AN APPRECIATION OF ABASHIYA MAGAJI AHUWAN'S *KIM-KIM* CERAMIC WORKS

JARI H. R.[1] **& GAMBO D.G.**[2]
1. Department of Industrial Design
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
2. Department of Fine Arts
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
08062244975
gambiis@yahoo.com

Abstract
Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan is considered a profound ceramist by his peers, colleagues and students. However, very little is documented and therefore, known about his work. It is for this reasons that this paper, examine his Kim Kim ceramic works, with a view to bringing them to the fore and therefore, increase their appreciation. It is the contention of this paper that, Ahuwan has over the years explored with both traditional and contemporary methods of ceramic works, with great success. Evidence is the adaptation of his Kim Kim ceramic forms, into musical instruments by Frank Giorgini and the acquisition of same, by the Metropolitan Museum, New York. The paper therefore, recommends the re-recruitment of professional local potters as instructors at Nigerian Institutions offering ceramics as a course. This, the authors believe, will re-invigorate some level of vibrancy.

Introduction
In 1974, the American State Department invited some skilled Africans to tour the United States of America and Canada to demonstrate their skills. Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan was one of those people selected. He opted to employ a traditional method of pottery to teach how to produce a Nigerian traditional pot, the *Kim Kim*, a percussion instrument. There are different variations of the *Kim Kim,* but generally, it looks like a pot, with a narrow neck and two openings, one at the top and another at the side. Rhythmically slapping the two openings or hitting the side of the pot with palms at chosen intervals could create varied sounds.

In preparing for the trip to America and after deciding to employ traditional methods in his demonstrations, Ahuwan set out to look for a traditional potter, who could instruct him on how to produce traditional pots. He met Mallam Mohammed Idi at Hunkuyi who taught him. Mallam Idi was later employed as a studio assistant at the ceramic section of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where Ahuwan taught.

One of the schools Ahuwan visited during the 1974 tour of America and Canada was the Haystack Mountain School of Craft, Deer Isle, Maine. Frank Giorgini was then a student at the school. Giorgini recognized the huge economic potentials of the *Kim Kim*. When Ahuwan left, Giorgini began making and selling the *Kim Kim* to musicians. He became successful at selling them as he continued to introduce innovations to them, such as fitting them with electronic microphones. On Ahuwan's return from the trip, he felt that his practice would benefit, better if he allowed the environment of Hunkuyi to be part of his experience, rather than Idi coming to Zaria to teach him. He therefore, acquired space in Idi's house and made it his studio. Since then, he has produced profound works worthy, of examination.

Ahuwan has been teaching Ceramics for over 40 years, but as Jari (2014) observes, many, if not all the books published on Nigerian artists, did not mention him. This omission includes a comprehensive publication recently, on over 100 Nigerian artists (Offoedu-Okeke, 2012). Addressing some of these concerns is the focus of this paper, whose objective is to analytically appreciate the works of Ahuwan, particularly the *Kim-Kim* series. The aim is, to present an objective documentation, of Ahuwan's works. In achieving this aim and objectives of the paper, the analysis will be restricted to *kim-kim* works. This is without prejudice to the other profound ceramic works that Ahuwan has produced. Methodology is qualitative and relying on a descriptive approach, for the analysis.

Having spent over fifteen years cumulatively, relating with the ceramic section, either as student(at both under graduate and post graduate levels) or staff respectively, the authors cannot authoritatively claim that they know the works of Abashiya M. Ahuwan.This is caused by the rare encounter with the works, since exhibitions of such works in the institution are hardly held. A paper such as this, is therefore, justified, since it becomes one of the avenues for many to encounter the works of Ahuwan, whom many students know, only as a teacher, a former head of department or a former dean of faculty and not as a Ceramic artist.

Background of the Artist

Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan was born on 31st December, 1947 at Sakwak in Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State. When he turned seven, his elder brother, Reverend Iliya, was already enlightened, having already attended the Bible College in Kagoro and Igbaja. He was established as a missionary in Kagoro. Rrverend Iliya bore the responsibility of sending Ahuwan to Madakiya Primary School. Madakiya is about 10 kilometres away from Sakwak, where Ahuwan lived with his parents. After three years at Madakiya, he moved to the Practicing School, which was located at the Sudan Interior Mission (S.I.M.) Teachers' College in Kagoro. He attended class four at the Practicing School and proceeded to spend three years at the ECWA Senior Primary School Kagoro, where he completed his primary education.

