



Awajún Pottery, Gender, and Transformation: From Social Prestige to Market Logic

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Abstract: Pottery making among the Awajún has historically been a feminine practice that intertwined technical expertise, symbolic prestige, and community legitimacy. In recent decades, however, this practice has been reshaped by market-oriented logics and "cultural rescue" initiatives that have altered its original meanings and social functions. This study explores how the transformation of traditional Awajún pottery, historically a ritual, feminine, and relational practice, into a commodified cultural product has impacted the symbolic status, agency, and social recognition of Awajún women. Drawing on a qualitative, decolonial framework, the research was conducted in the Cayamas community in Peru's Amazon region. The methodology combined five in-depth interviews conducted in the Awajún language (with intercultural mediation), participant observation, and informal conversations, supported by interpretive and thematic analysis. The study reveals that while the technical aspects of pottery making continue, the symbolic and epistemic frameworks that once gave the practice its cultural depth have been eroded by external interventions, market logic, and institutional discourses of "cultural rescue." These changes have disrupted intergenerational transmission, diminished women's traditional prestige, and introduced foreign aesthetic standards. Nonetheless, women's narratives also show subtle forms of resistance and re-signification, preserving fragments of ancestral knowledge through embodied memory and daily practice. The commodification of Awajún pottery has led to a profound reconfiguration of its social and symbolic value. Beyond the loss of technique, this shift signals a broader epistemological displacement that threatens the ontological foundations of feminine knowledge and community cohesion. However, the persistence of memory, gesture, and relational practice offers a space for reclaiming cultural agency amid ongoing transformation.

Keywords: Awajún Pottery, Indigenous Women, Gender Studies, Cultural Commodification, Epistemic Translation, Intergenerational Knowledge, Symbolic Dispossession

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the cultural practices of Amazonian Indigenous peoples have undergone profound transformations due to the expansion of market economies (Bant, 1994), development policies focused on the economic valorization of heritage (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009), and the proliferation of institutional discourses on interculturality (UNESCO, 2021). These shifts, however, have unfolded within a context of persistent structural violence, including poverty, institutional racism, linguistic and ethnic exclusion, and limited representation in public policy (Forero & Capera, 2020; Iglesias & Saavedra, 2020; Miller, 2022; Orcotorio, 2022; Vallejo & Álvarez, 2020). For example, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI) more than 75% of the Awajún population lacks access to adequate healthcare, and only 23.4% have access to clean water (INEI, 2018).

Adding to these structural conditions is the historical influence of Christian missions, particularly evangelical and Catholic, which have reshaped Awajún worldviews, disrupted ritual systems, and redefined traditional forms of authority (Regan, 1999). Within this context, Awajún pottery, once embedded in relational systems of reciprocity, memory, and cosmology, has increasingly been redefined as a marketable cultural product. This transition has introduced tensions between cultural continuity and external frameworks of valorization, altering not only the symbolic meaning of pottery but also its social and political function, particularly for the women who produce it (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Godelier, 1998).

The Awajún offer a compelling case to explore these dynamics through historical, symbolic, and gendered lenses. According to the 2007 census, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI), they constitute the second-largest Indigenous group in Peru, with 55% residing in the Amazonas region (INEI, 2007). In pre-Inca times, they were influenced by the Moche civilization and notably resisted both Incan and Spanish conquest (Bant, 1994; Brown, 1984; Fuller, 2009). However, during the 20th century, the arrival of Christian missions and the implementation of state policies began reshaping their territories and social organization (Greene, 2009). Since the 1980s, progressive integration into the market economy has significantly affected kinship systems, gender roles, and territorial relationships (Bant, 1994; Fuller, 2009).

Pottery, traditionally crafted exclusively by women, was once central to domestic and spiritual life. The knowledge was transmitted matrilineally and closely linked to female agency, social prestige, and a spiritual relationship with the goddess Nugkuy, believed to bestow the gift

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of clay (Belaunde, 2017a; Mader, 1999). Without pottery, essential communal activities such as food and masato preparation were impossible (Juárez, 2015). Moreover, pottery designs served to convey familial identity and embodied visions inspired by nature (Nolte, 2021).

However, the growth of market economies, the introduction of industrial materials, and state-sponsored cultural rescue programs have disrupted these traditions. These initiatives, often promoted by feminist organizations and development agencies, have redefined pottery as “art” rather than “craft” to boost its market value (Awajún Women’s Program, 2016; Nolte, 2021). De la Cadena (2015) and Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) caution, such forms of epistemic translation can result in the transformation or erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems. The commodification of pottery, therefore, does not merely change a material practice; it transforms the ontological and symbolic frameworks, especially those tied to gender and authority, that historically sustained it (Leroi-Gourhan, 1995).

Although prior studies have addressed Awajún pottery from aesthetic and heritage perspectives (e.g., Nolte, 2021), few have critically examined how commodification affects the symbolic authority and social standing of elder female potters, the primary bearers of this ancestral knowledge. This gap calls for an empirically grounded, decolonial analysis that considers how technical knowledge, gender roles, and systems of prestige are being reconfigured (Bourdieu, 1999; Butler, 2004; Sennett, 2008).

This study is situated within symbolic and economic anthropology and engages with Latin American decolonial thought. Drawing on insights from the French anthropological tradition (Godelier, 1998; Leroi-Gourhan, 1995; Mauss, 2023) and situated gender theory (Lugones, 2008), it treats objects as condensers of social and cosmological relationships. The research also pays particular attention to the epistemic displacements introduced by cultural revitalization programs and their impact on gendered authority (De la Cadena, 2015; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010).

