

# Enhancing the Value of Indigenous Pottery Products with Surface Decoration Methods & Macramé

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## Abstract

The study identifies the role of indigenous Ghanaian pottery in average homes as utilitarian vessels and indirectly as an effective means of employment in its production. It seeks to enhance its aesthetic qualities to alter its use and to increase its demand and utilization. The study employed both the descriptive and experimental methods to produce wares to popularize this concept for the Ghanaian populace. It explored the use of non-conventional materials (leather, wood, metal oxides, beads, among others) integrated into the biscuit fired wares and completed with macramé as a finishing technique. The results of the study indicate that the new materials added value and enhanced the texture and aesthetic qualities of the products produced. As such, other non-conventional materials could be explored for such products to inspire and educate producers to increase creativity. Discussions were based on theoretical, academic, religious, social, historical, cultural, philosophical and artistic contexts. The pieces showed originality, contrast, harmony, multiplicity and stability, and as well, captured the aesthetic energy inherent in ordinary materials. The research proved that the integration of traditional pottery with other materials can add value and improve the marketability of indigenous pottery wares.

**Keywords:** Pottery, Mixed media, Enhancing, Non-conventional, Macramé, Leather, integration

## 1. Introduction

The forming and finishing techniques employed over the years in the production of traditional pottery for their aesthetic, philosophical and utilitarian values have varied in many ways. These production methods range from solely labor-intensive to semi-automated forming techniques. According to Speight and Toki (2000), products from these techniques were often embellished with simple incised lines and complex geometric incisions or relief plant shape patterns as decorations. However, these achievements have not translated into any meaningful economic growth.

Due to the establishment of metal and plastic factories in Ghana in the wake of urbanization and the importation of refrigerators, metallic and plastic plates, blenders, metallic cooking pots and plastic buckets into the country, marketing of indigenous pottery has declined in value and use in the urban areas.

Transforming the indigenous pottery industry therefore can be a catalyst for changing the fortunes of the Ghanaian pottery industry. Repackaging selected indigenous pottery with integration techniques will considerably add value as well as give an appropriate marketing environment for the indigenous pottery industries. Strong economy, built on improved indigenous artefacts can boost national economic growth and reduce poverty (Adutwum, 2013).

The indigenous art industries are essential elements in reinforcing macroeconomic policies for stability and sustainable growth. There is the need, therefore, to change the concept of indigenous pottery activities as a way of life to that of a profitable commercial and industrial art occupation. Repackaging selected indigenous pottery will play a supportive role in achieving the transformation of the indigenous art industry from its subsistence orientation to a commercially attractive, viable, and dynamic sector, which is vital for the achievement of sustained equitable growth. The achievement of this objective requires an integrative approach to complement the efforts of local craftsmen and women.

Research of the past two decades in several Akan ancient settlements such as Akyem-Kotoku, Manso,

Dawu-Akuapem, Akwamu, Assin Twifo-Hemang, Kwahu-Twindorase, Adanse Ahisan and Asante Mampongten have demonstrated that in the period AD 1200-1800, pottery became more and more complex in style as society grew in population and complexity and more sophisticated in its tastes. Pots which in earlier times were constructed with a flowing profile and had simple decoration, now assumed angular complex forms, which imitated architectural designs and were ornamented with complex designs (National Commission on Culture, 2010).

However, for the traditional and religious leaders these forms and decorations were philosophical and often had religious connotations attached with other materials like cowry shells, raffia, fabric, leather etc. These decorations were aesthetically fetishist in their outlook. To Ian (1984), these compositions are believed to invoke some powers for the functioning of the wares.

Contemporary products in Ghana are often decorated by incision, stamping, embossment, sprigging, sgraffito and glazing. However, some pieces are often marred by the kind of finishing that are given to them, particularly, inappropriate glazes. These wares are no match to compete with the influx of foreign ceramic wares. Most often achieving variety in colour, desired finishing effects, with the philosophical dimensions of the ware is almost none existence.

