

## AN APPRAISAL OF TRADITIONAL YORÙBÁ POTTERY AND POTTERS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it”, this statement is true of the traditional Yorùbá pottery and potters, in the sense that their work will be gone into extinction if adequate scholastic attention is not given. This paper therefore appraises traditional pottery art and artists. It focuses on the growth and preservation of Yorùbá pottery traditions and culture, through the various forms and vessels made of fired clay. The world of the indigenous Yorùbá potter is such a fascinating one; yet unpredictable because of the phases involved in the production processes. It also observes the techniques, styles and forms employed by potters from different parts of Yoruba nation. The paper further showcases some of the works of the traditional Yoruba potters that is still ongoing. In summation, the paper observes the challenges that may eventually send pottery art into extinction; as a result of the fewer apprentices that are engaged in pottery art practices.*

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous pottery, Yoruba potters, Traditional Pot Making, Yoruba People and places, Culture, Apprentices.

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### INTRODUCTION

The arts of the Yoruba people cannot be detached from their identities due the fact that their art forms is being entrenched in their culture. The traditional Yorùbá artists, hence usually engage in various artistic practices essentially because they are born into the professions and as such they remain and practice the art as family business. Generally, the Yorùbá artists showcase their creative skills in various art genres which included wood carving, fabric design and textiles, forged metal, basketry and pottery. Examples are found in leading ethnographic museums and galleries all over the world. Pottery practitioners in Yorùbá culture have used pottery as a tool of continuity of tradition in modern and contemporary times. The resilience of the potter, which is induced by the practical demands of pottery, has accorded the profession and the practitioners much respect in most traditional settings of the world. Pottery has enjoyed social and cultural importance in pre-modern and contemporary societies through the various forms and design of utilitarian, functional and aesthetic vessels. The materials, forms and functions are given existence by the potter; and in Yorùbá world, the potter is responsible for the production of different types of pots used for cooking, storage, social and religious purposes.

### The Yoruba People and their Places in Brief

Indigenous Yorùbá potters are in Nigeria, and they are mostly found in six States of the federation; Òyó, Ògùn, Òsun, Òndó, Èkìtì, and Kwara States. The Yorùbá people are the Negroid stock of sub-Saharan West Africa, and they are homogeneous in culture, and language, though with variants of dialects. They are the second largest ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria, next to the Hausa in the northern part of the country. They are distinguished by their use of the Yorùbá language. Odùduwà Olófin of Ile-Ife is believed to be the progenitor of the Yorùbá

race, and Ile-Ife is recognized by the people as the spiritual and ancestral home of Yorùbá race (Fádípè, 1991 and Garlake, 2002).

In the seventeenth century, many of the Yorùbá lived in the Oyo Empire, bounded in the north by the Niger, on the east by Benin, on the south, the Gulf of Guinea and on the West, by the Dahomey. Oyo Empire which totally collapsed in the early nineteenth century because the Yorùbá was profoundly attacked and influenced by the Islamic revolution in the Hausa states inspired by Dan Fodio (Webster and Boahen 1980). Despite the fact that Yorùbá can be found in some other parts of West Africa, the largest concentration of Yorùbá is found in Southwestern Nigeria. According to Suzanne (2012), more than eleven millions of Yorùbá people live in the southwestern Nigeria and the neighbouring Benin Republic, an area historically ruled by kings whose authority was legitimized by the sacred ruler of Ife- the Yorùbá holy city.

The Yorùbá people are predominantly farmers, but practice other economic activities such as; merchandising, hunting, music, priesthood, arts and crafts. They are known for their excellent craftsmanship, and they are often considered as one of the most prolific and skillful artists producing all kinds of creative arts of Africa. It is from the Yorùbá part of the country that the largest sculptures of sub-Sahara Africa were produced (Fagg, 1963; Adépégba, 1995 and Kàlílù, Akintonde and Otonye, 2006).

