HISTORICAL FOUNDATION OF POTTERY ORIGIN IN BENIN

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Abstract
The Benin culture is vibrant, rich and filled with diverse activities; such as naming, marriage, coronation and burial ceremonies that are represented in artifacts. These artifacts symbolized cultural tradition of Benin in the ancient kingdom which is depicted on tools, clothing and utensils. Out of these ancient art pieces, the pottery stands out as a unique art ware, which is defined and redefined by many scholars of history and anthropologist. This study intends to work on the historical analysis of Benin Pottery tradition. The study will also examine the symbolic meaning of each of the traditions. It will project the aesthetic qualities, and the effects of new ideas of pottery of the indigenous Benin people, and how pottery is interpreted in the Benin culture with respect to environmental influences from neighbouring communities. The study hopes to compile and analyze forms of pottery that will rekindle interest in pottery, and serve as reference point for the future generation.
Key Words: Foundation, Pottery, Tradition and Ancient Benin

Introduction

The kingdom of Benin, presently known as Edo State is geographically situated in the tropical rainforest of South-West Nigeria. On a sandy coastal plain, west of the River Niger and north of the swamps and creeks of the Niger-Delta (Ezra. 1992: xii). Benin City is the center of a prosperous region in which rubber, palm oil, yams, cassava, corn, and timber are produced. Its industries include rubber processing, sawmilling, and brewing. Benin City is the site of a museum renowned for its large collection of antique carvings and other local decorative arts. The University of Benin (1970) is also located here. The people of Edo were variously called the Benin people up till 1963, the Mid-western people (region) until 1976, Bendel (the Benin and Delta area) till 1991 and Edo people from 1991 till date.

Umodiagbon (2010) says

> The word Benin (Bini) or Edo is being used interchangeably to refer to the people, the capital city and the kingdom or empire even after it had partially lost its independence in the wars with the British in 1897.

According to Igbafe (1979) Benin is a "term which stands for the kingdom which was a much smaller area than the empire and may now be regarded as coterminous with the section of the Edo-speaking peoples, and as distinct from the Esan, Owan,Etsako, (Ivbiosakon) and Urhobo; they are linguistically classified with the Binis. This area has a common language and culture as well as political unity under the Oba's (traditional ruler of Benin kingdom in Edo State) effective rule up till April 1899, when the colonial office took over the Niger coast protectorate from the

foreign office. The present-day Benin East and West divisions of the present day Edo State also correspond roughly to it (See Fig. 1).

Historical Foundation of Pottery in Benin

The general survey history of Benin Kingdom from the earliest times to the present can be treated in three phases. The first phase is the foundation period generally referred to as the Ogiso period [c.900 – c. 1170]. The second period of the New Dynasty of Kings or Oba's [c. 1200 - 1897], while the third phase is that of Pottery tradition and its impact on Benin society Ogiso period, the first ogiso ruler according to Igbafe (2007) was Igodo, a prominent elder in his community [Odionwere] who exercised authority over the various small communities which collectively formed the kingdom known as Igodomigodo meaning land of Igodo or town of towns. The most prominent among the known Ogiso rulers are Igodo, Ere, Orire, Oriagba and Owodo. The Benin kingdom began as a union of juxtaposed clusters of independent communities each surrounded by a moat. Tradition says that the last and worst of rulers of the Ogiso's dynasty was Owodo. Egharevba (1968) described his reign ''as a long course of misrule, failure and anxiety''. In the absence of any heir to Owodo, the people chose from among themselves Evian successor to Owodo since Evian was not an Ogiso, his choice of his son, Ogiamien as his successor in an attempt to legitimize his own dynasty was rejected by the people. This gave rise to the political factionalism, instability and disputes which formed the background of the new Eweka Dynasty (fig: 10)