This trend, however, can be corrected if other non-conventional materials and techniques are considered. This brings to the fore the need for pottery in mixed media. Speight and Toki (2000) defines pottery or ceramics in mixed media as either a clay pot or sculpture that incorporates different materials such as wood, metal, textiles, sound or light, glass, paint, or any other materials the artist wishes to add to the pottery piece.

Mixed media has been practiced by artists in different cultures to achieve their objectives. According to Graven (1994), mixed media was advocated by the early Dadaists in one way to debunk what he calls the high art, and in another, to bring art and real life together. Pottery in mixed media offers a limitless opportunity for self-expression for the pottery artist. Dona (1969) opines that mixed media provides artists with amazing range of materials and ideas that can easily be expressed by both young and older artists. Mixed media allows the artist to take a fresh look at the most ordinary item and separate them from their everyday environment and uses.

The purpose of this research therefore is to enhance indigenous pottery with some selected non-conventional materials for the finishing of traditional wares based on African philosophy of aesthetics.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1 Materials and Tools**

Materials used for the project were as follows: Mfensi clay slip, wood, beads, leather, adhesive, candle light, tins of acrylic paint, macramé cords, a ring of cane, dyed leather, an indigenous water cooler, straw, acrylic paint, anti-rust primer, mansion polish, PVA solution. Most of the indigenous pottery material resources were collected from Kukuo in Tamale and Mfensi in Kumasi.

Some equipment and tools that were employed in the project included, drilling machine, diamond drill bits, jeweller's saw frame and blade, a needle, a hand grinding machine, a drill block, lathing machine, utility knife, polythene sheet, binding wheels, guard sticks, sand paper, paper, masking tape, pencil, a pair of scissors, paper template, a tape measure and brushes.

### **2.2 Procedure**

The project was informed by earlier research works, on mixed media (Bosworth, 2006) and (Adjei and Nsiah, 2012) that examined the best ways of combining and fitting different materials together to help shape the project and explained the techniques to be adopted. The research process involved a review of related literature on mixed media integration of pottery wares to provide a global overview of the project as well as identify the appropriate method to be adopted. Structured observation (Cohen et al., 2000) was used to evaluate the selected pots in terms of their colour, quality, material and shape. This exercise provided the basis for assessing the value and result for the project. Tools, materials, techniques and procedures were carefully observed as described by Razavieh (2002). Mixed media materials were experimented on the biscuit state of the indigenous pottery wares to ascertain their efficacy for both functional and enhancing purposes.

### 2.3 Designing

The designing process addressed the concept of ceramics mixed media from the perspective of African aesthetics. Local materials were considered during the designing process. Sketches of the indigenous pottery wares with its envisaged end products were made (Figs. 1&2). The Ahina pot (an indigenous water cooler pot) is a storage and cooling device used to contain water in most societies in Ghana. As a result, the Ahina is considered a source of life and a fountain of refreshment among most Ghanaian societies. Its circular shape is a representation of the aesthetic and socio-cultural significance of motherhood (receptacle of benevolence). They were integrated and embellished with a non-conventional material (macramé cords). The ritual relevance of apotoyuaa, is strongly connected to their function as cooking containers and to their ability to contain and transform physical and spiritual substances indispensable to individual and community life. They preserve and administer the “vital substances” which ensure the continuation and prosperity of a family or community (Warnier, 2007).

### 2.4 Material Preparation and Forming

The whole process started by polishing, with the use of sandpaper, the entire bisque fired water cooler pots designed in Grooved linear design pattern on both the neck and the belly, creating a subtle textural contrast. With the help of a rag the surface of the pot was cleaned and a dark brown acrylic paint (a mixture of red and black acrylic paints) applied from the belly of the pot to the base, and then the rim to the inner part of the neck, with the help of a two inches paint brush after which it was allowed to dry under a shade (see Fig. 3b).

A ring of cane was made and inserted around the giant water cooler pot, after the macramé cords were wrapped over the cane ring before proceeding to mount the two yard double measured cords for weaving (see Fig. 4). For the purpose of repackaging and enhancement, the household water cooler was turned into a giant flower vase to be placed at any hall.

