reduced the everyday demand for earthenware, affecting the economic viability of pottery-making. Nevertheless, the historical foundation of the craft, rooted in cultural practice and environmental adaptation, has allowed it to survive despite these pressures. The practice of pottery in Thongjao village is deeply embedded in indigenous knowledge systems that have evolved through long-term interaction between the community and its natural environment. This knowledge is not acquired through formal instruction or written manuals but is transmitted organically within the household and community setting. From an early age, children—particularly girls—are introduced to pottery-making through observation and gradual participation in various stages of production. This informal learning process allows knowledge to be absorbed naturally, reinforcing both technical skill and cultural values associated with the craft.

Women play a central and decisive role in the transmission of pottery knowledge. Mothers, grandmothers, and elder female relatives function as the primary instructors, guiding younger members through demonstration rather than verbal explanation. Learning occurs through repeated practice, correction, and imitation, enabling the learner to internalize techniques over time. This form of apprenticeship strengthens intergenerational bonds and reinforces the role of women as custodians of traditional knowledge. At the same time, it highlights the gendered nature of skill transmission, where pottery-making is closely linked to women's domestic and social responsibilities. The indigenous knowledge system underlying Thongjao pottery is predominantly experiential and intuitive. Decisions regarding clay selection, preparation, and shaping are made through sensory perception developed over years of practice. Potters assess clay quality by touch, texture, and elasticity, identifying suitable material based on its responsiveness during kneading and shaping. Similarly, judgments about moisture content are made by feel rather than measurement, ensuring that the clay maintains the right balance between plasticity and firmness. Such knowledge cannot be easily articulated or quantified, as it relies on embodied experience rather than explicit instruction.

The firing process further illustrates the experiential nature of this knowledge system. Potters determine firing duration and temperature by observing visual cues such as color changes, smoke patterns, and sound rather than using thermometers or standardized firing schedules. These sensory indicators guide decisions during the firing process, ensuring that vessels achieve the desired strength and durability. The ability to interpret these signs reflects a deep familiarity with both materials and techniques, developed through sustained engagement with the craft. This embedded knowledge system also reflects a close relationship between the potters and their environment. The identification of clay sources, timing of extraction, and selection of fuel materials are all informed by intimate knowledge of local ecological conditions. Seasonal variations influence production cycles, with potters adapting their practices to weather patterns and resource availability. Such ecological awareness underscores the adaptive and sustainable nature of Thongjao pottery, where production methods are aligned with environmental constraints.

While this mode of knowledge transmission has ensured continuity over generations, it also makes the craft vulnerable to disruption. The absence of formal documentation or institutional training means that the loss of skilled practitioners can lead to irreversible gaps in knowledge. Declining interest among younger generations, driven by changing aspirations and economic pressures, poses a significant threat to the sustainability of this indigenous knowledge system. As fewer individuals engage in pottery-making, opportunities for learning through observation and participation diminish, weakening the chain of transmission. The production of Thongjao pottery is fundamentally dependent on locally available natural resources, reflecting a close and long-standing relationship between the potters and their surrounding environment. Among these resources, clay constitutes the most critical raw material and forms the material foundation of the craft. The selection, extraction, and preparation of clay are guided by generations of accumulated knowledge, enabling potters to identify suitable deposits based on experience rather than scientific analysis. These clay sources are typically located in specific areas near wetlands, riverbanks, floodplains, and other low-lying zones where fine alluvial deposits accumulate. Such locations are well known

within the community, and access to them has traditionally been regulated through customary practices rather than formal ownership.

