THE USES OF URHOBO TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS IN POTTERY ART

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Abstract
Urhobo indigenous art forms have become part and parcel of today's cultural development and its symbolization process are replete with physical attributes in Urhobo civilization endeavours, such as are found in clothing, housing objects of religious worship, and ceremonies as dance form, entertainment, etc. The symbolization process is therefore an enactment of these nuances which has become a way of life. This paper addresses the use of some symbols and forms of the Urhobo people on pottery. The pots of Dr. Abamwa, Oghenekevwe Elizabeth were used to analyze the adaptation of traditional symbols and forms on modern pottery of today use. This paper also used the Sherry B. Ortner's research theory for the methodology used for this paper. Similarly, paper discusses the conclusion by saying that the use of Urhobo symbols and forms as decoration and form for pots revealed the philosophical meanings and artistic initiatives in design concepts. Also, recommendations were made based on the findings.

Introduction
Art is a manifestation of the daily life of a people; it is inseparable from the performance of daily tasks and the fulfillment of man's needs. It is related to clothing, housing, and house objects, religious, ceremonial practices, entertainment and the likes, (Peter, 1988:2). According to him pottery is "the act of making permanent object of usefulness and beauty by the heat treatment of earthy raw material". It can also be fashioned into architectural detail or cult object, the form of which is predetermined by esoteric religious demands.

Meanwhile, in Africa pottery also performed various functions such as utilitarian, religious and ceremonial services. For instance, potteries are found in places of worship, public and private buildings. Potteries were used for ceremony, decorative objects as well as for domestic purpose, (Ajayi, 1976:2). In supportive of the earlier statement, he also confirmed that Nigeria, a country in West Africa has become famous in terms of world culture through her well developed pottery tradition. These pots occupy places of honour in the world, especially in Africa. These pots have not only helped to show that she has a rich cultural heritage, but also reveal vital aspects of her history.

Some of these pots are decorated with motifs which are symbolically oriented and most of the symbols have retained their importance and significance over the years. Although, some of them however, have been altered or modified through culture interaction and graded stylization

that have in some instances evolved from naturalistic representation to near abstraction (Jefferson, 1974). Symbolism has been an important part of art since beginning of time, in fact, art started from symbols. These symbols representations could sometimes be human figures, animals or supernatural forces of evils or good spirits that could bring about harm to man, protect him from his enemies, make his crop grow, or bring rain as noted by Kenny (1963) in Abamwa, (2002). Also, Gardner, (1965) in Abamwa, (2002) classified symbols into two main types: mimetic and vision. Mimetic means a simple kind of drama in which real person and event fun of and which mimicry and dancing were important. It involves the uses of only facial expressions and gesture visible and calls up mental images. This aspect of symbolism called vision is what this study concerned itself with.

Location of the Urhobo People

The Urhobo people live in the South-South and South-Central of Delta State of Nigeria. The immediate neighbours of the Urhobo people are the Ijaws to south, the Ukwuani to the North East and the Binis of to the north. Urhobo land is made up of twenty-three social political units (Otite, 1982 and Okumagba 1989). The Urhobo people use symbols among other objects as part of their creative works either as form or decoration especially in the olden days. But, today the story has changed. One hardly finds the use of such symbols and forms in any artistic creation of the recent times. For this reason the Urhobo youths are not privileged to have contact with these symbols and as such they do not know their philosophical meaning and significance. This could be a result of civilization and non participation in traditional religion or cult practices. With these happenings, the uses of indigenous symbols are gradually fading away thereby facing extinction.

From the above statement it becomes obvious that the Urhobo traditional symbols are separated from the people's world view, due to the fact that these symbols are essentially involved in the dynamism of their cultural life. With this understanding this study therefore was aimed at achieving documentation and interpretation of Urhobo traditional symbols and their philosophical meanings. It also, motivated potters into appreciating the use of Urhobo traditional symbols either as forms or motifs for decoration on pottery. The adaptation of symbols is believed to improve the attitude of Urhobo people, especially the youths and world at large towards understanding their philosophical meanings, their importance and also to evolve ways of preserving them.