To produce a Josephine knot, two double length of mounted cord was obtained. One double length of mounted cord was secured at the left hand side called the working end and the other to the right hand, which is called the standing end. Moving the standing end over the working end for about 3 to 6 inches, a clockwise loop was made. The working end passed over the standing end, and ascended (upward) to complete the knot. This rhythmic type of macramé weave was repeated until the whole belly of the pot was completed as shown below.

The Josephine knotting ended exactly 8 inches from the ring, which is also the height of the belly of the pot as illustrated in Fig. 4c above. To complete the macramé design on the pot the Josephine knotting Reef (square) knotting was introduced. This reef knot was formed by tying a left-handed overhand knot (using the left cord of the working end) and then a right-handed overhand knot (using the right of the standing end), or vice versa. A common mnemonic of this procedure is "right over left, left over right", which is often appended with the rhyming suffix "... making the knot both tidy and tight" as shown in Fig. 5a, b & c. This knotting technique continues to the tail end on the belly of the pot (that is 9 inches) with the very ends of the cords frayed as illustrated below.

To enhance the neck region of the pot four measured triangular cut out templates were placed on a dyed leather, cut out and sewn together with attached fringes as illustrated below. These were attached to the ring above the macramé knotting to complete the embellishment of the pot.

To attain firmness at the rim of the pot a wooden bowl was lathe turned to the exact size of the rim to fit the entrance of the pot. The base was then cut off to create a hole that will allow the straw to comfortably fit in after polishing for smoothness, painting with acrylic paint to resist water and vanishing with lacquer to seal off every pore. It was then allowed to dry.

The final flower vase piece was assembled with the various parts as shown in Fig. 7.

The designing process addressed the concept of ceramics mixed media from the perspective of African aesthetics. Local materials were considered during the designing process. Sketches were made on the Ahina (an indigenous water cooler pot) forms (Figs. 1&2). The Ahina pot is a storage and cooling device used to contain water in most societies in Ghana. As a result, the Ahina is considered a source of life and a fountain of refreshment among most Ghanaian societies. Its circular shape is a representation of the aesthetic and socio-cultural significance of motherhood. The final piece saw the integration and embellishment of the clay pot with a non-conventional material

(macramé cords).

Materials used were processed to make them beautiful and also to preserve those prone to insect and microbial attack.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The indigenous water cooler pot was translated into a contemporary flower vase fit for a conference hall or any hall of such magnitude in mixed media integrated with macramé weave, beads, dyed leather and wood. From the base of the vase right up to the necks are all aesthetically decorated with non-conventional materials. The neck of the vase is decorated with fringed marbled dyed leather and the base of the woven macramé fitted with multi-coloured beads. Right from the belly of the vase to the base of the piece flows gracefully in a relaxed rhythmic drop, the white woven macramé that touches the seat of the flower vase. The semi-circle, oval shape of the belly of the vase painted with brown acrylic reveals itself through the netlike macramé apparel that drapes around the circumference of the vase. It is finished with a colourful dyed straw which gives the vase its utilitarian characteristic effect. The entire composition is evocative of a contemporary traditional adornment that effectively contrasts with any environment. The amalgamation of these materials depicts an integrative harmony that enhances hitherto an indigenous water cooler.

When it comes to artistic expression, there are limitless possibilities. The artistic genre known as "mixed media" is an especially broad and varied type of art, as it allows artists to mix a wide array of materials and techniques together to create new and different forms of art. Inspired by resurgence art, this flower vase depicts a conceptual motherhood. Her voluptuous hip or belly recalls fertility goddesses, but in a broader context, includes her potential of intellectualism and economic capabilities. The title celebrates a prodigious sculpture operated on the interface of mixed-media sculpture and textile art. This in itself is a free-standing sculpture, sculpture that is surrounded on all sides, except the base, by space meant to be viewed from any angle.

