

The Theoretical and Socio –Cultural Dimensions of Kpando Women’s Pottery

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Abstract

Pottery plays a very important role in the indigenous culture of the various ethnic groups in Ghana. At Kpando in the Volta Region, the art of pottery making, the meaning and uses of the artefacts are enshrined in some deep philosophies that permeate the socio-cultural life of the people. However, the rich theoretical and cultural components of the art have not been fully documented, and are not well understood and appreciated. This knowledge gap has rendered this cultural landmark almost invisible in cultural anthropology and native art. This study therefore provides an intellectual review of indigenous pottery production at Kpando with the view to unearth their role in the social sustainability of the indigenous people. The paper takes a critical look at the ontology of the art, clay winning process, pottery production, their usage and associated taboos. The descriptive method of qualitative research was employed for the study. The findings of the study show that traditional pottery production in Kpando is principally women’s art and the artefacts have both theoretical and cultural undertones.

Keywords: Pottery production, native art, theoretical undertone, Kpando women

1. Introduction

Pottery products are distinctive part of the visual culture of indigenous peoples in most parts of the world. In traditional Africa, pots are widely used for many purposes and different types of pots are made in different communities for household and also for religious purposes. (Perani, and Smith, 1998) Speight and Toku (1999), Sadr & Smith (1999) and Mercader *et al.* (2000) trace the history making in Africa from archaeological findings of pottery shards from Sudan. Indigenous pottery is handmade by shaping plastic clay into objects and firing them to appreciable temperatures in the open fire or in pits to bring about a permanent physical and chemical change, (Baba, 2009).

Berzock (2007) asserts that pottery has a long tradition among the Ewes of the Volta Region in Ghana. Pots are hand-made in small quantities for the local market in most Ewe pottery communities (Priddy, 1974). Although pottery production methods and products are still traditional, patronage of the product is still high among the Ewes and is highly valued for their aesthetic and religious significance (Macquet, 1986). The most remarkable feature about pot making in the Ewe communities is the absolute simplicity of raw materials and tools involved (Barley, 1994). Tools could be anything suitable found in the environment, for instance, pieces of metal for scrapping; pieces of wood and corn cobs for making designs; smooth stones, rugs and discarded stainless steel spoons for smoothing and burnishing. On ceramics in Ghana, the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) reveals that the introduction of the potter’s wheel by European ceramists Michael Cardew and Von Stocker, in 1942 to potters in the Volta and Greater Accra Regions revolutionized pottery production to some extent. (Halluska,1999).

The Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (2006) indicates that, clay, the major raw material in pottery production, is still abundant in notable Ewe communities that make it possible for the production of pots. The pottery production process involves clay winning and preparation, forming, decorating and firing, and sometimes smoking. The two most extensively used forming methods are pinching and coiling. Indigenous pottery as a domestic art has for many years been the exclusive preserve of women, especially the elderly (Majuk, Erim, Ajor, 2010; Rattray, 1927). LaDuke (1991) reasons that while some women opt for pottery as a complete occupation, others take it as extensions of domestic activity where money accrued from the proceeds go into the provision of household necessities.

1.1. Ethnographic account of the study area

Kpando is located in the Volta Region of Ghana. The people mostly belong to the Ewe ethnic group who speak the Ewe language. History has it that the people of Kpando, migrated from Togo. There are mixed religious groups who worship in community and family shrines, mosques and church buildings. The indigenes are predominantly traditional worshipers with a section of them being Christians and some Muslims (Asante, 2009).

The women at Kpando engage themselves primarily in the production and sales of pottery wares such as pots, vases, cups, and sculptures. Almost every household makes or has a fair idea about pot making. They work on individual basis under trees and shades in their respective homes. (Brewer, 2004).

2. Methods

The qualitative research method which involves describing and understanding phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005) was adapted for the study. The methodology focused on exploring, describing how Kpando pottery is integrated into everyday life as a cultural heritage (Antubam, 1963). The main data gathering tools used was interview and observation.

For the purpose of this research, the target population covered all pottery production centres in Kpando, Volta Region. However, the sample studied was limited to female potters aged 25 and above who know the history and philosophy of the art, and female youth (25 and below).