The process of clay collection is labor-intensive and often requires coordinated effort at the household level. Clay is extracted manually using simple tools and transported to the village, where it is left to dry partially before further processing. Potters possess detailed knowledge about the qualities of different clay sources, recognizing variations in texture, color, and plasticity. Certain types of clay are preferred for cooking vessels, while others are more suitable for storage or ritual items. This selective use of resources demonstrates an advanced understanding of material properties developed through prolonged experimentation and practice. Once collected, the clay undergoes a careful preparation process to make it suitable for pottery-making. Raw clay is rarely used in its natural form, as impurities and excess moisture can weaken the finished vessels. Potters remove stones, roots, and other debris through manual sieving and repeated kneading. To enhance plasticity and reduce the risk of cracking during drying and firing, natural tempering materials are mixed with the clay. These tempering agents, which may include sand, crushed pottery fragments, or organic matter, are selected based on their availability and suitability. The proportion of clay to temper is determined intuitively, relying on tactile judgment rather than fixed measurements.

The kneading process is particularly labor-intensive and demands physical strength and endurance. Clay is repeatedly pressed, folded, and turned to achieve uniform consistency. This stage is crucial, as insufficient kneading can result in air pockets that cause vessels to crack or break during firing. After kneading, the prepared clay is allowed to rest for a period, enabling moisture to distribute evenly. This resting phase, though often overlooked, is essential for improving workability and ensuring structural integrity. Seasonal variations play a decisive role in shaping pottery production cycles in Thongjao village. Pottery-making is closely aligned with climatic conditions, particularly rainfall patterns. The dry season is the most favorable period for production, as dry weather facilitates clay extraction, drying of shaped vessels, and open firing. During the monsoon months, excessive moisture makes clay extraction difficult, prolongs drying time, and increases the risk of damage to unfired vessels. As a result, pottery production slows significantly or temporarily ceases during the rainy season.

These seasonal constraints influence not only production volume but also labor allocation within households. During the dry months, pottery-making often intensifies, with women dedicating more time to shaping and firing vessels. In contrast, the monsoon season is typically devoted to agricultural activities and household responsibilities. This cyclical pattern illustrates the integration of pottery-making within a broader livelihood system, where activities are adjusted according to environmental conditions. The firing process further underscores the dependence on natural resources. Traditional firing methods in Thongjao rely on locally available fuel materials such as firewood, agricultural residues, and dried plant matter. The selection of fuel affects firing temperature and duration, requiring careful management to achieve the desired outcome. The firing site, usually an open space near the household, must be protected from wind and rain, further reinforcing the importance of favorable weather conditions.

In recent decades, environmental changes have begun to pose significant challenges to the sustainability of resource supply. Land-use transformation, including urban expansion, agricultural intensification, and infrastructure development, has reduced access to traditional clay sources. Wetlands and low-lying areas that once provided abundant clay are increasingly converted for other uses, limiting the availability of high-quality raw materials. In some cases, potters are compelled to travel greater distances to collect clay, increasing labor and time costs. Environmental degradation also affects the quality of clay deposits. Soil erosion, pollution, and changes in water regimes can alter the composition of clay, making it less suitable for pottery. Such changes disrupt established knowledge systems, as potters must adapt to unfamiliar materials or modify traditional techniques. The loss of reliable clay sources not only threatens production but also undermines the cultural continuity of the craft, as access to traditional resources is integral to its identity.

These challenges are compounded by broader socio-economic factors. Declining interest among younger generations reduces the labor available for resource-intensive activities such as clay collection and preparation. At the same time, increasing reliance on alternative materials and utensils diminishes the incentive to invest effort in pottery-making. Together, these factors contribute to a gradual weakening of the resource base that supports Thongjao pottery. Despite these challenges, the traditional resource management practices of Thongjao potters reflect principles of sustainability and ecological adaptation. Clay extraction is typically conducted on a small scale, minimizing environmental impact. The use of locally sourced materials and low-energy firing methods aligns with environmentally sustainable production. However, the continuation of these practices depends on the preservation of access to natural resources and the transmission of ecological knowledge.

