GRAPHICAL AND AESTHETIC EMBELLISHMENTS CHARACTERIZING ABBAS AHUWAN'S POTTERY SURFACE DESIGNS

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Abstract
Abbas Magaji Ahuwan's life and career have developed from his locality at Sakwak Bajju, Kamrum District, Zango Kataf Local Government Kaduna State to international limelight, through passion and dedication to his culture and the pursuance of excellence. It is noteworthy that such a fulfilled life, has tapped inspiration from the likes of Ladi Kwali, Michael O'Brien, Michael Cardew and a local potter called Mallam Idi Hunkuyi. This article investigates the works of an artist and designer, very versatile not only in pottery but also graphic design and visual aesthetics. In understanding the thinking of this creative genius, it was expedient to know his sources of motivation to creative excellence and personal philosophies generally. The article concludes that Ahuwan is a creative giant whose pottery works and their exquisite graphical embellishments have projected the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria to the global community.

Background on Traditional Pottery
Over the centuries, African pottery has been practiced predominantly using traditional handcrafting techniques. They are produced in various desirable shapes and sizes for utilitarian and aesthetic functions like cooking vessels, food bowls, storage pots, drinking cups, funerary urns, flower pots, decorative pots and frying or drying pots etc. Pottery is an art of forming objects of clay in a moist plastic condition and drying them by either exposure to sun and air, thereafter firing and baking in kilns or ovens (Anonymous, 2011b). According to McKee (2007) since the first piece of clay fell into a fire and was transformed into a glasslike material, people have used clay for domestic wares, ritual tokens and decorative items. Peterson (2015) posits that pottery has been an important part of the human culture for thousands of years from prehistoric storage jars and has played a key role in innumerable human endeavors.

Ahuwan (2004) asserts that the art of pottery is as old as the Iron Age, when fire was discovered by man. In discussing 'Ancient Pottery,' the Encyclopedia of Art (n.d.) affirms that pottery is seen as the first functional art to emerge during the Upper Paleolithic, after body painting. Adding further, the earliest form of pottery was from the Chinese, with its first appearance in Jiangxi. Abiyamo (2013) emphasized that pottery was also (and still remain) a veritable source of income. However, besides their utilitarian function and economic attribute of being sold, one interesting characteristic of pottery that makes one artists or regions creation distinct from another is its aesthetic embellishments. African potters craft, as eloquently described by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, a Curator at the Department of African and Amerindian Art, "embody an immediacy of form and a deceptive simplicity that reflect their makers' deep understanding of material, process and embellishment" (Berzock, 2005).

Characteristics of African Pottery Embellishments

Khan Academy (2015) notes that in ancient Greece, some pottery were decorated with figures and patterns, others were plain and painted black all over, yet others were unpainted coarse wares that sufficed for cooking. Similarly, African hand-built clay vessels and pottery are decorated with beautiful forms, rich surface textures and sumptuous colors (Smithsonian Libraries, 2015b). The decorative forms range from human, animal and geometric shapes and patterns. This article reviews aesthetic patterns that characterize the works of Abbas Magaji Ahuwan, a Professor of contemporary Nigerian Ceramics at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. This is essential given that he is one of the most prolific pottery artists in Nigeria, whose works uniquely and graciously epitomizes a high-breed that transcends the traditional and contemporary worlds.

Ahuwan Trailed an Early Career Path

Abbas Magaji Ahuwan was born in 1947 (Smithsonian Libraries, 2015a) to Magaji Ahuwan, Sakwak Bajju, Kamrum District, Zango Kataf Local Government Kaduna State, Nigeria. His career was kick-started at the Sudan Interior Mission (S.I.M) School, Madakiya in 1955. Subsequently, he transferred to Practicing School, Kagoro, before going to the S.I.M. Senior Primary School (Adachip) Kagoro, in 1961 (Anonymous, 2015). Interestingly, the story of his life was going to change on entry into Secondary School from 1961. In his autobiographic report published by ASHAKWU he asserts "if I had not gone to Government Secondary School Abuja, where Ladi Kwali Pottery Center is cited across the road, the story of my life could have taken a different turn" (Ahuwan, 2014).

Backed by hard work and dedication Ahuwan was granted a Scholarship to study for his Higher School Certificate (HSC) at the Abingdon School, Berkshire, United Kingdom. He gained admission to the West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham to study Fine Art, graduating in June, 1972 with a B.A. (2nd Class Upper) Degree, specializing in Ceramics. On his return to Nigeria, he taught Arts at Girls Government Secondary School, Soba, he was later in the same year be appointed as an Assistant Lecturer at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He went to University of Tennessee Knoxville in 1976, to undertake an MSc Degree in Art and Design and University of North Texas for his PhD in Educational Planning and Administration and graduated in 1981 (Anonymous, 2015).