Using the simple random and cluster sampling methods yielded a population that could conveniently be categorized into three: young women (25 years or less); middle aged women (25-45 years); and the elderly women (45 years and above).

3. Findings

3.1 Ontology of Kpando Pottery

Kpando has been recognized for generations as the home of a skilled guild of women potters. It is however, quite unfortunate to note that the women artists themselves are not very sure of the origin of their proud profession. The study uncovered two different views of the origin of pottery in the area. Whereas some of the women interviewed reported that their ancestors brought down the art of pottery making from Togo, others claimed that the art of pottery was learned from a wasp. Based on the second view, the leader of one of the pottery groups claimed that her great, great grandmother learnt the art of pot making from the wasp. According to this informant, her great grandmother witnessed the insect creatively modelling its abode that looked like a pot. After that, she quickly rushed home and tried replicating what she saw the wasp doing and was successful in producing a miniature pot. She then taught her daughter and the art soon became popular amongst the natives. It is worth noting that the history surrounding the origin of pots varies from one place to the other.

3.2 Pottery Tools

Basic pottery tools used in Kpando are the Ababe (wooden paddle), Emedzeti (wooden fork) and Zemliti (shaping tool).



Plate 1 *Ababe*



Plate 2 *Emedzeti*



Plate 3 *Zemliti*

- *Ababe*, This wooden paddle (plate 1) is carved from a white lightweight wood called *kpomiti* in Ewe or *Sese* in Twi. It is used for shaping and removing trapped air from the surface of pots and bowls.

- *Emedzeti* is a fork tool that is carved from bamboo and used for ruling lines inside *kolizɔkpui* (grinding bowl). It is also used as a decorative tool to draw lines on the rim and neck of pots (see plate 2).
- *Zemliti* this shaping tool (plate 3) can be carved from any soft wood. It is used for shaping the neck and rim of pots and bowls.



Plate 4 *Keneɔɔɔɔ*



Plate 5 *Zedomakpa/tredzo*

- *Keneɔɔɔɔ*. This is a perforated coin (plate 4). It is used to divide the inner part of bowls into four parts for easy texturing and a decorative tool to deepen lines drawn on the rim and neck of pots.
- *Zedomakpa/tredzo*. This is a shaping leaf (plate 5) that is boiled to soften it so that it can be used for widening, shaping and smoothing the rim of a pot in the wet state.



Plate 6 *Akorɔɔ*



Plate 7 *Numeɔɔɔɔ*



Plate 8 *Sranu*



Plate 9 *Kpedonakpe/
Zeninikpe*

- *Akorɔɔ*. This metal scraper (plate 6) is made by blacksmiths and used for scraping the rough inner surfaces of pots and bowls.
- *Numeɔɔɔɔ* (plate 7) is a circular metal lid used after scraping the inner surfaces to level the inside walls of the pots.
- *Sranu* sieve (plate 8) is a metal strainer used for sieving grog.
- *Kpedonakpe/zeninikpe* These consist of smooth stones collected from the Volta River and used purposely to smoothen the surfaces of wares in order to seal off any sand and grog particles that appear on the surface of the wares.

3.3 Forming methods

Pinching and coiling techniques are the two main forming methods employed by the Kpando traditional potters. After kneading, the clay is rolled into a ball (**Plate 10**) depending on the size of the intended pot. After flattening one end of the ball of clay, a hole is made through the centre (**Plate 11**) and widened with the fingers from one end to the other to obtain a rim of an appreciable circumference as seen in plate 11. Holding the rim in between the *zedomakpa* (stack of folded leaves), the rim is widened as required, (**Plate 12**) and the *zemliti* (shaping tool) is used to form the neck (**Plate 13**).



Plate 10
Kneading clay



Plate 11
Making a hole in the clay



Plate 12
Smoothing rim with leaves

The potter runs the tool around the rim to create circular lines (**Plate 14**) and leaves it to dry in the sun. Water pots are usually marked with single lines on the rim and two lines on the neck respectively. The rim of the intended pot is upturned on the potter's lap and the base is scrapped off to reveal the wet and plastic surface (**Plate 15**). Initial modelling of the pot is done by winding a long coil of clay along the base of the rim and then it is attached to the base by pressing it down (**Plate 16**). Additional coils are laid over and pressed together one at a time and pulled to build a spherical shape (**Plate 17**) until the bottom is completely sealed (**plate 18**).



