

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POTTERY: SYMBOLISM
OF DECORATIVE MOTIFS

BY

GRACE NGOZI OJIE

DEPARTMENT OF FINE & APPLIED ARTS

DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY

ABRAKA

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POTTERY: SYMBOLISM
OF DECORATIVE MOTIFS

BY

GRACE NGOZI OJIE

Pottery craft tradition has come a long way in Nigeria and in the world in general since the time of its discovery. Pottery production has taken place in almost every culture and have taken different shapes, styles and designs. Pottery wares, since the beginning have served several functions, ranging from being storage facilities to cooking and eating utensils, as well as decorative pieces to mention but a few. The various functions of pottery indicate that pottery has had a significant impact on man's standards of living and the evolution and development of his socio-religious cultures.

Over the years, efforts have been made by various authors and researchers to document pottery production styles of various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Efforts have also been geared towards ascertaining the functionality of these pots. For instance, a report from Oyelola¹ about Nigerian pottery indicated that a visit to local markets will show enormous variety of sizes and shapes found in pottery vessels. These range from tiny containers with lids used for cosmetic oils and lamps small enough to be held in the palm of your hand to water storage pots as fat and round as a pregnant goat. Each pot has its own special name according to its functions, for example, Yoruba Amu (pot for storing water and ladugbo (pot for carrying water)). In the process of discussing the pottery production

styles, decoration techniques are mentioned as passing comments as if they are just part and parcel of the pots. It would appear as if the decorative techniques and motifs are not significant, hence not much has been done in the area of symbolic meaning of the decorative techniques and motifs.

In an ever changing world in which we live and particularly our peculiar milieu which is witnessing a full assault of acculturations, the need to ascertain the meaning of the Nigerian pottery decorative motifs becomes peculiarly imperative. There is equally the need to know if there are indications of change(s) in adoption and adaptation of motifs. What formal preferences are noticeable in the deployment of decorative motifs? Concentration appears to have drifted from the use of animals as decorative motifs; later wares appear to carry decorations which have little or no symbolic meanings at all. Are the meaning and cultural functions of the motifs used in decorating traditional pots in Nigeria fast fading away in the contemporary Nigerian pottery practices?

Many important facts about the traditional pots appear to be disappearing, especially when adequate documentation in this area has not been carried out. Perhaps there is the need to re-awaken the interest of historians and anthropologists to look in the direction of exploring the area of symbolic meanings of pots. The need for data on symbolism of pottery decoration is urgent, so as to re-awaken and retain our cultural heritage, for what we refer to today as household articles with a life span of weeks or months will turn out

to be collectors pieces in the future (King).²

The research area for this study are the decorative pottery traditions of the Edoid people of Nigeria and the pottery traditions of the Edoid people span through Edo and Delta States of Nigeria.

Most persons do not relate the functions of pots with the motifs used in decorating such pots. But the truth of the matter is that sometimes the motif(s) put on pots help to determine the functions the pots can serve. Alternatively, the functions of the pot determines the motifs to be applied on the pots for the purpose of decoration. What this goes to suggest is that motifs are associated with definite meanings in Nigeria. This is further reflected in the Edo pottery tradition, where potters are commissioned to produce for various segments of the community. For instance, there are palace pottery products, shrine pots and pottery wares meant for home use. These pots carry different motifs. This is not to say that all pottery wares produced by the Edo people carry decorations with symbolic meaning. Some are purely for aesthetic purposes.

The issue of symbolism is reflected in our daily lives as well as in other art works, one should note at this juncture that symbolism cuts across such issues as religion, social and historical matters. As far back as the fourth century, the early christians inclined towards abstract symbols such as the cross instead of the figure of Jesus ... (Cleaver).³ Towards the end of the same fourth century, Pope Gregory in Rome noted that many christians could neither read nor write and therefore suggested that pictures could be painted on

the wall to help them remember what they had been taught about Christ and christian religion. This led to such paintings as "... a hand protruding from a cloud which symbolised God, the father; a dove, the holy spirit, a wine; the church, a mythical bird called phoenix, the Resurrection, and a peacock, the soul. (Allen).⁴ Still on symbolism, the Romans had sometimes put a circle, a halo as we call it, behind the heads of sacred characters and saints to suggest holiness. According to Cleaver,⁵ the Byzantine tendency to use symbols rather than literal description is well illustrated here. The peacock were symbols of immortality, the grapevines referred to as the wine of the Eucharist ..."

