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**Mobility and circulation of knowledge among potters of the Arewa (South-Western Niger): impact of the frameworks of practice on the spatial distribution of ceramics' techniques**

Claire Corniquet

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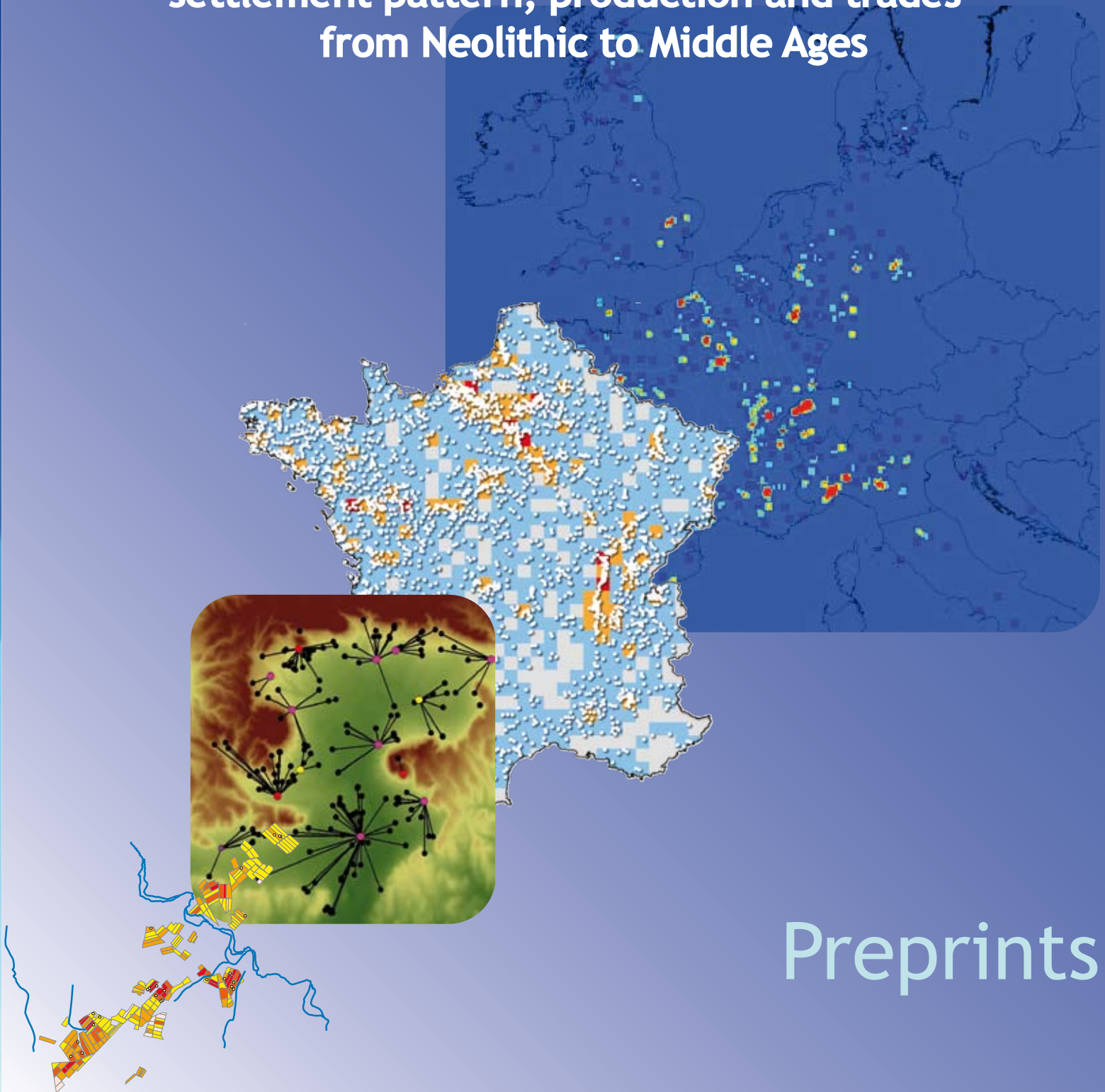
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ACI "Spaces and territories" 2005-2007  
Final conference - Dijon, 23-25 june 2008

# ARCHAEDYN

*7 millennia of territorial dynamics*

**settlement pattern, production and trades  
from Neolithic to Middle Ages**



Preprints

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**Spatial dynamics of settlement and natural resources :  
toward an integrated analysis over the long term  
from Prehistory to Middle Ages**

*Final Conference – University of Burgundy, Dijon, 23-25 June 2008*

# ARCHÆDYN

*7 millennia of territorial dynamics*

*settlement pattern, production and trades  
from Neolithic to Middle Ages*

## Preprints

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# Mobility and circulation of knowledge among potters of the Arewa (South-Western Niger): impact of the frameworks of practice on the spatial distribution of ceramics' techniques

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## ABSTRACT:

At first glance, Pottery is an activity practiced alone. Nevertheless, the field enquiries in Arewa reveal that at each stage of the “chaîne opératoire” the craftswoman is in more or less close contact with others practitioners. Whether these contacts are organised or informal, the gatherings take place in the context of some operating chain's stage situated at different scales. This paper proposes a study of the contacts' points and degrees which link and interconnect the potters from different localities of this area, and the impact of the shared space of practice on the technical ceramics' distribution. Analysing the “context of practice”, we would explain the technical configurations of this area.