After Primary education, Ahuwan got admitted into the Abuja Secondary School in 1962 where he became passionate about Art. The Abuja Pottery, a vibrant place, was directly opposite his school. Michael Cardew headed it, but it was when Michael O'Brien arrived at the Pottery, to learn how to make pots from Cardew, that Ahuwan and other interested students from the secondary school, had a chance to visit. O'Brien eventually got employed at the Abuja Secondary School, to teach Art, while he still made pots at the pottery. He liked taking the art students to show them around the Pottery. It was during one of such visits, that Ahuwan was able to make vases for the first time, using the kick wheel.

When Ahuwan completed secondary education in 1966, he attended the Abingdon School at Berkshire in England, to study for the Higher School Certificate (H.S.C.) in 1967. He obtained the Higher School Certificate in 1968 and in the same year, he enrolled at the West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham, also in England. Ahuwan chose to specialize in Ceramics and became the best graduating student in this field, in the college, in 1972, with a second-class upper degree.

Upon returning to Nigeria in 1972, he taught for four months at the Government Girls Secondary School, Soba, before getting appointed the same year at the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. While lecturing in the Department of Fine Arts, he got admitted to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, in the United States of America. He graduated with M.Sc. in Ceramics in 1976. He returned to the United States for a PhD in Educational Administration and Planning, which he obtained in 1981, from the University of North Texas, Denton. Ahuwan had attained other forms of education through, participation at workshops, conferences, and exhibitions, as well as, through visiting and lecturing, at art schools and centres.

Over the period of four decades of teaching in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Ahuwan had held several positions. He was Head,

Department of Industrial Design, from 1990 to 1993 and returned to head the department again, from 2002 to 2006. He was President of the Ceramics Association of Nigeria from 2002 to 2010. From 2004 to 2008, he became the Dean, Faculty of Environmental Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan is currently a professor of ceramics in the Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

A Few Literary Perspectives on Abashiya M. Ahuwan

Many researchers have kept away from writing on virgin areas, because of the absence of literature, as in the case of Abashiya Ahuwan. However, as scholars of Art History, these authors feel compelled, to provide some materials, which will serve as stimuli for others, while also helping others to appreciate the efforts of ceramists, like Ahuwan. There is thus, not much written on Ahuwan. However, available literary perspectives are presented.

Ahuwan (2014) recounts the highpoints of his stewardship as a ceramics student and artist. Much of what is discussed has already been stated as part of the introduction and background to this paper. However, the paper is incisive, particularly in its details, regarding locations, dates, and people Ahuwan has had experiences with, in the course of being a student and an artist. It opens with his experiences at the Abuja Secondary School and the Pottery, followed by his training in the United Kingdom, his return home and engagement in Zaria, his training and workshops in the United States of America and the Hunkuyi-Experiment. Ahuwan is very generous in offering credit to Mallam Idi, his private teacher at Hunkuyi. He lists numerous things he learnt from him, from how to prepare clay, to how to use perforated drums and how to fire, and obtain an interesting finishing. The Hunkuyi-Experiment, as recounted by Ahuwan, presents two levels of comprehension. The engaging narrative forms one level of understanding, while the second level encapsulates a concept akin to the *Natural Synthesis* of the Zaria Art Society, of the late 1950s. Ahuwan advocates the return to one's roots, in order to create a design, which has a "fulfilling effect to the soul and spirit, and the mundane senses."

Okpe (2003), on his part, opens his discussion on the works of Ahuwan with a brief statement about his educational background. He then provides a scope for his paper, stating that he was not concerned with the utilitarian aspect of the works, but with their form, function and tradition. He proceeds to provide information on other artists who have, in his word, "drifted" from employing the wheel and kiln technology in the production of functional wares, to the employment of "free-standing form development, in order to meet the dynamism of the changing culture of ceramic art appreciation." He associates this "drift" to the interaction potters have with sculptors, which has affected their forms. He mentions' Demas Nwoko, who claimed that, he was dissatisfied with the result he obtained from firing, using the university training method he received, because the wares always ended up with uniform colouring. Nwoko, he states, preferred the employment of traditional open firing methods, which gave a variety of colouring on a ware.