### **Traditional Yoruba Pottery Examined**

Yoruba pottery cannot be examined in isolation of the techniques that are involved, which in most cases the techniques are tied to the forms made. Wahlman (1972) asserted that the various techniques adopted by the Yoruba potters is basically hand built; without the use of any sophisticated machine. She made significant effort in studying Yoruba pottery techniques, forms and shapes with Ile-Ife as source of Yoruba race. She categorized Yoruba pottery making techniques into two distinct methods: the direct and indirect methods. She observed that the potters of towns such as Mòro, Ìpetumodù, Òyó, Ìséyìn, Ògbómòsò, Òkehò, Ìlorin and Abéòkúta adopted both methods. The indirect method is employed to prepare the base of the pots while sausages of clay are subsequently added on the top of the unfinished, firm (semi-dried) pot up to the rim. She also examined the potters in Èkìtì, north eastern part of Yoruba, where the potters used the direct method of pot moulding. In addition Wahlman associated the direct building technique only with the Èkìtì potters of the north eastern part of Yoruba. She did not notice that the direct method is also the one frequently used in the production of smaller wares such as, money box; *kóló*, cream container; *konjo*, local oil lamp *fitílà* and saucer or plate; *àwo kútúpú* by other potters in Yoruba land such as Ilorin, Ìpetumodù, Abéòkúta, Ìséyìn. However, her study created room for further research on related issues guiding the indigenous Yoruba potters till date.

Ìbígbà mí (1975) in his study also examined traditional pottery on the backdrop of techniques from clay prospecting, clay preparation, forming, decoration, drying, and lastly firing. The techniques of pot making he examined are the ones that are commonly used by most Yorùbá potters; the moulding and coiling methods; laying emphasis on difficulty potters often encounter in firing of pots. Ìbígbà mí thus attributed the success and failure of firing to Ìyámòpó, the goddess of Yorùbá creativity. He further established that no potter dare blaspheme against the taboos that are associated with Ìyámòpó or the profession, and her position is held with awe by most Yorùbá potters. Although his study did not examine the life of potters but the

information provided on Ìyámòpó is relevant because it provides insight to the religious beliefs of the indigenous Yorùbá potters.

Ìbígbà mí (1982) wrote on some socio-economic aspects of Yorùbá pottery where he acknowledged the great task embedded in the art of pottery. He observed that a potter is a real gem, a geologist while prospecting for and digging the clay. The potter is also a chemist, while preparing and mixing the clay; an artist, while moulding and decorating the pot; a marketer, while selling the pot and a worshipper, while appeasing Ìyámòpó - the Yorùbá goddess of creativity, and the spirit guardian of potters. He classified pots into three main categories. The first category comprises the big pots, which included storage pots; *Ìkòkò omi* (water pots), *Ìkòkò aró* (dyeing pots), *Ìkòkò aso* (cloth storage pots), The second category is the smaller pots, which are referred to as cooking and household utensils which included soup pots, and food dishes. The third category are the religious and ceremonial pots which are; *Ìkòkò Obutun* (bride's pots), *Ìkòkò Sàngó* (Sàngó pots), *ikòkò Otùn* (Otùn pots), *Ìkòkò Òsun* (Òsun pots). Ìbígbà mí's discussion on the socio-cultural importance of traditional pots among the Èkìtì subgroups of northern Yorùbá is very relevant in the history of Yoruba indigenous pottery practice.

Beier, 1980 examined pottery production in Ile-Ife, Ede, Iwo and Ìpetumodù in Òsun State, Òyó and Ògbómòsò in Òyó State. These towns were flourishing and at peak in the late and early 80s, in her examination of traditional Yorùbá pottery she noted that in principle, the same technique was used throughout; which is either direct or indirect and combination of both. She discussed the socio-cultural and religious features of Yorùbá pottery generally, with reference to some pottery forms that are still very efficient and more useful than most industrial products. Indigenous pottery is only practiced today in towns such as Isua, Igbara-Odo and Erúsú-Àkókó in Òndó State; Ìlorin in Kwara State; Abédókúta, Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè, Ìmótó in Ògùn; Isàn and Ilafon in Èkìtì State and Saki, Ìbàdàn, Ìsáyìn, Igbeti and Òkehò in Òyó State.

The work of Allsworth-Jones (1996) provided a general overview of pottery making among the traditional Yoruba potters with emphasis on their techniques of moulding that have not changed with time. He acknowledged the continued practice of ritual pottery, especially in Abeokuta, despite the incursion of Christianity and Islam religion. Since his concern was mainly on techniques involved in pottery making, little or nothing was done on the potters; however, one of the potters mentioned is among the potters examined in this paper.

Òjó (1982) in his Yoruba ritual pottery examined the various pottery vessels that are used in performing one function or another in various religious ceremonies and from different parts of Yoruba land. He described religious pots as vessels that are sturdily built and decorated with representations of the paraphernalia of the deity that such pots is named after. He gave examples of religious pot studied which included Sàngó pots, Òsun pots, Erinlè pots, to mention but a few. The functions to which these pots are put during festivals are equally examined especially in Èkìtì, the northeastern part of Yoruba. Òjó observed that some pots are ornately decorated and specially made for ritual or religious purposes, while some plain domestic pots are occasionally adopted for ritual use. He therefore, remarked that when a standard form is made specifically for ritual purposes, the decoration is more elaborate than when intended for domestic needs.