This wonderfully crafted integrative sculpture shows four triangular petals around the neck of the pot linking each other in an embrace that depicts collaboration in life. This crafted pieces of leather and fibre has a continuous diamond shape with no sharp corners or angles given a harmonizing effect to the pottery piece. The neck of the pot protrudes out of the diamond shape depicting elegance of motherhood. The base sits within a circular bowl, suggesting stability and fluidity.

This executed piece integrated with graceful, expressive circular and triangular forms, display a balanced and serene posture. The fringed leather displayed on the neck of the pottery piece exhumes ornamentations of spiritual tranquillity, conveying a sense of equilibrium and harmony; an alluring piece capable of adorning any space of a home or office. The various elements in their respective forms embrace, unity, forged into a romantic gesture by mutual and harmonious agreement that complement an intimate décor.

### 4. Conclusion

This study has shown that the mixed media materials employed in the projects could be used effectively to achieve high quality aesthetic contemporary pottery products. It also ascertains that materials such as wood, macramé cords, beads and many other materials could be a wealth of additional resources to enhance indigenous pottery products.

Conclusively, non- conventional materials integrated with indigenous pottery products could be an effective means to provide alternate and unlimited opportunities for traditional potters to explore and enhance their wares for maximum economic benefits. The outcome of this study provides hope for traditional potters to explore unusual materials and techniques to finish their indigenous pottery products.

The results are that, mixed media can add value and improve the marketability of indigenous pottery. In this regard, enhancing indigenous pottery can foster economic cohesion by linking up and supporting foreign investment inflows which will contribute to the improving indigenous pottery productivity capacities.

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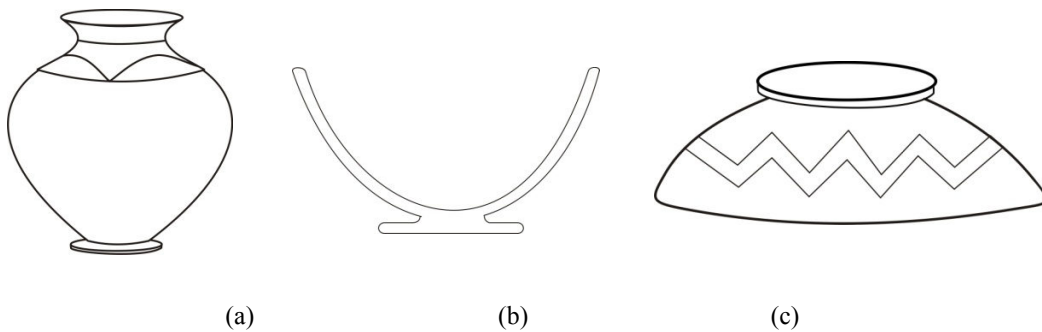