**KEY WORDS :** Africa, ethnoarchaeology, pottery, social dynamic, frameworks of practice.

## Introduction

Pottery is an utilitarian artefact rather used over the whole African territory. It is also an excellent medium to study the relation between social and technical logics. This artefact implies the interaction of a series of actors (craftsmen, hawkers, customers), whether it concerns the production sphere or the consumption one. That aspect was sustained by studies orientated towards the current ceramics practices which illustrate the existence of a strong bond between the techniques used by the artisans and their social identities. As shown by Mahias (2002) and Gosselain (2000) for instance, one kind of shaping technique or one kind of preparing the paste can be the prerogative of a linguistic group, or caste, or type. Yet differences in the ways of paste preparing, or firing, or even decorating are frequently observed among craftswomen who nevertheless consider themselves from the same belonging (may it be to a language, or caste, or type). In other words, the pottery activity inside a group of individuals that share the same linguistic or statutory identities carries as many similarities as differences.

Technical identity is constantly constructed in the frame of ordinary social relations and inside known and practiced contexts. The historical approach of Berns (1989) tends to show that material culture cannot be understood without taking into account the historical-social context into which it is integrated. One common material culture does not always allow to identify one same linguistic group. A more meticulous

examination reveals that appropriations happen, due to long and repeated contacts which contribute to give sense to the objects and their shaping techniques. The question of choice made by the artisan at different stages of the “*chaîne opératoire*” (Lemmonier 1993; Stark 1999) becomes unavoidable to whoever wants to understand the contemporary practices as well as their history. Therefore, one group of individuals can share a « palette of possibilities », to say, alternative techniques and mobilizable knowledge which compose the foundations of a population's « technical catalogue », that catalogue being constituted in the course of time according to the actors' interactions. According to the social context into which the activity takes place, the artisan may choose among these elements and then possibly adjust them.

Yet, since works started by pioneers Haudricourt, Mauss, Leroy Gourhan, then systematized in what is commonly called « cultural technology » by Lemmonier, Sigaut, Creswell, or Guille Escuret, one question remains: towards which are cultural choices directed? How does one decide to adopt one way of making, one technique rather than another one? In *Technological Choices*, Lemmonier (1993) argues that techniques are social productions and choices operate through the interaction of actors and technical systems. In which nature, aspect and context do these interactions take place? And how can we justify the fact that one technique may concern a whole group of individuals?

1. We mean by « frameworks of practice » the areas in which one or another stage of the chaîne opératoire occurs. These areas are invested with specific actions which can be collective or individual.

2. The missions that were undertaken in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 started under the project of « Atlas des traditions céramiques » directed by Olivier Gosselein, and continued thanks to the Mini-Arc scholarship granted by the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

3. The language that is spoken by more than half of the Niger people.

4. The potter activity is exclusively female in this part of the Niger.

From that point, to understand how social and technical are interwoven needs identifying and locating the « frameworks of practice<sup>1</sup> » into which the potter activity takes place. Admitting that every practice is situated and that situation gives sense to practice (Suchman 1987; Visetti 1989; Brown 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991), then it becomes imperative to emphasize on the situations of practice as well as the frames into which these situations develop themselves.

Given that consideration and the surveys carried out over female potters in the Arewa area (South-centre of Niger), we would specify the various frameworks of practice related to pottery and their impacts on the ways of making in that area. We would study the « networks » through which knowledge circulates at the local (the village) and regional (between villages) levels, in order to deal with the mechanisms that are responsible for the technical configurations based in the studied area. Thus, and contrarily to most studies over pottery, our interest will focus less on the chaîne opératoire in itself than on the « frameworks » into which it develops.

This paper is divided into two main parts: presenting first the frameworks of practice through the different stages of the chaîne opératoire, I will then study the impact of two frameworks of practice on the technical distribution of ceramics at a regional scale.

## Field of investigation

The present data come from ethnographic surveys carried out since 2004<sup>2</sup> in Niger. They have been collected from female potters based on 36 locations situated in three districts of Arewa (Ill.1): North Dosso (counties of Dogondoutchi and Loga); South-East Tilaberi (county of Filingue); South-East Tahoua (counties of Birni N'konni and Illéla).

