

APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM IN INDIGENOUS YORUBA POTTERY ART OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Mastery is subjected to learning, while learning is made available everywhere depending on how people explore it. Studies abound on traditional Yoruba pottery tradition with emphasis on pot making to marketing of several pottery vessels made in one town or the other, with little effort on the apprenticeship training systems. For many African cultures, a pottery vessel means more than just a “pot”. This paper therefore, identifies the historical significance of apprenticeship system in indigenous pottery profession as a reflector of the social-cultural life of the traditional Yoruba potters in Southwestern Nigeria. It examines the apprenticeship training system; mode of training, duration and graduation procedures among Yoruba potters. The paper reveals that most apprentice potters are usually the relations and neighbours of the master potters (daughters, sister-in-laws and friends), and pot making thrives where the apprenticeship training system is open to every individual who is interested in the art. The paper concludes and points to the fact that the decline status of pottery in some pottery towns today could be connected with the closed-door apprenticeship system adopted which does not allow “outsider” to learn the art.*

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Pottery, Yoruba Potters, Closed-Door, Open-Ended Apprenticeship, Successive Generation.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Yoruba pottery is an ancient art that is as old as the origin of the Yoruba race. The Yoruba people live on the west coast of Africa in Nigeria and can also be found in the eastern Republic of Benin and Togo. Because the majority of the slaves brought to the Americas were from West Africa Yoruban descendants can also be found in Brazil, Cuba, the Caribbean, and the United States. There are also many Yoruba currently living in Europe, particularly Britain, since Nigeria was once a British colony. The Yoruba are one of the largest cultural groups in Africa. Currently, there are about 40 million Yoruba world-wide. The Yoruba have been living in advanced urban kingdoms for more than 1,500 years. They created a strong economy through farming, trading, and art production. ¹ They had been excelling particularly in wood carvings, pottery, cloth weaving etc.

Pottery is a profession that is held in high among the Yoruba of Southwestern part of Nigeria because of the paramount functions it had performed in the recent past and some of the salient functions serve in the contemporary times. The functions range from house hold utensils to socio-religious functions; however, some of these functions have been relegated to the background because of western civilization and the incursion of Christianity and Islam religions. This notwithstanding, indigenous pottery is still practiced and priced because of its

¹ Nicole Mullen (2004) **Yoruba Art and Culture** Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology; California

innate functions which cannot be substituted with other products made of synthetic products of aluminum, rubber, enamel, plastic to mention a few. Therefore, indigenous pottery is still ongoing, dynamic and viable in some towns and villages in Yoruba country of Nigeria where young girls are trained and empowered in modern times. The art is exclusively a woman's profession and was regarded as a closed door profession in the recent past; a culture that allows the art to be traced to a particular lineage. In line with this the secret of the trade is kept within the family lineage. This paper is therefore an attempt to place apprenticeship system of indigenous Yoruba pottery in historical perspective. Today the art of indigenous pottery in most towns is opened to anybody that is interested in the profession which perhaps strengthened and prolonged the age long artistry.

Apprenticeship in Indigenous Yoruba Pottery

No knowledge comes in vacuum of information. Information is the mother of knowledge which can be achieved through any means. Apprenticeship training system is the most common and preferred method of training trade's secret in Yoruba visual and verbal arts. Oral traditions are another channel that Yoruba race has employed in keeping their beliefs, trade, culture, history etc. The training of potters in most cases is much deeper than the one between master and trainees, because the transfer of pottery skills is usually from mother (or aunt) to daughter (or niece) through successive generations. Ìbígbà mí (1982) asserts that the apprenticeship system of pottery making in Yorùbá land is a family affair in which the learner is usually a sister, daughter or cousin. He claims that 'outsiders' are not allowed to learn the art and thus the business is regarded a 'closed-door' affair.² It is only the relatives of potters that are entitled to learn the business. Indigenous pottery thus enjoys continuity and stability of practice because the activity is transferred through successive generations.

In recent times, most of the aged indigenous potters struggle to maintain the practice in the family for continuity due to the fact that young generations are not getting involved; as Yoruba adage asserts that "*Oosa ti a ko fi han omode yoo paarun ni*". Meaning, the arts that the youths are not involved will eventually go into extinction. Though, the art is passed from mothers to their daughters and anyone who is interested in the pottery profession. However, some traditions are strictly adhere to keep the trade intact, for example, in Ìganran-Ìsàlè village in Ògùn State, it is compulsory for mothers to introduce and handover the trade to their daughters or daughters-in-law or else will face the wrath of Obalùfòn³. The potters' children learn the art intuitively from childhood; money is not paid, no official enrolment is required and there is no official ceremony to commemorate their independence (graduation). For example, in Erúsú-Àkókó, Òndó State, Isàn-Èkìtì in Èkìtì State, Odeòmu and Ìpetumodù in Òsun State, "outsiders" were not usually allowed to learn the trade in the recent past. This is perhaps a way of safeguarding the profession in order to enjoy the monopoly of the trade and a sense of identity. In this regard, Aronson (1995) observes that the Shai potters of Ghana also established boundaries that prevent outsiders from learning the profession because of the lucrateness of the pottery market.⁴ However, the apprenticeship system still subsists in some towns like Abéòkúta and Ìganran-Ìsàlè in Ògùn State, Odi-Odéyalé in Òyó State, Ìlorin in Kwara State,

² Ìbígbà mí, R. I. (1982). "Some Socio- economic Aspect of Pottery among the Yorùbá People of Nigeria". In J. Picton (ed.), *Earthenware in Asia and Afric* London: Redwood Burn Ltd., Trowbridge, Wiltshire, No.12, pp. 106-117.