Thongjao pottery is distinguished by its distinctive hand-moulding technique, which sets it apart from many other pottery traditions in India that rely on the use of the potter's wheel. The absence of the wheel is not a technological limitation but a deliberate continuation of a traditional method that has been refined through generations of practice. This technique demands a high degree of manual skill, patience, and experiential knowledge, as the potter must shape the vessel entirely by hand while maintaining balance, symmetry, and structural integrity. The reliance on hand-moulding reflects the deep-rooted traditional character of the craft and its resistance to mechanization. The tools employed in Thongjao pottery are simple yet effective, emphasizing functionality over complexity. Wooden paddles, smooth stones, flat supports, and occasionally

improvised tools made from locally available materials are used during shaping and finishing (Manipur's Thongjao Pottery, n.d.). Each tool serves a specific purpose: paddles help expand and thin the walls of the vessel, stones are used to smooth surfaces and enhance strength, and flat bases provide stability during shaping (Devi and Panjwani, 2014). The effective use of these tools depends largely on the potter's experience, as the pressure, angle, and rhythm of movement must be carefully controlled. Mastery of these techniques is acquired through long-term practice rather than formal instruction. The production process of Thongjao pottery follows a sequential and carefully structured series of stages, each of which is critical to the quality of the finished product. The first stage, clay preparation, involves refining the raw material to achieve the appropriate consistency and workability. Prepared clay is kneaded repeatedly to remove air pockets and ensure uniform texture. This stage demands physical effort and careful judgment, as inadequately prepared clay can lead to cracks or deformation during later stages.

The shaping stage is the most skill-intensive phase of production. Using hand-moulding techniques, the potter gradually builds the vessel by coiling, pinching, and smoothing the clay. The form emerges through repeated adjustments, with the potter constantly assessing thickness, symmetry, and proportion. Unlike wheel-thrown pottery, where rotational motion aids uniformity, hand-moulding requires continuous manual correction. This process highlights the potter's embodied knowledge and ability to visualize the final form while working incrementally.

Following shaping, the vessels are left to dry under controlled conditions. Drying is a delicate stage, as excessive exposure to sun or wind can cause warping or cracking. Potters typically place vessels in shaded, well-ventilated areas and adjust drying time according to weather conditions. This stage may take several days, depending on vessel size and climatic factors. The gradual removal of moisture is essential for maintaining structural integrity during firing. Surface finishing constitutes another important stage in the production process. Once partially dried, vessels are smoothed using stones or other polishing tools to remove irregularities and enhance strength. Some vessels may receive additional treatments such as slip application or surface burnishing, depending on their intended use. Finishing not only improves aesthetic appearance but also contributes to functional qualities, such as reduced porosity and increased durability.

The final stage of production is firing, which transforms the shaped clay into durable earthenware. In Thongjao, firing is conducted in open kilns or hearths rather than enclosed kilns. Vessels are carefully arranged, surrounded by fuel materials such as firewood, agricultural residues, or dried plant matter, and ignited gradually (Ningthoujam & Rashida, 2022). The firing process requires constant monitoring to regulate temperature and prevent damage. Potters rely on visual cues, such as flame color and vessel appearance, to judge firing progress, reflecting an experiential understanding of thermal processes. Open firing produces earthenware that is well suited to specific cooking and storage purposes. The porous nature of the pottery allows for slow and even heat distribution, making it ideal for traditional cooking practices. Similarly, storage vessels benefit from the natural cooling properties of earthenware. These functional attributes reinforce the continued relevance of Thongjao pottery within local culinary and domestic contexts. Throughout the production process, attention to detail and accumulated experience play a crucial role in minimizing defects. Cracks, uneven surfaces, or firing failures can result in significant loss of labor and materials. As a result, potters develop a cautious and methodical approach, constantly adapting techniques in response to environmental conditions and material behavior. This adaptability underscores the resilience of traditional knowledge systems in managing uncertainties.

In contemporary contexts, the hand-moulding technique and traditional production methods of Thongjao pottery face both challenges and opportunities. While mechanization and industrial alternatives offer efficiency and uniformity, they lack the cultural authenticity and environmental sustainability inherent in traditional methods. The continued practice of hand-moulding thus represents a form of cultural preservation, maintaining techniques that embody historical continuity and community identity.