The objective of this study is to analyze how the transformation of Awajún pottery from a ritual, communal, and ontologically relational practice to a market-oriented commodity has affected the symbolic status, prestige, and social agency of women potters in the Cayamas community in the Amazon region of Peru. The central research question guiding this study is, *How has the transformation of Awajún pottery, from a ritual, communal, and ontologically embedded practice into a commodified object, affected the symbolic status, social prestige, and epistemic authority of women potters in the Cayamas community of the Peruvian Amazon?*

Unlike previous literature, this study provides first-person narratives of elder Awajún women, triangulated with participant observation, to analyze how external systems of value reshape traditional knowledge regimes and gendered authority. By centering the voices of these women, the research contributes to broader debates on gender, cultural heritage, and epistemic justice, revealing that the commodification of ancestral practices can simultaneously bring symbolic recognition and result in epistemic loss. Ultimately, this work highlights the fragility and resilience of Indigenous ways of knowing that continue to endure through body, memory, and intergenerational transmission.

2. Literature Review

This study draws upon three interrelated bodies of literature: (1) the historical and sociocultural transformations of the Awajún people; (2) the symbolic and technical role of pottery within Awajún society; and (3) critical debates on the commodification of Indigenous heritage, gendered knowledge, and decolonial epistemologies.

2.1. Historical and Sociocultural Transformations of the Awajún

The Awajún people, Peru’s second-largest Indigenous group, have experienced profound transformations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. More than half of the population resides in the Amazonas region, particularly in the provinces of Bongará and Condorcanqui (INEI, 2007). Historically, the Awajún resisted both Inca and Spanish conquest and were significantly influenced by Moche religious practices (Bant, 1994; Brown, 1984; Fuller, 2009; Regan, 1999). However, sustained transformations began with the arrival of Christian missions in the early 20th century. Institutions such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Jesuit missions introduced bilingual education, religious conversion, and a Westernized social order (Fuller, 2009; Greene, 2009).

The enactment of the Native Communities Law in the 1970s further restructured Awajún political representation and agricultural production systems (Varese, 1970). Since the 1980s, market integration has intensified, weakening traditional kinship networks and gender norms (Bant, 1994; Fuller, 2009). While traditional gender roles were rooted in cosmological principles and sustained through myths and reciprocal labor (Belaunde, 2017b; Viteri, 2002), scholars such as Bant (1994) and Fuller (2009) reveal that such structures also concealed gender asymmetries. Married women were expected to serve their husbands and children exclusively, while men often maintained multiple wives through kin alliances, dynamics that contributed to high rates of suicide and psychological distress among women (Bant, 1999; Brown, 1984).

Contemporary shifts, including road construction, extractivist projects, and intercultural education, have disrupted traditional gender complementarities. Younger Awajún generations are increasingly disconnected from their ancestral myths, spiritual systems, and artisanal knowledge, as they adopt urban, Western lifestyles and pursue professional roles in Indigenous organizations (FONDEP, 2020). These sociocultural disruptions provide an essential backdrop for understanding the decline of traditional practices such as pottery-making and the loss of embodied, gendered knowledge.

2.2. Pottery as a Gendered, Technical, and Cosmological Practice

In traditional Awajún society, pottery was far more than a utilitarian craft. Produced exclusively by women, it was central to domestic, ritual, and territorial life. Its significance extended beyond its functional use for food and masato preparation to encompass social prestige, spiritual authority, and ontological belonging (Belaunde, 2017b; Juárez, 2015). According to Awajún cosmology, pottery-making was taught by the goddess Nugkuy, and mastery of this technique marked women’s symbolic alignment with the divine (Gualart, 1990; Mader, 1999). Pottery design encoded family identity and spiritual knowledge, and the act of locating clay deposits (*duwe*) was itself part of feminine education and religious training (Belaunde, 2017a; Levi-Strauss, 1986).

This embodied transmission of knowledge operated through matrilineal pedagogy; girls learned from mothers and grandmothers through observation and practice, reinforcing pottery as a performative expression of gender identity (Butler, 2004). Women were permitted to share specific tools but not vessels, which remained within the nuclear family unit, further highlighting the relational intimacy of the practice (Juárez, 2015). As Mader (1999) and Belaunde (2017a) argue, such practices positioned women as custodians of memory and agents of territorial management, linking pottery to broader forms of political and ecological defense.

A point of debate concerns the origin of Awajún pottery designs. Some recent studies propose that women's decorative inspiration may stem from visionary plant experiences, particularly under the influence of ayahuasca (Juárez, 2015; Nolte, 2021). However, this claim lacks support in earlier ethnographic literature and is often shaped by New Age or neo-shamanic perspectives aligned with global market expectations of "authentic" Indigenous art (Gebhart Sayer, 1986). Traditional testimonies and symbolic frameworks suggest that creative inspiration came from spiritual vision and environmental observation, not psychoactive ritual.

2.3. Commodification, Cultural Revitalization, and Epistemic Displacement

Despite its historical significance, Awajún pottery has steadily lost its centrality in domestic and ritual life. With the spread of durable plastic and metal containers in the late 20th century, pottery-making became increasingly obsolete (Awajún Women's Program, 2016). As this practice faded, so too did the cosmological link between women, territory, and knowledge. In response, numerous revitalization efforts, driven by international cooperation, feminist NGOs, and state cultural agencies, emerged in the early 21st century. These initiatives aimed to preserve ancestral techniques while repositioning them within economic circuits through training, promotion, and aesthetic refinement value (Awajún Women's Program, 2016; Nolte, 2021).

However, the rebranding of pottery as "art" rather than "craft" introduces tensions between Indigenous meaning systems and dominant market epistemologies. De la Cadena (2015) and Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) warn, translating Indigenous knowledge into frameworks legible to external institutions often strips it of its ontological integrity and epistemic depth. Rather than preserving ancestral practices, these programs risk transforming them into commodified representations designed for outsider consumption. Strathern (1988) critiques the imposition of Western assumptions about individuality and authorship, which are incompatible with the relational ontologies that underpin Awajún knowledge systems.