There are diverse versions of the circumstances in which the Eweka dynasty was established. One of the myth version as recorded by Igbafe (2007) is that ''the banished prince of Benin, Ekaladerhan, who was Ogiso Owodo's son, left Benin for Ughoton to escape from his executioners. After a brief sojourn and attempts to bring him back to Benin, he decided to flee from his new home. Travelling through the village of Erua on the present Auchi road and through the forest, he surfaced in Ile-Ife, where he became king on account of his fortune telling abilities and magical powers. When the Benin people wanted a ruler, a delegation was sent to ask Ekaladerhan to return to Benin. He subjected the chiefs from Benin to a test by asking them to domesticate seven lice for three years and to return to Ife as evidence that they would be able to look after his son, arguing that he was too old to travel to Benin, and was in any case, not in the position to abandon his kingdom in Ile-Ife. When the chiefs cultivated these lice on the head of Oliha's slave and returned to Ile-Ife with them in a well nourished condition, Ekaladerhan was presently surprised and decided to send his son, Oranmiyan, to rule in Benin. He was the father of Eweka.

Oba Eweka (1200-1255) marked the beginning of Obaship in Benin kingdom; he was succeeded by Oba Ewedo (1255-1280). It was Oba Ewedo that gave the kingdom the new name of Ubini which the Portuguese, on arrival recorded as "o Beny" from which Benin was derived. Oba Oguola (1280) main notable achievement was the digging of trenches, the first Benin moat around the city in Oredo, to shave off attacks from his enemies and the introduction of Art (Brass casting). According to Benin tradition, Oguola sent to the Oni of Ife for a brass smith in order to replicate bronze heads sent to him from Ile-ife.

The fifteenth century marked the transformation of the kingdom of Benin into an empire under two capable rulers, Oba Ewuare (1440) and Oba Ozolua (1481), it was during Oba Ewuare that the city was renamed from Ubini to Edo after Edo. The change of the city's name to Edo, the city of love (edo n' evboahire) was to celebrate how his life was spared

by the love of ogiefa's slave (Egharevba 1968). He also encouraged ivory and wood carving in Benin and elevated Benin to the status of a city, and maintained a policy of aggressive conquest. Oba Oguola was the founder of Bronze casting; this art later became a flourishing trade in Benin City especially to the Igun-Eronmwon family which comprises mostly of two families Osa and Inneh's family.

After some years that the trade began to spread rapidly, Oba Esigie (1504 A.D. – 1550 A.D.) had to stop the trade for one reason or the other. History says that this art of Bronze casting was introduced to Benin City through Ife. After the death of Oba Esigie in 1550 A.D. a new Oba arose, he was Oba Orhogbua (1550 A.D. - 1578 A.D.) and he later re-introduced and lifted the ban on the art. The Binis use the knowledge of moulding and carving in Bronze casting. It is observed that Bronze casting claims the highest place in the traditional art and craft of the Binis, especially in Nigerian and African scenes. History has it that during the olden days, Bronze casting works were not works that were kept at any body's disposal. But only to the Oba of Benin shrine.

Among all Benin artistic traditions, Bronze casting is more popular but pottery remains, the most functional. There is hardly any home or community in Benin City without a pot serving one function or the other. The art of Bronze later became an economic object and as such, it is now used as a means of decorating the environment or home. The people of Benin believe that the skill of Bronze casting belongs to certain families as hereditary gifts from above, and as such others are not allowed to learn or witness their production processes. Hence the practice of this craft was held secret. Women were not allowed to learn the craft in order for the secret not to be revealed to other communities after marriage.

Pottery craft was introduced to women in Benin, since then the production of pottery is basically the women craft. Hagger (1959), Charleston (1997) and Oluwafuas (2009) lay claim to pottery as "mainly women's occupation and a great source of revenue to the womenfolk in the past". These two families that practiced this art, the traditional craftsmen (Bronze casters) were so conservative that they did not transfer their knowledge to outsiders, their male children work with them. This is why the female were encouraged to learn pottery so that when they marry, the art of Bronze casting will not be revealed to other families and communities. This made pottery the main trade carried out among the Benin women of Oka and Ovia village or communities in Benin.