Fátúnsin (1992) did excellent job by extensively appraising on Yorùbá pottery focusing on pottery techniques, forms and functions in over twenty pottery centres in Yorùbá land. She studied the origin and development of traditional pottery in Nigeria to the immediate domestic

purpose that pots serve and noted that pots are generally produced because of the paramount functions they serve in the day to day activities of human beings. She however gave a detailed account of pottery as practiced by potters in the study areas. She studied many pottery centres in Yorùbá regions and the names of some potters were only mentioned without focusing on any particular potter.

Aiyédùn (1986) described pottery making in the Ìgbómìnà area of Kwara State. He focused on materials, technique, type and function of pots and potshards. The ways and manners in which clay, the essential material, is gotten and prepared, and the techniques involved in pot making were examined. The materials and building techniques examined are the same as the ones adopted by most of the indigenous potters in Yoruba land.

The people of Ilora were prolific in Yoruba pottery. Ajekigbe (1998) considered pottery making in Ilòrá and its relationship with Old Òyó pottery finds. He examined the techniques and functions of traditional pottery in modern today Ilòrá and compared it to archaeological discoveries of pottery at Old Òyó, the Yoruba capital of past centuries. The study concerned itself with migration history and as such, issues that are discussed were centered on the differences and similarities that exist between old and modern pottery vessels of Oyo and Ìlorà towns. He noted the great differences that occurred between Ìlorà pottery vessels and that of Old Oyo finds and postulated that Ìlorà pottery vessels have no bearing with either the Old Oyo or modern Oyo pottery vessels. Since the study is an ethno-archaeological one, attention was not paid to the potters or who they represent.

On skill and speed in Yoruba pot making, much must be told. Though, Akínbogun (2002) and Ìdówú (2007) studies on pot making in Isàn-Èkìtì had examined skill, speed and the making of contemporary earthenware vessels which includes religious pot (*Oru*). Ìdówú's study deals with the making and uses of contemporary religious (*orù*) pot. Akínbogun in his view tried to bring to fore the ability that is inherent in consistency, especially in creativity. He wove the factors that enhance speed in the production of pottery among potters of Isàn-Èkìtì to years of experience. He noted that the production process is obviously an age-long technology proficiency that is built on repetition and continuity. He stressed further on the methods of production, though crude but facilitates quick and good production. Since the study is on techniques and speed skill, the life histories of potters were not examined. However, the study information is useful in identifying the town as one of the towns where potters are still available in Yoruba culture area today.

### **Traditional Yoruba Potters Appraised**

There is no way one can detach a worker from his work; so are the potters who are engaged in the art of pot making. In Umoru-Oke (2002) an attempt was made on documenting an individual potter, Madam Salumi Olatundun Raliatu, a potter from Okelele district, in Ìlorin. Umoru-Oke provided an account of the potter's life, training and works. Emphasis was laid on the potter's creativity ingenuity while the works of the potter were classified according to form and function. In the same vein, Thompson (1969) in his study examined the life of a prolific traditional potter named Àbatan from Òkè Odán area of Ègbádò in Ògùn State. Thompson appeared to have done justice to the study of Àbatan, concentrating on the life, philosophy, value, style and her contribution to the religious life of the people of Òkè Odán. His study traced Àbátàn's lineage to the third generation. Abatan's religious pots were examined and the pottery style classified into developmental periods. He described Àbátàn pots as an embodiment of Yorùbá religious form; the profuse use of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic

with symbolical images associated with Erinlè deity (emblematic motifs). The study of Thompson is perhaps one of the very few that focused on the life of an individual potter.

Àjàyí (1987) and (Kashim, Fatuyi, *et al* 2013) documented the life and works of Felicia Adepelumi, a prolific potter from Igbara-Odo in Ekiti-State. Both studies examined the functional and aesthetic values of her pots within the cultural environment. The uniqueness of her pottery vessels is characterized by the profuse use of decorative motifs and elements. According to Kashim, Felicia Adepelu's domestic and religious pots are unique expressions of authentic Igbara-Odo pottery traditions.

