THE ROLE OF POTTERY AND THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE CERAMIST IN ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract
This study focuses on reclassifying the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria through pottery from known to the contemporary and it also compared their pottery/ceramic wares. Three artists were able to explore the context of environment and transformed them into contemporary ceramics in metaphorical forms. These works which they produced during their masters' degree programme in the University of Nigeria Nsukka were mostly outdoor ceramics installations. Outdoor ceramics in form of installations are basically recent development in ceramic sculptures. This outdoor ceramics or environmental ceramics grew out of the art scene of the 1960s and 1970s, a period when ceramists and other professionals in field of art began to use the old media "clay" in new ways. Furthermore, this article discusses the outdoor/environmental ceramic works of the three ceramics (MFA) students Ngozi Omeje, Zubairu Ayuba and Sunday Adeyeye of 2009 session as an Ethnic Identifier. Their works are most considerable in size; the configurations constitute a clear point of focus in their culture without dominating the surrounding landscape. By using both natural materials, mainly clay, and natural colours they emphasise the organic unity of the sculptures with the surrounding ambience. These natural materials allow them also to create smooth as well as rough surfaces making textures an integral part of the vocabulary.

Introduction
Pottery is as old as man as recorded in many cultural histories. Its origins are so ancient that they are generally assigned to the beginning of time or the mythical past (Olatundu et al, 2006). Nonetheless, evidence indicates that ceramic wares in decorated forms have been produced in the prehistoric art traditions across the world. Archaeological findings have also assisted in putting the majority of the pottery in time contexts. Pottery has been noted by archaeologists and historians as the primal source of historical records, not only from the pot shards found in archaeological sites but the continued practice of the craft and its marriage to traditional beliefs (Ekong, C.E, 2002). Since the earliest times, humans have made votive objects from clay to create a focus for worship. Thus functional pottery made its appearance at the same time as agriculture was developing around 10 – 8000.BC (Igwilo, B.N, 1993). The early domestic vessels were made for storage, food containers and funerary artefacts. The craft spread throughout the habitant of human existence linking their spiritual belief and the physical needs. So also, pottery production happened at different times and place in the world of different ethnic group, culture and belief.

It was recorded that art through the ages is a universal language (Steve Mattison, 2003). Hence the making of pots was not confined to certain races or countries. It was something that was bound to occur through man's unavailable contact with the earth (Ibid). It was considered that the same pattern of development existed everywhere

so it is interesting to note that while pottery from the Greek civilization was similar to those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the same similarity exists between that of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Nigeria (Op cite).

It is observed that African artists are usually very conscious of their identity and the works produced were always influenced by the physical and socio-historical factors in the environment in which he lives or works (Ikwuemesi, C.K. 1996). Art plays an important role in environmental and cultural identification of a people and other issues which influence the existence of human beings (Ibid). These art pieces are used for issues connected with religion, social, farming, harvesting as well as other ceremonies bordering on birth, age grade classification circumcision and puberty as well as death(Op cite). The history of ceramics parallels the history of the human race and reflects the changing customs and ritual of civilization (Igwilo, B.N, 1993).

Clay being a unique vehicle for personal expression which allows artists to create both functional and decorative work in-that ceramist are no longer bound or limited by the traditional ideas and the techniques of production. As the practice continued, ideas flow from one civilization to another, ceramists are no long bound by geographical or cultural constraints (Ibid). Recently, ceramists have shown how ornamental, architectural and large-scale ceramic works have always appeared on buildings and in the landscape since the beginning of ceramics in civilization by the increase of environmental ceramics. Environmental ceramics is an art that is produced in conjunction with the architecture of a building or a landscape. Environmental art's main purpose is to embellish human spaces and enrich our surroundings. A recurring element in large-scale of ceramics in the environment is the multiplication in numbers, often in the form of tiles, sometimes other more solid segments. This is often due to the limitations of kiln size. Once the work reaches dimensions that can no longer be accommodated by the kiln, the ceramic artist may work in segments, which are assembled after firing. The works shown in this paper were produced drawing inspirations from the traditional pottery in different ethnic group and environments which include Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba. The works were done starting from the existing traditional ways of pottery making by hand-moulding and throwing on the potter's wheel generating ideas from these rudiments, expanded to more contemporary ideas on ceramics and installation. The artists works discussed are those of Ngozi Omeje, Zubairu Ayuba and Adeyeye Sunday. Omeje representing the Eastern, Ayuba – Northern and Adeyeye Western Nigeria.