This epistemic displacement is not merely symbolic, it has material effects. The transformation of ritual and mythical objects into commodities alters gender hierarchies, reconfigures social authority, and diminishes the symbolic capital historically afforded to women artisans (Bourdieu, 1999; Godelier, 1998; Sennett, 2008). The loss of a gift-based economy, where pottery circulated through systems of reciprocity and kinship, also weakens social cohesion and spiritual continuity (Graeber, 2011; Mauss, 2023).

Pottery's transformation parallels other global cases. In North America, pottery has been reclaimed as a site of third-gender expression and Indigenous resurgence (Sunnergren, 2023). In Ghana, female potters are positioned as knowledge bearers within feminist economic models (Abaka-Attah, M., Opoku-Bonsu, K. y Gbologah, L. (2017). Indian studies (Khumukcham, 2022) highlight tensions between tradition and innovation in artisanal industries, while Brazilian Quilombola women use pottery to assert collective agency and challenge colonial legacies (Blikstein et al., 2024). These examples underscore pottery's political potential, but also caution against assuming that commodification and empowerment are always aligned.

In Peru, however, critical scholarship that addresses heritage-making through a gendered and decolonial lens remains limited. While Beida (2023) and Ramírez (2022) have documented processes of artisanal commodification, they often fall short of interrogating the ontological violence embedded in dominant frameworks of development. More recently, grassroots organizations such as the Awajún and Wampis Women's Council (COMUAUWUY) have drawn direct connections between cultural defense and gendered resistance, positioning traditional practices not only as heritage, but also as tools of political self-determination (Amazon Watch, 2024; Ministerio de Cultura, 2021).

This literature review identifies a gap in existing research: while Awajún pottery has been discussed in terms of heritage, aesthetics, and cultural revitalization, few studies have examined how commodification reconfigures gendered authority and symbolic capital among elder women. By critically engaging with interdisciplinary literature in anthropology, gender studies, and decolonial theory, this study offers an original contribution to understanding the ontological consequences of transforming embodied, relational practices into marketable goods. It challenges romanticized narratives of cultural rescue and foregrounds the voices of women whose knowledge, status, and memory are increasingly at risk of erasure.

This study draws on a multi-theoretical framework that integrates symbolic and economic anthropology (Godelier, 1996; Mauss, 2023), performative gender theory (Butler, 2001), and Latin American decolonial thought (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; De la Cadena, 2015). These perspectives enable a situated analysis of Awajún pottery as more than a material practice, understood instead as a carrier of ontological, epistemic, and gendered meaning. Mauss's theory of the gift informs the analysis of reciprocity and value embedded in knowledge exchange, while Butler's concept of performativity provides insight into how pottery shapes female identity. Meanwhile, decolonial theory interrogates how cultural revitalization under state and NGO programs may result in epistemic dispossession and symbolic reconfiguration. This framework underpins the analysis of how commodification displaces ancestral knowledge systems and alters the social recognition of Awajún women.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in in-depth interviewing and oral history methodology (Flick, 2018; Guber, 2001). It is informed by a decolonial theoretical orientation (De la Cadena, 2015; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010), supported by conceptual frameworks from symbolic and economic anthropology (Godelier, 1996; Mauss, 2023), the sociology of recognition (Bourdieu, 1999), and Latin American gender theory (Belaunde, 2017a; Lugones, 2008). These perspectives collectively informed both the selection of participants, elder Awajún women recognized as custodians of relational knowledge, and the interpretive strategy used in analyzing their narratives. Special attention was given not only to

verbal statements but also to nonverbal expressions such as gestures, silences, and emotional cues, which often reflect the tensions between overlapping and conflicting epistemic systems in Indigenous heritage-making.

Fieldwork was conducted in the Awajún community of Cayamas, located in the Cenepa River Basin in Condorcanqui province, northern Peru. Five in-depth interviews were carried out on November 16 and 17, 2024, with elder female potters, using a purposive and convenience sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). Selection criteria included: (1) a recognized trajectory in pottery production, (2) familiarity with Awajún myths and customs, and (3) voluntary availability and consent. All five women selected through consultation with the vice-apu, community leaders, and non-potter Awajún women agreed to participate. The interviews were structured to elicit detailed testimonies related to personal experiences, cosmological beliefs, and the shifting meanings of pottery-making.

Interviews followed ethnographic and oral history protocols (Portelli, 2006; Spradley, 2016), emphasizing the embodied, affective, and narrative dimensions of knowledge transmission. Field notes were also recorded during observation sessions, capturing social interactions, contextual details, and nonverbal behaviors (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Supplementary insights were gathered through informal conversations with women who no longer practice pottery and with the local vice-apu, whose accounts helped triangulate and contextualize the narratives collected.

Crucially, all interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, Awajún, with the support of a trained university student from the community who acted as a linguistic and intercultural mediator (Restrepo & Escobar, 2005). The student received a month of preparatory training to ensure culturally respectful and accurate translation. While real-time interpretation facilitated comprehension, the authors acknowledged limitations due to inevitable loss of affective nuances, gestures, or culturally specific intonations during translation, a process understood as both linguistic and epistemic mediation (Gal, 2015; Temple & Young, 2004).

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Interviews took place in women's domestic or communal spaces in recognition of the gendered nature of pottery production (Belaunde, 2017b; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). Informed consent was obtained both collectively and individually, and a pseudonym system was used throughout transcription and reporting, in accordance with qualitative research ethics protocols (Tracy, 2020).

The interview guide included thirteen open-ended questions organized around three themes: (1) traditional myths and beliefs legitimizing pottery as a feminine practice, (2) changes in the symbolic and social roles of pottery, and (3) the implications of commodification for the prestige and agency of women potters. Audio was recorded using Sony devices, and interviews were transcribed first into Spanish while preserving oral narrative structures, and later into English for academic dissemination. Translation was approached with critical awareness of its epistemological implications (Baker, 2018; Venuti, 2004).

