

# Traditional Pottery Production Amongst the Tiv People of Benue State from the Pre-Colonial Era to 2000: The Role of Women

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## Abstract

Traditional pottery production is an important living art that has been with humanity from time immemorial. It is one of the world's languages that do not require any interpretation from anybody before it is identified and understood. Tiv women are very good at the production of pottery products through the use of traditional methods. Through the use of secondary sources of historical reconstruction, the paper discusses the origin of traditional pottery production. The findings reveal that: first, Tiv women use various stages in the production of pottery and secondly, Tiv women also use various pottery products domestically. Lastly, Tiv women encounter numerous challenges in carrying out their roles in traditional pottery production. The paper concludes with the assertion, that if local, state and the federal government implements all the recommendations proffered in the paper, it will help the Tiv women in ameliorating their challenges in this field of endeavour.

**Keywords:** pottery, women, production

## 1. Introduction

Traditional pottery amongst the Tiv people of Benue state is one of the craft of the ancient Nigerian people generally that is still being practised in most parts of the country today. It is Nigeria's most cultural material that has caught the attention and interest of early British archaeologists like Professor Thurstan Shaw, whose work of excavation of these precious fired – clay objects has been outstanding, but humongous. Traditional pottery is the act of making earthenware containers. It is the art of forming objects of clay in a moist plastic condition using the hands and then drying them by either exposure to sun or air and fire. They are formed in various types like cooking vessels, food bowls, storage red pots, drinking cups, funerary urns, flower pots, decorative pots and frying or drying pots etc (Vanguard 2011).

Pottery is known as one of the cheapest arts being practised in Benue state and heavily dominated by women. The reason is not farfetched. The raw materials used in making pottery are clay and water which are common as well as found throughout the length and breadth of the state. They are not scarce commodities, and machines are not used in its production. Thus, pottery making is ubiquitously practised by virtually all the ethnic groups of Benue state including: Tiv, Idoma, Igede, Etulo, Nyifon, etc. Pottery in its traditional setting is unique in the sense that it is manually made and so, no duplicate of it can be made or found elsewhere except by the potter.

The paper therefore attempts to examine the role of Tiv women in traditional pottery production which is an aspect of economic development. To accomplish this task, the paper is divided into six sections. The first section, introduces the basic issues in the paper. The second segment looks at the origin of traditional pottery production. While the third part, examines the processes of traditional pottery production. The fourth segment discusses the uses of pottery products in Tivland. The fifth segment has to do with the challenges Tiv women encounter during the process of pottery production. The sixth section proffers some recommendations for the control of the challenges and finally, a conclusion is drawn.

## 2. A Brief History of Pottery

The art of pottery is practiced all over the world. It was found to be common sight in developed, developing and underdeveloped nations as well as in cities, towns and villages (Egonwa, et. al.1998). However, it is pertinent to know the origin of pottery. According to Diakparomre (2010:44):

Is generally not known, it is however believed to be one of the most ancient arts. The oldest known body of pottery dates from the Jomon period in Japan (c. 10500 to 400 BC). Chinese potters are known to have developed characteristic techniques of pottery production by about 5000BC. By about this period too ancient Egyptians were also already practicing pottery. Excavations in the Middle East have revealed that primitive fired-clay vessels were made there more than 8,000 years ago. Potters were working in Iran by about 5500 BC, and it is believed that earthenware was probably being produced even earlier in the Iranian high plateau.

On the African continent, pottery practice is widespread. Nigeria provides evidence of the oldest of these practices in the continent. The terracotta objects from the Nok civilization that developed in Central Nigeria provide evidence of pottery practice by about 500 BC in the valleys of the Niger and Benue Rivers. This traditional pottery has survived most notably among the Nupe who produce earthenware containers/vessels and the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Bini who, in addition to the production of containers, also developed figurative pottery. Apart from these cultures, every cultural group in Nigeria, including those of the Niger Delta region, has

one form of pottery tradition or another that also dates back into history. In spite of the prevalence of this art tradition in the region, however, the pottery traditions do not seem to have been sufficiently interrogated to ascertain the extent to which historical factors and changes have impacted on the forms of pottery produced as well as the chronology of emergence of the tradition given the historical accounts of how the region was populated (Diakparomre 2010).

### 3. Processes of Pottery Making

According to Makar (1994:16):

Pottery production was undertaken normally by women and pots were made in different sizes and shapes depending on the purpose for which they were made. They were made beautifully with attractive designs, prints and colours. They were baked and then coated with some preservatives.