Fig. 1a, b & c: Sketches of various media used- by the authors



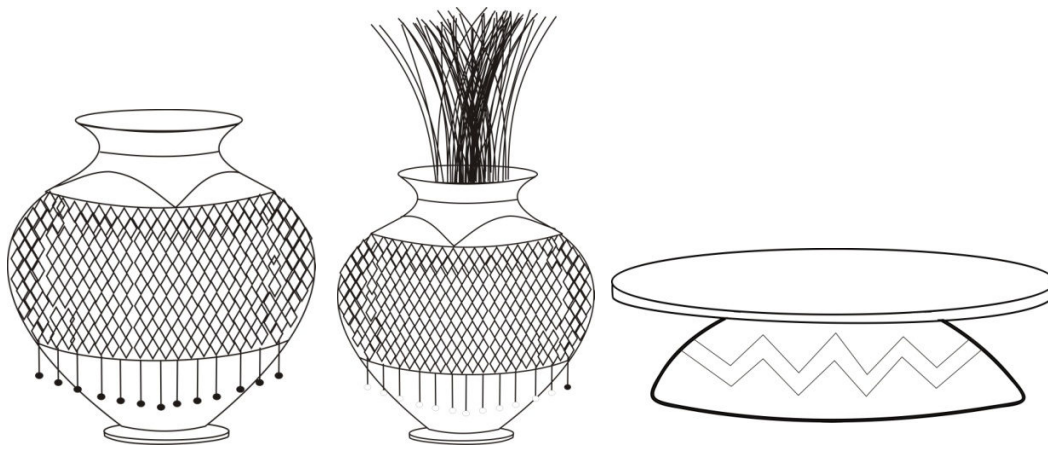


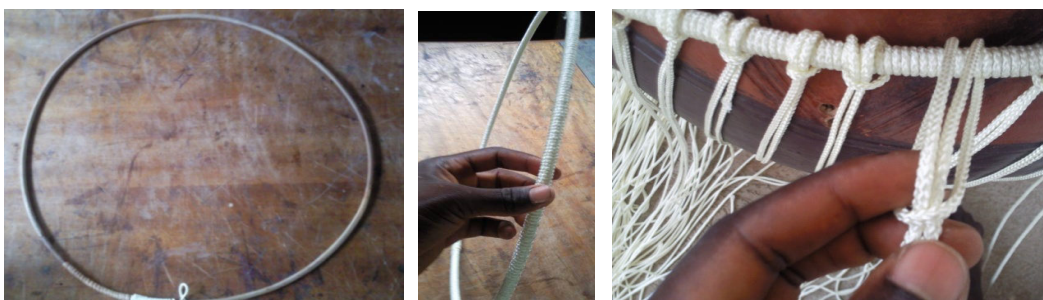
Fig. 2: Sketches of mixed media work- by the authors



(a)

(b)

Fig 3a & b: The water cooler pot with its base and 3b shows the pot being painted.



(a)

(b)

(c)

Fig. 4a, b & c: The bare cane ring, the wrapped cane ring, and the macramé cords being mounted around the wrapped cane ring.

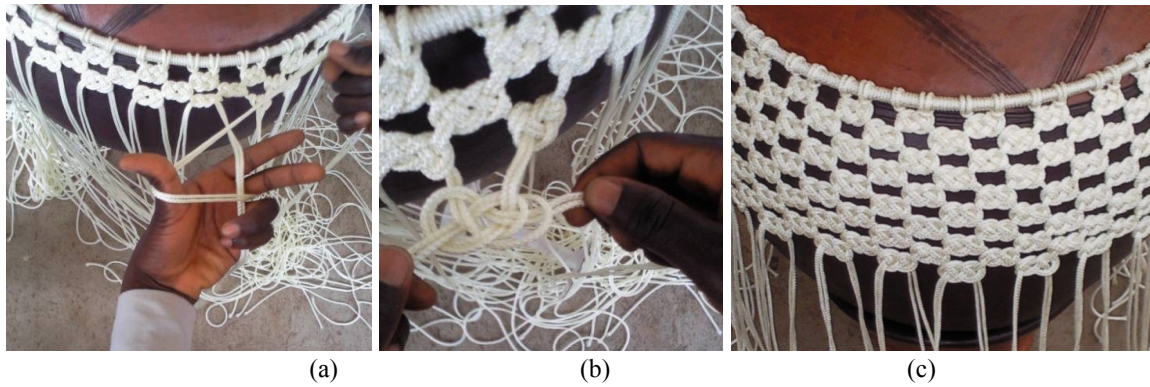


Fig 4a, b & c: Show the Josephine knots being constructed repeatedly to cover the entire belly of the pot.

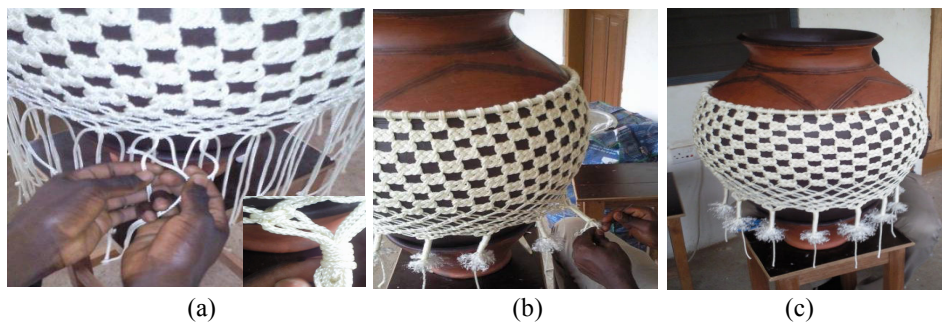


Fig. 5a, b & c: Illustrate the Josephine knots being constructed and the tip of the cords frayed.

