



## Talking to the Clay

by Lee Ann Cheromiah

In 1972, my mother, Evelyn Cheromiah revived Laguna Pottery. I watched her as a child and was inspired to also become a potter. As my mother and I worked together I learned different aspects of pottery making, other than the physical techniques, that she would teach me. These were the traditional beliefs that have been passed on from generation to generation, and from potter to potter.

Working beside my mother, she would tell me about making pottery; from mining, cleaning, grinding of the pottery shards and the mixing of the clay, to the sacred belief we have for Mother Earth. While preparing to mine the clay, I was told to make food offerings. My offerings came from my breakfast, as we always went for clay in the morning. In addition to these food offerings, I would always bring some corn meal. With these I would offer and pray to the Clay Woman. In my prayers, I would ask that I be allowed to mine the clay safely, and that the clay would be easy to mine. I would also pray that my work with the clay would be easy and plentiful, meaning that I would be able to sell my

pots and use the gifts (money) for my family and home, and that I would be able to help others when in need. After the clay was mined I would take it home, welcome it to my home, and invite her in.

At home, the clay for Laguna pottery, is laid out in the sun and sprinkled with water for a few days until it is broken down into small pieces. During this time I am still talking to the clay. My mother would tell me to talk to the clay as if it were another person. I would tell the clay to be my friend and that I would make her into pretty pots.

Because pottery shards come from clay, I ask the shards to be easy to grind for I need them to mix with the clay. When the clay is ready to mix with the fine powder of the pottery shards I ask the clay to be easy to mix. The clay is very heavy, but I need the clay to be light so I can finish soon, and so I will not have to work too hard. The first time I mixed a small amount clay it took only a half a day, but I was sore for many days afterward. The clay or mud is kneaded four times, symbolizing the four directions and the four seasons. The clay is then left to rest, as I will too.

It is now time to start making pottery. I get a ball of clay into my hands, and I begin by squeezing it and rolling it. Again, I ask the clay to be my friend and to work with me. During the time that I am making my pottery I am talking with the clay. For example, when I have finished the pot and put it out to dry, I always tell the clay how pretty she has become, and what a pretty shape she is. There are days when I cannot make a single pot, or it seems that it takes forever to complete one. When this happens, I believe that the clay does not want to work with me, and that she doesn't want to be my friend.

After the pot is set out to dry, it is ready to be smoothed and sanded. White slip is then applied and stone polished. Next, I sketch a design in pencil to make sure images are in the right place and are balanced. A long time ago potters skipped this step because they were confident of their skills. All of my paints are natural and from the earth. Red, is made with red clay, black is concentrated wild spinach juice, and the white is made with gypsum clay. When I have finished painting my pot, I always tell the clay again how beautiful she has become.

Firing pottery is the last step. On a calm day, usually in the morning, I would take my pots where my family and I fire all our pots. While building my kiln, with cow dung and pottery shards, I ask the spirits to help me. I ask the spirits to pray with me, that my pots will fire safely, with no popping, cracking or fire spots, and that they will come out perfect. For the firing, food offerings and flowers are put into the kiln. Food is for those spirits who have helped me, and flowers to impart their beauty. I wait, wonder, and listen for any popping sounds from the fire. When all the cow dung has turned to ash, the pots are ready to be removed. I always give thanks for a good firing whether the pot has survived or not. When a pot does not come out in perfect form, I feel that it was not meant to be, and that this is how the spirits wanted it. When a pot is fired perfectly, I admire it again, and tell it how beautiful it has become.

When a pot is sold and it is time to relinquish my possession, I tell the pot to go and be happy wherever it may go. I also tell the pot to bring happiness into the home and to take care of that home. Finally, I thank the clay again and say good bye.

