TRADITIONAL POTTERY: EXAMPLE OF INNOVATION AND ADAPTATION OF OJAH POTS IN MODERN USAGE

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ABSTRACT

The history of pottery is a window to the history of human civilization. Coming from an age of base intellectual development, it is one of mans earliest steps into the world of technology. While advancement in technology, commerce and industry have helped to push the frontiers of pottery to an amazing level of production and application, it is surprising that many pottery practices are struggling to survive. Of particular interest to this study is the mode of adaptation to contemporary challenges. The paper relies on the data gathered from Oja pottery village to arrive at its mode of survival of the areas of study. While making appropriate recommendations, it concludes that individual artist's attitude toward the challenges of the practice will ultimately determine the survival of the art trade.

INTRODUCTION

Pottery is basically the use of wet clay to form different objects, dried in the open air and made durable by firing. It is an occupation, which distinguishes the people who practice it as well as bring into the limelight the place where it is practiced. According to Ibigbemi, (1978) a potter is a “miner when digging clay, a craftsman when making pots, an artist when decorating the pots, a scientist when mixing clay, drying, firing and hot batting pots and a trader when buying and selling pottery wares. She is a worshipper when she placates the goddess of pottery to protect herself and her work while accomplishing these scientific, artistic and economic activities.

The art of pottery offers a window to the history of human scientific and technological civilization. Cardew (1976) described it as the surest guide to a nation's character. It is about the earliest of human foray into scientific enquiry though through trial and error, nonetheless leading to the present technological advancement. It has its roots at the prime of age of the prehistoric humans. Beyond domestic application, African pottery found relevance in religion, industry, and social applications up to the point of traditional architectures as Willet (2002) recorded the use of broken pottery shards as pavement in excavations at Ife. While the art of pottery in other societies outside Africa maintained a steady growth due to cultural advancement in technology, industry and commerce, the art of pottery tradition in Africa can not be said to be that lucky. Several factors could be said to have been responsible, some of these self-inflicted but most others foreign inspired.

The effect of external influences on Nigeria as well as other pottery traditions in Africa is such that the emerging development of traditional pottery was interrupted. The result is that the art of traditional pottery, using the Oja pottery community in Edo State of Nigeria as a case study, was abandoned and left to grope in the shadows of uncertainties.

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Notwithstanding, the practice of traditional pottery in Nigeria is striving to survive without much inspiration other than the will to survive through a creative adaptation to the socio-cultural dictates of the social milieu. Though methods, tools techniques and ethos of practice remain largely at their prime level, some of the products are gradually finding expressions in modern applications. This paper is therefore an examination of the Oja pottery tradition with a view to examining the practice in relation to the survival strategy of the art form. The need to consider their present strategy and to consider their present position with a view to repositioning them thereby preserving this “surest guide to our nation's character”, informs this paper.

Location

Ojah is a village located in the northern part of Edo State in South South Zone of Nigeria. It is a village in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area and is situated in the low land stretch of Afemai (Kukuruku hill) of the southern part of the local government with a distance of about 185 Kilometers from Benin City and about 27 Kilometer from Igarra, administrative headquarters of its local government area. It is bounded by Okpella in the East, Ososo in the North East, Makeke in the North, Damgbala and Uneme Osun in the west and south respectively. The soil is quite suitable for agriculture hence farming is also thriving in Ojah along with pottery. There are pottery making communities all over Nigeria however it is sad to see that traditional pottery practice is fast becoming a past time and occupation of the elderly.

Oja is a village where almost every woman is a potter besides farming. The only seemingly important trade is potting. The emergence of new pottery products in the community has been inspired by modernization e.g. beads, fruit compositions and adaptation of modern materials like tap head on water pots.

The Beginning of Pottery in Ojah

Investigation shows that pottery tradition of Ojah people is as old as the community itself. According to Omosua, an eighty eight (88 year old potter), pottery developed with the oral history of the village. She said that her mother was a very good potter and she learnt pottery from her just as her mother also told her that she learnt it from her grandmother. All the potters interviewed including Mrs. Azikiwe, Mrs. Balogun and Mr. Jathro Afe on the issue of origin told similar stories. They all agreed that the origin is as old as the town itself and the discovering of clay was a big relief to the Ojah women who had long abandoned the moulding artistry from the time they migrated from Benin and Ozanogogo to settle in their present location. The soil is quite suitable for agriculture hence farming is also thriving for men along with pottery by women. Clay in Ojah is held sacrosanct. It is most sacred and inviolable. Clay is believed to be connected to gods and deity in the land, hence it is taboo for raw clay to be taken out of Ojah community or given a price for unfired clay or ware. Whatever goes out of Ojah must be fired. Another important law guarding the handling of clay in Ojah is that a woman under menstruation is forbidden to touch clay or work on pottery. This is based on the belief that a woman under menstruation is not spiritually clean and so forbidden to touch any sacred item of the land; an attempt contrary to these demands will attract a sacrifice to appease the gods of the land. This law has helped to preserve clay in the land against abuse and indiscriminate exploitation. The Obueri kindred in Ojah land are the custodians of the clay; they control also the usage and all rituals associated with the practice.