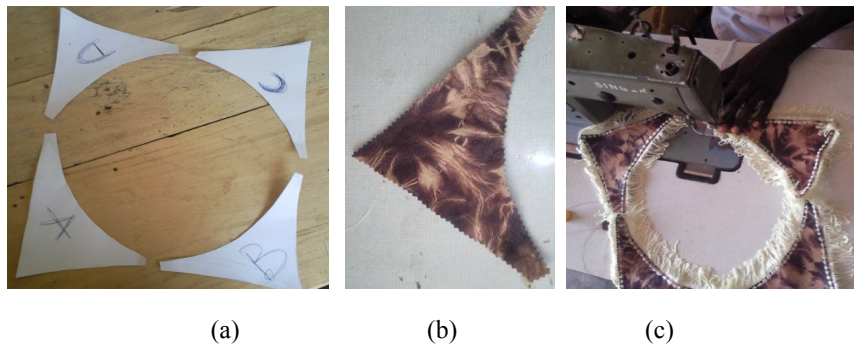


Fig. 6a, b & c: The measured triangles cut in paper, transferred unto dyed leather and sewn together.

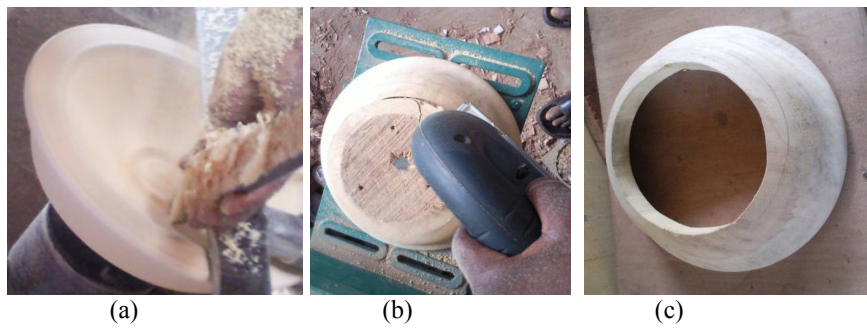


Fig. 7a, b & c: Show the block of wood being turned cut at the base to attain a wooden rim.

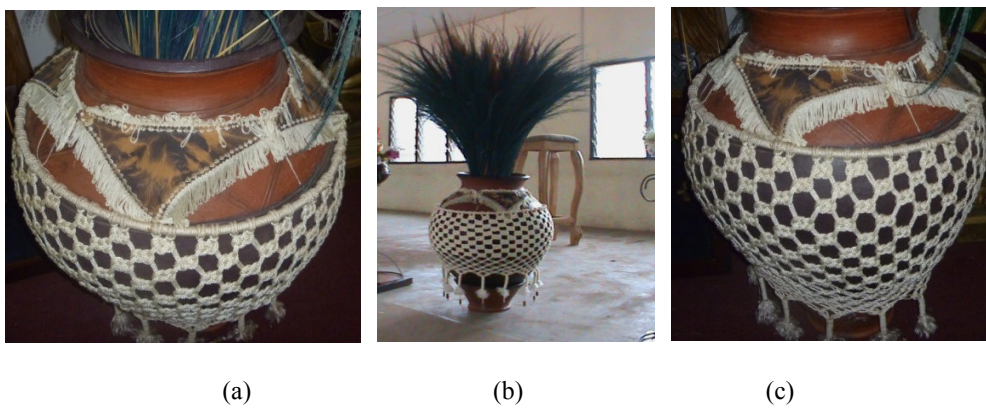


Fig. 7a, b & c: Show the assembling of the various parts of the flower vase into one piece.



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