Ahuwan's Philosophical View of the Nature of Clay

Abbas Magaji Ahuwan alongside such iconic potters Ladi Kwali, Benjo Igwilo, Abbas Ahuwan, Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike and Michael Cadew, are considered the most celebrated in the history of Nigerian arts (Alkali and Morakinyo, 2014 and Dajo Pottery Ltd., 2015). Abbas Ahuwan's attainment can be ascribed to his broadened academic lineage and international exposure. In a paper presented at the China Jingdezhen International Ceramic Fair World Mayors' Summit on Ceramics in Jingdezhen, China he affirmed that "although making pottery is perceived to be a feminist occupation in my community, however my exposure to the western world; broadened my viewpoint thereby seeing clay works generally as a humanistic profession." Adding that, of course, it is no doubt that the profession is cross-gender and non-respecter of persons (Ahuwan, 2011).

Over the years, I have come to terms with the fact that "clay is for the people and of the people and by nature clay defines socialism." My philosophy on clay derives from the Raku tea party concept; where the elegant crackled surface of the Raku vessel form simple shapes that serve the high and lowly during a tea party celebration. I contrast this with the African clay musical instruments which advocate a communal spirit in the society as exemplified in the right of passage experiences – birth, marriage and death. Consequently, artifacts made of clay are of no functional significance until they go through the heating state, during which period any substance that is not clay related is consumed.

Ahuwan affirms that "a pot shard, clay vessel or any fired clay product is pure and has a soul. It is unadulterated." He adds further, "this is why clay products are 'pure,' hence the process of producing pots is internally

and externally purifying" (Ahuwan, 2011). This state of sanctification has made clay artifacts reliable to its users in all ramifications for generations everlasting. Without being contradicted, pottery is divine with a living soul, that is why archaeologists, anthropologists, ethnographers rely on it to tell the story of consumed civilizations. Unlike iron, textiles, wood, polymer products rust, decay, disintegrate and disappear overtime, fired clay is awesome, useful and forever.

Graphical Characteristics of Ahuwan's Pottery Embellishments

Although, Ahuwan's hand-crafted pottery are considered very beautiful and elegant in terms of physical shapes, from the cooking vessels, food bowls, storage pots, beer drinking mugs, flower pots and decorative containers, the mastery displayed by their intricate decorations are quite exceptional. It is no doubt that he applies high conceptual, philosophical and technical knowhow in the design and construction of these wares, manifested by the eloquent African tribal design motifs and symbols embellishing them. It is noted that Ahuwan's pottery designs are decorated in a variety of ways that include:

- **Radical Textual Glaze Patterns (Non-man or Heat Induced):** Glazing generally is achieved through the use of a range of mineral-based colour pigments. Ahuwan (2015) affirmed that glaze can be applied using as many methods as an artist's imagination can guarantee him/her, through simply dipping the piece of pottery into a pool of glaze wholly or partly or using different patches of different coloured glazes. In fact, the patterns would further transform and blend into unexpected radical and ubiquitous embellishments when fired. Lots of unimaginably beautiful amoebic graphical patterns would result in this process (see Plate 1).
- **Definite Geometric Shaped Decorative Patterns:** Definite renditions can be achieved when a brush is used to apply glaze or a hard knife-like object to scrape glaze layers off in desired rhythmic visual patterns. Glazes can also be hand-painted before (or after) firing, through a method called underglazing (or overglazing) decoration. Stenciling as a form of transfer or the use of a roller, sprinkling, spraying or atomizing, or additive application of clay rolled pieces to form relieves or subtraction or incision or finger/object indentations to form grooves, are all great surface decoration procedures. These outcomes would result into more definite graphical renditions of decorative patterns than the radical process. Glaze applicators can be almost every object around the studio or household. It would only require some imagination to experiment and discover the potentials of such objects. Of course, a potter that is willing to venture is most likely to stumble over new, workable and unique ideas to standout with very unique outcomes. Slip painting can also result into definite graphic patterns as decorative techniques, whereby a thin combination of watery clay is applied to the pottery surface using a painterly procedure. Geometric patterns can also be applied to the outer surface of the pot by wrapping the vessel in a mold or with coiled basketry, or by impressing or stamping patterns on the raw clay body. All these procedures can result into beautiful circular, triangular, rectangular, stared shapes. Plates 2 and 3 show examples of these kinds of designs. Other definite geometric shapes are derivable from zig-zag, spiral or wavy lines.
- **Graphical Unambiguous Figurative Images:** Pottery decoration can afford great liberty to the designer, unambiguous human or animal shaped graphical images and motifs can be placed on pots. These can be done through hand-painting, stamping, rouletting, incising, perforating, elaborate carving of large shapes around the object to give very beautiful graphical decorations and finishing for pottery pieces. The procedure can also be used as a canvas for telling a visual story or composition relevant to the

culture or interest of the maker like the lizards, birds, turtles and African hut motifs on several of Ahuwan's pottery pieces. See the flower vase and water containers in Plate 2 and Figure 1; they give a graphical representation of an African agama lizard.