³ Obalùfòn is the goddess of women craft in Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè and Ìganran-Ìsàlè towns, Ogun State.

⁴ Aronson, L. (1995). "Women in the Arts". In Margaret J. Hay & Sharon Stichter (Eds.), *African Women South of the Sahara*. U.K: Longman Group Limited, pp. 119-142.

where anyone (irrespective of tribe or race, and gender as in the case of Abeokuta in Ogun State) with genuine interest is allowed to learn the profession which perhaps keeps and sustains the age long artistry in these environments till date.

Apprenticeship Duration, Methods and Graduation

In pottery profession, learning duration is not definite and it is of less importance for those that are born into the profession of pot making. The nature of apprenticeship system shows how it is different from schooling⁵ which there are formal principles regulating learning duration. Basically, the apprenticeship duration differs from one town to the other for outsiders who are interested in the practice, and in most cases the time spent in learning depends on the creative ability and interest of the learner. According to Àiná⁶, the art of pot making can be learnt between two and three months which perhaps, is too short to learn the art. But she claimed that the shortness in the duration of apprenticeship is aided by the support of the pottery deity (Òsun)⁷. Juliana, a potter in Odeòmu town in Osun State on the other hand, claimed that passion and concentration (*àfokànsí*) are primarily and essentially required of an apprentice, because pot making is too cumbersome and tasking. Nonetheless, the trade can be learnt within six to nine months. However, irrespective of the duration of apprenticeship, after the apprenticeship process, all the missing qualities necessary for pot making like creative insight and design consciousness are intuitively acquired through constant practice, and these are gotten with a great deal of hard work.⁸

In the towns where indigenous potters learn through apprenticeship system, a girl may be apprenticed to a potter for a definite duration of period and for a fixed amount, which can be paid before enrollment or at the completion of the training; whereas in some towns, payments are not made for learning. For example, at Ìjàyè, Abéòkúta in Ogun State a fixed amount is paid on the apprentice's enrollment and when she successfully completes the training, this fee automatically services her membership levy. At the completion of her training, she offers two cartons of biscuit, packets of candies, two crates of soft drinks and some kola-nuts to her master.

The methods of training in most indigenous Yoruba pottery centres are direct participant-observation and learning through logical tutelage. According to Ajekigbe (1989) young girls at age seven or eight do watch their mothers, and participate in making of small pottery wares, especially, local oil lamps (*fitila*) and plates (*awo*).⁹ The direct participation involves imitation whereby a learner mimic her master as she moulds pots. The logical tutelage entails thorough supervision and monitoring of every aspects of pot making, from clay digging, preparation, forming, drying and firing. The apprentice in most cases provides all the materials needed and necessary tools for learning during the period. In the course of training, the apprentice as well

⁴S. S. Obidi (1995) Skill Acquisition through Indigenous Apprenticeship: A case study of the Yoruba blacksmith in Nigeria, *Journal of Comparative Education*; Volume 31, - Issue 3, accessed from <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cced20/current> on 1st July, 2017

⁶ Aina Olajide is the current chairperson of the Ijaye guild of potters in Isàn-Èkìtì of Ekiti State, Nigeria

⁷ Osun is the goddess of pottery in Isan-Ekiti and also referred to as Yeye Irefin'

⁸ An oral interview with Juliana Oladejo, a master potter at her residence in Oke-Ola area of Odeomu, Osun State Odeòmu, on the 11th of June. .

⁹ Ajekigbe, P. G. (1998). "Pottery Making in Ilorà and its Relationship with Old Oyo Pottery Finds". In Wesler, K.W. (Ed.), Trenton, New Jersey: *Historical Archaeology in Nigeria*, Africa World Press, Inc., pp. 99-141.

assists the master to run errands and performs other household chores; the secret of the trade is revealed quickly to a learner who serves her master selflessly.

