

The Nature of Indigenous Ghanaian Pottery and Its Moral and Religious Scope

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Abstract

The extent of the nature of Indigenous Ghanaian pottery is extensive and its constituents countless and wide-ranging. For this reason no comprehensive and convincing explanation of this art has been made, although several unpublished and published studies have been made as an effort to expose the nature of indigenous Ghanaian pottery. Many people look at this as an art form monopolized by women, others see it as a cultural artifact without any reference to the makers who are women. The forms, forming and functions of indigenous pottery is shrouded in secrecy and belief, giving this art a moral dimension and a religious scope. This piece of writing does not only bring about a parody but conflicts particularly on the religio-cultural boundaries. The object of the writing is to explain the nature of indigenous Ghanaian pottery and its various dimensions and to indicate that, this art is the product of human achievements. This has been the gallery of information that has guided indigenous pottery practitioners and pottery societies since the period indigenous pottery was not considered as necessary component of original traditional art forms of Ghana.

Keywords: Indigenous Pottery, Belief, Secrecy

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1. Introduction

Indigenous Ghanaian pottery is an art practiced by women in indigenous Ghanaian pottery villages. It's one of the arts of the Ghanaian people monopolized by women. It's believed this art was introduced into Ghana by foreigners sojourning in Ghana. Some have said that Ashanti pottery was from Denkyira in the Central region of Ghana and others hold the view that it's Volta region, yet where it came from to these places is not well define. There is much disagreement about the origin of this pottery art which has now become part of the cultural heritage of the people of Ghana. Many attempts have been made to give the exact source of this art, its nature and the religio-cultural component of the indigenous pottery art, but these attempts have not been successful because of the complexity of the human factors, their belief and morality associated with the art. This art throughout Ghana has become part of the culture of the people. Effa-Ababio (2005) said culture deals with human beings who are not just physical but spiritual and are complicated and this is what makes this art of the women of Ghana complex.

One can tell from the forms which group of indigenous potters produced a particular type, shape of pottery, its purpose, and function and production location. Peculiar features of pottery give the pottery work its identity and can be traced to a particular region, village or clan. When several pottery wares are selected from different indigenous pottery villages or centers, one can tell where each pot was produced. There are several physical features that helps identify the background of the pottery ware. Form, colour, shape, finishing and function are some of the characteristics of indigenous pottery that defines it. The similarities in the physical features which have been developed by the different cultures in different locations in the regions and production centers make it more difficult to imagine whether all emerged form one source. In most of the cultures where indigenous pottery is practiced, the craft is for onward development, which is directed towards achieving a meaningful way of life. These developments Effa-Ababio (2005) said are a constituent part of culture and are the products of the achievement of people in the natural world. Culture is the outcome of the reaction of people to nature. Effa-Ababio (2005) also said that, culture is the product of proper utilization of the gifts of nature to create healthy environmental conditions and social organization for the well-being of society, a traditional area or a nation. Among the areas of manifestation, Effa-Ababio (2005) mentioned the inherited and studied artifacts, moral values, art forms, progress and development in science and technology. It is within the areas of manifestation of culture that the diverse forms of indigenous pottery have been created in the different indigenous pottery villages in Ghana. The differences in their ideas and philosophies of life contribute to the variations in their forms. colour, shape, function and finishing.

2. Indigenous pottery, a learned phenomenon shrouded in belief and secrecy

Large quantities of assorted pots of antique origin in various part of Ghana indicate that pottery was one of the earliest form of Artistic expression in Ghana. Fosu (1994). The creation of form to harmonize with function is always a mystery and the reasons for their creation have always been need. In an interview with an indigenous potter in Ashanti, Maame Akua Afriyie at Pankorono, an indigenous pottery village, she explained that, in the past all forms that were created in the craft were out of need. She further explained that, although the pottery art is founded on roundness, this does not stop the creation of other forms. The water pot, the cooking pot and the bathing pot are all round in almost all the cultures. The forms of the pots produced have differences and the colour of the fired works help to distinguish them from others made from other cultures. The knowledge and the skill of forming indigenous pottery work is usually passed on to the youth in the family to keep the skill and knowledge in the family as the family strength and asset. The art of indigenous pottery involves the mining of clay, preparation of the local raw material which is clay, the forming process, decoration, finishing and the firing of the pottery products. All these activities are done holding on to particular ways, beliefs and rituals and performances that are accepted norms in the community in which the craft is practiced.