A wide range of pottery items are produced in Thongjao village, each carefully designed to meet specific functional, cultural, and ritual requirements. The diversity of these products reflects the adaptability of traditional pottery to everyday domestic needs as well as its symbolic importance within the social and cultural life of the community. Pottery-making in Thongjao is not oriented toward mass production or standardized forms; instead, each vessel is shaped according to established traditional norms, practical considerations, and the specific needs of individual households. Among the most commonly produced items are cooking pots, which occupy a central place in domestic life. These pots are designed to withstand repeated exposure to fire and heat, making them suitable for traditional cooking practices. Their shape, thickness, and size are carefully adjusted to ensure even heat distribution and durability. Cooking pots are often preferred over metal utensils for preparing certain traditional dishes, as earthenware is believed to enhance flavor and maintain the authenticity of indigenous food practices. The continued use of these vessels underscores the enduring relationship between pottery and culinary traditions in Thongjao.

Water vessels constitute another important category of pottery products. These vessels are designed to store drinking water and are valued for their natural cooling properties. The porous nature of earthenware allows for slow evaporation, which helps keep water cool, particularly during the warmer months. The design of water vessels reflects both functional and aesthetic considerations, with smooth surfaces and stable bases that facilitate daily use. These vessels are commonly found in households and continue to be preferred in certain contexts despite the availability of modern containers. Storage jars represent a further category of pottery

items produced in Thongjao. These jars are used for storing grains, seeds, and other household items. Their size and shape vary according to storage requirements, with larger jars used for long-term storage and smaller ones for daily use. The durability and breathability of earthenware make it suitable for preserving agricultural produce, especially in a humid climate. The use of storage jars highlights the integration of pottery within the agrarian economy of the village.

In addition to utilitarian items, Thongjao potters also produce pottery for ritual and ceremonial purposes. These ritual objects are often crafted according to specific cultural norms and symbolic meanings. Certain vessels are used exclusively during festivals, religious ceremonies, marriages, and other life-cycle events. The forms and sizes of these items are not arbitrary but are guided by tradition and ritual prescriptions. For example, specific pots may be required for offerings, ceremonial cooking, or ritual cleansing, reinforcing the sacred dimension of pottery. The production of ceremonial pottery underscores the cultural significance of the craft beyond its economic utility. These items are often valued not for their market price but for their symbolic meaning and ritual function. Their use during important social occasions reinforces communal identity and continuity of tradition. The fact that such pottery continues to be produced and used demonstrates the resilience of cultural practices associated with Thongjao pottery.

The design and size of pottery items are influenced by traditional norms that have evolved over generations. Potters adhere to established forms that are widely recognized and accepted within the community. These norms ensure consistency and functionality while allowing for subtle variations based on individual skill and preference. Household requirements also play a crucial role in determining the type and quantity of pottery produced. Larger households may require more cooking and storage vessels, while ceremonial needs may dictate the production of specialized items. The continued relevance of earthenware in ceremonial contexts highlights the symbolic value of pottery in Thongjao society. Earthen vessels are often associated with purity, tradition, and cultural authenticity. Their use in rituals is believed to uphold customary practices and maintain continuity with ancestral traditions. This symbolic association elevates pottery from a mere utilitarian craft to an important cultural institution.

Moreover, the production of diverse pottery items reflects the adaptability of Thongjao potters to changing needs while maintaining traditional forms. Although modern utensils have reduced the everyday use of earthenware, the continued demand for ritual and culturally significant pottery provides a niche for the survival of the craft. Potters often balance the production of utilitarian items with ceremonial objects, adapting their work to seasonal and cultural demands. Thongjao pottery occupies a central and enduring position in the social and cultural life of the community, extending far beyond its role as a utilitarian craft. It is deeply embedded in everyday practices, collective activities, and symbolic expressions that define the identity of Thongjao village. The production and use of pottery are closely intertwined with social relations, cultural values, and shared traditions, making the craft an important medium through which community cohesion and cultural continuity are maintained.