4. Findings and Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding and an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in cultural and narrative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibbs, 2018; Guber, 2001). Following Saldaña's (2021) three-tiered coding framework, the analysis proceeded through: (1) a descriptive level, identifying recurring themes in the narratives related to the production, use, and symbolic meaning of pottery; (2) an interpretive level, focused on unpacking the cultural logics and emotional resonances embedded in those accounts; and (3) a theoretical level, where findings were situated within broader conceptual debates about gender, intergenerational transmission, and epistemic transformation.

One key finding was the role of pottery as an embodied form of intergenerational knowledge transmission, closely linked to the cosmology of the goddess Nugkuy. Participants described learning pottery from their mothers and grandmothers, not through formal instruction, but through observation, repetition, and physical co-presence. This mode of learning aligns with what Lave and Wenger (1991) term "situated learning" and highlights the deeply performative and embodied nature of feminine knowledge production in Awajún society.

Secondly, participants consistently framed pottery not merely as a domestic object but as a marker of prestige and female agency. Several narratives recounted how women once competed to create the most aesthetically refined vessels, which were exchanged through systems of barter and given to high-status men such as warriors and leaders. This highlights the operation of a gift economy (Mauss, 2023) and the symbolic capital associated with female craftsmanship (Bourdieu, 1999).

Another major theme was the epistemic tension between ancestral practices and contemporary revitalization programs. Participants expressed ambivalence toward recent cultural rescue initiatives that introduced external aesthetic standards, such as the depiction of animals or flowers influenced by mestizo designs. While some acknowledged their attractiveness for market sale, others lamented that these forms lacked the spiritual meaning embedded in traditional motifs. This dissonance reflects what De la Cadena (2015) and Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) describe as "epistemic translation," in which ancestral knowledge is reformulated to meet institutional or market expectations, often at the cost of its original cosmological significance.

The data also revealed a growing intergenerational disconnect, as younger Awajún women increasingly perceive pottery as outdated or burdensome. Several elder participants noted that their daughters and granddaughters view the craft as labor-intensive and economically unviable. This points to a symbolic dispossession (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013) wherein traditional practices once tied to feminine authority are devalued under neoliberal conditions.

Finally, participants highlighted material and structural constraints, such as the depletion of clay deposits and reduced forest access, that further hinder the continuity of pottery-making. These environmental changes, often driven by extractive industries, compound the symbolic erosion by limiting the physical conditions necessary for cultural reproduction.

Together, these findings demonstrate that the commodification of Awajún pottery represents not merely a shift in economic value but a profound reconfiguration of gendered authority, symbolic recognition, and ontological belonging. The women's narratives foreground both resilience and loss, revealing how memory, craft, and identity are reshaped under external pressures yet remain anchored in relational logics that defy complete assimilation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Belief System and Social Function of Awajún Pottery

Aju was married to Nantu, who had cleared a large field to plant squash. One day, Nantu told his wife that the land was ready for her to begin planting, and so Aju did. After some time had passed, Nantu noticed that others who had planted later were already eating squash. He asked his wife why she was not harvesting any and why she always brought him the worst parts to cook. One day, Nantu decided to follow Aju because he suspected she was deceiving him. When he reached the field, he saw his wife lighting a fire in her ichinak to prepare masato, which she drank alone, bringing him only the worst of what was left. He saw all of this and returned home quietly, where he told his children that he had seen their mother eating alone and, for that reason, he would return to the sky. Later, when Aju arrived, she asked the children where Nantu was. They told her he had gone to the sky. Aju replied that he was lying, that she had only a small mouth and could not possibly eat so much squash (she had sewn her mouth shut to prevent them from discovering that she had eaten it). Then she said that if their father had gone to the sky, she would go too. But when Nantu had climbed the long rope to the sky, he had told it not to let her ascend and to break when she was halfway. When she tried to climb, the rope broke, and because she had eaten so much squash, her belly burst when she fell. That spill, like blood, is what we call duwe (clay). And the Sun, who had been watching Aju's fall, cursed her: "Cursed be you, woman, for drinking without sharing with your husband. That is why he left you." From that day on, every time the full moon appears, you will cry for your husband." That is how the Sun cursed Aju, and he also said: "You will always be remembered when people go to collect duwe to make pottery." That is why it is said that those who go to gather clay for pottery hear the Aju bird cry under the full moon, and where the bird cries, that is where the duwe is found. (Balina, 74 years old)²

Awajún myths provide a crucial foundation for understanding how pottery functions not only as a technical practice but as a form of embodied knowledge that encodes moral, social, and cosmological meaning. One central myth recounts the story of Aju and her husband, Nantu, who assume differentiated but complementary roles in their community, he clears land for planting, and she cultivates and harvests the squash (Bant, 1994; Fuller, 2009). Aju's act of consuming the fruits of her labor in secrecy, without offering them to her husband, violates a deeply embedded principle of marital reciprocity. This transgression provokes a symbolic punishment, in which Aju's fall from the sky leads to the spilling of her womb, producing *duwe*, the clay that is essential for pottery-making.

The myth is not merely etiological but deeply symbolic. The origin of clay from a punished female body constructs a "bodily memory" that fuses pain, gendered exclusion, and technical production. The Sun's condemnation of Aju transforms her into a moral exemplar, embedding the logic of punishment, ritual propriety, and feminine sacrifice into the material practice of pottery. In this way, the myth codifies pottery as a distinctly feminine activity imbued with ritual obligation, memory, and moral consequence. Aju personifies what Strathern (1988) describes as a "female debt", a condition wherein women not only sustain the daily reproduction of life but also carry the symbolic burden of ensuring cosmological balance. Thus, this narrative reveals a relational ontology (Belaunde, 2017b; Descola, 1986) in which body, material, and territory are co-constituted. However, as Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) and Tzul Tzul (2019) argue, this symbolic centrality does not guarantee political authority or public recognition; instead, women's knowledge often persists under conditions of structural invisibility.