3. The Belief of the Potter

In Ghana the art of pottery is the monopoly of women. In several collaborating interviews with some indigenous potters, it became clear that most of them from different communities are of the thinking that God provided the earth and all there is in the earth. The earth as always referred to as “Asaasie Yaa” is the wife of God “Otwediampong Kwame.” God is believed to have emerged into existence on Saturday and the earth; he made on Thursday hence the names Kwame and Yaa. Before mining the clay, the earth “Asaasie Yaa” must be appeased to give consent for the clay’s mining to be done. Asaasie Yaa, the mother of all creation holds everything in life to feed all that Otwediampong Kwame, her husband has created. The earth supports plants which are the food for all living thing. Some of the food items are displayed on the plants like oranges and many others and some are also hidden in the earth for safe keeping like yams, potatoes, cassava and many others which are of the types like tubers. It is the believe of the potters that when humans are born, it means they have been released by mother earth to inhabit the earth and to fulfill their destiny designed by God, Otwediampong Kwame . In all these, the potters in the execution of the craft give recognition to God and this is done by the prayers they offer through Aaasie Yaa, the ancestors to Otwediampong Kwame. The roundness of the pot, a belief and notion held by majority of Ghanaian indigenous potters signifies the perfection of God, that is a believe majority of the potters hold in executing their works. The indigenous pottery art has been the occupation for women over several years and stories and myths have been created to support the belief to help keep the craft as a vocation for women. This is a kind of monopoly that has been cultivated from believes and myths. Stories of how men who attempted to practice pottery suffered from swollen scrotum have been narrated to mystify the belief. Several of these have been created to give protection to the pottery vocation.

4. Functions of indigenous pottery.

Indigenous pottery ware forms were created and made for the need it does supposed to meet. Several forms like the fufu eating bowl, the vegetable grinding pot (apotoayuwa), the soup cooking pot (kwan sen) bathing pot(dware sen), the frying pot. These pots were made for immediate domestic use, so were used for eating, cooking, grinding, bathing, frying, fetching and storing water.



Plate 1 The grinding pot (apotoayuwa),



Plate 2 Abusua Kuruwa (Family Pot)

Representational pots were also made to bind the living, the dead and the unborn together for the onward advancement of the human race and for that matter society. In forms like the Abusua kruwaa, (the family Pot) Professor Kofi Asante and Professor James Amoah, (2020), all from the Industrial Art Department of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, in separate interviews, agreed in saying that different forms of the family pot have been made in different location with the same concepts. They further explained that pottery Art of the indigenous people is the expression of their reverence, thought, and perception of who God is and the role of the ancestors who are made up of the dead in the society who were considered very responsible and honorable, the unborn who are in the bosom of mother earth, Asaasie Yaa and the living. The roundness of the Pots talks about God, the God who has no beginning and has no end. The three heads on the Abusua Kruwa (Family Pot) is the representatives of the living, the unborn and the ancestors (the dead), taking counsel from the perfect unending God Otwediepong Kwame.

In most indigenous pottery producing villages or centers , the roundness of the pot is related to the excellence and faithfulness of God. In explaining this, the circle which is known to be without a beginning and without an end reflects the nature and idea of God, who he is and how the community have known him. For this reason at the entrance of most shrines, shrines of the community where all consultation concerning the community is done, the round pot is found placed on a three way branched stamp of the popular tree Nyame Dua (God's Tree). This signifies the presence of God carrying perfection. In simple terms, the presence of the perfect God. In most situations, the pot is a black one, the surrounding ground has white clay (kaolin) sprinkled all around, portraying God's presence and Holiness and therefore shoes or any form of foot wares are not allowed in and around the shrine. (for this particular image pictures were not allowed to be taken. It was prohibited by the gods.)



Figure 1 The pot on top of the Nyame Dua at the shrine.

In the indigenous setting, the family pot is kept in the family room in the family house. No one sleeps in in the family room. It is considered the room for the ancestors and a place of abode in the family house for the ancestors. If the ancestors do not have a place in the family house, it means they are not welcome to their own home and cannot give spiritual protection to the living in the family house. Because of this, the finger nails of the departing family member who is then becoming an ancestor and hair from the head and other body parts are cut and put in the family pot in the family room to keep the soul of the departing family member in the family.

At the entrance of the cemetery, a round pot smaller than the average soup cooking pot containing water for washing hands of the people who go to the cemetery to bury their loved ones, is paced at the entrance for hand washing, a sign of wishing the dead fair well, and an act symbolizing a complete separation of the living from the dead. This same kind of pot is used as a parting pot or divorce pot, which is crushed by the widow or the widower as the procession of sympathizers moves to bury the spouse. This act is considered as a crashed or broken relationship between the living and the dead. Although pots are made to function, it is the potter who determines and defines the pots produced. This kind of responsibility is believed to be a divine calling from the ancestors.

5. Traditional pots widely used in Ashanti Ghana.

This study considered very few varieties of pots made in Ashanti. Among these are those classified as storage pots. These include those to contain water, palm wine, honey, oil, grains, beans and groundnuts just to mention a few. Those in this category are almost similar in shape and they include the Ahina, Asuhina, Sahina (Afamuhina or Atetehina), the Afrahina.(mixing pot). Under these are the sempoa and takuhina. Again both the large palm wine pot and the water in some cases serve as storage pot for grains and cereals.



