

# Traditional Pejaten ceramics gain popularity

TABANAN, Bali (JP): Pejaten, a small village only 15 kilometers northwest of Denpasar, has long been known as the hub of Bali's terracotta industry.

Its decorative and roof tiles as well as its earthenware have been exported to places like Japan, the United States and Europe. This small village is situated in Tabanan regency, which is dubbed Bali's "rice barn."

To visit this village, it is best to drive west from Denpasar, passing through Kerobokan. If you are lucky enough to go during harvest time, you will be able to see the swaying rice crops in the paddy fields, in hues ranging from green to yellow, along the asphalted road to the village.

Approaching Pejaten village, the road is stone paved. It is no wonder that people say that 90 percent of Pejaten villagers are terracotta craftsmen. Most homes in this traditional village house a small tile-making workshop, although they are not as crowded as the silver and gold home industries in Celuk, Ubud, where every house runs a craft business.

Some parts of this village, where about 4,000 people live, are untouched by modern technology, as seen in the lack of telephone connections. Don't be surprised too if you happen to see topless middle-aged women wandering in and around their houses.

In the hinterland villages, it is customary to see them wear only a sarong while their torso remains unclothed. However, upon seeing guests, the women often become modest and will quickly put a blouse on.

The excellent quality of Pejaten red clay has turned this village into the center of the terracotta industry. The growth of the Pejaten terracotta industry resulted in the over-mining of red clay. Therefore, in the 1980s, as the red clay was getting scarce, some Pejaten villagers began to seek alternatives for their home industry.

By Wahyuni Kamah

Ngurah Gusti Suryasa is one of these innovators and he and some of his local friends pioneered a small-scale ceramic home industry in 1987. "I knew nothing about ceramics but was familiar with terracotta," said Ngurah, 35 years old. He stated that the initial establishment of his business was partly financed by Sucofindo.

The dim showroom that is only 10 meters away from the factory is simply decorated. The collections, ranging from incense stick holders to flower vases, are arranged plainly in glass racks on the wall, while a number of vases and boxes filled with ceramic plates are scattered on the floor. The showroom is a bit messy.

"We mainly accept big orders and our products are sold as consigned goods in some shops in Kuta and displayed there," Ngurah explained. "Moreover, our location is not that accessible though some tourists do visit this showroom," he added.

His ceramic wares bear natural colors. Green, which is the dominant color, has now become the trademark of Pejaten ceramics. The color was found by trial and error in the glazing process. Other colors include light blue, ivory and shades of green-gray.

The designs have animal shapes like fish, lizards, frogs and turtles that climb out of sugar bowls, lids of teapots and perfume jars. They rest on soap dishes, ashtrays, cups, clay glass covers, napkin holders, candle holders and vases. The showroom, however, does not display the complete collection. Ngurah, having no formal education in the ceramic industry, said that other designs and models are made upon request.

"Frankly speaking, I have learned by doing," explained this graduate of Tabanan high school with a major in the Social Sciences. He learned

about ceramics in training classes in Malang, East Java and Bandung, West Java, but stressed that trial and error was the most effective method to acquire the best technique.

Now Ngurah has 80 workers and most of them are women. His factory produces around 5000 ceramic pieces per month. However, production output is affected by the number of religious events and duties which may arise in any given month. "My workers take days off when there is a religious ceremony so we cannot produce any pieces during that period."

At lunch time, the factory is deserted as the workers and potters who live nearby go home for their lunch. Close to 1 p.m. some workers slowly return to the workshop to continue production.

Ngurah divides his workers into seven groups that are assigned to take orders. "It is easier for me to control them that way," he said.

The traditional factory is arranged according to the orders received. I visited a group that consists of about 20

workers. In the first line, a woman weighed ceramic clay according to the size and shapes of the piece to be produced. Two women then busily blended the ceramic batter, which is made of white clay (imported from Malang, East Java) and water. Ngurah said that he used at least six tons of white clay for production each month. "We don't have such good quality white clay in Bali," he added.