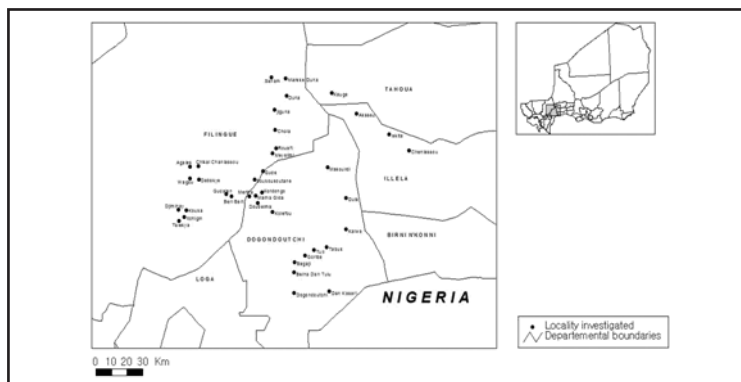
Arewa is located in South-Western Niger, to say, the country's Sahelian part. This area lays is surrounded by Filingue, Dosso, Tahoua and Konny, which are four important towns of Southern Niger. It stands in a half-arid zone dotted with bushes and small trees, and it is drawn as a plateau scattered by the Bosso and the Maouri « dallols » (vales), which were formerly affluents to the river Niger. Being limited in the West by the Zarma Ganda and in the East by the Adler, Northern Arewa stands at the junction of the Zarma/Songhaï country and the Hausa one. Though the studied zone is mostly inhabited by Hausa speakers<sup>3</sup>, the inhabitants' identity is not monolithic. All our interlocutors are *hausaphone*, but their belonging comes in a variety of forms on a regional basis: according to the place for the survey, they introduce themselves as Hausa Mawri, Arewa, Aderawa, Bagube, Kurfawa and Beri Beri.

## Chaîne opératoire, sharing of practice and collective mobility

At first sight, pottery is an activity supposedly practised alone: every potter<sup>4</sup> mistress their work from the beginning to the end of the chaîne opératoire; there is no collective workshop, since every craftswoman possesses her reserved place of practice within the household; all financial benefits of the production are hers, since during the containers sales, the whole earnings come back to her. However, the field studies reveal that at each stage of the chaîne opératoire, the craftswoman is in a more or less bond with the other practionners: apprentices, local craftswomen or artisans from other localities. Whether these links are sometimes informal or not, some gatherings regularly occur within certain stages of the chaîne opératoire. Although those gatherings are planned and generate collective actions, they are not indispensable for the practice of the activity. Indeed, an isolated female potter is perfectly able to fulfil every stage of her work without any exterior help. Gatherings thus seem generated by a common will to collaborate and help each other. This collaboration aims at lightening work thanks to tasks' sharing, as well as « being together » for pleasure or from force of habit. There are four frameworks of practice that can be the place of such collaboration: the workshop, the firing site, the extraction site and the market place.

We will now explore their specificities, following the chaîne opératoire's course, and detailing the operations that happen there.

Ill. 1: Map of the localities investigated



### “chaîne opératoire” and frameworks of practice.

The first framework of practice in which we are interested is the extracting site. Here the craftswoman gets her clay - the first material necessary for the making of a piece of ceramics. In Arewa, the sites are generally out of the village within a radius from 1 to 20 km. Craftswomen go there by foot, cart or car. Two sites are usually used simultaneously, being located at different distances and in different surroundings: « white » clay is usually found close to the village (from wells and hills), when « black » clay is extracted at further distance (from swamps or dried waterways). That latter kind of sites is often shared between craftswomen from different localities, and that sharing provokes « extra-village » meetings that are generally fortuitous. Generally, all craftswomen from the same village frequent the same extracting sites, including the artisans who, coming from other villages, used to get supply elsewhere. In other words, the potters coming from other villages generally adopt the extracting site(s) used by local potters. Extraction is rarely a stage driven alone. Indeed, the potter is frequently accompanied by children of her household and, in some localities, craftswomen agree to go together to seek clay. Though the transport until the source can be collective the responsibility for the clay's choice remains individual. Each potter selects a place at each working season<sup>5</sup> and then extracts the raw material. There are consequently several sources of clay within the same extracting site. Every potter has her own conception of what physical properties should be contained inside a kind of clay, that conception being a consequence of both her apprenticeship and practice (Arnold 1972: 38). However, the site and the clay's quality are often subdued to the discussions and the shared conceptions of those who frequent that site: the clay's quality is regularly considered as a distinctive element between two different village productions.

The second framework of practice is the workshop, or at least the place devoted to the making within the household. That place is occupied by the potter(s) of the household as well as the apprentices. There three stages of the chaîne opératoire take place: the clay preparation, the shaping and the containers' decoration. During these three operations, the craftswoman can be helped by one or several apprentices. She may also be working with another potter from the same household or from the neighbouring workshop. This latter

is usually a relative or a friend. However, « *each one has her own hand*<sup>6</sup> », the potters say. This expression implies that each one's work is distinctive: not only in the facts but also in the interviewed people's minds, because every production is singular.

