

**GHANA & NEPAL: BEESWAX
USED IN LOST WAX BRASS-CASTING**

a photographic review

TONY MOODY, Commonwealth Secretariat

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A PHOTOGRAPHIC REVIEW

by Tony Moody

Introduction

Beeswax is commonly used in the lost wax technique of brass-casting, where idols, figurines and latterly souvenirs are made from brass scraps in village workshops. This technique is used throughout Asia and Africa. Beeswax models are made and coated with clay and ash, and baked to form a mould.

The mould, while still warm, is pierced and the wax allowed run out. The mould is then put back in the fire, carefully upright with brass scraps atop the hole. As they warm and melt, the brass fills the mould, which is then cracked open to release the cast figure.

In West Africa this technique is used from Senegal to Tchad, but is particularly renowned in the Ashanti region of Ghana, where miniature brass castings have traditionally been used as gold weights. Some photographs show details of some of these figures. Other photographs show stages in the process as observed in Nepal recently by David Wright of Intermediate Technology Industrial Services, Rugby, England.

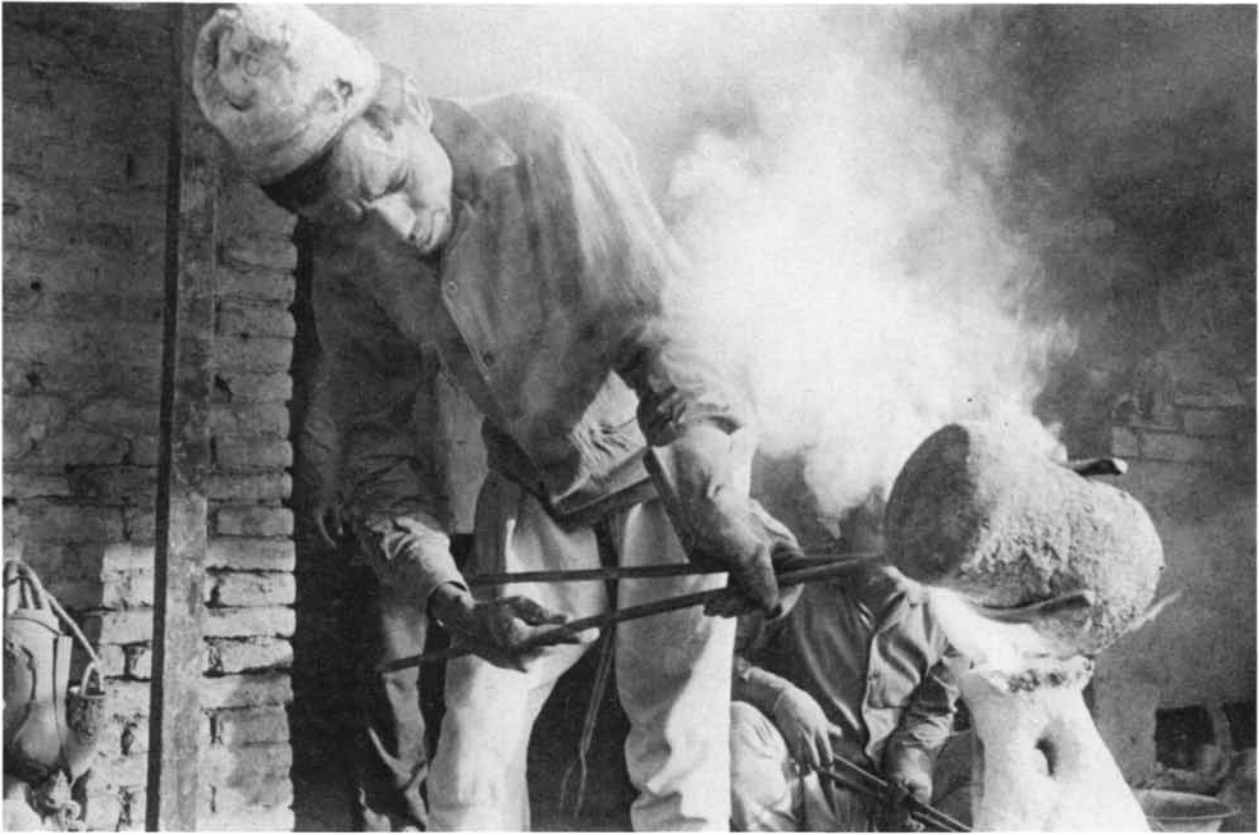
The figurines in the photographs were bought in the village of Kuruforum outside Kumasi: a village where the peasant households specialize in this production and where villagers have formed a production co-operative.

The Technology Consultancy Centre at the University in Kumasi is giving management extension advice to this co-operative and aiding them to improve the design of their ovens for casting the brass. The beeswax they use is now imported from neighbouring countries at a very high cost of nearly £45 sterling per kg: a price that reflects both the scarcity of beeswax and the scarcity of foreign exchange in Ghana today. Despite this high cost, the production of these figurines is a very significant boost to the incomes of families in this co-operative.

Until now the casting have all been of ornamental figurines which rely upon the domestic and export tourist markets for demand. There should be scope, however, to expand the market for brass castings by introducing designs of household fittings for which there is a broader consumer demand, both domestically and for export. One could imagine that door handles, cupboard hinges and latches, bearing the imprint of Ashanti tradition and workmanship, would have a market alongside the existing range of simple cast designs.