A second foundational myth involves a woman who, lacking the ability to make pottery, suffers ridicule and exclusion within her community. Her status changes only when Nugkui, a tutelary female figure, teaches her how to collect *duwe* and form vessels. This myth reinforces the idea that technical knowledge is not simply a utilitarian skill but a gateway to social legitimacy and agency. As Bourdieu (2016) posits, such knowledge operates as symbolic capital, its mastery grants prestige and a place of honor within the community. Other mythic variants emphasize that the absence of this knowledge can even lead to marital instability, illustrating how domestic harmony and personal identity are tightly linked to the ability to produce pottery (Mader, 1999).

Beyond her association with pottery, Nugkui is also revered as the mother of agriculture. In one narrative, she introduces cassava and plantains to the Awajún, forming a reciprocal relationship with a woman who receives these gifts. When the woman fails to reciprocate appropriately, Nugkui withdraws her favor, and abundance gives way to scarcity. This story illustrates a moral economy grounded in the logic of the gift (Mauss, 2023), where knowledge must circulate within ethical frameworks of exchange. As in the *duwe* myth, Nugkui's lessons define not just agricultural or technical procedures but the normative conditions under which knowledge must be shared, honored, and reproduced.

These narratives affirm that the transmission of pottery knowledge is embedded in systems of reciprocity, bodily ethics, and cosmological legitimacy. Yet this transmission is also governed by ritual restrictions. One such set of restrictions concerns the collection of *duwe*, which is subject to bodily and sexual norms. As one potter, Carmen (age 68), explains:

"If I were a young woman on my period, I couldn't gather duwe. If I were pregnant, I couldn't collect duwe either... because our ancestors said that if you approached it in that condition, the pottery wouldn't last."

These prohibitions are not mere taboos but expressions of a cosmology in which the efficacy of technical production is contingent upon the moral and biological state of the body. The female body, therefore, becomes a technical-ritual operator, mediating between the environment, spiritual forces, and the community's material survival. As Leroi-Gourhan (1995) and Blackmore (1999) argue, all technical practices are socially and cognitively embedded, shaped by normative expectations and shared symbolic frameworks.

Thus, the regulation of women's bodies during menstruation or pregnancy should not be interpreted solely through a biomedical or patriarchal lens but as part of a relational epistemology (Belaunde, 2017b; Descola, 1986; Strathern, 1988). In

² During the narration of this myth, it is worth noting that Balina did not rely solely on words. She also accompanied her storytelling with gestures, changes in intonation, and guttural sounds that imitated the song of the Aju bird. Our field notes reveal this expressive richness, showing that myths are communicated not only as verbal accounts but also as oral and bodily expressions, in which the narrator's body becomes a vehicle for cultural transmission (Barber, 2007; Tedlock, 1983).

this framework, technique, gender, and world-making are not separable domains; rather, they co-produce one another in a moral and ontological order that has governed Awajún life for generations.

5.2. Female Prestige, Knowledge Transmission, and the Logic of the Gift

Historically, the transmission of Awajún pottery knowledge has been sustained through intergenerational pedagogies rooted in maternal relationships. Women learned by observing and replicating the gestures, techniques, and evaluative criteria of their mothers and grandmothers. This embodied form of knowledge transmission transcended verbal instruction, involving emotional engagement and physical participation in the daily practice of pottery-making. As Isabel (68 years old) recalled:

"I learned from my mother, Suanua Najamtai Juwau, when I was fourteen. She told us that she learned pottery from her mother."

This informal pedagogical process aligns with what Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualize as "situated learning," wherein technical expertise emerges through progressive participation in a community of practice. Here, knowledge is not abstract or codified, but lived, enacted, and transmitted through social immersion. Within this framework, technical knowledge resides not in written records but in bodies, gestures, and relationships, positioning women as both repositories and mediators of ancestral epistemologies (Belaunde, 2017b; Guber, 2001).

From a performative perspective, the repetition of specific acts, molding, painting, firing, and assessing pottery, constitutes a culturally legible feminine identity. As Butler (2001) argues, gender emerges through the reiteration of embodied practices that produce recognizable social roles. Within the Awajún context, pottery-making was historically a core activity in constructing women's identity, prestige, and intergenerational competition. As Carmen (68) remarked:

"Things have changed now. It is not like before when learning pottery was respected. Do they still ask Mrs. X to make pottery? That importance is gone. In the past, though, there was always competition among women to make the most beautiful pieces."

In earlier times, the most skillfully crafted pottery was exchanged for goods such as *temashmatai najanak* (combs) and *tijinka* (men's cotton sashes), reflecting a symbolic barter economy where aesthetic value and technical skill were directly linked to women's prestige. Pottery, therefore, was not simply utilitarian, it was a medium through which female agency and social status were exercised (Awajún Women's Program, 2016).

However, not all women mastered this skill. In such cases, community-based exchange mechanisms compensated for individual limitations. Mabaik (41) explained:

"Some women didn't know how to make pottery, but if there was a woman who did, she would teach them. Those who couldn't learn would exchange household animals for pottery plates. Or they would bring duwe so they could learn how to make it. My mother told me that not everyone knew how to make plates perfectly."

This practice illustrates the circulation of knowledge and goods through a system grounded in reciprocity rather than accumulation. Women unable to produce pottery could still access it through barter, offering animals, goods, or assistance in collecting *duwe*. This system reflects the moral economy described by Mauss (2023), in which the value of objects is inseparable from the social ties they generate. In the Awajún context, technical knowledge and material goods circulate within ethical frameworks that structure gendered solidarity and community cohesion.