Plate 13
Shaping with Zemliti



Plate 14
Ruling lines on the rim



Plate 15
Scraping sand from base

Simultaneously, the potter gently pushes out the inner surface while beating the outer with *ababe* (shaping tool) to bring out the spherical shape of the pot (**Plate 19**). At the leather hard stage, the inner parts are scraped with *numeflanu* or scraper (**Plate 20**). Clay slip is applied to facilitate smoothing and burnishing.



Plate 16 *Adding coils*



Plate 17 *Pulling wall*



Plate 18 *Sealing bottom*



Plate 19
Shaping with ababe



Plate 20
Scraping the inside wall



Plate 21
*Burnishing
the pot*

These processes aid in concealing all sand and grog particles that may appear on the surface after scraping. Burnishing is done at the leather hard stage to render the pot smooth (**Plate 21**). The pot is then thoroughly dried under shade and in the sun before it is fired. The open firing method is used to fire all wares, (Vincentelli, 2005). The fire place is lined with dry bamboo and palm branches before arranging the pots on them. The pots are smoked in a hole lined with dried leaves immediately after firing to permanently fix the carbon surface on the ware.

3.4 Taboos and Ritual in Kpando pottery production

Clay used for the production of pots is dug from clay-pits found along river banks. These pits are usually under the control of the Kpando priestesses (Asante, 2009). The winning of clay has associated rituals and prohibitions such as the following:

- Previously, uninitiated girls were not allowed to enter the clay pit because of the belief that girls were ‘unclean’ and would defile the earth deity if they enter the clay pit and suffer their wrath. In the same way the people believed that girls and women who have not undergone puberty rites may defile the earth deity.
- Men are traditionally forbidden to participate in the winning of the clay. Failure to abide by this may render the man impotent. This was also to prevent men from seeing the nakedness of the women who go into the clay pit virtually nude to win clay. The presence of men is therefore considered inappropriate.
- Women in their menstrual periods are not allowed to engage in clay winning process. Women who break this rule may suffer premature menopause which implies a break in fertility. It is believed that such a person may incur the displeasure of the ancestors who are believed to reincarnate in the form of babies.
- A special libation must be poured to the earth goddess to solicit her consent and ask for success in the usage of the clay before digging begins.

In addition to these, there are some general taboos that govern the indigenous Ghanaian pottery industry. Examples include the following:

- One should not go to the clay pit in foot wear as this would defile the earth goddess who is the custodian of the clay.
- One should not price a pot until it is fired. It is believed that doing so may cause the ware to break during the firing process. The potter should not be angered during the process of pot making. Failure to observe this may result in the production of a bad-looking ware.
- One should not break a pot intentionally; this is a sign of disrespect to the gods.
- Pots are not to be left standing empty overnight since evil spirits may put poison in them at night and dirt may also be trapped in them. These posed health hazards to the users.

However, taboos are currently not keenly observed due to the influence of Christianity, Islam, Western education and the general spate of modern civilization.

3.5 The role of Kpando Pottery in Life's Transition

Traditionally, pots play very important roles in the culture of the people of Kpando beginning from birth through to death and even after death. They are used in performing customary rites, boiling herbs, cooking and storing food, liquid substances. Pots that are used for performing customary rites, such as *kɔnuze* (ritual pot) are not made by women who are in their menstrual period or have had sexual intercourse with a man during the pot making process. To be sure about purity, most people entrust the making of such pots into the care of elderly women who have passed the period of menopause. As regards the stages of life, a number of pots are made for birth, puberty, and death rites.