As far as the pottery traditions are concerned, symbolism had in the past been used for various purposes. In East Africa, paintings concerning previous events had been reflected on pottery wares with the aid of engobes or coloured clay slips. In Nigeria, the Eyinle shrine of the Yoruba people is decorated by embellishing the pots with stones which are counters of immortality, longevity, initiation and increase ... Figures in the Oke-Odan (pottery tradition) complete, in nudity, is allegedly a "sign of sucking", and a final evocation of human continuity (Thompson).⁶ There are a few cases where the entire or part of the pottery piece symbolize one or two things or events. The lids of the Eyinle shrine pots of Oke-Odan carry the figures of a female in most cases symbolizing Eyinle - a woman who was said to have had two children and could not feed them conveniently. In search of food, she wandered into the bush with the children and

got lost. Watching her children almost starving to death for lack of food and water, prayed for God to spare the lives of her children. She was said to have been transformed into a river from which the children drank and survived (Thompson).⁷ The Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, precisely in Argungun produced "... pottery dolls worth nothing. They are unusual and suggests fertility figures ..." (Heathcote).⁸

Pottery productions of the Edo people of Nigeria is similar in shapes, designs, decorations and functions to that of the Yoruba people. Decorations are usually achieved with the use of wet rags, broom sticks, match sticks, combs, needles of varying sizes and smooth stones. Other tools include carved wooden rollers or plaited palm fibre rollers and carved spatula. Prominent among the pots produced are ritual pots, latex containers, drinking, cooking and eating pots. Others include lamp holders, flower planters and storage pots. The Urhobo and Ukwuani people of the Niger Delta produce latex containers probably due to the presence of rubber plantations in that part of the country. They also produce spice or pepper grinder and portable food flask. The Ishan people produce in addition to the general pottery wares, bathing pots and pots for performing burial rites.

Despite the similarity of decorations in some cases, the symbolic interpretations differ from one ethnic group to the other. In some cases, the decorations applied on the pots have no symbolic connotations attached to them. They are merely applied on pots for aesthetics and

functional purposes. For instance, the spice or pepper grinding piece produced by the Ukwuani people carry rough inner and outer surfaces. This decoration is achieved by the use of rough wooden edge impressed on the walls of the tray - like pots during the process of production and when the pot is leather - hard. Although some of the potters interviewed argue that the dot-like patterns of decoration connote seeds of the pepper and spices for which the pots are produced, one supposes that this sort of design is meant to aid the efficiency of the functions of the ware which is the grinding of pepper in question.

Some decorations are elaborate and complex, while others are simple. This is the reason why the decorations applied on the pots determine the value of the pots. Decorations on pots may also be suggestive of the areas of production as it is possible to link such pots with pottery traditions. Patterns of decorations may be regional and common to potters of a particular tradition or locality. The Bini of the Edoid group in Nigeria use cowries to decorate pots for both palace and town uses. Cowries to the Bini symbolize the natural wealth of the king (Oba). While the Bini king (Oba) uses such pots for decoration and as table wares, other influential Bini individuals use them as ritual pots. The aged among them see such pots as wealth and as a means of remembering and retaining their culture. They would therefore normally have such pots for keeps.

According to data gathered, the Binis also believe in the use of elephant tusk for the symbolism of royalty. Tusks are also

regarded as symbols of nobility, high status and power. The leopard used as decorative motif by the Binis symbolizes the Oba's political authority. This animal, it is said, is capable of taking or preserving life whenever it suits it, just as the Oba possesses the power of life and death over an offender. Pots carrying such decorations are merely for interior decoration and aesthetic purposes. Where mud-fish are used in the decoration of pots, such pots are often ritual pots. Although the mud-fish serves as a symbol of royalty to some Bini, it is often used on pots placed permanently in the Olokun shrine because Olokun is a king as well. The mud-fish is also believed to be a pure and royal fish with powers to regenerate (Ben-Amos).⁹

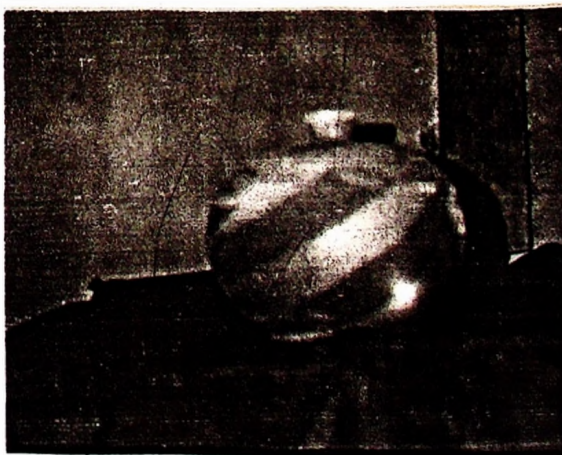


Fig. I

pot reflecting Elephant Tusk
as motif

Beads appear to be one of the few objects used to suggest wealth in the early days. The Binis having special regards for beads, produce pots bearing bead designs. Such pots symbolize wealth because

of the presence of beads on their ^{pots.} / Among the Edos, precisely the Bini and Ishan, parts of human-being are adapted to serve as either the main body of the pots or as means of decorating the pots. Where the full human head or face is used, it believed that people who use such pots would be able to realize their potentials in life because the human head is supreme, while the human hand is meant to shappen the destiny of the human-beings. Above all, the Bini use the "Ada and Eben" to symbolize authority and royalty. pots featuring such decorations are produced for the use of the palace only and specially for the Oba. Pots featuring the representation of a cock are produced for the queen mother.