Okpe also refers to Magdalene Odundo of Kenya and Mohammed Ahmed Abdalla of Sudan, as potters who although practiced in the United Kingdom, have adapted a variety of methods from their traditional backgrounds. Odundo for instance, employs the typical African building method, along with different firing techniques while Abdalla, employs methods associated with the traditions of the Nile Valley. Okpe then summarizes the experimental enquiry of Ahuwan in pottery, tracing how he started throwing with the kick-wheel in Zaria and how such enquiry took him to various locations around the world, including the United States of America and Hunkuyi in Nigeria. He notes that this enquiry produced results, especially on the surface treatment of wares, such as the variety of colours and finishing. Okpe seems to suggest that, the anthropomorphic shapes Ahuwan's wares, sometimes assume, are influenced by traditional pottery forms of the Mwona and the Ilorin Yoruba of Nigeria. According to him, "Mwona make anthropomorphic vessels of this kind, for divination, protection and curing and so also is the burnished red pot and lid of the Yoruba

people in Ilorin, Nigeria." Okpe therefore, recommends that, formal art schools should provide opportunities for students, to imbibe both Western and traditional methods of pottery, as a consequence of what he has seen Ahuwan achieved.

Okpe (2003), is one of the first direct efforts to awaken interest in the study of Ahuwan's works. It was published as a precursor to a bigger project, which is yet to commence, after twelve years. While it is a laudable effort, its central concern is to debate relationships between ceramics and sculpture, which is why the publication is specific on Ahuwan's works, only in a few paragraphs. It is however, illustrated by three of his works, which were produced in 1998. This paper therefore, remains indebted to Okpe's work, in terms of inspiration, but will attempt providing detailed information, for a better understanding of Ahuwan's works.

Jari (2014) presents Ahuwan as one of three treasures in the Zaria Art School. The other two are Gani Odutokun and the act of retaining works of graduating students. He opens his discussion on Ahuwan, with lamentations on the dearth of literature on him. He then proceeds to provide Ahuwan's educational background. Jari describes in some detail, how he creates his works. He states that, the works are fully constituted by indigenous content, as Ahuwan does not use the kick wheel, glazes or modern kilns. He uses the hand-built technique and fires his wares, using the open-firing technique, where corn horst, cornstalk, cow dung, firewood or sawdust, is used, as fuel. Jari states that, Mallam Mohammed Idi, a Hunkuyi potter, taught Ahuwan how to employ these Nigerian Pottery techniques. Until Idi passed away, Ahuwan maintained his studio in Hunkuyi, because of the quality of clay he found there and because he wanted to stay in touch with his teacher. Whenever Ahuwan starts to create a new pot, he first inverts an old pot, on which he piles up clay, which he prepares himself. He beats the clay evenly, around the base of the old pot. The new ware therefore, initially takes the shape of the old one, until it is detached from the old. Ahuwan works on it, to change the shape or maintain it, as it is. He could create openings on the pot, add protrusions or studs, or embellish it with motifs or shapes. The oxidation during firing in open-fire creates interesting finishing on his wares, which usually end as terracotta. Jari observes that, Ahuwan's more recent works are created not as utilitarian objects, as some of the older wares were, but as aesthetic objects. Jari's last part of discussion onAhuwan centres on his encounter with the *Kim Kim* and how he taught its creation to students in the United States of America, to the benefit of Frank Giorgini, an account earlier narrated in this paper.

Jari (2014), is not published exclusively on the works of Ahuwan. It is an inaugural lecture, which reveals six decades of Zaria Art School treasures. The part on Ahuwan is just a few pages, but well-illustrated. Like Okpe (2003), it provides part of the reason for writing this paper, as it bemoans the reluctance of academics, to discuss one of these treasures of the Zaria Art School. The intention of this paper therefore, is to provide fresh insight into Ahuwan's works. Hence, the focus on the Kim Kim ceramic works.