Birth: On the eighth day after the birth of a child, the mother carries *zevi* (small pot) on her head to fetch water from the stream to be used for *vidzidzi kɔnu* (birth rites). The significance of this rite is to announce to the whole community that a successful delivery has occurred. A mother who unfortunately dies before the eighth day is said to have died mysteriously. In such a circumstance, a common question is asked by anyone who hears about the death of such a mother, thus, *amea de tɔme a?* This is literally translated as “has the person gone to the stream?” which connotes ‘has the person gone through the puberty rites?’ The burial of the deceased mother does not take place until the rites are performed for her.

During the naming ceremony of a newly born child, *tomedeze* (water fetching pot) full of palm-wine is placed in the centre of the house for members of the community to drink and share their joy with the family. Among the indigenes of Kpando, twins are considered extraordinary beings therefore they are treated special. Rites are performed occasionally to honour and maintain their status in society. One of such rites is *venɔvi kɔnu* (twin rite) which is performed using *venɔvize* (a special pot designed for the rite).

Puberty: Two types of pots are usually used in performing *gbɔto* (puberty rites) for young girls in order to prepare them for adulthood. If the novice belongs to the pottery fraternity, she carries pottery tools in a pot during the celebration while going round in the town and market place to show that all the items used for the performance of the rites were duly worked for through potting. The novice also carries the *gbɔtozevi* to the stream to fetch the water she would drink during the period of the rites. Afterwards, she is accompanied to the betrothed husband's home amidst dancing while carrying a number of pots, bowls and other cooking utensils meant to equip the young adult's kitchen with the utensils she may need to prepare food for her husband and children.

Death: A woman whose husband is dead gives *zevi* (small pot), *koloe* (bowl) and *nuɖati* (stirring stick/paddle) to the *tɔvi* (father's representative) to declare that the items were the utensils she used in preparing meals for the deceased. *Tɔvi* who now represents the husband collects the items for use. It is believed doing this will prevent the dead husband from recognising the voice of the wife who is alive. In other words, the wife's declaration breaks the soul tie with the dead husband.

3.6 Names and uses of some pottery wares

There are three major class of products that are produced at this centre; pots, bowls and “swish stoves”. Some Kpando potters have a flair for making unstained and unpainted pots. Their pots are characterised by freshness of the natural clay colour. *Tomedeze* (water fetching pot) in **Plate 22** has the natural colour of the clay with the mouth bigger than *tsinoze*. It is used for fetching and carrying drinking water from the stream. *Tsinoze* (water storing pot) in **Plate 23** is usually blackened and has a smaller mouth than *tomedeze*. It is used for storing drinking water and also used as *ahaze* (palm wine pot) for collecting palm wine from *lubu* (palm wine tapping pot, **Plate 29**), carrying palm wine from the bush and as a container for selling palm wine.



Plate 22 *Tomedeze*



Plate 23



Plate 24 *Kpl-dzize*

Kpl-dzize (table pot) in **Plate 24** derives its name from the fact that it is always placed on a table. *Kpl-* means table and *dzi* means ‘on’. *Kpl-dzi* simply means “on the table.” It has a lid with a handle and a foot for stability when placed on a flat surface. It is used for storing drinking water reserved specially for visitors on special occasions.



Plate 25 *Detsifoze*



Plate 26 *Nuqaze*

Detsifoze (soup pot) is usually blackened by smoking which reduces the porosity of the pot.

The broad rim of the pot serves as the handle while the wide ‘mouth’ holds up the overflow of boiling soup. It is used for preparing and storing soups and vegetable meals.

The walls of *Nuqaze* (cooking pot) are thicker than the *detsifoze* and it also has a wide mouth which allows easy movement of a paddle when used in preparing meals such as *akplē* (corn flour meal) and *kokonte* (cassava flour meal). Other foods prepared in *nuqaze* include yam, cassava, cocoyam and rice. While *detsifoze* is broader at its waist *nuqaze* is slimmer but deeper.



Plate 27 *Amatsidaze*



Plate 28 *Gbotozevi*

Amatsidaze (medicinal pot) is used for boiling herbs for medicinal purposes. It is also used as *kɔnuzevi* (ritual pot), a similar pot to *zedzē* that is used purposely for rituals at the shrine.