Yet the tools and techniques of production were simple. Traditional pottery involved processes most of which were delicate and demanded enormous patience and manual dexterity while others were gruelling and even dangerous. At this point it is pertinent to discuss the production process of traditional pottery in Tivland.

To fully appreciate the place of Tiv women in pottery production in Benue state, Nigeria, it is necessary to look at the production processes. The first thing to note is that pottery production by these women is not a specialized occupation. It is a supplement to farming. It is also open to women of all ages (Obiegbu, 2002). Generally, pottery – making involves digging the clay at water aside or stream or rocky places, carrying it home, pounding it, soaking it, shifting or separating it from foreign matters, kneading it, shaping it, decorating it, and firing the pot etc. The making of pottery includes the following basic methods namely: shaping, moulding, decorating and firing.



Source: Fieldwork observation<sup>1</sup>

The clay must first of all undergo some sort of purification before the pottery making commences. Shaping can be accomplished by use of hand. The hand – process requires simple pinching depression in a ball of clay into a desired shape. In moulding method, a rigid mould like old pots or baskets are used. The soft clay is pressed into the mould and allowed to dry or liquid clay called slip may be poured into a mould that absorbs moisture as the clay slowly dries. For decorating method, the object formed can then be decorated by merely scratching designs of the potter's choice into the surface of the pot. Decoration may entail cutting into the surface of the pot geometrical patterns with a sharp knife. A potter can also accomplish decoration by rubbing patterns of her choice on to the surface of the clay pot with smooth pebble.

### 4. Preparation of Clay

The first stage in pottery production is the gathering of clay which is achieved through digging (see picture above). The potter's clay is found at different places and beneath varying types of surface soil. Identification of clay deposit is usually made through visual inspection of the surrounding areas being suspected. Such sites are usually located at the low land area; valley or swamp areas during the rainy season. Crabs usually dig their hole into the ground and ring out the part of the clay. The dug out clay by the crabs are usually inspected and given simple hand test to determine their suitability as clay for pot making. On the other hand, during dry season, the areas suspected of harbouring clay deposit are usually surveyed visually to check if enough cracks exist. Clay is so mostly dug out by the women folk (Ada 2005). The clay bodies dug assume different consistencies ranging from rubber latex pliancy to very tough streams. This explains the general superiority of pottery produced in such localities.

After the clay had been dug out, the potters dry the clay and grind it after which the clay is then soaked for kneading and adequate packing before usage. Sometimes the potters pound the clay in wooden mortars after removing the foreign particles. During the drying process, old mats are spread on a flat ground while the clay pieces are spread on the mats to dry, or sometimes the ground is carefully swept and then the clay is spread on it.

After drying, the clay pieces are gathered for pounding or grinding. The clay must first of all undergo some sort of purification before the pottery making commences. This is because raw clay contains a lot of impurities like sand, rocks and vegetable matter which need to be removed by sieving. After purification, the pure clay is then mixed with water to make it malleable, and then kneaded to remove all air bubbles (Vanguard, 2011). Afterwards, it is stored in a damp area or in old large pot and covered with either large leaves such as banana leaves, sack or old rags for a day.

#### **4.1 Moulding**

Moulding is done by coiling and building, the pot is built up from rough sausages of clay, pulled upward and thinned as the work progresses. The shaped pot is thereafter carefully thinned by beating and scraping; then decorated, polished and put away to get thoroughly dry. The formation or moulding of the bases of new pots is done inside the broken bottom of old pots which are of various sizes by potters, or inside the bottom of any broken pot which is at least bigger in size than the base of the pot being built. The base of an old pot placed upside down or in an inverted position is used as a mould for the formation of a new pot. The first technique and its variant, achieve the base formation by scooping with the hand and the fist expanding with the fingers and gaining height by drawing with the palm of the hand, thus a greater use of hand manipulation. In the second technique, the base is formed largely with the use of the old mould, facilitating the easy achievement of the configuration of the new base and the clay beater which aids the new pot to gain height as the clay batt is being beaten with the use of the hand around the old mould (Aiyedun 2005).

Once the new pot is half way done, whether inside a broken pot, or with the use of an old mould, the upper part is done by coiling, sometimes, potters complete their pot by adding a lump of clay at a time onto a particular area of the pot, and raising it with the palm of the hand and fingers, as well as with the aid of a maize cob, dipped in water from time to time. Coiling takes place inside another container bigger than the pot being built, nowadays, mostly inside worn out domestic metal containers, which is placed on top of an old wooden mortar standing upside down, serve as a support as coiling takes place and to enable the potter to work in a standing or bending position. The duration of pottery manufacturing, i.e. its working day cycle ranges from one day among some potters; two days for pots with rounded bottom; to three days for pots with ringed bases (Aiyedun 2005).