The third framework of practice is the firing site. It is made at the village's borders, inside circular depressions made for that case. Firing is mostly made through the help of apprentices and /or other potters from the village, in places shared by several potters. The creation of a firing site is attributed to isolated potters, either because they are the firsts of the village, or because they are not integrated in a knowledge network that allows them to share a firing « hole », or because there are some enmities which prevent them from sharing the same hole, or even they are not from the same *neighbourhood* or social group.

Despite the fact that several people can share the same hole, the latter belongs to the one who initially made it or who inherited it from her mother. The responsible heiress then possesses some rights and duties that are implicitly linked to the site management (e.g. the cleaning of the place at each new working season). The firing group that is constituted of potters and apprentices who share the same hole does not change, but it is nevertheless renewed when a member ceases the activity, being replaced by her direct apprentice or another beginner. Those who share one site are consequently either people whose mistress was already used to frequenting it, or craftswomen that are integrated to the group thanks to the family or friendly network.

The firing modes and the [organic] fuels change sometimes within the same village. However, potters who share the same firing site - though they sometimes acquired their knowledge in other localities, from different teachers and manners - generally tend to develop a common practice. When the young potter arrives and does not find her « technical counterpart », she generally adapts [herself] to the local practice. In most cases, the firing differences that we noticed within the same village do not concern the employed fuels, but they consist in subtle variations. Thus, in Kordongo, the members of some firing groups break the millet stalks, whereas some others keep them entire before placing them above their containers. Although the technique seems apparently identical, the small variations embody the way of making that is specific to each firing group.

5. The potter activity takes place during the dry season, roughly from February to May. Outside this period, artisans are employed for the agricultural tasks and do sometimes “petty trade” (dough, peanuts etc.).

6. We witnessed at several occasions some demonstrations of artisans who recognize, especially by touching, the containers of their colleagues as well as there are some apprentices that identify the production of their mistresses.

Finally, the fourth and last framework of practice is the market place where most of the ceramics production is sold<sup>7</sup>. These markets take place at set days, and they drain off sellers and buyers within a radius of 20 to 30 km. Potters may frequent several different market places whether the latter take place at a reasonable distance. As a general rule, they pay a weekly visit to the market place which is closest to the village. Potters only go to other places when they have time for that or when they have not sold enough containers at the regular market place. The reputation and the size of the market place are also determining factors for choosing the selling places to which potters go. However, craftswomen do not decide spontaneously to go to the market place in order to sell their production. Far from being chancy, the market place's frequenting is transmitted from one generation to another, in one or several localities. There the makers have their habits and their reserved location. Three modes of organisation are noticeable from that point: there is a gathering per village of craftswomen from different origins; a sharing of the location, whatever the origins may be; and there is a scattering of places despite a common origin.

We are thus facing a series of frameworks of practice in which different forms of interaction develop. These frameworks of practice are associated to four opportune moments favourable to the knowledge acquisition of the « ways of making » and the « ways of viewing », not only from the other potters of the village, but also from the clientele and the changes that would possibly improve the techniques: the clay extraction, the firing, the sales at the market place and, to a smaller extent, the practice in the workshop. These four frameworks correspond to areas in which craftswomen of the same locality participate in a « common venture » (e.g. the collective firing) and are committed to a shared practice with other artisans that come from the same village or from other localities (e.g. the extracting site or the market place)<sup>8</sup>.

Ethnographic surveys made upon the Arewa area show that the techniques of paste preparing, shaping, firing or decorating are, except for a few exceptions, common for the whole practitioners of the village entity, whereas they are not native from it and had learnt pottery in another locality.

Such homogeneity would be easily explained whether all the potters would have learnt in the same village with the same « teacher ». Yet, some recognize that they modified or adapted their technique - acquired, in that

case, during childhood in another village context - according to the conventions in use in their new place of practice - in their « welcoming village », which is generally their spouse's one.

Generally, in a village where potters who acquired their knowledge in other localities meet, our informants describe their work specificities with a laconic « *we all make the same* ». Through the course of time and because of common experience, the changes that possibly intervene are made by the whole of the village potters: « to make the same » means « to make the same *as* the others ». It is all the more important than our interviewed have a relatively precise understanding of the way with which each village's craftswoman proceeds. On the one hand we notice that individual knowledge moves from one craftswoman to another, on the other hand the potters from the same village form a group whose members recognize each other through the fact of « making the same thing ».

Thus, this group which develops itself at the village scale is comparable to what Lave and Wenger (1991) call a « community of practice<sup>9</sup>». The potters who « develop » their technique there lie within a history of shared practices. In the course of the time spent together and through some collective operations where they help each other and share information, craftswomen construct a catalogue of shared knowledge and *savoir-faire*, and they develop a feeling of membership and commitment with the other practitioners. That process is anchored and reinforced by the fact of making the same, which implies a progressive homogeneity of practices.