Akinbogun (2003) also attempted documenting the status of traditional potters in Isua and Erusu-Akoko where names of some notable potters such as Dorcas Ijato of Erusu-Akoko and Dorcas Ilesanmi of Isua were mentioned. His study also highlighted the support given to potters by the government at both levels (Federal and State) through the potters' guilds while problems confronting traditional pottery and potters were examined and the conclusion suggests a better future for potters and the profession because of the cultural acceptance of traditional vessels in modern times. In furtherance to this, Akinbogun (2004) worked on a notable potter of Yoruba descent, Bankole Adedoja of Isan in Ekiti State where he examined and classified her pots into two types namely: the "common types" and the "unique types".

In summation, available traditional Yorùbá potters are very scanty; the few that are available are with a few or no apprentice, hence kudos should be given to the few existing Yoruba traditional potters because pottery products are still available and alive.

### **The Effects of Indigenous Yoruba Potters**

The indigenous Yorùbá potters produce creative pots that serve varied purposes which can be classified into two main categories: utilitarian, and religious. The utilitarian pots are largely produced for domestic usages and these were commonly used before the introduction and importation of cooking and other household utensils made of plastic, aluminium and some other metals. Utilitarian pot ranges from the most tiny lidded pot *kudu* (*plate 1*) to *odù*, the biggest storage pot. For example, large water pot, cooking pots, money box, (*plate 2*) and herbal pot *orù* (*plate 3*) to mention but a few. The indigenous Yorùbá potters continue to produce utilitarian pots for the use of their various customers who appreciate the fundamental nature of indigenous pottery vessels.

The religious pots are produced for use in the worship of various deities (*Òrìsà*). The potters who specialize in the *Òrìsà* related pots are most often than not traditionalists who engage in the worship of such deity or the other. These indigenous Yorùbá potters (that specialize in the making of religious pots) are usually very skilled in pots decoration because the pots are usually decorated with design and images that are peculiar to the deity for which they are produced. Examples of such pots are Sàngó pots (*plate 4*) and Erinlè pots (*plate 5*) to mention but a few.



Plate1. *Kùdù* pots (Iyabo Karim, Dada Pottery Centre, Ilorin) Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, December, 2013.



Plate 2. Money box; *kóló* (Adédojà Jimoh of Ile Alága, Ilorin). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, January, 2013.



Plate 3. Herbal pot; *orù* (Òjò of Abéòkúta) Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, February 2011.



Plate 4: Sango pot with emblematic motifs. Potter: Unknown. Photograph Stephen Fólàrànmí, March, 2006



Plate 5: Erinlè pot (Mrs. Òjò of Abéòkúta). Photograph by Umoru-Oke, Nanashaitu, February, 2011.

In conclusion, traditional Yorùbá pottery to some extent has been untouched by modernity. Its value has not been totally relegated to the background in spite of the teaching and practice of foreign religions like Islam and Christianity, and importation of modern cooking and household utensils. Their vessels are patronized today because of the socio-cultural importance attached to the pots which perhaps cannot be substituted with plastic, enamel or metal containers. For

example, Omoniteni, a potter of Ijaye in Abeokuta claimed that sacrificial food items (*ebo*)<sup>1</sup> can only be efficacious when carried with saucers (*àwo*) or potsherds (*àpáàdí*) in line with Yorùbá traditional beliefs. *Àpáàdí* and *ilè* (the earth surface) are believed to be connected in the spiritual world, which could be due to the fact that every other existing thing including human is ephemeral, but the earth surface will ever remain as connoted in the Yorùbá saying ‘*kà kà kí ilè kú, ilè á sá*’, meaning the earth surface will remain inactive rather than to die. The *àpáàdí* therefore also enjoys the permanence attributes of the earth surface.

Consequently, the indigenous Yoruba potters cannot be side-lined in the development of their community because of the functions their various pots serve in the contemporary times. With respect to patronage, the traditional potters are threatened by the continuous influx of imported products such as plastic and metal wares into Nigerian local markets. Nevertheless and ironically, the reduction in the population of traditional potters is beneficial to the very few that remain in the profession. They are able to wax strong every day because they enjoy the patronage of few people who still value their pots. The few indigenous Yoruba potters practicing today have become rare gems in their own distinctive ways as they keep the age-long artistry alive to some extent. Hence, there should be a resurgence in raising young Yoruba potters for continuity of indigenous pottery arts in Nigeria.

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<sup>1</sup>Ebo is a kind of ritual offering prepared with prescribed sacrificial items, which is usually placed on crossroads for Spiritual assistance and atonement.



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