The underlying logic of this gift economy also finds expression in Awajún cosmology, particularly in myths involving Nugkui. As a tutelary figure, Nugkui introduces essential crops and crafts, always within a framework of reciprocity. Her teachings emphasize that knowledge must be returned or re-circulated, failing which it loses efficacy or invites scarcity. This logic mirrors the community's own practices, wherein knowledge and prestige are shared, contested, and redistributed through collective participation and mutual obligation.

Moreover, pottery also functioned as a marker of social distinction within the community. Carmen (68) and Balina (74) recounted that certain vessels were reserved for people of elevated status, such as the *waimaku* (prestigious warriors) and *wajiu* (troop leaders). These elite figures received *masato* in ornately decorated vessels painted with annatto, while simpler pottery was used by other members of the community. The aesthetic refinement of these pieces communicated social hierarchy, transforming pottery into a material expression of rank and recognition (Bourdieu, 2016).

These differentiated uses underscore that pottery served both practical and symbolic functions. Through ornamentation, quality, and designated use, vessels encoded social distinctions and materialized authority. Pottery thus acted as a conduit for reproducing the symbolic order, reinforcing internal hierarchies and social roles.

Interestingly, although pottery-making was historically a female practice, the narratives reveal a degree of male participation, particularly in collecting materials such as *chimi*, *shankuina*, and *duwe*. However, this collaboration did not extend to the technical or pedagogical dimensions of pottery. Men assisted with labor-intensive tasks like felling trees or transporting materials, but they were excluded from the design, firing, and teaching processes. This aligns with Levi-Strauss's (1986) notion of complementary oppositions in Amazonian kinship systems, where gender roles are functionally distinct yet interdependent.

Nonetheless, as Mader (1999), Fuller (2009), and Bant (1994) have argued, complementarity in such systems does not necessarily imply equality. Male authority and control over women's domestic roles can coexist with formally reciprocal labor arrangements. While this observation provides an important theoretical caution, the current study's data do not offer sufficient evidence to confirm or challenge these dynamics. As Descola (1986) reminds us, even apparent equilibrium may conceal latent hierarchies that require empirical unpacking beyond the scope of this analysis.

What the testimonies do make clear, however, is the widespread sense of loss regarding the erosion of these traditional knowledge-sharing networks. Contemporary transformations, driven by financial pressures, urban migration, and the adoption

of mestizo values, have disrupted the ethical economy of reciprocity and replaced it with monetized, transactional relationships. As Isabel (68) lamented:

“The love for others has been lost. The way we used to live has changed because many people have adopted the customs of the mestizos, or non-Awajún people. Now, our children go to the city, and when they return, they adopt the mestizo customs. Because of that, everything has changed.”

Taken together, these accounts reflect not only the decline of traditional prestige structures and knowledge systems but also the emergence of new forms of legitimacy, negotiation, and identity, issues which are further explored in the next section.

5.3. From Ritual, Social, and Symbolic Technique to Commoditized Object

Recent academic accounts have suggested that Awajún women personalize their pottery based on visionary experiences induced by consuming hallucinogenic plants such as *ayahuasca* (Juárez Rutty, 2015; Nolte, 2021). However, the testimonies of the five elderly female potters interviewed in this study directly challenge this interpretation. As Isabel (68) emphatically states:

“No one has ever learned to design pottery by taking ayahuasca. That does not exist for pottery, and our ancestors never told us that one learns through ayahuasca. It was never like that.”

The women draw a clear epistemological boundary between visionary plants and pottery-making. Plants such as *datem*, *tsag*, and *yaji* are associated with specific social functions such as warfare, spiritual protection, and leadership, not artisanal production. As Mabaik (41) explains:

“The waimaku drank datem to gain vision (...) they were troop leaders. But for making pottery, that was never used.”

These accounts reaffirm the autonomy of pottery knowledge as a distinct domain, separate from visionary practices. Contrary to contemporary reinterpretations, often shaped by neo-shamanic, spiritualist, or externally imposed discourses, the testimonies emphasize that pottery is not the product of altered states but rather of technical skill, intergenerational transmission, and everyday embodied learning. As shown in the previous section, women learn to make pottery through prolonged exposure to maternal practices, physical apprenticeship, and participation in domestic life. This form of knowledge is rooted in territory, memory, and gendered relationality, not psychotropic revelation.

Nevertheless, in recent decades, Awajún pottery has been the object of revitalization efforts led by state institutions, NGOs, and international cooperation agencies. These initiatives, while often framed as heritage preservation, have substantially altered the context in which pottery knowledge is transmitted and practiced. One of the most prominent actors in this process has been the Organization for the Development of Border Communities of the Cenepa (ODECOFROC), which, in coordination with the Peruvian state and global development partners, has promoted pottery training programs aimed at fostering cultural entrepreneurship and market integration.

Such programs, including the *Awajún Women’s Program* (2016), have introduced new techniques and aesthetics into community practices. Pottery education has been incorporated into school curricula and community workshops, where commercial viability has become a central concern. While these initiatives have opened up new economic opportunities, they have also reshaped the epistemic content and symbolic forms of pottery-making. As one potter recalls:

“They only started drawing on the pottery, like mountains and flowers, with the program.” (Mabaik, 41)

Another woman remembers how non-Indigenous instructors promoted naturalistic designs:

“The mestizo teacher told us to look at nature and make it look like that.” (Carmen, 68)

These interventions mark a significant break from traditional practice. Whereas older styles focused on geometric motifs and color contrasts, often inspired by visions or creativity within cultural bounds, the new designs include flowers, animals, and landscapes that are foreign to the Awajún visual tradition. Isabel (68) notes:

“We never painted animals. Now, I’m just starting to see different drawings. Now, those who work in programs paint animals like añuje [agouti] and frogs.”