### How the community of potters works

The sense of belonging to a community (even if it is informal) and the commitment that is set between the craftswomen of the same community do not grow/develop overnight. As already shown by Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), Geslin and Salembier (2001), Chanal (2001), Bowser (2006), it is the daily practice of a common activity which makes the foundations of a community and which ensures its continuity. When we look at how the potter activity takes place, it is clear that integration and membership in a group of practice is gradually constructed and negotiated. Pottery, like any other practice, requires apprenticeship. The « training » starts during childhood or after marriage.

When apprenticeship is made during childhood, the novice first becomes involved in some minor tasks that require little

7. The other distribution channel is the command, generally increased by the villagers.

8. We must specify that only the firing site is unique for artisans from the same village. The extracting site and the market place may be common for different villages.

9. The concept of community of practice is mentioned for the first time in the nineties through the book of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger « Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation ».

technical expertise and that is often seen as easy and or perhaps benign<sup>10</sup>. As the novice obtains experience, her activity becomes more central while her relations with other members grow. The novice firstly starts her learning process at the activity's periphery.<sup>11</sup> From the beginning of her learning, the apprentice is in contact with craftswomen that are different from her "mistress" on particular occasions like firing, clay extracting or market sales. The mistress of an apprentice is not the only source of knowledge, and, through collective actions, the novice learns from other practitioners who are able to help or correct her during the practice.

She participates in actions that are common to the group and she gradually learns what is made in the village. According to her participation, she takes part of the group, defining her technical identity and weaving relationships with apprentices and craftswomen who share the same firing site, extracting site or market place.

When apprenticeship starts after marriage, this learning is usually made with a potter of her welcoming household such as the mother-in-law, the co-wife or even the sister-in-law. In this case, learning pottery seems to be a key for the gradual integration of the young married within her new home. And it is on this basis that she gradually takes part of the group of practice.

The third *scenario* happens when the craftswoman has been already formed before her arrival in the husband's locality. In this case, the potter arrives in the village with her technical and practical knowledge, which sometimes reveals the notable differences with the ways of making of the craftswomen of her new living place. The main trend is that the "newcomer" has to adopt a new "way of making" based on the practices of her "welcoming locality". Thus, she has to meet other practitioners as well as to attend other frameworks of practice, and she becomes gradually integrated, through one adjusted practice, to a new community that has its own practice area. She finds her own place as a wife, a new villager and a new potter. The newcomer goes to one or several "important" craftswomen of the village who most of the time are the oldest or the most renowned ones. She observes and takes information little by little from the practice and the techniques used by the craftswomen of her new locality through the frequenting of the extracting site or the firing site in which she can possibly fire her containers.

These three examples give a better understanding of how a community of potters works: adaptation, integration and

participation. Being a member of a group requires an active participation as well as an awareness of *what the others do*. Participation is a learning tool as well as a social one for constructing relationships, becoming integrated and recognized as part of the same sphere of activity and of the same group of practitioners. The community of practice works because the members who compose it are involved in collective actions; they help each other and they work together. When the common participation generates a sense of belonging to a community, then this last element is a key for understanding the practices homogeneity within the same locality. Finally, being part of a group is also like integrating into one's own practice a technical identity that concords with the ones of the other members. In that case the "similar" practice justifies and materializes the belonging to a group.

### **The extra-village scale: the technique distribution within the studied zone and the effect of the extra-village practice's frameworks.**

From that point, it appears that the practices' homogeneity at the village scale is the result of a community working. However, we cannot confine to that level of analysis since, as we mentioned it at several occasions, frameworks and collective actions are divided between craftswomen that usually come from different localities.

Some localities are connected through the space of shared practices (e.g. the market place or the extracting place). We now need to know whether collective practices which are made outside the village frame have an impact on the technical "traditions" at a higher scale than the one of the village locality. In that respect, we will compare the distribution of the observed techniques in different communities concerning two levels of the chaîne opératoire - the paste preparation and the containers' decoration - and we will compare the frameworks of practice that are common to the different potters' communities of the studied zone.

10. For instance, during the clay extracting or the firing, the craftswoman is often accompanied or assisted by the children of her household, or by her apprentice(s) (either a child or an adult).

11. As shown by Lave and Wenger (1991), the informal learning of a professional practice is constructed through the apprentice's participation to collective actions and this draws a trajectory from the periphery to the centre.

12. Tough this element will not be deepened here, it is seen as crucial to understand the changes in the “traditional” techniques » over relatively short periods of time.

**The effects of the frameworks of practice on the spatial distribution of paste recipes.**

Two elements become distinctive when looking at the spatial distribution of the elements added to the clay which is being prepared (Ill.2).