The work order uses a running wheel system. Women potters shape the well-blended clay into various shapes and sizes. Their strong feet energetically rotate the potter's wheel while their hands and fingers painstakingly shape the ceramic wares into vases, plates, cups and other objects. They chat freely with their neighbors while working. The finished wares are put in wooden racks to await the next phase of production.

Contrary to what is generally assumed, the decorating is done mainly by men instead of women. Three men work to decorate the pieces. One of

them cleverly decorates a vase by drawing plant leaves using a sharp pin, while another shapes small frog-like figures to be put on ashtrays. "We make all decorations by hand," says Putu, a young man who artfully draws plant leaves on a rounded vase.

The tosca green look of Pejaten ceramic is obtained from the composition of glazing material and a firing technique that has been learned through experimentation. According to Ngurah, who makes his own composition for glazing, the result of the glaze is known only after the wares have been fired.

The composition of the glaze is adjusted according to the firing temperature. A glossy look is obtained by setting the temperature to 1,200 degrees Celsius, while a matte finish is obtained by setting it to 1,300 degrees. The positioning of the wares in the kiln also influences the final appearance. "Therefore, it is completely impossible to make wares that are all identical," Ngurah explained. To obtain a green color he uses copper in the

glazing composition while the blue color is obtained by adding cobalt.

There are only three simple cube-shaped kilns at the factory. By the oven, bare breasted women place the vases inside to be finished. Because of the small size of his oven, Ngurah said that he was unable to meet an order for a large plate from a luxury hotel in Ubud.

As the first ceramic home industry in Pejaten, the Keramik Pejaten, is still run traditionally. The factory was also a 'school' for students of ceramics. A Japanese student once traveled to Indonesia to study at the factory along with many Indonesian students from across the country.

The rising price of utilities such as oil has affected Ngurah's business. He said that the most important thing for him and his workers there is the fulfillment of orders every month to run their factory. His ceramic wares have been exported to the States, Japan and France. Some hotels in Bali also order his green ceramics to decorate their hotels.

## Ancient bronze inscriptions deciphered

BULELENG, North Bali (Antara): Local archaeologists have succeeded in revealing and reading the ancient stone inscriptions dating from the year 1002 found in Pungit Temple in Bulian village in Buleleng regency, 115 kilometers northeast of Denpasar.

A team of five archaeologists led by Putu Budiastira, former head of the Bali State Museum, have read some parts of 17 bronze inscriptions written in the ancient Javanese Palawa script.

The reading of the 1000-year-old inscriptions was witnessed by Bali's Governor Dewa Berata, Buleleng Regent Ketut Wiratha Sindu, Hindu priests and a number of other important officials.

The inscriptions were written

and advice on how to govern well and lead a harmonious life.

"The rulers and *bagawan* (religious leaders) were closely united so that people at that time lived peacefully," revealed Putu Budiastira.

The contents of the inscriptions were relevant to the current situation in Indonesia which was now facing the threat of national disintegration.

"If we look at the current situation in Indonesia, the advice could be for a reconciliation between the government, House members and the people of Indonesia," the archaeologist said.

The local community usually refer to the inscriptions as being *pungit*, which literally means sacred or unapproachable and they were

In this area, it is believed there are some 33 other bronze inscriptions measuring 15 centimeters by 20 centimeters each. Believe it or not, these inscriptions are normally invisible but can sometimes be summoned to appear if they are needed by the community.

"Nobody knows the precise location of the inscriptions which are now regarded by the locals as sacred," explained Made Seridana.

If the community needs them for reading or studying, they invite Jro Mangku Sukarya to lead a religious ceremony and

meditation near the Tukad Buah river, usually in the middle of the night.

"If the Deity is willing to give us the opportunity to see and to study these inscriptions, then they suddenly appear before us," added Made.

After the inscriptions were read by the team of archaeologists, they were later returned to their original places and disappeared again.

The reading of these unique and rare inscriptions was preceded by a series of rituals including performances of the *Turi Baris Gede* and *Turi Rejang* sacred dances.

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