Jefferson (1974) took a cursory peep study into ancient history and this showed that symbolism has often been utilized by man. For example, the use of traditional signs in presentation, especially of divine images and spirits in order to indicate qualities, powers, degrees or other attributes in man's view to life. He explains further that in ancient Egyptian art, symbolism was highly practiced for example, Sistrum of Isis symbolizes conscience, Rising sun of Osiris symbolizes birth, Sma symbolizes union, Sundral symbolizes life, Vulture symbolizes funeral, Winged Serpent symbolizes evil, Falcon symbolizes sun, Pyramid symbolizes heaven, Fire and Scarab symbolize longevity. Further more, he discovered that the Dogon people of Ancient Mali use Hombill as a symbol of Fertility while Guwo people used Antelope and Elephant as symbols of Fertility.

Another writer who also investigated into the use of symbols is Ilogu. He identified and documented some Igbo traditional symbols. These are some of the traditional symbols among others that he studied: Ogirisi (*Newbouldia leavis*) is a small, strong and resistant plant which over the

years has developed into a big tree with off-shoots from its base. The tree bears flowers on its branches during the dry season and children usually harvest it to suck nectar and it is grown by vegetative propagation. It can thrive under any climatic condition, and it therefore survives harsh weather conditions, Ilogu (1964) in Abamwa, (2001). He also said that there is no generally accepted history or myth of the origin of this plant. But, most Igbos believed that it is one of the longest surviving plants from their original kingdom.

Negri (1976) took time to study the use of some traditional symbols in some of the cultures in Nigeria. Some of symbols studied are found in Cross River State, these, Negri explained that they are involved in the 'Nkuho' fattening ceremony. Where young girls who have completed their fattening ritual are taken to their husband's houses, on their faces are traditional markings with chalk running from the eye-brown down to the corner of the ear to show that they have now been initiated into the women's society. On their necks and waists are numerous beads, the most noticeable is the big pipe tied against the chest called *('ekpakunkwa')* and it indicates the husband's position in one of the most renowned cult called '*Ekpe'*. Sometimes, girls found holding a staff made of brass in their right hands, indicating the position of their father, in their culture, especially daughters of kings. Also, such girls' hair styles are exclusively, and it shows that they are from the royal household.

Some Symbols Found on Wood Carvings and Mud Sculpture among the Urhobo People

Emekpe (1985) identified some of the Urhobo traditional symbols and have also explained their meanings and these are as follows: **'Osu' – (staff protection):** This is a staff of about 1.65m long and it is called 'Osu' in urhobo language. It forms part of the Ovie (king's) kingship regalia among the Urhobos. It is made from cast iron. It is part of the paraphernalia given to chiefs or 'Ivie' (Kings) in Urhobo land by the Oba of Benin during their installation. It is held or used as a support staff. Traditionally, the 'Osu' possesses some mystic powers which are capable of warding off any trouble that might beset the king on his return journey from Benin City to his domain.

'Okpo r'Ovie' (Royal staff): This is another royal staff and it is about 1.30m long. It is made of bronze with a rather pointed end. It constitutes the authority of the 'Ovie' to rule over his entire kingdom. It is employed as a punitive instrument by being staked against the main entrance or gate of the house of anyone who offends the 'Ovie' (king) or Ohovwore (chief). In such a case, all the Ehovwore' (chiefs) on hearing about such an incident or receiving a message from the senior 'Ohovwore'(chief), would proceed to the spot and stake their own staff around the main 'Okpo'(walking stick). It should be clearly understood that each 'Ohovwore' possesses an 'Okpo' of his own which is one of the chieftaincy symbols. The 'Okpo' of the 'sOhovwore' does not have the same design as that of the 'Ovie'. Ubrurhe (1990) in Abamwa (2001) also involved himself in the study of identification of Urhobo traditional symbols and he looked at them from traditional religious perspective and one amongst the ones studied is the one known as 'Edjo'. 'Edjo' (spirit): It is a spirit being represented with carved sculptural pieces. It is classified according to its functions e.g. prosperity, fertility, war and guidance, divinities e.g. 'Erhi' – (man's guidance spirit). 'Erhi' means fate or destiny. The Urhobos believed that before a child is born, his 'Erhi' appears before 'Oghene' (God) to say what the child would be in the world and whatever the 'Erhi' says will be confirmed by 'Oghene'. The Urhobo people also believed that it is only when a man's 'Erhi' accepts something before that thing can occur to him. It is always