Works

Drawing inspiration from the Igbo–identity of *Uli* design, Ngozi used the *Uli* linear forms to depict socio-political and cultural subject matters. The calligraphic nature of '*Uli'* art body painting/decoration informed the designs. *Uli* painting is a women's art form found in body painting and on shrine murals. The work was embellished with the *Uli* and *Insibidi* motif and design. Working on the wares with delicate but sturdy designs with embossment, incision and brushed colours on them arouse the sense of imagination; the work shifted to ceramic sculpture like the mushrooms, porcupine, sleeping arrangement. Direct manipulation of the clay itself, without the use of molds or the potter's wheel was also practiced. There was a successful creation of clay based installations.

In this clay based installations, the clay was manipulated to achieve some ceramics installation with inclusion of no other materials. The installations are as follows: The Porcupine series, Mushrooms and Sleeping Arrangements. The porcupines (figure 1) were built by cutting and fixing the clay coils bit by bit to form a round circumference. The coils were laid from one layer to another round the porcupine bowls until the final layer of the coils. In the Porcupine series clay coils cut into bits were used to produce plates, human figures, and pots. While the diameters of the porcupines remain more or less constant, their height and shapes vary, creating movement and visual rhythm in different assemblages (figure 2). These pieces of works explain the bond we find ourselves through self defence by acquiring a particular defence mechanism. In the making of the porcupine series, the prepared clay was mixed with grog (3:1 ratio)

as the clay was being kneaded. The clay was gradually rolled out into long coils. The coils were cut in pieces of small cylindrical form. The cylindrical coils were arranged to create plates, animals and human forms.

Hatching porcupine is a three whole parts of installation with each capable of standing on its own as a single art work but in combination with others they form a three-lobe kola nut. The cracking shell of the porcupine suggests that a new life is about to emerge from within. The work suggests that after a period of time in one's life, the person takes stock of life spent, either to carry on with good attributes of his/her life and shed bad aspects and vice versa. Thus, the porcupine tries to shed off the entire spike on its body because with them, it is difficult for it to accommodate other animals. To live in harmony with others the society, one needs to shed off all the bad traits in the persons' life as in the case of the porcupine.

Figure 3 shows the hand manipulation of lump of clay to create rhythm in movements of clay bits on a moulded body of work that represent peoples' daily activities affecting other life by trying to change theirs either positively or negatively.

Figure 5 shows mushroom as it used to be in natural environment. Mushroom grew in forest and damp scenario or in secluded area. It has values attached to it. Some varieties of mushroom contribute to the daily dietary source of humans. It has a high nutritional content. It is used in cooking soup (*ero* soup) mostly in Igbo land. Mushroom has aesthetic values; people visit mushroom setting for recreation. Mushrooms are several cast from different press moulds and then joined with rolled up slabs for the stand or base. Each mushroom has different *Nsibidi* motif and design on the cap making them sacred mushroom. Some of the mushroom caps were gotten from textured raffia basket with the stem coiled up. The clay was mixed with crushed bisque clay (grog) for tempera. The mixing of clay and grog was done manually by kneading them on a clean concrete table. Models of mushroom were moulded with clay from the sample of mushrooms. Afterwards, the models of mushroom were casted with the aid of plaster of paris. Prior to the casting, the ply board was used to erect a round wall around each model to prevent the plaster of paris from flowing off the model; and oil was used as a separator between the plaster and the model. The clay mixed with grog was press cast from the plaster moulds as a mushroom. The press-casting was done repeatedly until a reasonable number were moulded for mass aesthetics. This installation consists of an open-ended number of clay mushroom forms, assembled randomly or selectively. The work was done using a modern context to draw upon cultural tradition, rich with historical resonance, to provide the meaning in the work and to build up artefacts that function on many levels. Mushroom is a special delicacy in Igbo land and when closely observed it resembles traditional huts. One might even wonder whether the early man got his inspiration for building of hut from it because clusters of mushroom represent village setting desolate after the eligible men and women left the villages for city life. The huts lay wasting, losing their beauty and calmness, collapsing one after the other to be replaced by the conventional houses. With the emptiness and pathetic view, yet full of life emanating from this installation are witnessed in our age-old rural environment where the aged and the children are left behind, to their own detriment.