Carmen further adds:

“We saw the drawings the mestizos brought, especially the image of the flower. We thought it looked nice, so we started making them.”

These testimonies highlight the subtle yet profound transformations introduced through cultural revitalization programs. The adoption of floral and naturalistic motifs, encouraged by external facilitators and consumer demand, not only changes the material appearance of pottery but also reconfigures the ontological logic underpinning its creation. Pottery is no longer produced solely as a gendered ritual practice embedded in social reciprocity, cosmological knowledge, and territorial ethics. Instead, it becomes an object of aesthetic consumption, an “art” redefined to meet market expectations.

This shift involves more than a change in form. De la Cadena (2015) argues, translating Indigenous knowledge systems into legible forms for global recognition often entails the erasure or distortion of the epistemologies that gave rise to them. The translation of Awajún pottery into a commoditized object, one that must look a certain way to be sellable, risks extinguishing the plural ontologies that originally animated its production. While such translation may increase visibility or income, it also imposes new symbolic regimes that displace traditional knowledge, aesthetic codes, and embodied practices.

5.4. Symbolic and Epistemic Consequences

External discourse has not only transformed the visual aesthetics of Awajún pottery but also reshaped the potters’ memories and understandings of their own traditions. Several women acknowledge that they have begun to hear assertions such as, *“Our ancestors used to do it this way,”* even when their lived experiences contradict those claims. This reformulation of tradition,

under the influence of external actors and cultural revitalization programs, reflects what Brown (2014) refers to as a reconfiguration of cultural memory, a process in which inherited knowledge is revised, contested, or diluted in response to shifting expectations and market logic.

Carmen (68) offers a striking example of this tension:

“The munji [important people] told us that our ancestors created these designs by observing nature. They told us that our ancestors did it that way (...) So, yes, what was done in the past is being lost, and we are adapting more and more to new designs for sale.”

This change is not merely aesthetic or technical; it is deeply symbolic. As Godelier (1996) argues, material objects are repositories of social structures and values; when the object is transformed, so too is the symbolic system that produced it. In the case of Awajún pottery, the ritual, domestic, and gendered dimensions that once defined its cultural significance are now increasingly eroded. Balina (74) voices this erosion with clarity:

“In the past, women who made pottery were respected. Now, I see that they sell those clay plates just to buy plastic ones.”

Such testimonies articulate a lucid awareness of the broader implications of commodification. Pottery is no longer regarded primarily as a vessel of memory, status, or feminine knowledge. Instead, it becomes a saleable artifact, divorced from the complex webs of ritual, ontology, and domestic labor that once defined its meaning.

What is at stake, therefore, is not merely an economic shift but a profound epistemic and ontological transformation. De la Cadena (2015) cautions, when modern regimes of value are imposed as universal, alternative worlds, other ways of knowing, making, and relating are rendered invisible or illegible. Similarly, Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) contends that cultural recovery projects led by external actors often reproduce colonial logics by essentializing and domesticating Indigenous subjectivities. In such cases, what is labeled as “revitalization” may operate instead as a subtle form of ontological discipline, pressuring communities to reproduce only those aspects of themselves that align with marketable or exoticized expectations.

As a result, Awajún pottery is no longer made solely for domestic use, ritual performance, or intergenerational teaching. It now circulates within an economic and visual field structured by external standards of legibility and value. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this shift entails a loss of feminine symbolic capital, once grounded in technical mastery and the social prestige it conferred within Awajún domestic and cosmological life (Bourdieu, 2016).

These changes may appear at first as minor adjustments in technique or ornamentation, yet they carry far-reaching implications for the symbolic positioning of Awajún women. Drawing on Butler and Athanasiou’s (2013) concept of symbolic dispossession, one can interpret this as the displacement of practices that historically anchored feminine subjectivity and social agency. As Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) asserts, hegemonic modernity invalidates and devalues knowledge systems that do not conform to its epistemological norms. In this context, the embodied, place-based, and relational epistemology of pottery-making, rooted in memory, the land, and gendered practice, faces the risk of erasure as a legitimate form of knowledge.

Thus, Awajún pottery, once a core expression of feminine prestige and cultural continuity, now exists in a liminal space between memory and oblivion, between past reverence and present devaluation. As the community navigates between cultural survival and economic adaptation, a critical question persists: What worlds are being silenced in the pursuit of recognition?

5.5. Intergenerational Rupture and Its Impact

The shift of Awajún pottery from a ritual, social, and symbolic practice to a commodified object governed by market logic has significantly weakened traditional systems of knowledge transmission. This rupture has disrupted the intergenerational continuity that sustained pottery as an embodied form of cultural inheritance for centuries. It also signals a deeper transformation of the social practices that once linked pottery to identity, pride, and communal recognition (Bourdieu, 2016).

At the core of the artisans’ testimonies is a growing concern: the disconnection of younger generations from the practice. As Balina (74) notes:

“My granddaughters say it is too much work, that there is no time, that getting dirty is not worth it. Even my daughter says that. They tell me: ‘Why suffer if we will not even sell it?’”

This generational alienation echoes Sennett’s (2008) analysis of how manual labor becomes devalued in societies dominated by market logic, where productivity and profit overshadow symbolic meaning and skill. As a result, the social status of women potters has eroded; once central figures in communal life, they now find their expertise relegated to the margins, unrecognized by a generation shaped by different values.

This subjective displacement is compounded by a broader loss of social legitimacy. As the vice-apu of the community observes:

“Some mothers still safeguard this knowledge, but most already use plastic plates. Preserving the culture is difficult.”

A younger Awajún woman, who does not practice pottery, adds:

“Women who still make pottery are no longer valued like before.”