Abashiya M. Ahuwan's Kim-Kim Pots

It is not clear when Ahuwan started making *Kim-Kim* pots. From his account however, it would be a few years or months, before undertaking the trip to the United States of America, in 1974, on the invitation of that country's government, for a three-month educational tour. *Kim-Kim* is the name given to the aerophone or idiophone percussion instrument, made out of clay, by many of the ethnic groups, south of Kaduna. It creates sound by the vibration of air, modulated by the rapid slapping, closing and opening of the two holes provided on the pot, one at the top and the other at the side. Another variation has the two holes at the top and bottom of the pot.

Ahuwan employed the traditional method of pottery, which he learnt from Mallam Idi, to produce the *Kim Kim.* It should be useful to describe this method before getting into the individual analysis of the works he created in this series.He began work by inverting an old pot. He shapes moist clay, into a round padded form and sprinkles grog on it, to stop it from sticking on the old inverted pot, before putting the clay on top of it. Ahuwan works on the ground, without any rotating disc or

turntable. He is therefore, always in a bent-over position, going round and round the pot as he beats the clay, using a flat stone, gently and outwards, from the top. This act compresses the clay and spread it gently, downwards. He takes care, to spread the clay evenly.

He occasionally takes measurements, with a sharp pin, at different sides, to ensure that the pin is sunk, at the same height, at the different points. He continuously trims the lower edges of the new form, in order to maintain a uniform growth, on all sides. After beating the clay with a flat stone to compress and expand the clay downwards, and after obtaining a uniform thickness all round, Ahuwan uses a flat wooden paddle, to smoothen the surface, by the same beating method, all round the form. He further smoothens the surface, by using a wet flat stone, after sprinkling a little water to the surface of the form. At this point, the bottom half of the *Kim Kim* would have been complete. It is left for a while to stiffen a bit and subsequently, detached from the old pot and kept with its wide edge up, ready for further building, using the coiling method.

Before adding the coil, Ahuwan scores the edges and moistens them, so as, to have the coil, fully stuck to the form. The scoring is done both inside and outside the edges of the pot, as well as, the top. The coil-clay is also scored before it is laid on the edges and built into the form by squeezing and pinching. This is done, in order to prevent the coil part from coming off the form, when dry. From the point of the first coil, the pot is controlled slowly inwards, to eventually create a narrow opening, at the top. After each coil is added, the newly built area is smoothened continuously. Ahuwan adds a coil at a time, after the new edges are slightly stiffened, following the same procedure, as when adding the first coil. He continuously checks to ensure that the wall of the pot, is of even thickness, all through the process

Abashiya Ahuwan determines what height a pot attains, based on its size and what sound he wanted the pot to create. At the appropriate height, the contour of the pot is directed from inwards and upwards to form the neck. Usually, the neck determines the sustainability of the sound the *Kim Kim* makes. The shorter the neck, the less sustained the sound is. It is also not useful, to have a very long neck; so the height of the neck should be just right to maintain a sustained sound, Ahuwan says that most of the *Kim Kim* pots are shaped after a natural gourd.

The lip of the *Kim Kim* is created by first, pounding clay into a round shape. After obtaining an evenly round shape of the same thickness, a round opening is cut out of the middle. The open-shaped round clay is left to stiffen slightly, before attaching it to the neck of the pot, to form the lip. This is attached the same way a coil is attached. The inside of the lip is trimmed to bring it to the same diameter as the inside of the neck. To reinforce the attached lip to the neck, a coil of clay is added round, underneath, where the neck joined the lip. The joint is then smoothened along with the lip and the neck. To obtain sound efficiency, the side hole was created not too close, to the neck and not directly on the centre but slightly above the centre. The side hole was generally about the same circumference with the mouth. After the *Kim Kim* pots have been produced, they are allowed to dry slowly, before firing.

