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Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa

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Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa

Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa, Nigel Barley, British Museum Press (distributed in the U.S. by the Smithsonian Institution Press), London, 1994. 168 pp. Plates, foreword, notes, bibliography, index.

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This is a volume of interest to any archaeologist who has even a passing interest in Colonoware or indigenous ceramic traditions. Barley, Assistant Keeper (Curator) in the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum, has produced a survey of the role of pottery in traditional and modern Africa, the technologies used in its production, and the aesthetic effects it achieves.

This is a very well illustrated volume (125 plates), and the accompanying text is well-researched and substantive. Barley draws mostly on the collections of the British Museum, whose considerable holdings still represent a patchy archive. Noting the limitations of trying to address a single aspect of the culture of a vast and ethnographically diverse continent, wherever possible his discussion links specific examples to specific cultures.

Taking an analytical lead from the archaeological literature on ceramics, Barley considers pots as conservative and passive bearers of cultural meanings, associated with women (while metals are innovative and associated with men). Beyond their everyday functions, Barley considers aesthetic, gender roles, power relations, and models of the human body, the seasons of the year, and procreation and reincarnation in ceramic creation and use. Most interesting is his assertion that the importance of pots in Africa derives from a concern with "non-material forces" that can only act through localization in a material object that serves to contain or direct the force (p. 151).