A considerable amount of variability in tools one used in the shaping of the neck and the rim and in exhibiting or putting finishing touches. In some cases the two sections of the pot (rim and neck) are shaped with the use of a single tool, while in others, the two sections are shaped individually with a pair of tools. Tools used for smoothing and or burnishing the inner and the outer part of the pot range from a single tool to triple tools. The neck and the rim of the pot are shaped with the aid of a maize cob with unused plain or woven cloth; or with the skin of either goat or sheep; or with the skin of any animal. The rim of the pot is shaped with any wet leaf and the skin of a goat, while the neck of the pot is shaped with a piece of raphia palm stick and a broken calabash (Aiyedun 2005).

The inner part of the pot is smoothed with a broken piece of calabash or with both a piece of calabash and quarts. The outer part of the pot is smoothed with a piece of bamboo; or with the bark of corn stalk and quartz or with a wooden stick and quartz or sandstone; sometimes, this is achieved with the use of a piece of raphia stick and calabash. Some other times, the potters adopt the triple use of a broken piece of calabash, quartz and the seeds of baobab, strung on a string and soaked in Shea-butter for smoothing and polishing the inner part of the pot, while the outer part is also subjected to the same process with the triple use of maize cob, quartz stone and the baobab seeds in sequential order (Aiyedun 2005).

#### **4.2 Drying**

This may appear on the surface to be simple that anyone can do it. But a closer observation reveals that pottery objects have to be positioned with consideration of domestic livestock, or playing children not knocking them over, or even the possibility of their rolling off, (or falling) on their own. Removing them from the sun too soon may result in cracking at the time of firing and leaving them in the sun for too long can also lead to pre-firing cracks. Either way, the pottery object will be destroyed. To advert this, adequate care is usually taken to time the drying at the safest locations. Depending on the intensity of the sun, it usually takes two to three days. If the sun is intense, they are brought out only for some hours each day and then returned indoors or under a shade to avoid pre-firing cracks. It should however be pointed out that the quality of clay used, and the level of expertise of the individual potter, can also determine how easily the pottery objects will crack or not in each case (Iyanya, 2011).

#### **4.3 Firing**

This refers to the process of subjecting fully dried pottery objects to heat generated through combustion. This is generally done collectively by a group of potters who put together their wares for the purpose. Firing takes place in an open space inside a circle of stones or earth blocks. Firstly, combustible materials were laid out on the ground. Then the raw pots are placed, neck downwards, on each other, smaller pieces going inside or between

larger ones. The entire clamp is covered with thick layers of grass and palm branches which served as fuel. The clamp is then lit at several points. Because firing is done in the open, the temperature attained is relatively low. The next day, after the entire clamp had completely cooled, it is pulled down and the women sort out and divide the wares. Incomplete drying of wares before firing resulted in their splitting. The finished products are put to various uses (Iyanya, 2011).



Source: Fieldwork observation<sup>2</sup>

The Tiv women also use the 'Bonfire method'. This means that a large open fire is made, with dry grasses and sometimes fire wood serving as fuel. The pottery objects are usually supported off the ground by some giant stones or metal objects, so that flame from the fire can reach them. Sometimes, the pottery objects are heaped together and fire is made over them. However, most of the women potters are aware of the need for the temperature of the fire to be fairly controlled so as to minimize cracking or other firing mishaps. But since the local firing method available to them is not easily adjustable like the modern potter's kiln, another device for controlling fire is the repeated addition of grasses or firewood at regular intervals. This will ensure that the fire never gets too high as to generate excessive temperature that can cause damage. This process is continued until the pottery objects are considered to have been fired enough to guarantee resistance to liquids and other corrosive agents. Most of the objects are left with dark patches as evidence of uneven fire distribution. The whole process usually lasts between two or five hours on the average. Once completed, most pottery objects are ready to be taken to the markets for sale, or to be used for whatever purpose they were meant. However, some of them may still need to be glazed before they can actually be ready for use. This however depends largely on the purposes for which they were made. It also depends largely on the individual potter and the level of her expertise.

#### 4.4 Glazing

This refers to the application of a certain paste-like liquid to pottery objects after firing, so as to ensure that the surface is shiny, glossy, and more attractive, but less prone to wearing. For the potters, glazing is not a common practice or skill. This is however not necessarily an indication that their level of local pottery technology is not standard. It only means they are responding to their immediate needs which in most cases do not include aesthetics. Consequently, the potters practicing glazing learnt it through contacts with other potters outside Tivland, such as in Igedeland. This means it is a recent development (Iyanya, 2011).