Ahuwan also adopts the traditional method of firing. Traditional firing takes place in an open area. The area is cleared of all combustible materials and all pots to be fired are brought out and laid near the firing area. A heap of cornstalks is spread on the cleared area, as the first stage. Dry twigs of wood then follow. They are laid on the cornstalks methodically, to maintain a flat surface. The flat surface is necessary, because after the layer of twigs of wood, the green pots are laid, again methodically, in order for the space to accommodate as many pots as possible. Usually, the bigger pots are laid first on their sides and in lines, one closely behind the other, in the middle of the firing place. Some of the smaller pots are placed inside the bigger pots. The others are kept upside down on the sides of the bigger pots. More pots are piled upside down, on top of them and these could include other bigger pots. Depending on how many pots there are, to be fired, they are piled on top of one another, to create a dome-like mound. When the laying of the pots is complete, more wood is stacked around the mound of pots. The entire pile is

then covered with a large hip of dry grass. The mound could actually be climbed over, in order to compact the grass around the pots. After the laying of grass was complete, water and ashes are sprinkled on the mound, to slow down the rate of burning. The area around the mound is further cleared of all debris, after which, fire is set to the mound. Usually, the time for firing is preferable in the evening, so that the fire might continue to burn into the night. It could stop burning by midnight and the wares would then begin to cool down until morning. In the morning, the wares are inspected and taken away from the fireplace, the firing having been completed. All the wares will become light-brownish terracotta pieces, after this bisque firing.

Ahuwan explained that after this first firing, he subjects his wares to a second firing, in order to introduce an aesthetic finish to them. The second firing is conducted by first, collecting sawdust and wood shavings. He makes a layer of sawdust on the ground in an open space, which would have been cleared of combustible objects. He places his wares on this layer of sawdust, after which, he piles more sawdust and wood shavings on the wares, to create a mound. This is carefully done in order to trap some pockets of air within the mound. He set fire on the mound and wait for it to finish burning. When the wares are cold enough, he inspects and collects them from the fireplace. Wherever smoke hit the wares, dark tones are created, through reduction process, and wherever air hit, oxidation takes place, to create different light tones of various hues. He cleans the ashes off the wares and they are ready for display.

The analyses of the *Kim Kim* in this paper are undertaken from the observation of photographs, as none of them is in the possession of Ahuwan or within reach. The whereabouts of five of them are unknown, even to him, while two of them are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The*Kim Kim* shown in Plate ii, is one of the earliest that Ahuwan created. The image is reformatted into a digital image, from an old slide, which accounts for the poor quality of the picture. It shows an almost plain *Kim Kim* except for a relief design in a triangular shape around the neck area. It also has one handle close to the neck.

Plate iii shows another *Kim Kim,* more decorative than the one shown in Plate ii. Apart from the fact that this *Kim Kim* is not plain, it is imbued with different patterns of colouration. The designs on the pot are created using coils. Six coils entwine the mid-section while four are visible around the lip. A raised coil also marks the edge of the side hole. The subtle dark hues are in harmony with the natural clay colour patches around the pot. It is as if the appearance of the *Kim Kim* was more important to Ahuwan than its function.

One of the most fascinating *Kim Kim*, which Ahuwan had ever produced, is shown in Plate iv. It is no wonder therefore, that it is one of the two in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acquired since 1989. It looks different from the ones he produced previously, richly endowed with a variety of elements borrowed from tradition. This *Kim-Kim* is provided with three stands, as if to emphasize the point that it was meant to be on display. Some of the traditional elements adopted, are the several studs that form part of the decoration. They are actually used by traditional potters in many ethnic groups in Nigeria, as a symbolic tool, to ward off evil spirits. On this pot, they form three lines round the lower part of the pot and three other lines, round the upper part. The middle section is left to contain other forms of decorations, created as horizontal line incisions and large arrows pointing upwards. Ahuwan explained that the arrows are actually the shape of the windows, which he saw on the Abuja Pottery House. An arch similar to the doors provided on traditional architectural houses encases the side hole. The overall effect of all these elements is the general ambiance the *Kim Kim* possesses, as an antique.