The technology of Benin pottery is very unique in terms of shape and style. The pottery craft cuts across table, dinning and traditional court art and spiritual wares. Suffice to say that hardly any home in a typical Benin man's house of the old or modern flat that shrines are not located besides the building; it is Ogun, Osun, Olokun, or Esu shrine. Both Olokun and Osun pots harbor some concussion (medicine) used for purification. 'OWIWA WA' pots are very small and also contain some concussion, before any warrior goes to war, sacrifices have to be carried out using either broken pot *'usowen nwa wa'* or the sacrificial pot *'nwawa na ye zese'* to appease the gods.

As pottery plays a vital role in the life and style of Benin tradition, the Benin potters are exceptionally skillful in the handling of clay available at that period. These are not enough to conclude that they have ample knowledge of the materials used. One may need to inquire: what informed those potteries how did they source their materials, what technique of production did they bring into play. How was their wares fired, and is there any influence of western culture? These and many more are what this research hope to give a

critical examination, mostly in the areas of style, form, analysis of materials and the local technology of the pottery of Benin civilization.

Form

Generally, traditional pots are predominantly rounded – bottomed and are stood either in depression in the ground or on rings. "The Benin potters use round bottoms, which increase the pot strength and spread heat evenly when pots are used for cooking over the traditional three stone hearth" (Barley, 1994) Benin pots vary in shapes and sizes. Pottery produced can be classified into a ritual or ceremonial pottery and domestic pottery. A domestic pot can be converted into a ritual or ceremonial use and vice-versa. The only exception to this practice seems to be those native pots which are made and dedicated to gods and divinities. These pots are kept in the shrines and they are treated as sacred. See (fig: 2, 3, 4 and 8) "Olokun pot" (cult pot in Benin) cannot be used for any purpose outside that for which they are made.

Styles and Decoration

Pottery decoration as a form of design dates back to the antiquity in Nigeria (Shaw 1978, Willett 1960). Benin potters use four main methods of pottery decoration namely:- roulette (impressed) patterns, molded (or embossed) patterns and burnishing. Fowowe, 2004:56 write that "Benin and its environs uses of roulette decoration predominates, in no other area can any of the methods of pottery decoration be said to have an exclusively over whelming dominance" However burnishing is a popular form of pottery decoration among the generality of the traditional potters of Benin. Motifs used on traditional pots pass massages and its serves a unique purpose e.g. "Ada and Eben" (traditional symbol decoding royalty, power and authority).

Modern potters use this motif (Ada and Eben) discriminately without paying attention to its original traditional usage; motifs are now being stylized with little or no regards for its origin.

Techniques of potting

Hand building is the traditional method of making pottery among the Benin community. There is no record of potter's wheel, they make used of pinch and coiling methods. To start potting the head of previously broken baked pots are use, the old pots are placed upside down on the new pot. Clay is passed against the concave part of the stand and the potter makes more coils of clay. Using her right hand, she presses the second coil with a backward movement around the pot. Until it gets to a stage where it will be left to harden up a little, during this period another is started. By the time the pot gets to the first pot's stage, the second pot is left and she moves to the third, by the time, the first pot must have hard enough for more coils of clay to be added, this alternative process continues until the pots are completed.

The scraping and final shaping of the pot is left until the pot is almost completed the fashioning of the neck of the pot and the rim is done before the outer wall of the pot is scrapped. The shape and design of the rim depends on the potter. The contemporary potters make use of potter's wheel, jigger - jolly machine and coiling method of traditional potters to drive home some intricate design on their works.

Conclusion

Findings show that local Benin hand building style is still in use and they include pinch, coiling methods and occasionally produce works on slabs. While the contemporary methods involve the use of potter's wheel, jigger-jolly machine, coiling and hand building method to produce stylized shapes, round bottomed pots are still in use by traditional potters which gives the pot strength and

spread heat evenly when pot are exposed to fire.

Research findings show that the use of motifs by the traditional potters are for a purpose and its passes massage, “Ada and Eben” (traditional symbol of Benin curt art) signify authority and power. Some contemporary potters make use of this motif indiscriminately. “Ada and Eben” use as a motif for decoration should not be used for propose of Art sake, when used it should be able to link the Benin court Art or royalty of Benin

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Fig. 1: Map of Nigeria showing Edo State



Fig 10: Various small communities which collectively formed the kingdom known as ‘Igodomigodo”

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