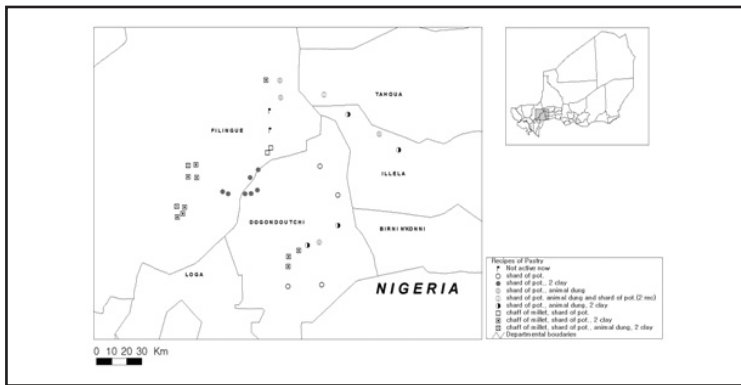
Firstly, though there is a great diversity of paste recipes, this latter is rarely observed at the village scale. In other words, potters from the same locality generally use the same recipe to prepare their clay, whereas that one can significantly vary from one locality to another. This element concords with the fact that there is generally only one site and one market place that are related to one village, every craftswoman from the same locality frequenting the same market place and the same extracting site (Ill. 6 and 7).

Secondly, the homogeneity of techniques, which is obvious at a local level, can also be observed at a micro-regional scale:

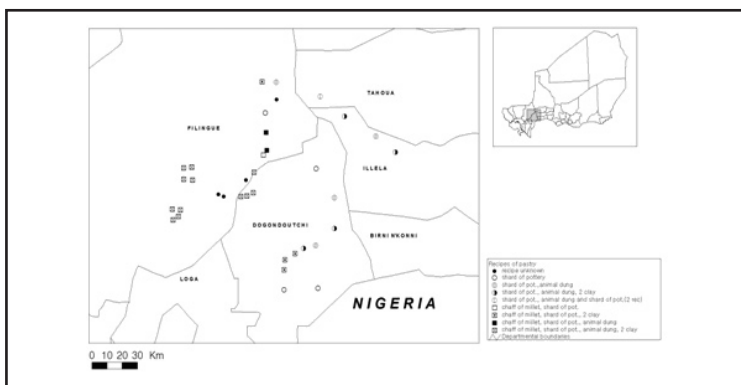
Eastbound and central to the studied zone, several villages seem to represent technical “islets” whose limits are not only justified by the distance between localities (Ill. 2). When observing the frequenting of the frameworks of practice (Ill. 6 and 7), we notice that one extracting site and one market place can be common to several villages. Illustrations 6 and 7 shed lights on some village ensembles whose potters frequent the same extracting site and/or the same market place. When comparing the distribution of paste recipes to those frequenting networks of extracting sites and market places, we notice almost a superposition on the technical islets that are observed in the east and in the centre of the studied zone.

In the east, paste recipes are much more diverse, and technical homogeneity, beyond the village entity, is almost absent. When confronting the map of paste recipes (Ill.2) to the map of the frameworks of practice (Ill. 6 and 7), we observe that the “limits” related to the frequenting of the frameworks of practice are partly similar to the limits related to the distribution of paste recipes. Consequently, where craftswomen do not seem to share some common frameworks of practice, there is an increase in the diversity and in the heterogeneity of paste recipes, from one village to another.

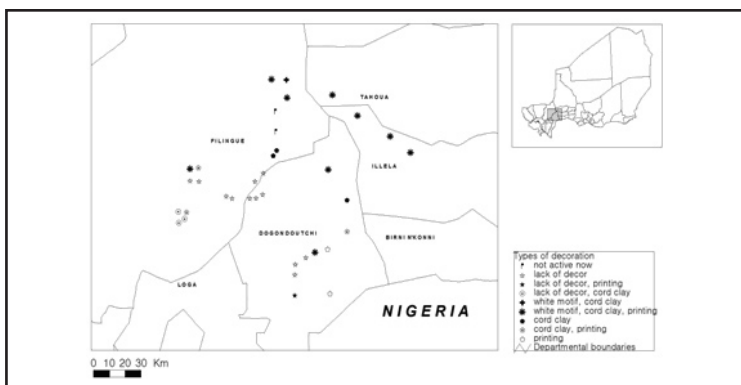
Ill. 2: Map of current pastry recipes



Ill. 3: Map of former pastry recipes



Ill. 4: Map of current decorations



At last, when we confront the map of current paste recipes to the map of the more ancient practices (Ill. 3), which were made up from the potters’ testimony, we notice that a series of changes happened, generally corresponding to the change of one potters’ generation to another. In other words, when the mistresses cease their activity, the young confirmed potters take over and they tend to modify the formers’ technique. “Each generation does what it they want”, “it is necessary to adapt to one’s time”, the potters of that new generation say to justify their way of making to the one of their elders<sup>12</sup>. However, we notice that technical changes are adopted by the village ensembles which perpetuate the technical configurations of the zone of study (Ill.2 and 3) and which transmit the frameworks of practice from one generation to another (Ill.6 and 7).