These statements underscore that the rupture is not only technical, it is symbolic. In earlier times, the ability to produce pottery conferred legitimacy, prestige, and feminine identity. Today, those social rewards have diminished. Following Butler and Athanasiou (2013), this decline in recognition constitutes a form of symbolic dispossession, the loss of the very conditions that make a life valuable within its cultural context. Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) similarly notes that such shifts dismantle the affective, generational, and ontological structures in which women once held central roles. What is being lost, then, is not just knowledge, but a relational, legitimized way of being.

Structural barriers have also emerged. The availability of essential raw materials has diminished due to extractive industries, restricted forest access, and the privatization of once-shared resources. As Mabaik (41) explains:

"Before, my mother would bring duwe from far away, but now there's none left. Since people make pottery to sell, they don't want to give it away anymore."

This observation aligns with Isabel's (68) testimony:

"Trees like chimi and yukuku can no longer be found nearby. They still exist, but they're far away and hard to collect. That's why we use plastic plates now."

In response to these challenges, some efforts have been made to revitalize pottery through formal education. According to the vice-apu, local teachers "teach pottery in schools through project-based learning," often with support from women leaders. While these efforts offer potential for transmission, they raise a critical question: *What kind of knowledge is being transmitted when the pedagogical frameworks do not emerge from the same ontological and experiential logics that originally shaped the practice?*

From a decolonial perspective, this situation reflects a broader process of epistemological reconfiguration. De la Cadena (2015) argues, when dominant ontological regimes do not accommodate certain knowledge forms, those forms must either transform or disappear to be heard. Pottery, once embedded in the rhythms of the forest, domestic life, and ancestral myth, is increasingly recontextualized as a skillset taught within state-sanctioned or development-driven educational frameworks. While technical processes may be preserved, the symbolic and relational world that once sustained them risks dissolution.

This tension is poignantly captured by Carmen (68):

"I feel happy when I make pottery. But sometimes I wonder if our traditions are disappearing. Before, we learned the entire process from our grandmothers, but now my granddaughters don't know anything."

The transition from clay to plastic, from forest harvesting to scarcity, and from oral, embodied teaching to institutional instruction does not merely threaten an ancestral craft. It fractures an entire way of inhabiting the world. Pottery is not just an object, it is a materialization of memory, gendered identity, and intergenerational connection. As Tzul Tzul (2019) emphasizes, when communal forms of reproduction are displaced, the women who embody them are displaced as well.

Ultimately, the transformation of pottery reflects more than the end of a practice. It marks the silencing of a feminine voice, one that once sustained relationships, time rhythms, and meanings now struggling to survive in memory alone.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined the profound transformation of Awajún pottery, traditionally embedded within the feminine sphere, in terms of its function, meaning, and transmission. Through an analysis of myths, oral testimonies, and contemporary practices, it has become evident that this artisanal technique is not merely a utilitarian craft but a structuring axis of social organization, feminine prestige, and intergenerational cultural reproduction. Awajún pottery historically integrated technical, ritual, and symbolic dimensions within a relational ontology in which body, territory, and knowledge were inseparably intertwined.

The findings suggest that the displacement of this practice, due to the adoption of industrial materials and its reconfiguration through market forces or "cultural recovery" programs, entails far more than the erosion of a technical tradition. It marks the disarticulation of an entire epistemic and ontological matrix. Equally at risk is the symbolic position of the women who have historically embodied and transmitted this knowledge. As theorists such as Rivera Cusicanqui (2010), Butler and Athanasiou (2013), and De la Cadena (2015) argue, these epistemic displacements reveal deeper forms of symbolic dispossession and ontological discipline that erode female agency and sever links to collective memory.

A notable limitation of this study lies in its localized focus on a single Awajún community and its qualitative methodology, which privileges interpretive depth over statistical generalizability. Additionally, the study was conducted in a context of multiple translations. Testimonies were initially gathered in the Awajún language, transcribed and interpreted in Spanish with the assistance of student mediators, and later translated into English for presentation to an international academic audience. This "translation of a translation" inevitably introduces linguistic and cultural challenges, including the potential loss of affective tones, symbolic registers, and epistemological subtleties that may resist capture in another language.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on gender, technology, and Indigenous epistemologies. It demonstrates that material practices such as pottery are not simply tools for subsistence; they are embodied expressions of knowledge, social recognition, and world-making. Furthermore, the study offers a critical lens through which to evaluate discourses of cultural "rescue," which, however well-intentioned, may strip practices of their symbolic density and repackage them within aesthetic, folkloric, or mercantile frameworks.

Practically, the study's findings offer valuable insights for the design of cultural and educational policies that align with the epistemological frameworks of Indigenous communities. Revitalization efforts must move beyond technical instruction and instead recognize the material, symbolic, and relational conditions that make such practices meaningful and sustainable.

Finally, this research opens avenues for further inquiry into the transformation of other embodied knowledge systems, such as those associated with food, song, traditional medicine, or communal labor, that may also be subjected to displacement by dominant logics that validate only certain ways of being. There is an urgent need to foster authentic intercultural dialogue that embraces ontological plurality and supports the coexistence of diverse ways of knowing and inhabiting the world. Awajún pottery, as a form of ancestral feminine knowledge, serves as a poignant reminder that what is being lost is more than a technique. It is the unraveling of a symbolic fabric, an embodied memory, and a lifeworld that continues to endure through acts of dignity, resilience, and remembrance.

7. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research, as outlined by Tracy (2020). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts and reporting. Informed

consent was obtained in two stages: first, during a public consultation with the community, and subsequently in private with each individual interviewee.

Awajún cultural codes and protocols were respected at every stage of the research process. Special attention was given to ensuring context-sensitive and respectful interactions. The study was guided by an intercultural ethical framework that acknowledges Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate and that commits to safeguarding their use under the conditions agreed upon with the community. This approach emphasized reciprocity, transparency, and mutual respect in all phases of the research relationship.

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