One of the most significant social functions of Thongjao pottery lies in its role in reinforcing social bonds within the community. Pottery-making is not an isolated household activity but often involves collective participation, particularly during stages such as clay collection and firing. Clay extraction from designated sites may involve multiple households working together, sharing labor and resources. Similarly, the firing of pottery, which requires careful coordination and monitoring, often becomes a collective event where family members and neighbors assist one another. These shared activities foster cooperation, mutual support, and a sense of collective responsibility, strengthening social relationships within the village. The communal nature of pottery production also facilitates the transmission of cultural values and social norms. Younger members of the community learn not only technical skills but also the importance of cooperation, patience, and respect for elders through participation in pottery-related activities. Such learning experiences contribute to socialization processes that reinforce community cohesion and continuity. In this way, pottery-making serves as both a practical and pedagogical activity within the social fabric of Thongjao.

Beyond its social function, Thongjao pottery serves as a powerful marker of cultural identity. The distinctive hand-moulding techniques, forms, and uses of pottery produced in the village distinguish Thongjao from other settlements in Manipur. This uniqueness fosters a sense of pride and collective identity among the potters and the broader community. Pottery thus becomes a tangible expression of cultural heritage, symbolizing the village's historical continuity and traditional knowledge systems.

The cultural significance of pottery is particularly evident in its association with traditional food practices. Earthen vessels are commonly used for preparing and serving traditional dishes, and their use is believed to enhance flavor and preserve the authenticity of indigenous cuisine. The porous nature of earthenware allows for slow and even cooking, which is valued in traditional culinary practices. The continued preference for earthen vessels in certain contexts reflects a strong attachment to customary foodways and a resistance to complete reliance on modern utensils. Pottery also plays a crucial role in ritual and ceremonial practices, further underscoring its symbolic value. Specific pottery items are used during festivals, religious ceremonies, marriages, and other life-cycle events. These vessels are often associated with notions of purity, tradition, and continuity. The use of earthenware in rituals is believed to maintain cultural authenticity and honor ancestral practices. Such symbolic associations elevate pottery from a functional object to a meaningful cultural artifact imbued with spiritual and social significance.

The integration of pottery into ritual life reinforces its status as an essential component of cultural identity. During communal celebrations and ceremonies, the use of traditional pottery serves as a visible reminder of shared heritage and collective memory. These practices help sustain cultural continuity by linking present generations with their ancestral past. Even as modern materials and utensils become increasingly prevalent, the retention of pottery in ritual contexts demonstrates its enduring cultural relevance. Thongjao pottery also contributes to social differentiation and recognition within the community. Skilled potters, particularly elder women, command respect and recognition for their expertise and knowledge. Their role as custodians of traditional skills confers social status and authority, reinforcing the value placed on experience and cultural knowledge. This recognition further motivates the continuation of pottery-making as a respected social role. At the village level, pottery serves as a unifying cultural symbol that distinguishes Thongjao in the broader regional context. The association of the village with pottery has become an integral part of its identity, shaping how it is perceived by neighboring communities. This recognition strengthens communal pride and reinforces the significance of preserving the craft as a collective heritage. In contemporary contexts, the social and cultural significance of Thongjao pottery faces challenges due to changing lifestyles and declining participation. However, its continued presence in social rituals and traditional food practices suggests a resilient cultural foundation. Efforts to preserve and promote the craft must therefore consider its social and symbolic dimensions, not merely its economic aspects.

While Thongjao pottery has preserved many of its core traditional characteristics, it has not remained static. Like most indigenous crafts, it has been shaped by broader socio-economic transformations, changing consumption patterns, and environmental and technological pressures. The gradual changes observed in Thongjao pottery reflect a complex process of adaptation rather than abrupt transformation, revealing how tradition negotiates continuity and change in a contemporary context. One of the most significant changes affecting Thongjao pottery is the reduction in demand for traditional earthenware. The widespread availability of industrially manufactured alternatives such as aluminum, stainless steel, plastic, and non-stick cookware has altered household preferences. These materials are often perceived as more durable, lightweight, and convenient, particularly in urban and semi-urban settings. As a result, the everyday domestic use of earthen vessels has declined, reducing the scale of pottery production in Thongjao village. Pottery that was once essential for routine cooking, storage, and water use is now often reserved for specific traditional or ritual purposes.