Materials

Clay that is commonly used by the potters in Ojah is workable when taken straight from the clay pit with little or no cracking hazards. They are usually dug up with hoes and cutlasses at a near leather hard stage. The traditional Ojah potter is only concerned with how to make her clay work and not what it is made up of. They know their clay by their colour: the 'Erema Obibi' and “Erema Omeme” which are red and black clays respectively usually combined for usage at ratio 1 to 2 to achieve a better result. This they discovered through experience and experimentation. After digging up the clay from the deposit, it is kept in 'Iperema' or clay pit and protected from being washed away by rain by being stacked round with wood or stones. They are thus left under the rain for some four or five days or more s to 'age'. This helps the clay to slake. Although the potters cannot explain scientifically the reasons for this, they found that it loosens the clay for better workability after the large impurities are removed and clay is worked to required plasticity, the potter settles down to building of the pot. Among the Ojahs', it is a general practice to either set on a low platform or stand while moulding the pot with several pots being attended to at the same time.



Plate 1: Clay Sites / Clay Prospecting



Plate 2: Clay Sites / Clay Prospecting



Plate 3: 'Iperema' (Clay Pit)



Plate 4: One of the Researchers Inspecting 'Iperema'

Working the Pots

Hand building is the usual method of making pots among the Ojah women. They are used to basic forming technique, which are coiling and pinching. In most cases she combines the two methods right from the beginning.



Plate 5: Woman Hand Building Clay



Plate 6: Moving backward as she builds the pot



Plate 7: Hand Building in Progress

Working Tools

Pottery making is a very exciting enterprise and with unique impliments. A good potter can produce great quantities of work in series with simple but effective modelling tools. To start with, the potter rolls the plastic clay into an appropriate size ball. She places the clay on her left hand or on top of a pre-mould or broken pot neck base called 'urhofe' and open by making a hole in the top centre of the ball with her thumb and fingers. The opening up of the clay progresses until the wall and bottom have been formed to desired thickness. Then she make; large rolls of clay, which she takes one at a time to work onto the pot. With the aid of 'Oberema' leaves for smoothing and designing, she builds the pot by working round the pot moving backward; or sits down and moving the pot neck. Once fashioned into fairly good shape, the pot is left to rest on a pedestal made of either banana leaves or elephant grass, broken pot rim or calabash 'to set' while she works on another. She normally works on many pots simultaneously.

The potter then takes a piece of ring like metal called 'Ohamai' or scooping tool made from palm front or 'Ojagba' metal tool and scrapes the surplus clay from the outer and inner wall of the pot. This is to give it even thickness

and symmetry while using the left palm to guide this action.



Plate 8: Sharpening the bottom of the pot using Epki



Plate 9: 'Ohami' scooping tool made from Palm front



Plate 10: Scooping of pot with 'Ohami.'

Decorating the Pots

Immediately the pot is finished the potter uses a roulette 'Egbegiri' made from a scorched corncob to make a textured design on the pot. Sometimes contrasting area of polished or matt surface pattern is given the pot while still wet using 'Ovabo', a kidney shape-modeling tool.

Burnishing is usually done with the aid of smooth stone pebbles of different shapes and sizes called “Ekhushe'. In Ojah the four types of pottery decoration used are predominantly roulette, incised, mould or embossed pattern and burnishing.



Plate 11: Designing application using corn cobs



Plate 11: Burnishing with stone Pebbles 'Ekhushe'

Firing the Pots

A pot becomes permanent only after firing. The firing spot in Ojah is called 'Otor'. No matter how dry a pot seems, there is always moisture in it until a temperature of about 500^{0}C is reached. In other to avoid dunting of the pots as a result of accelerated firing, the potter makes a small fire in each pot or burn wood spread out the ember and preheat pots thereon.