Plate VI shows the second *Kim Kim,* in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. It is as interesting, as the other one shown in Plate IV, although characteristically dissimilar. Its main feature is its long neck, which bulges near the lip. It also has studs but they are quite scanty, compared to the other one. Geometric

shapes, such as triangles, circles and irregular rectangles, characterize its main decorative motifs. Linear incisions are also created, to provide texture within some of the geometric patterns.

When Ahuwan was asked if these two *Kim Kim,* at the Metropolitan Museum were created solely for aesthetic purpose, he retorted that, they could actually function as musical instruments as well. Coincidentally, however, after he had produced them, he turned his attention to producing sculptural forms, which have no utilitarian function, and of coursenot the focus of this paper.

Conclusion

The *Kim Kim* wares, on the other hand, are unique. Ahuwan tried to make each one, different from the other, either from their shapes or from their decoration and finishing. Some had textured motifs embellished on them. All had accidentally created nuances of different earth colours, through oxidation and reduction, which occurred, when using the traditional firing method. Balance is well explored in creating most, if not all the forms. This is seen in the deployment of the stud-like protrusions on many of the works. Where holes or depressions are visible, they are deployed methodically.

Some of the *Kim-Kim* and the sculptural-ceramic forms, had resemblance to other objects. For instance, the two *Kim-Kim*, which were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, appeared like pottery wares used in some ethnic groups in Nigeria, to ward off evil spirits, because of the several stud-like protrusions spread across their surface. Ahuwan himself, while presenting the works to the Museum in 1989, alluded to the fact that, he used studs to ward off evil spirits.

To situate Ahuwan within the context of Ceramic practice, one needs to look at his teachers and close associates. Apart from Mallam Idi, Cardew, O'Brien, and Counts, left an impression on him. They were all influenced by H.V. Meyerotwitz's philosophy, which put premium on the aesthetics of ceramic forms over their functionality. Meyerotwitz was Cardew's teacher and Cardew, was Counts and O'Brien's mentor. Cardew would later refer to this philosophy as *trial-by-fire*, implying that, talented teachers "must be pressed into service, so that the students (from the beginning) can see a master…at work". Ahuwan maintained the same philosophy. His Hunkuyi Experiment was more a concept, than an event, akin to the *Natural Synthesis* of the Zaria Art Society of the 1950s. Ahuwan, given such background, is a Post-Colonial artist. His *Kim-Kim* and other forms of ceramic expressions, like the sculptural-ceramic forms, appeared to be a metaphorical liberation from the West or colonial vestiges. He had followership in some of his students, who included the late Elizabeth Ewule and Frank Giorgini.

The paper reveals how the engagement of a traditional potter, to demonstrate his skills to staff and students, at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, became beneficial, in terms of developing new methods and forms in Ceramics. Ahuwan is one of the living evidences of that initiative. It is therefore, recommended that, this practice be restored, to regenerate the vibrancy of Ceramics in the University and by extension, in the country.



Plate I: Two Kim-Kim pots in use in Southern Kaduna acquired from Atakar Market 2015



Plate II: Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan, Kim-Kim c. 1974 Terracotta, about 32cm high



Plate III: Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan, Kim-Kim II c. 1974 Terracotta, about 35cm high



Plate VI: Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan, Kim-Kim IV c. 1989 Terracotta, about 40cm high



Plate V: Ahuwan creating the Kim-Kim shown in Plate I



Plate VI: Abashiya Magaji Ahuwan Kim-Kim c. 1989 Terracotta, about 42cm high

Reference:

Ahuwan, A.M. (2014): "Towards a Search for Nigerian Ceramics Identity: The Hunkuyi-Experiment". *Ashakwu, Journal of Ceramics*. Vol. 11 Special Edition, Zaria: Ceramic Association of Nigeria, pp1-11

Jari, J.J. (2014): *Revealing Six Decades of Zaria Art School Treasures*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, p.16

Offoedu-Okeke, O. (2012): Artists of Nigeria. Milan: Ford Foundation, pp17-21

Okpe, T. (2003): "The Seeming Sculptural (Un)-Intention of a Potter: The Paradox of Abbas Ahuwan's Forms". *Ashakwu: Journal of Ceramics*, Vol.1 No.1, Zaria: The Ceramics Association of Nigeria, pp.40-45