The "***Sleeping Arrangement***" is another installation portraying the arrangements during bedtime both in most privileged and less privileged homes. In the less privileged homes bedtime becomes a nightmare akin to survival of the fittest, rotating from bed to floor depending on how large the family is. This is seen in the interior villages where we have many polygamous/big families and our present day campus hostels. In the most privileged the individual's arrangement on bed provokes either rape or abandonment from either stepfather or stepmother, even sometimes from the father as was shown in some Nollywood movies.

The homogeneous form of this installation allows one to focus clearly on the conceptual basis of the work, unifying each of the works in a thematic grouping to make a strong collective statement of purpose. Each piece works in isolation but in combination each assumes a new and separate importance. This work was done with clay coils and clay

slabs bound together with binding wires to form a bedspread (figure 6). This work was achieved by twisting longer cylindrical coils than that of porcupine to form sleeping figures.

Zubairu Ayuba studied and examined how the production techniques, forms and decoration of Garin Bah pottery can be adapted into contemporary ceramic forms and ideas. Garin Bah is a pottery producing village located in Potiskum, Yobe State. This village is situated about 5 kilometers North East of Potiskum in Potiskum Local Government Area of Yobe state (Zubairu Ayba, 2009). Garin Bah is dominated by Ngizim speaking people. Its population is over 1,200. Migration has affected it's populate as they search for lucrative businesses away from the rural to the urban areas. There are other communities that practice pottery in potiskum local government area, but the Garin Bahs' unique method of acquiring and processing of clay were considered more interesting than others in the locality. It was observed (during workshops in Garin Bah) how the local potters have improved the plasticity of clay with *Rankaya* plant (*Grawiamollis*). The plant was added in the clay sourced around Nsukka. A number of ceramic installations were produced with this clay body with which were integrated in the environment. Through these ideas from the Garin Bah potters a number of ceramic works were produced during the master programme in the university if Nigeria, Nsukka. These environmental ceramic installations will be examined in this paper in relation to the ethnic group. These installations are namely: national support, vision and mission, economic reconstruction.

National Support

Pottery as an ethnic identifier in this installation was shown through the use of Garin Bah *Murfus* (pot stand) in a contemporary terms. Traditionally the *Murfus* identifies the young median's origin and locality. The *murfus* as seen in figure 7 are normally decorated with symbolic incision on the body to differentiate one tribe from another. In this context it stands for unity and equal responsibility among citizens and leaders figure. 8. National Support was achieved using coiling and pinching method of pottery production. The *murfus* were casted with the aid of plaster of paris. The pots were fired in the kiln at 900 degree centigrade. After cooling of the wares, they were smoked fired again with grasses. Pots were mounted on top and around the *murfus*. The same material and production techniques were employed in the vision and mission and economic reconstruction.

Vision and Mission

In this installation, casts of many fruits found in the environment were made as *asusu* (safe box). The *asusu* safe box is also known as *kolo* in Osun state, Nigeria. The concept came from the traditional terracotta safe box found in the northern part of the country. Accordingly, vision and mission depict the determination and quest for development in Nigeria figure. 9.

Economic Reconstruction

Ayuba used the ideas gotten from Garin Bah traditional pottery forms to explore economic issues in Nigeria. The terracotta *asusu* were made in different sizes with slits and assembled to form a whole in the environmental installation. In this installation, one can liken it to a beetle rolling a ball of shit gradually forming a bigger ball. Small scale pottery trading with minimal savings can turn into big merchandize store if properly managed (figure 10). We should all harness our effects on how to re-establish the dying traditional pottery communities.