P.7.0.

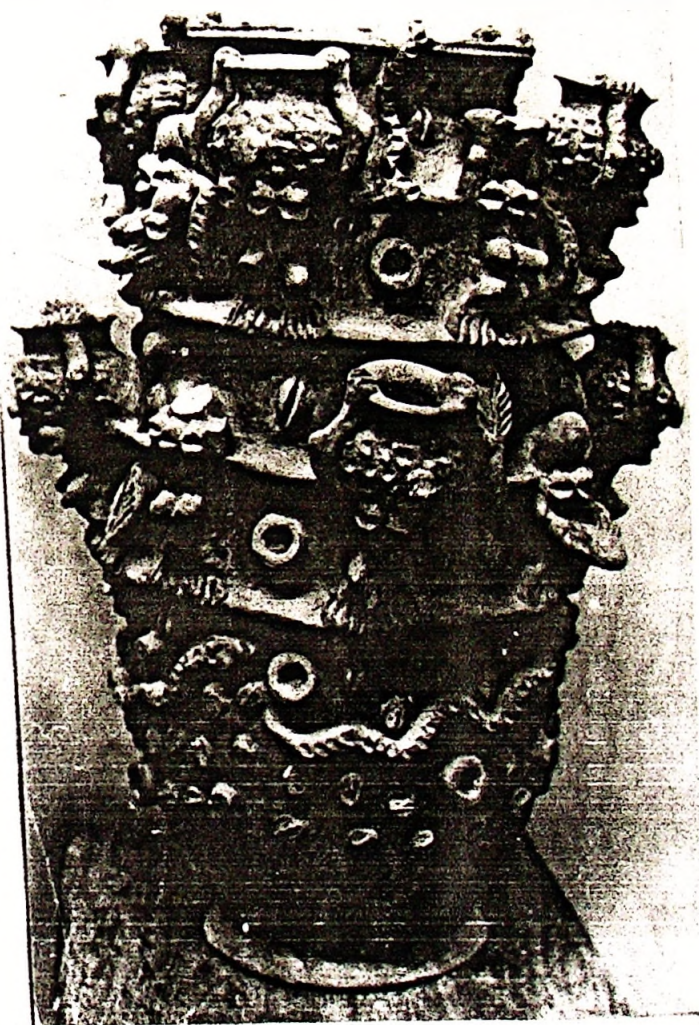


Fig. II

Ritual pot showing snakes, cowrie shells and parts of the human figure as decorative motifs. (photographed in Benin from the shrine of Chief priest Osamwigie Ebohon)

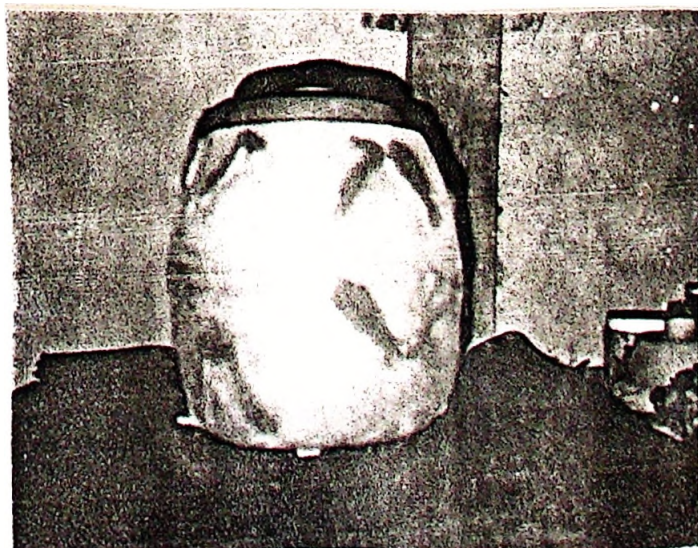


Fig. III

Palace pot showing "Ada and Eben" as decorative motifs.

The Ojah community of the Akoko-Edo are known to possess high degree of decorative ability. This reflects on their pots, especially ritual pots which carry mostly motifs of tiger and lion. These animals are believed to symbolize enormous strength and so protect and guide the Ojah people from evil forces.