However, a very unique method of glazing called 'Smoke-Glazing' by the Tiv women, it involves the suspension of a pottery object usually for aesthetic purpose, in a position slightly above the heat, where it remains for several days, or even weeks. The gradual but continuous contact of light smoke on the surface of the pottery object leaves behind a shiny, attractive look on the surface of the pottery objects. However, for this to be uniformly achieved, the object has to be turned periodically to enable the smoke touch every side evenly. This may include the inside of the pottery object, depending on what the potter intends to achieve. It should be added at this point that even though the potters themselves explain that the glossy finish on the pottery surface is the effect of the smoke, the writer's close observation of one of such processes actually revealed that more than the smoke, the accompanying heat reaching the pottery object, may have affected the glazing. Iyanya (2011:165) asserts that:

Most of the potters who apply a semi-liquid paste to their pottery objects to achieve a glazy surface, were reluctant to disclose what the semi-liquid consisted of (to the writer); since they consider this to be one of their trade secrets meant only for apprentices. However, the writer suspects that they may have used the same properties mentioned in the *Oxford Companion to Art* (1987), where glazing is said to be achieved by two main ways: first, is the exposure of the pottery object to excessive and protracted heat through firing. The second is the mixing of potash with liquid clay to achieve the same effect. The second method is therefore suspected as the most probable method the potters use. However, the presence of glazed pottery objects in Tivland proves that the local potters had contacts with other potters from elsewhere.





Source: Fieldwork observation<sup>3</sup>

### 5. Uses of Pottery

Pottery is an ancient Tiv art that continues to increase in importance despite the introduction of European utensils. However, it is not clear how the knowledge of pottery making began in Tiv society of Benue state but available information shows that pottery making in Tiv society is of great importance to the people. As they use pots for various purposes. Tiv women produce pottery in various forms and shapes largely independent of western influence.

Some are used as pitchers; some, usually bellied and open-mouthed types, are used for storing grains and for soaking cassava tubers. Some are used for cooking different types of food, e. g yams for pounding in the mortar and smaller ones for the preparation of different types of soup. Others are meant for serving special dishes. Others are used for fetching drinking water from the streams, rivers boreholes and taps. Some are used for the preparation of local drinks made from guinea corn, corn and millet grains. The larger pots are used for the preservation of grains. The perforated pots are used for drying fish, meat and other foods such as moimoi, locust beans. Some for ritual functions. Musical pots are used widely by various communities for entertainment, such as during marriage, burial ceremonies, title installation and political rallies. Big and deep clay pot with wide mouth that is as fat and round as a pregnant goat, are used for fermenting cassava to make “foo – foo” or storing water for drinking, bathing and washing. Some flat deep pots are used for frying garri.



Source: Fieldwork observation<sup>4</sup>

### 6. Major Challenges Encountered by Tiv Women in Traditional Pottery Production in Benue State

One of the major challenges is that, the introduction of products of modern technologies such as ceramics, plastic and metallic utensils that are steadily replacing utility of indigenous craft products in both urban and rural areas, is affecting economic status of these Tiv women in pottery making. Under this circumstance most of the women have lost and are still losing their traditional rural markets and their position within the community. The consequence is, therefore, firstly the product is affecting progress of indigenous technology. Secondly, it is leading to widespread unemployment by destroying the labour-intensive crafts and intimidating livelihood option.

The scanty researches done on pottery making in the country mainly focus on the direct importance (economic significance) of handicraft works and utilitarian purposes of the products. However, the significance goes beyond that and the utensils that are shaped may have additional socio-cultural values. In other words, a pot shaped by a potter is not only for functional/utilitarian purposes (e.g. for steaming, boiling, storage etc.) but also for social and non-utilitarian or symbolic values (e.g. self-expression and identity marks) which can be sources of tourism industry. Further, women’s skills in embroidery, weaving, and basket-making are not only means for generating income but also sources of social and emotional independence for them. In addition, handicraft works

and other rural non-farm sectors in rural areas are declining due to unnecessary urban-rural migration. This development partly associated with fact that the major institutions of micro-finance, which invest capital on non-farm activities, are situated in the urban centres and thus to get access to the opportunity many people are leaving rural areas.