Rationale for Ahuwan's Adherence to Excellence in Pottery

According to Beck (1987) technology, which applies the knowledge of science, always has an artistic element in its creation and production, even though it may not be emphasized. In a broad sense, there is an art to doing anything well and any activity can be perceived as an art by looking for beauty in the process and result. Abbas Ahuwan's dedication to quality and intricate design outputs is borne out of a sheer creative instinct and intrinsic satisfaction that include among others the following:

- ***Insatiable dedication to design and creative perfectionism:*** Professor Abbas Ahuwan admits to being a very passionate ceramist who is dedicated to design perfection, an innate trait that is not only evident in his pottery practice but in every sphere of his life. Hence, diligently in his practice, refusing to accept any design that is less than the best. Always searching for the last 'touch' that would that be the *'icing on the cake.'*

- ***Providing a medium for promoting his cultural identity and heritage:*** He is highly committed to the rich culture and heritage of his people (Bajju) and Nigeria as a whole. He argues that a potter is endowed with the best platform for cultural promotion, given that his piece of table ware or vase has the potential to travel the world. Therefore, must be an ambassador to carry a cultural message, a reason to always make a creative statement on them or through them.
- ***Deriving him a sense of nocturnal fraternity with his clay forms:*** Creating a beautiful piece of pottery ware is the most enjoyable part of my day, but finishing is my favorite part. He said at the Haystack Udu drum making workshop at Frank Giorgini studio in New York "I tend to enjoy burnishing and alternately rubbing the pot with my hands. I think this is when you really impart your cosmic energy into the drum. The final shaping and smoothing is a meditative ritual." Deriving a form of nocturnal fraternity with his clay forms. See Plate 4, showing Ahuwan in a deep cosmic interaction.

- ***Paving a path to his own creative identity and style:*** Professor Ahuwan believes that there is great and insatiable delight in self-expression. That is, the art of freeing and letting loose one's hidden ingenuity to unveil and pave a path for developing ones creative identity and style.

- ***Enhanced visual appearance of pottery can attract buyers:*** Professor Ahuwan holds that having a beautiful pottery form is only half the process, a well finished design would be carefully crafted through burnishing and embellishing to display craftsmanship and provide the needed charm that can attract a buyer fast. Of course, a well crafted work cannot be attained haphazardly; it must be painstakingly done to with rhythmic renditions to emphasize the wholesomeness and beauty of the work and attract a decent reward.

Conclusion

Professor Abbas Magaji Ahuwan has over the years emerged from the humble locality in Kaduna State to international fame, through passion and dedication to his culture and the pursuance of excellence. He has transformed into a potter per excellence, with beautiful graphical renditions on pottery. It was interest to delve into understanding his sources of motivation to creative excellence and some of his personal philosophies generally have been highlighted. To know that his career influence emanated from the inspiration he received from Ladi Kwali's pottery center, Michael O'Brien, Michael Cardew and Mallam Idi Hunkuyi and the

education in the UK, US and the interaction with Frank Giorgini to name a few to develop the Haystack-Hunkuyi Experiment. He has trained and influenced hundreds of enthusiastic and creative minds both home and abroad, through which process he is not only fulfilling his personal ambition of impacting humanity, but also striving to leave indelible marks in the chronicles of history for the future generation to reckon with.



Figure 1: An artist's impression of the graphical embellishments of Ahuwan's pottery pieces
Drawing by Azi, J.I.



Plate 1: Ahuwan's unique narrow based serving bowl with radical textured glaze patterns
Source: Professor A.M. Ahuwan's private collection



Plate 2: A wine pot, flower vase and tableware with definite geometric shapes and figures
Source: Professor A.M. Ahuwan's private collection



Plate 3: Ahuwan's Kim-Kim series well rendered in geometric patterns
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Plate 4: Abbas Ahuwan embellishing a large pot he calls the 'devil's spikes'
Source: Progler, J. (2011)

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