The Urhobo people of Delta State believe in certain creatures and they entrust spiritual powers onto such creatures. These miniature creatures are used at Otor-Edo (a village in Ughelli polity) to decorate ritual pots. Such pots are used to reflect powerful activities in the shrines. Such creatures as tortoise and snakes are used on "Olokun shrine" pots or other ritual pots that serve as shrine furniture. Tortoise and snakes symbolize wisdom (craftiness) of the deity and dreadfulness of the deity, respectively some of the priests/priestesses believe that these are the water servants of the deity.

At Amai (Ukwuani village in Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State), pots meant for "ASUA" shrines are produced by mature women potters. Decorative motifs on these pots include some animals, elephant tusks, snakes, snails and cowries. According to the potters visited at Amai, such pots are not commercialized because of the implications of mass producing and wrongful application to use. They are only produced on request by the shrine priests and priestesses. When snakes, snails and cowries are the dominant motifs for decoration, then such pots are used for the worship of water spirits and deities of the area. These animals are said to symbolize

some of the children of the spirits as well as the patience of the deities in handling matters involving punishment of offending persons, while the cowries symbolize wealth believed to be provided by the river goddess. The elephant tusk is believed to be an instrument sounding a warning from the spirits and deities and requesting believers to avoid getting involved in evil deeds. Some of the ritual pots even have representations of animal heads featuring gaping mouths and perforated eyes. To the potters, these set of pots are used to communicate with "ancestors" and convey messages to the supreme gods. The perforated eyes symbolize widely open eyes of the gods to have visual perception of the evil deeds of the believers. The gaping mouth is to ensure communication of same to the ancestors and supreme deities. It is through this same gaping mouth that punishments to offenders are pronounced.

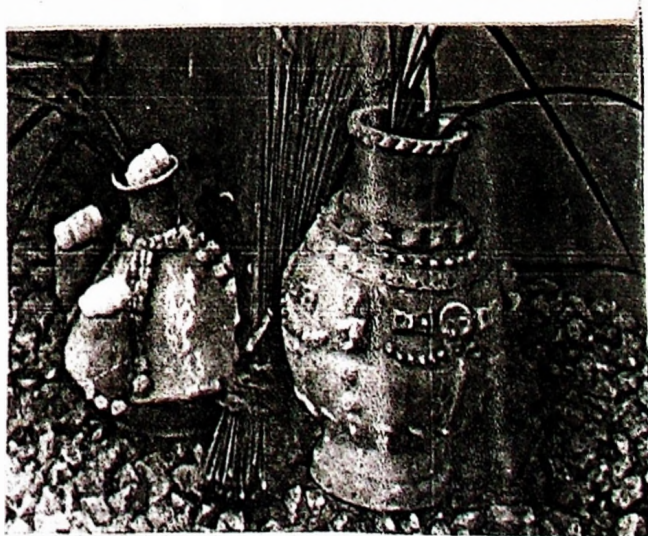


Fig. IV

Shrine pots featuring human heads and cowrie shells as decorative motifs (from Asua shrine in Amai)

From the foregoing, it is clear that the main motives for the decoration of pottery wares among the people of Edo and Delta States of Nigeria are for aesthetics and functional reasons. In the formal - functional purpose of decoration, symbolism accounts for the aesthetic preferences. Pots produced with symbolic meaning are usually more complex and elaborately decorated. Even complexity itself is some form of symbolism. It symbolizes status, nobility et cetera, as it is only a rich man who can afford to request for a complexly and elaborately decorated pot to be produced. However, decorative motifs of the study area have been to serve for spiritual protection of the human race as well as symbolizing wealth and royalty among other things. There is a correlation therefore between significance as manifest in symbolizing and the formal functional purpose of decorative motifs in pottery craft in the area under study.

REFERENCES

1. OYELOLA, Pat. Nigerian Crafts. London: MacMillan Education Limited, 1981. p. 1
2. KING, John B. "Contemporary Nigerian Pottery" In Nigeria Magazine, Vol. xxx No. 74. Sept. 1962. pp. 16 - 24.
3. CLEAVER, Dale G. Art: An Introduction. (2nd ed.). New York: Harcourt Prace Jovanovic Inc. 1972. p. 138.
4. ALLEN, Agnes. The Story of Sculpture. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1958. p. 59.
5. CLEAVER, Dale G. Op. cit. pp. 147 - 148.
6. THOMPSON, Robert. "Abatan: A Master Potter of the Egbado Yoruba" In Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art. London: University of California press, Ltd. 1973, p. 152.
7. Ibid. p. 138.
8. HEATHCOTE, David. "Hausa Traditional Art: The Range of Hausa Art Forms" Being text of lecture delivered at the Department of Antiquities 'ethnographers' in-service course at Jos Museum, June 1976. p. 1.
9. BEN-AMOS, Paula. "Symbolism in Olokun Mud Art". African Art Vol. 16 No. 4, 1973, pp. 28 - 31.

Note: ASUA - The god of the Amai traditional religious believers.