Market competition has further intensified these challenges. Mass-produced goods are cheaper, uniform, and widely distributed, making it difficult for handcrafted pottery to compete on price and availability. Thongjao potters, who rely on labor-intensive and time-consuming production methods, cannot match the output or cost efficiency of mechanized industries. Consequently, pottery-making has shifted from being a primary subsistence activity to a supplementary or occasional occupation for many households. This shift has implications for both income generation and the transmission of skills, as reduced production limits opportunities for practice and learning. Lifestyle changes have also influenced the craft. Younger generations increasingly pursue formal education and alternative livelihoods, often outside the village, reducing their engagement with traditional pottery-making. The physically demanding nature of the craft, combined with uncertain economic returns, makes it less attractive to younger community members. As a result, the demographic profile of active potters is increasingly skewed toward older women, raising concerns about the long-term continuity of the craft.

In response to these pressures, limited adaptations have emerged within Thongjao pottery practices. One such adaptation is modest product diversification. While traditional forms remain dominant, some potters have experimented with producing items that cater to contemporary tastes or niche markets, such as decorative pots, planters, or smaller vessels suited for modern kitchens. These adaptations reflect an attempt to expand market appeal while retaining traditional techniques and materials. However, diversification remains limited due to constraints in design exposure, marketing channels, and access to broader markets. Changes have also been observed in firing techniques and production strategies. In some cases, potters have modified firing methods to reduce fuel consumption or minimize breakage, responding to rising fuel scarcity and environmental constraints. While open firing using locally available materials remains prevalent, incremental adjustments—such as improved stacking methods or selective firing schedules—demonstrate practical innovation grounded in experience rather than formal technological intervention. These changes illustrate how traditional knowledge systems adapt incrementally to new challenges.

Despite these transformations, the persistence of pottery-making in Thongjao reflects a strong sense of cultural resilience. Cultural attachment to the craft remains a powerful motivating force sustaining its practice. Pottery continues to be valued not merely as a utilitarian object but as a symbol of heritage, identity, and continuity. This attachment is particularly evident in ritual and ceremonial contexts, where traditional earthenware retains its cultural legitimacy and symbolic importance. The selective retention of pottery in such contexts underscores its enduring cultural relevance even as everyday use declines. Localized demand also plays a crucial role in sustaining the craft. Within the village and surrounding areas, there remains a segment of the population that values traditional pottery for its functional qualities, aesthetic appeal, and cultural authenticity. Traditional food practices, which favor earthen vessels for specific cooking methods, continue to generate limited but consistent demand. This localized consumption provides a fragile yet vital economic base for potters, enabling the craft to survive despite broader market challenges. The survival of

Thongjao pottery also reflects adaptive resilience embedded within indigenous knowledge systems. The flexibility of hand-moulding techniques, reliance on locally available materials, and experiential learning methods allow potters to adjust production in response to changing conditions. This adaptability, however, operates within narrow limits and cannot fully compensate for structural challenges such as declining demand, resource constraints, and generational disengagement. The future sustainability of Thongjao pottery remains uncertain and contingent upon multiple factors. Without deliberate efforts to support skill transmission, resource access, and market integration, the craft risks gradual erosion. Documentation of traditional knowledge, community-based initiatives, and culturally sensitive interventions could play a role in strengthening resilience. However, such efforts must respect the cultural context and agency of the potters rather than imposing external models of commercialization or modernization.