Plate 29 *Lubu*

Lubu (palm wine tapping pot) has the natural colour of fired clay and a small opening to prevent insects and dirt from entering the palm wine. *Lubu* is normally placed under the felled palm tree to serve as a receptacle for the wine. The surface of *lubu* is characterised with drawings of the palm tree and tools that are used for the palm wine tapping activities such as *deti* (palm tree), *eha* (earth chisel), *krante* (cutlass) which are used to trim the palm trunk of its branches; and *akplɔsu* (metal drill) for boring holes in the palm trunk to direct the wine flow as shown in Plate 29(a-d).



Plate 29a *Deti*



Plate 29b *Eha*



Plate 29c *Krante*



Plate 29d *Akplɔsu*



Plate 30 *Ahakoloe*



Plate 31 *Koloe zɔkɔkɔe*

Ahakoloe (palm wine bowl) in plate 30 is a large sized bowl with a foot capable of containing about a gallon of palm wine. It is used for mixing and serving palm wine on various occasions. *Koloe zɔkɔkɔe* (funeral bowl) in plate 31 is an elongated foot bowl used for serving food prepared during funerals for the guests of the bereaved families. It is mostly made with a lid to cover the food.



Plate 32 *Abebuze*

Abebuze (proverbial pot) in plate 32 is associated with the three human senses; the mouth, eye and ear. These human parts are moulded in relief and placed equidistant from one another with the hand indicating the specific senses as shown in plate 32 (a-c). The pot has a similar shape, lid and foot like the *kpl-dzize* (plate 24).

The meaning of the motifs on the pot is, “what the eye sees is what the mouth says to the hearing of the ear.”



Plate 32a *Eye*



Plate 32b *Mouth*

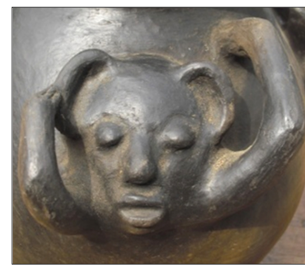


Plate 32c *Ear*

3.7 Philosophy of Kpando Pottery

The fact that the ancestors used clay over the years and are still using it demonstrates that it is the most convenient material for making pots. It is venerated because it has never shrunk since the time potters started using it. F. Yaokpoe, (personal communication, 2010) believes that philosophically clay is seen to be endowed with extraordinary qualities which are linked with the spiritual world. In the minds of potters, it is still a mystery to see ordinary clay assume such a round shape and endure the heat that it is subjected to. The making of round shaped pots and bowls is a skill inherited from the ancestors. Its philosophy is like the stomach which looks insignificant on the exterior yet when filled, it is able to hold enough substances. The capacity of a pot is closely tied to its round shape. On the exterior, pots look small but in reality they are huge and characterised by what the Ewes call *eto* (depth) when filled to capacity. The round shapes are also considered well balanced and stable when placed on the “swish stove”, carried on the head to fetch water and placed in shallow holes on the ground to store drinking water (D. Tettey, personal communication, 2010).

Furthermore, there is a relationship between women potters and the shape of pots. The round shape is similar to pregnancy which undergoes a number of developments until birth. Similarly, pots undergo a number of similar processes before they emerge finally as containers. Pots can therefore be attributed to containers of life. As confirmed by Adu, J.I. (1999).

The sizes of pots are determined by the numbers assigned to *gaze*, (locally made aluminium cooking pot) as well as the various uses to which they are put. It is interesting to note that balls of clay are not weighed before they are used, yet they correspond to the various sizes of pots made. With many years of experience, potters are capable of perceiving effortlessly the quantity of clay to use in making each pot or bowl.

The shapes of pots communicate an idea of beauty to both the potter and the customer or user. Beauty here is linked to pots which are well decorated and have peculiar forms pertaining to the locality. This refers to characteristics such as the shiny outer surface, ringed lines on the rim and neck and the black colour from the smoking process. Traditionally, pots that emerge undamaged after firing are accepted as beautiful.