At the Áyanba Pottery Centre in Ìpetumodù, Osun State pot making is learnt only through imitation under the supervision of masters. Rachael Adébìyì of Ìpetumodù in an interview by Umoru-Oke noted pottery is easy to learn under this method; all that is required is for a master to instruct and supervise the learner on how to carry out the processes involved by imitation.¹⁰ The apprentice provides the materials and the necessary improvised tools. Her primary assignment as a new apprentice starts with clay collection and preparation and as time progresses; she starts to make simple bowls, saucers and plates. A potter is assumed to be a master potter in Ìpetumodù when she is able to mould water pot (*àmù*). *Àmù* usually requires mastery of some technicalities because of the complexity of the rim fixing. At Ìpetumodù, apprentices are usually saddled with clay preparation because one or two types of clay are used which is similar to what is obtained in many of the pottery centres assessed. In Erúsú-Àkókó, Isàn-Èkìtì and Ìjèbù-Ìmòpè towns, apprentices are not usually allowed to prepare clay because of the peculiarities of their clay types which requires experience and skill to prepare because three to five types of clay are blended together to make a whole. In addition, it is believed that the preparation and blending of clay can be done by skilled hands. As a result of this, learners start with simple technique of pot making like pinching to form miniature pots and bowls. Àiná of Isàn-Èkìtì intensified further on the importance of clay preparation as she was allowed only to prepare clay when she had mastered pot making very well. In other words experience is required to do certain things in indigenous pot making. She claimed that throughout the training period, her master never left her alone to do anything without being thoroughly supervised which is the source of her meticulous attitude towards her productions.

Types of Apprenticeship Training System in Indigenous Yoruba Pottery

There are variations from town to town on who can be trained to be involved in pottery. These could only be viewed in two ways.

The Conservatives: These are people who considered apprenticeship training system as being “closed door”. Where only family members or relatives could be enrolled in pot making. They see pot making as a family trade which no stranger can do or learn. Apart from female children of the involved family, wives married into such families also have all right to be trained.

The Liberal: This group of people see it as a trade for all. They allow whoever is interested to learn it. They opine that apprenticeship training system should be an “open-ended training” which has no limit or boundary, race or even tribe. In fact, this school of thought will not be dogmatic about sex provided the person is interested.

Challenges

Religious Beliefs

The value system of apprenticeship in Indigenous Yoruba Pottery is now subject to religious beliefs. Man has ever been religious oriented, but the wave of religious pluralism has now led to so many people desisting from getting involved in pottery apprenticeship. Yoruba pot

¹⁰Umoru-Oke N.A. (2016) A Study of Indigenous Potters in Yoruba Culture Area of Nigeria: a PhD Thesis Submitted to Fine and Applied Arts Department of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

making is now referred to as traditional religious occupation; maybe because some of the works of potters showcase the indigenous values. Cultural values of Christians and Muslims is a threat to apprenticeship in pot making among Yoruba people of Nigeria.

Civilization, Urbanization / Western Education

Renaissance, as good as it is has created a great challenge to traditional and indigenous values in this part of the world. In Nigeria of today, anyone with a first degree now sees him/herself as bigger than learning under an uneducated woman, who is very prolific in indigenous pottery. It has been a challenge where there are no youths getting involved in Yoruba indigenous pottery. Youths are now seriously shying from learning pot making due to western education leading to their civilization and mass exodus to urban cities. Pot making is seen as a local person's job or occupation of the illiterates. Young people that grow in traditional towns wish to travel to urban locations where social amenities can be harnessed. 21st Century youths and parents want their wards in cities where they get prestige of lives; some love to make quick money, so they look for petty jobs where they can do skilled or unskilled labour to get money.

Ecological / Environmental Degradation

The challenge of where Yoruba indigenous pottery workshops are located continues to pose great obstacles on the continuity of pottery among Yoruba nations. Ebu (the place where pots are made) is now very scarce due to the fact that all traditional sites are now being sold for other purposes. Another ecological degradation is based on deforestation because pot making requires firewood to burn or fire up pots (firing). Hence, Yoruba indigenous potters cut down trees to get firewood out of it. Also, there are no accessibility to the sites or workshops where pots are made, because sites are always in remote places. Climate change affects the whole of man; so pot making is not an exception; such as flood and other natural disaster

Closed-Door Apprenticeship System

Where education is for all, learning consistently continues. In closed door apprenticeship system learning or training is not for all. However, there shouldn't be secrecy in getting progressive information. Yoruba indigenous pottery in most towns employs "closed-door" apprenticeship system. It is either only female family members join in the training or those who are married into the potters' family and are divinely called into the profession in most cases by goddess. There is no way like any other trade for continuity in indigenous Yoruba pottery if anyone who is interested cannot be given chance to learn it.

CONCLUSION

The history had shown the creativity of the Yoruba people through their art works, cultural values and religious beliefs. Basically, pottery in all cultures has many similarities among the societies where is being practised and independently developed in every society engaged in the arts.

This study however established the fact that the youths and other less privileged people in Nigerian society should be involved in the arts of pottery as a means for sustainability in a society where economy is hard and unemployment is pronounced as a result of lack of inadequate creativity. Apprenticeship can be a benefit from implementation of programmes

and policies that adopt the notion of economic empowerment through active participation in Yoruba indigenous pottery workshop trainings as affirmed by Elebute and Odokuma that “It should be borne in mind that the economic empowerment of our youth is one of the main procedural concerns when addressing the issues of poverty, corruption, nepotism and other negative vices. Human development through artistic approach, therefore, should be seen as a necessary step if Nigeria is to overcome the obstacles associated with political progress, social re-engineering and economic development.”¹¹ Therefore, Yoruba indigenous arts in the medieval period and till date activates the actions of the Yoruba people to be active in believing in themselves as a people that has what it take to make the world work. Indigenous apprenticeship helps the indigenous potters to be original in their art works.

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