Conclusion

The present study set out to examine Thongjao pottery of Manipur as a traditional craft deeply embedded in the social, cultural, economic, and environmental fabric of the community. Through an integrated analysis of historical continuity, indigenous knowledge systems, production techniques, resource dependence, and contemporary challenges, the study has demonstrated that Thongjao pottery is not merely a material practice but a living cultural institution shaped by generations of experience and collective memory. One of the central conclusions of the study is that Thongjao pottery represents a rare example of sustained indigenous craftsmanship that has survived largely through oral tradition and experiential learning. The absence of written documentation has not hindered the continuity of the craft; rather, it has reinforced the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission within families, particularly through women. The women-centered nature of pottery-making in Thongjao stands out as a defining characteristic, highlighting the role of women as primary custodians of traditional knowledge, skills, and cultural values. This gendered dimension contributes significantly to the social identity of the craft and challenges conventional assumptions about artisanal production being predominantly male-driven. The study further concludes that indigenous knowledge systems form the backbone of Thongjao pottery. The processes of clay selection, preparation, shaping, drying, and firing are guided by intuitive judgment, sensory perception, and long-term practice rather than standardized techniques. This experiential knowledge reflects a close and dynamic relationship between the potters and their natural environment. Such knowledge systems have enabled potters to adapt to local conditions and maintain production with minimal external inputs. However, the same characteristics that ensure cultural authenticity also make the craft vulnerable to disruption, particularly in the face of declining participation by younger generations and changing socio-economic aspirations. Another important conclusion relates to the strong dependence of pottery production on locally available natural resources. The study reveals that access to suitable clay sources, fuel materials, and favorable seasonal conditions is critical to sustaining pottery-making in Thongjao. Environmental changes, land-use transformation, and restricted access to traditional clay deposits have begun to pose serious challenges to resource availability. This growing ecological constraint highlights the fragile balance between traditional livelihoods and environmental sustainability. The continued survival of Thongjao pottery is therefore closely tied to the protection of local ecosystems and customary resource-use practices.

From a technological perspective, the study concludes that the hand-moulding techniques employed in Thongjao pottery represent a high degree of skill and craftsmanship, despite the absence of mechanized tools such as the potter's wheel. The production process is labor-intensive and requires careful attention at every stage to avoid defects. The use of open firing methods, while traditional and culturally significant, limits production scale and consistency. Nevertheless, these techniques are well suited to producing vessels designed for specific cooking, storage, and ritual purposes, reinforcing the functional relevance of the craft within local cultural contexts.

The findings also indicate that the socio-cultural significance of Thongjao pottery remains strong, even as its economic role has diminished. Pottery continues to play an important role in traditional food practices, rituals, festivals, and life-cycle ceremonies. Earthen vessels are valued not only for their practical utility but also for their symbolic associations with purity, tradition, and cultural authenticity. The collective activities involved in pottery-making, such as clay collection and firing, strengthen social bonds and reinforce community cohesion. In this sense, pottery functions as a cultural marker that distinguishes Thongjao village and sustains a shared sense of identity. Economically, the study concludes that Thongjao pottery has undergone a significant shift from a subsistence-based activity to a marginal or supplementary livelihood. Reduced demand, competition from industrial products, and changing lifestyles have led to a decline in production scale and income generation. While limited adaptations such as product diversification and modified firing techniques have been introduced, these measures have not been sufficient to fully address structural challenges. The craft's survival is therefore less dependent on market competitiveness and more on cultural attachment and localized demand.

The persistence of pottery-making in Thongjao, despite multiple challenges, points to a broader pattern of cultural resilience. The craft continues to survive because it is embedded in social relations, ritual practices, and collective identity. However, the study concludes that cultural resilience alone may not be sufficient to ensure long-term sustainability. Without supportive interventions that respect local knowledge systems,

encourage youth participation, and safeguard natural resources, the craft risks gradual decline. In conclusion, Thongjao pottery embodies the complex interplay between tradition and change, culture and economy, and humans and their environment. It represents not only a material craft but also a repository of indigenous knowledge, social values, and cultural identity. The study underscores the need to view traditional crafts such as Thongjao pottery within a holistic framework that recognizes their cultural significance alongside economic considerations. Preserving and sustaining Thongjao pottery is therefore not merely an act of heritage conservation but a means of supporting cultural diversity, community resilience, and indigenous knowledge systems in Manipur.

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