Personal communication, with informants in the year 2010 revealed that specific proverbs and proverbial songs are associated with pottery. The significance of proverbs in this context relates to the fact that pottery thrives on thoughtful expressions. According to the informants, customers purchase proverbial pots because of their relation to real life situations while others do so because of the beauty. Examples of such proverbs are:

- ***Mina nuđe made ze me kpɔ*** - a lyrical expression literally meaning “give me something to put into the pot.” It is an indication that a potter at work is hungry and anybody cooking at that moment should consider serving her with some food. The implication is that it is risky to abandon clay work at a crucial stage to engage in other businesses such as food preparation.
- ***Eno tsi vie de a*** - this proverb which refers to a stranger literally means “has the stranger also drunk a little amount of the water.”

- ***Tome dela egba ze*** - literally means “one who goes to fetch water at the stream is responsible for the breaking of a pot.” It is an advice for people to take a risk and be responsible for every act of misfortune and never shift the blame on other people.
- ***Enyo wu be eze me tsi ne fugbe wu be ezea nyt- ne gba*** - Literally meaning “it is better for a pot of water to waste away than the pot itself to be broken.” This proverb, which is linked to the birth implies that a safe mother (pot) is better than a dead child (water). This suggest that, as a pot that is protected provides regular supply of water, in the same way, a living and safe mother is capable of giving birth to another child.
- ***Vodada le nu nyuie wola desiade ny*** - Literally meaning “every morally upright person is bound to make mistakes.” This implies that nobody is perfect and therefore a potter who mistakenly breaks a pot cannot be said to have committed an outrageous crime.

Kpando potters also incise proverbs on the surfaces of their pots to serve as designs. Motifs such as flowers, cock, tortoise, snail, crab are incised on pots as found in Plates 33-35 *Tsinoze* (water drinking pot) is particularly decorated this way.



Plate 33 *Abɔbɔ/klo* (snail and tortoise)



Plate 34 *Avese* (time bird)



Plate 35 *Asi le koklozi* (a hand holding an egg)

A pot decorated proverbially with a combination of a snail and tortoise is interpreted as, *klo kple abɔbɔ be nenye yewo ɔɔɔ ta ɔɔɔ, etu maɔi le gbeme o* (Plate 33) which translates into but for the snail and tortoise, there would never be any gun shot in the forest.” These are slow moving shell animals that are not hunted with guns but picked from the ground. These animals signify peace; hence the design counsels people to live in peace and harmony.

The chameleon is also used as a motif for decorating pots. Its illustration in the Eve proverb *nyɔnyɔnye nyɔnyɔnye nye azɔli, megbemegbe nye azɔli*, which literally means “moving forth and back is all together walking.” This slow but sure action suggest that just like the chameleon moving at a fast or slow pace, forward or backward, the ultimate aim of the potter is to maintain quality so that the pots can turn out whole and attractive.

Another animal motif is *avese* (time bird, plate 34). It is believed that this bird keeps the potters working according to time. At the sound of the bird, the indigenous potters know when to start, take a break or retire to prepare the evening meal for the family without having to look at a clock.

Asi le koklozi (a hand holding an egg, plate 35) is a motif that is related to life. *Agbenɔɔ le abe koklozi ene, ne wome lebene eye wo dzo ko agba*, which literally means “life is like an egg, if it is not held with care it will break,” is an advice to take good care of one’s self because life is as precious as an egg

4. Conclusion

Pottery production at Kpando is basically a traditional craft which is passed on from generation to generation up to the present day. The art of pottery production is an integral aspect of the socio-cultural fabric of the people of Kpando. As is usual in many indigenous cultures, pottery production in the Kpando traditional area is purely a woman’s craft. Women’s role in the economic development of Kpando suggests the need for government to consider

the value of gender roles and factors this into development plans. As Nikoi (1993) argues, the gender factor should not be ignored if effective national development can be ensured..

Kpando traditional pottery products are an essential source of historical knowledge that can be researched. As a cultural repository that links the people with a common sense of value and identity, pottery is a very important profession for the Kpando women and the entire community. They provide sources of reference for art education and provide the main source of utensils for daily living. The whole practice of the craft, from clay winning to firing, is encapsulated in a tradition and belief system that unites of humankind and the environment. Trade in pottery thus provides opportunity for the people of Kpando to project their culture and also raise the standard of living for the women in particular and ultimately, helping to reduce household poverty and transmit their cultural beliefs to the next generation.

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