Adeyeye observed in his research that pottery practice in Ekiti is almost exclusively a woman's profession which is passed on from mother to daughter, from generation to generation (Adeyeye Sunday, 2009). The practice of the craft proven the archaeological findings in Ekiti that this ethnic group was part the culture that use clay to produce domestic wares. Ekiti potters have acquired great reputation in the world of pottery long before the state attained its present political and economic position in Nigeria (Ikwuemesi, C.K, 1996). The pots produced by these potters are functional pots for storage, cooking and eating.

The pots produced by the potters are spherical, hemispherical and globular in shape. On the market, these pots are stacked and bundled together for easy

transportation and also to safeguard the pot from damage. The stacked and bundled pots of Ekiti traditional potters inspired conceptual possibilities in ceramics. Figure 11 and 12 shows the stacked and bundled pots from which the artist was able to produce a number of ceramic installation and outdoor ceramics. Through the work produced, political and social issues were discussed. Among these environmental ceramic installation are: power in politics, democracy in bondage, power holding.

Power in Politics

In this work of art, the terracotta pots were stacked and bundled traditionally with the aid of twin rope to comment on the power of politics in Nigeria Figure 13. Pots were stacked and bundled together to suggest strong men who have ruled the nation autocratically for several years. Symbolically, the pots in the cage signified the doom that awaits the self acclaimed and dubious leaders. The work was produced using the throwing wheel in combination of coiling and pinching method. The pots used in this installation were stacked and bundled together; then they were assembled inside a cage built with wood and wire gauss. Employing the same materials and technique in democracy in bondage, pots were tied and arranged around a tree in a natural environment. In like manner, power holding installation was also achieved.

Democracy in Bondage

Employing the same technique as seen in figure 14 and 15 exhibits pots tied to a tree which signifies the present situation of democracy around the world. Some of the pots were placed on the ground beside the stacked and bundled ones on the tree. The pots attached to the tree depict democracy in bondage, while the ones on the ground represent the less privileged masses. The masses which make up to 98% of the nations' population are denied the basic entitlement as citizens of the country. The fundamental human rights are abused and innocent are jailed without trial.

Power Holding

Figure 15 shows hemispherical and semi-hemispherical forms which were inspired by the traditional shapes and form. These pots were tied in bunches unto the tree to resemble bunches of fruits. Symbolically, the trees depict the government, bunches of pots represent the economy of the nation while the ropes capture the strings of political god-fatherism. This is the cause of the political insurgence in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This article has shown how these artists have utilized the ideas from their environments in a very innovative and creative way. From simple pottery technique of pinching, coiling and slab, each artist's works opened up new spaces in the reinterpretation of an immense cultural heritage. Furthermore, the artists push back the boundaries of the figurative and the abstract; the ritual and the secular; the artistic and the political; in a narrative way thereby immortalizing simple objects in a meaningful form. The mushrooms and also the supporting tripods for cooking pots provide an ethnographic study which can be archival materials useful in reclassify various tribes in ethnic groups.

Hence, the traditional and contemporary approaches brought the diet, culture and the works of traditional potters from these ethnic groups to public attention. Thus, revolutionary art opened new approaches to tradition and environment in that there are explosion of creative exploitation of natural objects around the world art scene. Conclusively, the unifying characteristic of these installations is that all of them have made a commitment to the material -clay; surface treatment and the omnipresence of the forces of gravity are not lost in relation to idea (Andrew Livingstone, 2007).