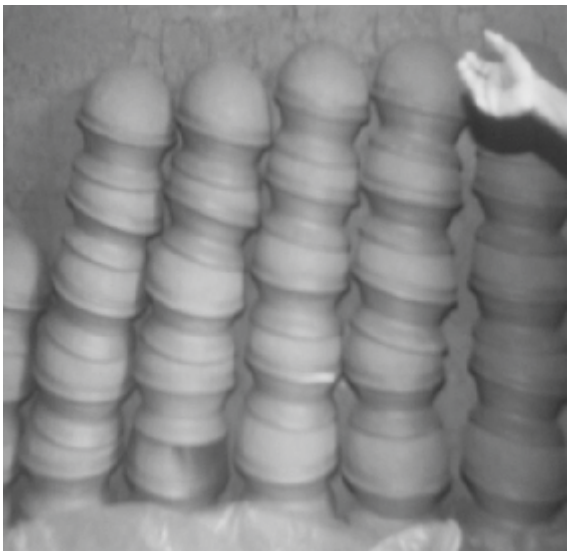


Plate 12: Drying of pots



Plate 13: Pre-heating of pots

Preparing the Pots for Firing

Materials for firing include: grass, twigs, firewood and sometimes charcoal. As firing takes place in the open, the potters remove the heated pots from where they are preheated to the stage set for the main firing. Pots are arranged on a bed or hard wood with supporting stone and shards. The hardwood, the stone, and shards act as props to keep the pots in position during the firing. After firing as the case may be the potter brings a concoction prepared from a local plant called 'Orone', pick up a red hot pot, and then hot baths it in the solution. The solution 'Umini Oshugbe' steams with a loud hiss and apparently soaks into the already fired pots 'Abope' to seal the pores and changes the earthen colour of the fired pot to shinny brown.



Plate 14: Loaded pots before firing



Plate 14: Firing sites



Plate 15: Open Firing of Pots





Plate 17: Offloading the Pots

Typology and Functions of Ojah Pots

It is sometimes difficult to classify or group the pots from Ojah into compartments because both form and functions of the pots cut across the various shapes and sizes of the pots produced in the community. Hence the diameter of the mouth, the length of the neck, the shape of the rim is determinant of the functions a pot is going to perform. Some of the following products are community recognized pottery forms at Ojah. These are Abe Osomi, Abe Idodo or Abe Udodo, Eyeame, Iresuma, Abe Oka, Agogo, Eruesumu, Abe Ope, Age, Owaja, Oshiaololo, Emashimi, Akomi, Enamako, Ekpakunu, Abe-Iwe, Amaokomi.

The Adaptations and Innovations



Plate 18: Abe Udodo

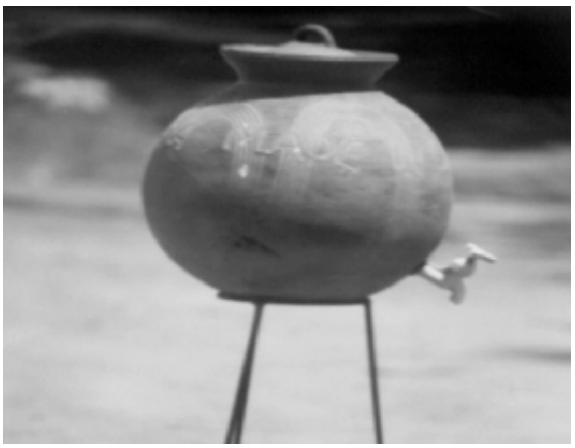


Plate 19: Eyaeame (Water Pot)

Abe Idodo (Plural) Abe Udodo (Singular) – (Flower Pots): It is an innovation in traditional pottery made specifically to meet up with the demand of modern age and has found a good market as a result of the flourishing tourist trade. Eyaeame (Water Pot): There are pots with spherical or cylindrical bodies wide or small mouth and round bases. They are usually decorated with roulette or corncob, relief as well as incised patters. Some have been modernized with tap and filter attached to them in order to meet the demands of the people in contemporary times.

Iresumu

This is a large traditional vessel for keeping water cool. It is usually stationed in a corner of a room where water from pots like the Eyeame is filled into it.



Plate 20: Iresumu

Abe Oka: These are very large pots with wide mouth, used for storage of agricultural produce and sometimes too for the preparation of local wine called 'Pito'.

Agogo: Is a medium size frying pan. The very large ones are also known as Agere.