But one of the first steps that the Kuruforum co-operative wants to take, and needs to, is the development of its own production of beeswax. With the help of the Technology Consultancy Centre, they hope soon to embark on their own beekeeping programme.

The paper printed earlier in this book by Dr. August Gorenz relates how beekeeping was quite possible in Ghana in 1962-65 and forest honey is still collected by other villagers around Kumasi. It would not require much more than a few years assistance from an experienced tropical apiculturalist before these villagers would be able to institute improved beekeeping practices. If and when this should happen, beeswax supply will be greater for the brass-casters, and a popular foodstuff will be gathered for village consumption and domestic Ghanaian markets.

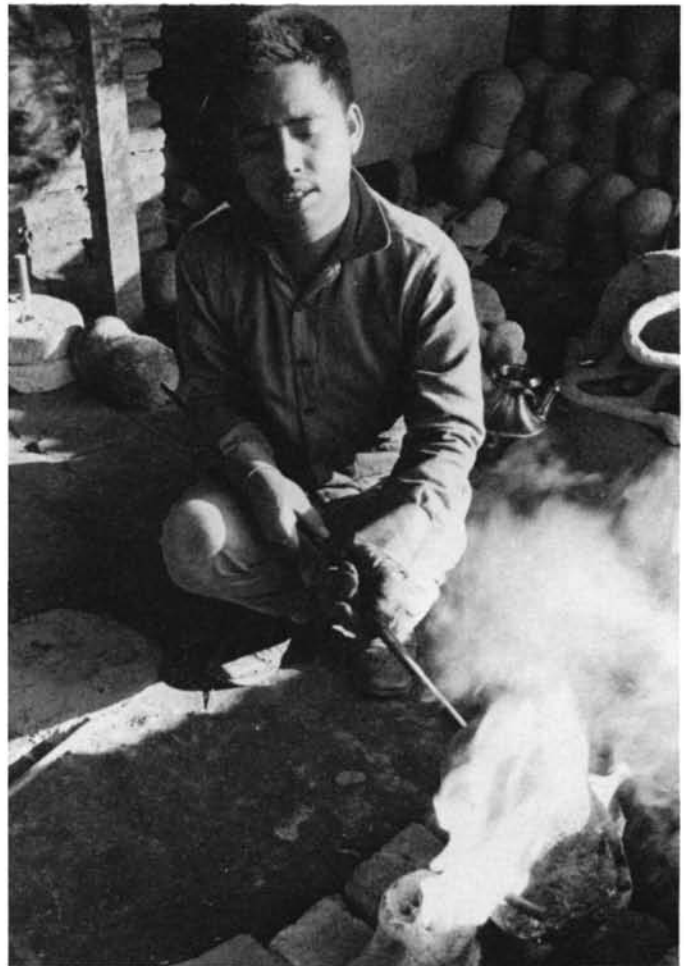


(D. Wright)

Brass-casting in Nepal

(Top) Taking a mould from the fire.

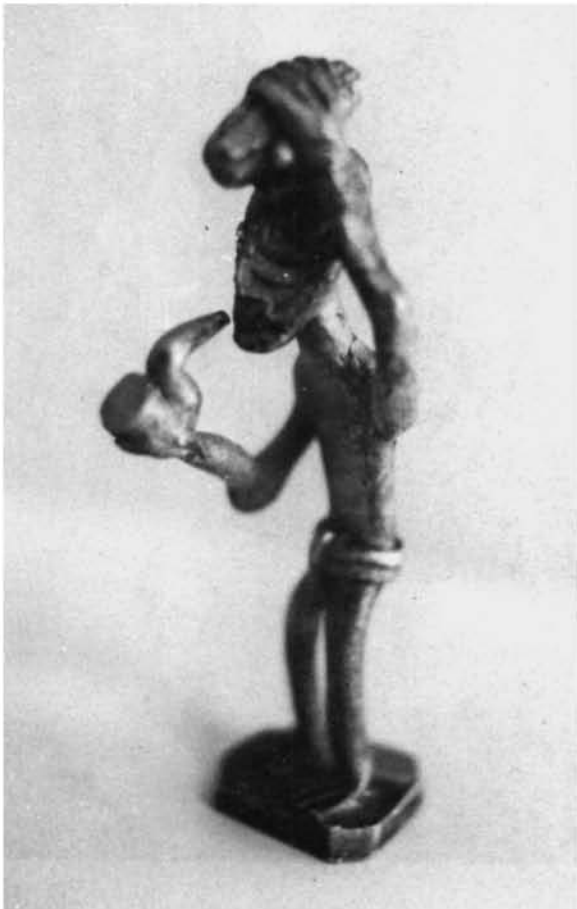
(Right) Pouring molten brass into a mould — note the pile of moulds in the background.



(D. Wright)

Ashanti Figurines

The old man is carrying a gunpowder keg on his head – and he is smoking a pipe. The blatant message of danger is a typical motif of the “proverbial” message in these figurines.



(Right) The old lady is carrying firewood.

(Bottom) The old man cannot resist looking in the woman's basket. It is empty, however, and there is no reward for the would-be thief!