Plate 3 Kwansen (soup cooking pot)



Plate 4 Aruhina,(water pot)

Kontape, this is a storage pot with several other names like 'keba and,'beyere'. This is an extra ordinarily large pot with a wide opening. The types with very short necks are described as kontape meaning short neck. This pot is normally found at the corner in the compound holding water either fetched from the river or stream or tapped from the rain. Another group of pots are the cooking pots Esen. There are two distinct shapes of these pots, the Borodesen and the plantain pot) and the Kwansen(soup pot). The Borodesen doubles as soup pot and pot for boiling other food items like yam, cassava, cocoyam, and potatoes. The kwansen on the other hand is usually black and like the other pots is fire proof. This can withstand the normal heat for the required for boiling the soup without cracking. The kwansen is designed with a wide opened mouth with rims positioned to prevent soup from drifting off when being boiled. The indigenous soup cooking pot has no lid so remains uncovered while soup is cooking or boiling. According to E C Nyarkoh of the ceramics department of the faculty of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Kumasi, there are three types of the kwansen(soup pot). These pots he said have names that define the type of soups that are prepared in them. These include Nkraa Kwansen, Abe kwansen and Nkatekwan kwansen. These are varied in size with the largest used for ceremonial cooking like aduane kesse, a meal prepared by the newly married for the husband. Asenaa is a unique pot made specially for the boiling of herbs. In most cases this pot is described as dudosen. Esenkese is the largest size of the cooking pots with other names like tukunya and senpon. In the past it was also used to prepare concoction for bathing warriors.



Plate 5 Asenaa pot for Boiling herbs.

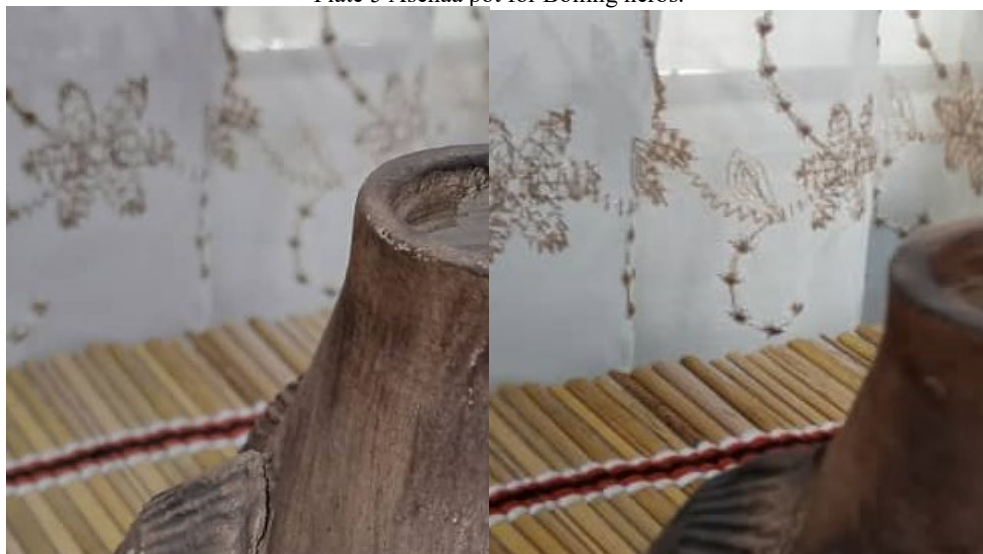


Plate 6 Polygamous pot

This pot is called the polygamous pot and its represented by three feminine heads behind a male head. This is simply to say three women have one head. The three hold allegiance to one man. This also shows how wealthy the man is. Wealthy men marry more women because they have what it takes to take care of them. The heads are placed behind the male head and lower to signify that they are behind the man and their heads are lower than that of the man a symbol of submission, humility and respect. Polygamous marriages are common in most of the indigenous pottery producing communities. Some of the polygamous wives are potters and they do the pottery business to support their husbands. Some of these women go into such marriages because they claim the man in question is handsome, some, he has what it takes to make a woman feel like a woman, others wealth and some unfortunate ones they are in for loan recovery.

6. Conclusion

The subject of this writing was to look and elucidate the nature of indigenous Ghanaian pottery and its moral and religious scope. This study has revealed that, indigenous Ghanaian pottery has communal, ethical and sacred proportions. This study has discovered that indigenous pottery is a product of the total achievement of a people and cannot be alienated from them because it's their culture. Beholding the art of pottery in the various segments, indigenous pottery can be defined as a legacy that is bequeathed to a people for their social, moral and religious development. It is like the sum of special knowledge that has accumulated in a large united family and its content has become a common property for all in the community or family (Huxley, 2005). As a component of the culture of the people, it accommodates and collaborates with religion, which is basically the belief of the people. This has also given monopoly to women and has defined a vocation which in Africa can be said to be the province of women. Indigenous pottery is part of the Arts of Africa which imparts society intellectually, and creates a way of life, mental, intellectual and spiritual for a society. Its obvious that all that have been achieved is as a result of need of the people. In maintaining cordial relationships with ancestors pottery was one of the reliable medium society could express their heartfelt gratitude to their ancestors. In presenting food to their gods pottery was found to be the most presentable. To preserve the presence of the souls of the departed, the art of pottery came out with the family pot Plate 2 Abusua Kuruwa (Family Pot) was made to serve that purpose. Indigenous pottery served in almost all sectors of indigenous living and was therefore seen as a integral part of the people.

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