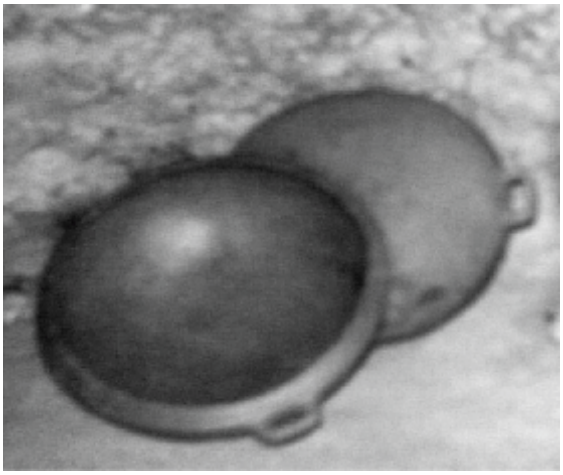


Plate 21: Agogo



Akomi and Enamako: These usually are in animal form, domestic or wild respectively, and are either meant for rituals or decorative purposes.

Amaokomi: This usually refers to any agricultural produce represented in clay. They are mainly used for decoration in line with new tastes of the people.



Plate 23: Amaokomi (Corn)



Plate 24: Amaokomi (Banana)



Plate 25: Amaokomi (Pawpaw)

Ekpakunu: Flat floor tiles of various kinds and shapes



Plate 26: Ekpakunu

Abe Ope: These are water jugs or kettles.

Owaja: These are drinking cups or mugs for water or for beverages.



Plate 27: Abe Ope



Plate 28: Owaja



Plate 29:Candle stands

Innovations to meet new Demands

Somehow the Ojah potters are conscious of the great threat posed by modern wares hence the potters have started to create a forms of pottery like Abe Idodo or Abe-Udodo, Ekpekunu, Age, Emaokomi, Oshiaololo Emaishimi to meet up with modern demands. The flower pots have been designed and created with present day taste of modern homes. They now attach taps to some of their forms to perform the role of industrial pots such as kettles, coolers and filters. This will help to further boost the transition of these potters to meet up with the modern challenges of pottery craft without undermining the natural virtues of a village craft and ancient culture which produces it.

Ojah is a village in a remote location. The Oja potters are striving to remain relevant in terms of production and adaptation to new demands while maintaining their creative cultural identity. The Ojah potters are faced with the challenge of survival, pottery being their means of livelihood and social recognition. They have little or no other avenues of a good link to the outside world. They are also aware that they are admired for their creative prowess and so with a dogged zeal they have continued and are open to innovations.

CONCLUSION

It is pertinent to note here that the Ojah pottery tradition has moved on to achieve relevance in contemporary world of technology, some traditional potters still cling to the old products. The effort of those who make the attempt at contemporary adaptation is feeble. The Oja pots are essentially for utilitarian and spiritual purposes.It is therefore no wonder that the Ojah potters were able to transform some of their products into forms for modern usage, even delving into the purely aesthetic applications like modeling different kinds of fruits, thereby making themselves remain in business. Their methods of production, techniques of decoration, materials and ethos of practice however remain ancestral and primordial.

It is advised that every traditional potter finds ways of relevance in this fast growing world or become lost in time. The Oja potters could surely do with help and assistance like exposures, good roads, and communication. It is good that these traditional industries are still being guided by their own primordial laws even though they cannot adequately justify their basis. It is still helpful, to ensure the preservation and the sanctity of the culture and the trade of the people.

Anyone who feels the beauty and value or meaning of popular folk art, government, non-governmental organization (N.G.O), individuals, must try to do something to care for them and cherish them; not just academic curiosities or having a merely historical interest. They are something of universal value and significance for all. They are living and can grow and change for good; the power to do things to us and nourish and enrich our lives in the future and lives of future generation.



Plate 30: Finished pots ready for sale

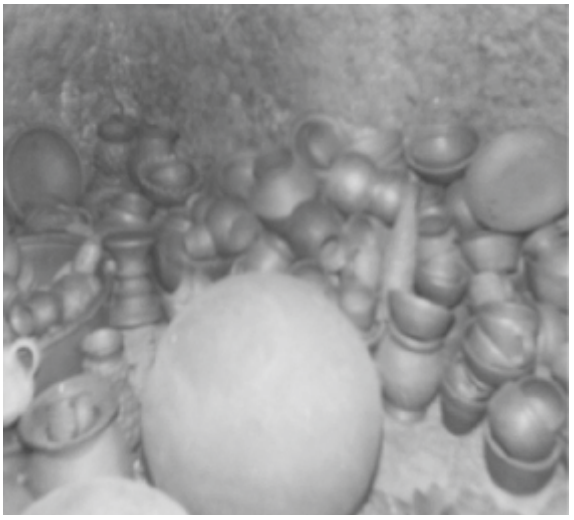


Plate 32: Some other collection of pottery wares from Ojah



Plate 31: one of the researcher's and the villagers



Plate 33: Some other collection of pottery wares from Ojah

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