**The effects of the frameworks of practice on the spatial distribution of decorations.**

Concerning the decorations (Ill.4 and 5), I chose to focus on two types of containers that are particularly ubiquitous for the ceramics' production in the study area : the *Karihi*, which is a water jar placed inside houses, and the *Tukunia*, which is meant to drain and carry the water coming from the well. The *Karihi* differs from the *Tukunia* because of its more important size and its higher neck. Both containers are covered by a red-coloured engobe that has been employed before the firing process.

The first striking element concerning the containers is the quasi-disappearance of decorations within the study area. This new tendency would have appeared in the south-east of the area and spread out progressively towards the centre.

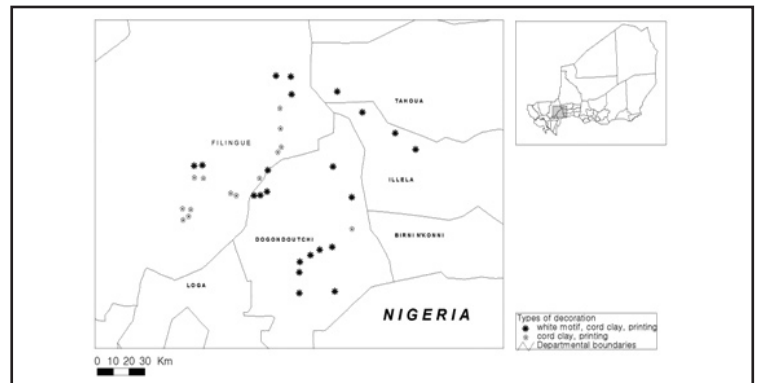
The ancient decorative practices map (Ill.5) shows the use of printing on roulette cord and on spike from *Blepharis ciliaris*, as well as the implementation of a clay cordon at the neck height. Nowadays, printing decoration (Ill.4) has disappeared from the centre and the south east of the study area, but it is still working out in the north, as well as in the west but more sporadically. The clay cordon implementation, rather frequent than the cord one, is also disappearing in the areas where printing is no longer practised. Concerning white painting, this one is only implemented on *karihis*. It has been associated – and still is – to the water jars that are offered at a marriage occasion. However, the painted patterns (generally point- or stripe-shaped, along the container's shoulder) seem on the decline too, and it is seen more particularly where printing and clay cordon implementation disappeared.

It has only been ten years since the craftswomen of that area totally ceased to decorate their containers. This giving-up would be due to customers' complaints that were made on market places and then taken over from village to village. These complaints would focus on the fact that printing decorations "retain dust" and give a dirty, neglected aspect to the containers. They were mainly expressed at Doubelma, Kolefou and Bagaji markets. Kolefou market welcomes not only local craftswomen – who frequent to Doubelma market too – but also hawkers coming from the south-east (Ill.6). These hawkers give also supply to Bagaji market, which is frequented by potters coming from the neighbouring villages.

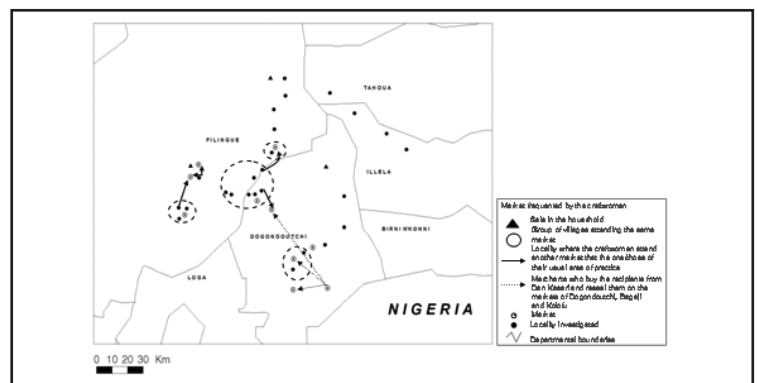
The merchants, who come from the south, sell the production of craftswomen coming from the Dan Kasari area, which is outside the study zone; those craftswomen do not have any contact with craftswomen from the centre. Yet, it seems that the decoration stopping should be older in the south. The hawkers, who bring different kinds of containers made by local production, may have "encouraged" the decoration stopping, or perhaps in some cases, the stopping of the *karihi* production. Whatever it might be, foreign containers import makes the buyers face other ways of making and, may those ones win their preferences, it has an actual impact on local production.