The other challenge is mainly related to training program and marketing. There is the need to give training regarding design, training, business management and marketing resources that create opportunities for female potters, and a self-sustaining crafts production business. Training on design, business management and marketing resources is mandatory to improve demands for local and tourist market to create opportunities for potters, and a self-sustaining crafts production business. However, no training is given to Tiv women to improve the quality of the pottery products they make. Though a large number of NGOs have been established, the majority of their projects are mainly concerned with issues of gender and health without explicit focus on pottery improvement for poverty alleviation.

There is a great need to acquaint female potters with a wide range of local natural resources available for the work and train them on how to use them. It is also important to give them training on how to create new crafts sample. In addition, the potters have no shops where they can display their wares. Bearing in mind that majority of potters are from rural areas, they take the utensils to market on market days. After selling some of the utensils, potters take the remaining utensils back to their rural homes for they do not have where to keep them until the next market day.

Traditional pottery is performing at their lowest capacity due to foreign alternatives or modern method of production. However, pottery making in the traditional way, is striving to survive and is affected by modernization of the production process and the diffusion of substitutes such as plastics, porcelain, and metallic products. Potters are faced with mirage of challenges some of which are; lack of adequate funds or loans to meet the increasing demands of their consumers, others are bad, roads, water shortage, and transportation to mention a few. The study observed that pottery production is not on the increase due to the above challenge.

## **7. Recommendations**

There should be formation of handicraft association that will help the coming together of people involved in related types of business activities and create an environment that may result in decrease of costs, increased in productivity and profitability (Lanjouw et. al, 2001). In line with this, the association will increase access to good quality business input, market expansion, and access to advocacy and lobbying. This will help the artisans to sell their products and increase their profits. The association also creates suitable environment to give members of the association training regarding saving, developing new design, undertake further need assessment and to have funds for the project from concerned bodies.

The state government and wealthy individuals should encourage local pottery production in their Tiv society to develop their skills better through useful advice from the art and culture section of Benue state.

In addition, the state government should help to stop the massive importation or introduction of products of modern technologies such as ceramics, plastic and metallic utensils that are steadily replacing utility of indigenous craft products in both urban and rural areas. More importantly, the mass media should endeavour to advertise the use of traditional pottery products, so as to encourage Tiv women in this skill.

Skills and knowledge of craft sector benefit not only artisans but also a broad range of community members. Thus, there is a need to ensure that decisions about crafts development are made by bodies reflecting the interests of diverse groups of community members, and that these groups genuinely share in the benefits of the development.

Another possible way of promoting the sector is giving training to potters to improve quality, quantity and design of their products to be competitive in local or national market. Training through workshops is also required on saving i.e. proper time, resource and capital management. Receiving training in product quality, entrepreneurship, market identification, pricing and negotiating buyers is also mandatory in order to improve the sector. They need assistance to set up saving and credit cooperatives, making capital available for further investment. Groups' saving and credit cooperatives are helpful to link the local cooperative unit to mainstream financial institutions in the country. Furthermore, training is required regarding proper utilization of natural resources. There is a need to teach them the fact that existence of their technology is wholly based on the availability surrounding natural resources and devastation of the resource cycle lead to interruption of the craft works. They should be encouraged to plant trees/ grasses for maintenance of healthy natural environment and future uses, and this may become visible through revitalization of traditional environmental principles and incorporating them with the modern one where appropriate and rewarding individuals who play role models.

Micro-finance institutions that give loans with minimum interest rate should be set up in rural areas. Access to such funds should be made easy for handicraft workers. This helps to mitigate two fundamental problems. Firstly, it limits unnecessary rural-urban movement and its associated social problems. Secondly, it encourages livelihood diversification that reduces scale of environmental degradation caused by activities linked to

agriculture. This contributes toward the attainment of sustainable development.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that traditional pottery production is rampant amongst the Tiv people of Benue state from the pre-colonial era to 2000. The role of Tiv women in this economic sector is also discussed.

The paper to give a brief origin of traditional pottery, and analysed the various stages of pottery production. Based on the analysis, the study discussed some uses of pottery products. Also, the study posits that, Tiv women encounter a lot of challenges in carrying out the task of pottery production. It is on this note that the study offered some recommendations on eliminating the challenges. Some of the suggestions border on Micro-finance institutions that give loans with minimum interest rate should be set up in rural areas so that Tiv women can access these funds, promoting the sector is giving training to potters to improve quality, quantity and design of their products to be competitive in local or national market. Training through workshops is also required on saving i.e. proper time, resource and capital management amongst other recommendations. The study believes that if these suggestions are given audience, Tiv women that are potters will put in their best to ensure enhanced productivity and quality.

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