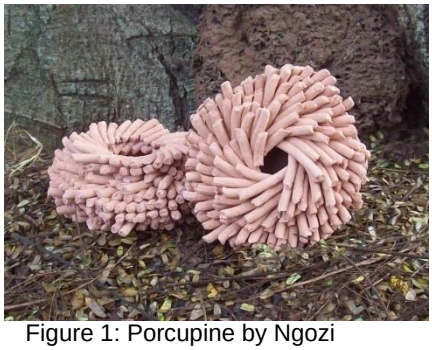

Figure 1: Porcupine by Ngozi Omeje



Figure 2: An Assemblage of the Porcupines





Figure 3: Hatching Porcupine by Ngozi Omeje

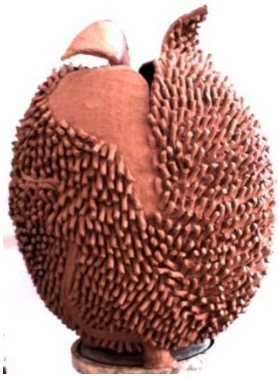

Figure 4: Hatching Porcupine (close view) by Ngozi Omeje





Figure 5: Mushrooms by Ngozi Omeje



Figure 6: Sleeping Arrangements by Ngozi Omeje

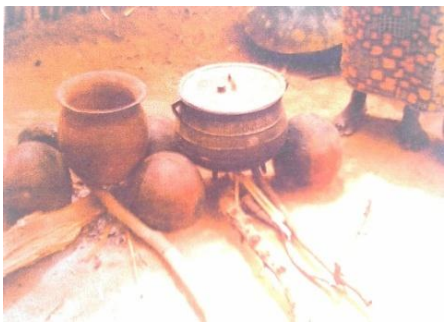

Figure 7a: Traditional Murfu (After Ayuba)

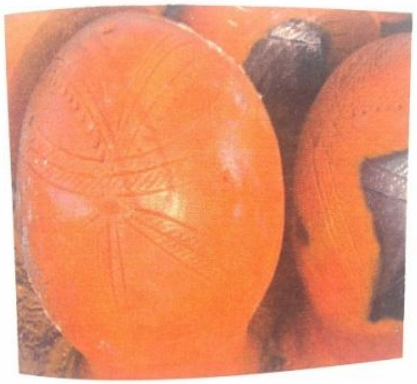

Figure 7b: Traditional Murfu (Closer view after Ayuba)



Figure 8: National Support by Zubairu Ayuba

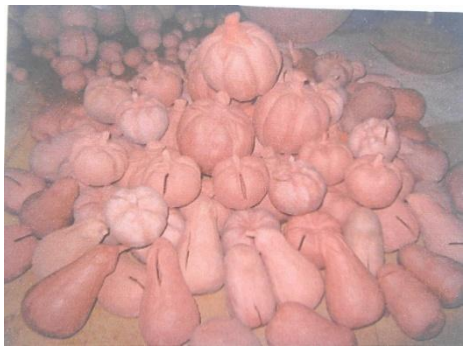

Figure 9: Vision and Mission by Zubairu Ayuba

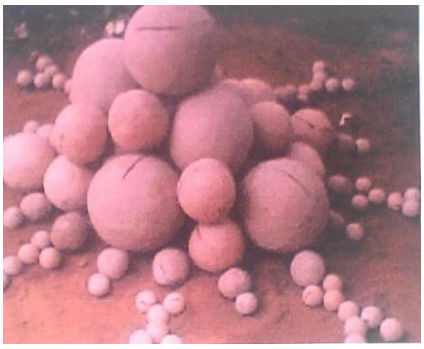

Figure 10: Economic Reconstruction by Zubairu Ayuba



Figure 11: Stacks of pots in Ekiti (After Adeyeye)



Figure 12: Pots stacked and tied with ropes for easy transportation (after Adeyeye)



Figure 13: Power in Politics by Sunday Adeyeye

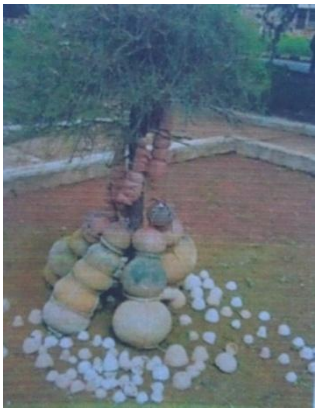

Figure 14: Democracy in Bondage by Sunday Adeyeye





Figure 15: Power Holding by Sunday Adeyeye

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