In the centre and in the east, we also notice a decorations decrease, but *karihi* remains a part of the main production. Whereas all concerned craftswomen stopped the containers' decoration, stopping the *karihi*

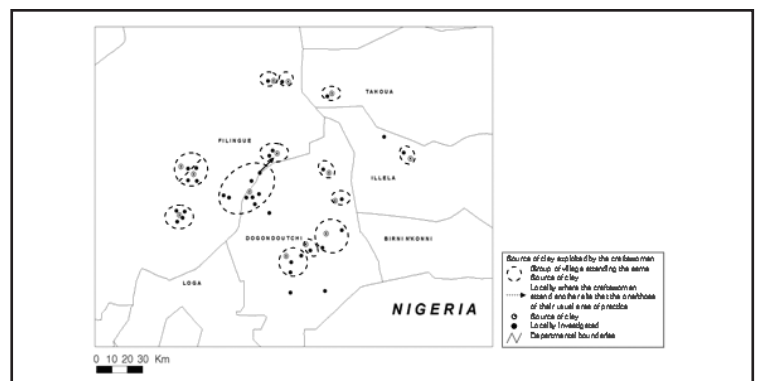
Ill. 5: Map of former decorations



Ill. 6: Map of market places frequented by the craftswomen



Ill. 7: Map of extracting sites frequented by the craftswomen



production has not been generalized. This shows that information is subdued to evaluation and it is also sized up depending on its accuracy and its appropriateness with the local practices.

In short, the current decorations' distribution sets three areas that correspond approximately to those described for paste recipes. As for paste recipes, the west and the centre of the study area display some small village concentrations where craftswomen use the same technique that they have identically modified. Then, the "technical islets", as concerns paste preparing and decorations, have to be compared to the frequenting of practice's frameworks.

What emerges from that, at the level of examining the spatial distribution of techniques, is that there can be a relative homogeneity of practices, at a village scale as well as at an extra-village one. Reading the map of paste recipes and decorations distribution allows us to identify the areas of homogeneity but not to explain them. In fact, technical configurations can only be understood when the practice places of craftswomen are taken into account, to say, the market place and the extracting site. The maps of the market places and extracting sites distribution shed light on the existence of micro-regional areas within which practice takes place. The craftswomen that use the same "frameworks" know the ways of making of the other potters who frequent them. These frameworks define and maintain the area within which the activity takes place, as well as its associated meetings. Although there are some technical differences that are noticeable between the former and the new generations of potters, we observe that the frequenting of one extracting site and one market place almost never changes from one generation to another. That area legacy conditions and maintains the relations that have been established between generations of craftswomen, and it seems to be set as an explaining factor for the technical configurations of the study zone. Thus, whereas technique is modified in the course of generations, the spatial evolution of these configurations does not seem to be so changing. The extracting site and the market place are consequently part of the "legacy lot" of apprenticeship and/or community membership.

At last, the example of the stopping of decorations in the centre of the study area illustrates the implementation of a piece of information, this one being collected during the extra-local practice (e.g. the sales at market place), into the production of the concerned craftswomen. The local and extra-local spheres are intricately mixed and a series of actors has to be taken into account in order to understand the change(s) that has (have) been assimilated in the course of time. We also understand that there is an extra-village dynamic, at a micro-regional scale, which can be related to the one that is found at the village scale in terms of knowledge sharing. Though the technical homogeneity at a village scale is due to the practice community's working, the technical homogeneity at a micro-regional scale is linked to the sharing of frameworks of practice that are the bases to a common awareness of belonging to the same regional area and to the sharing of the same technical catalogue.

## Conclusion

The technical disparities, changes, and continuities are often the object of explanations without any real understanding of the mechanisms that lead them. In other words, we focus on the "why" rather than on the "how". As François Sigaut says, "there are not and there cannot be any transfers of techniques, because we cannot move/transport/carry skills separately from the men who possess them and from the social groups that are necessary for their (re)production." (Sigaut 1999:526) What we can learn from that is that if we want to understand the dynamics of technical "traditions", we have to keep in mind that the potter fits in a context of practice which can be defined at two levels : at the village scale and at the extra-village scale. To be more precise, the practice of the activity takes place either within the household, or at the firing site, or at the market place, or at the extracting site. To understand how knowledge is constructed and how it changes within a group needs replacing the community into its global context of practice and establishing the possible connexions with the members of other communities.



Consequently, whereas it is admitted that craftswomen are committed to a group dynamic at the village scale, our study tends to show that such a dynamic is also present at a wider scale. Even though one craftswoman is isolated within her village, she is anchored in a particular area and she weaves relationships - or at least she comes into interaction - with other practitioners through the operations and the collective movements that are outside the village context. Neglecting the frameworks of

practice and the interactions that take place within them is like denying the context and the "daily" history that has shaped and still shapes the technical "traditions". Based on the homogeneity which is obvious at the village scale and visible in the micro regional areas, the cooperation and the constancy of the frameworks of practice appear to be two explaining factors for the technical configurations that are present in our study area.

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