represented by a sculptural piece in form of a man.

Symbols are abstracted in nature but, it is the representation of the symbols as forms in art pieces that show their solidity and firmness. Also among the Urhobo people symbols have been represented through mud sculpture, wood carvings and pottery. However, this unique identity is fast fading away, a situation that should be arrested if Urhobo culture and art is to be maintained and developed. In the light of the above, a negation of history and tradition would cause a setback in the development of any society. Thus, the applications of traditional symbols as decoration and forms for pots by potters would enhance creativity of a new form of expression, thereby carving a unique cultural identity for the Urhobo people. For reason, this paper is concentrated on the ceramic products of Abamwa, where she used the Urhobo traditional symbols for forms and decoration for modern day pottery use.

Abamwa, Oghenekevwe E is Ceramist and Art Educator, and she has been teaching both areas of study, in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the Delta State University, Abraka. Her major area of research is on Symbolism, and that is what is being manifested in this paper and also she has been part of many group exhibitions within and outside this country-Nigeria. She has great fare for studio practice and she still enjoying productivity of ceramic pieces.

Methodology

This study was based on Sherry B. Orthner's 1979 research formula which says that "a particular possesses a key symbol, if it is signaled by one of the following indicators". Here, the indicators comprises of the symbols, philosophical meaning and value, representation in different usage, and the flow into other cultures. These indicators are: This sentence does not make sense recast

1. The "native" tell us that 'X' is culturally important
2. The "native" seem positively or negatively aroused about 'X'
3. 'X' comes up in many different contexts. This context may be behavioural or systematic, 'X' comes in many different kinds of action, situation or domain (myth, ritual, and art).
4. There is a regular cultural elaboration surrounding 'X' examples are elaboration of vocabulary or elaboration of details of 'X' nature, compared with similar phenomena in culture.

The symbols were studied in regards to philosophical meanings, although the symbols and forms are adapted on pots as to serve as form for object and beautification purposes.

Results and Discussion

Artists express themselves, a society, or people's way of life through different mediums. In the same vein Dr Abamwa used a three dimensional modeling approach, popularly known as pottery to show forth the beauty in using the symbols and forms based on the beliefs, values, and norms of the Urhobo people. The paper analyzed application of the symbols adapted on the surfaces of the pots as decoration and forms as found in the illustrations below.

Aghighon: It is a string of round brownish beads threaded together to make a circle-like form. The Urhobo people call it 'Aghighon' and it is presented to chiefs during their installation. It is an important part of a chief's regalia that makes it possible for strangers to identify the status of a chief ('Ohonvwore or Olorogun') as noted by my informants. It is therefore a symbol that symbolizes chieftaincy in Urhoboland.

In Ijaw language the object is called 'Le-Ila' and it is seen as an important object that completes the full regalia of a king.

Although it is also used by chiefs, it is mostly used by kings ('Pere'). Here, it symbols kingship and to little extent, chieftaincy. Among the Benin people, the object is called 'Le-Ila' and the people see it as an important object that compliments the dressing of a chief. It is Le-Ila is also used during installation of chiefs. This object therefore symbolizes chieftaincy.

In kwale land, this object is mainly associated with the king (Eze). It is an object used to complete his kingship attire. Although in recent years, people without title buy it and make use it without minding their position. This object is called "Esuru" in Kwala language, and it symbolizes kingship as it is the case with the Ijaw people. This symbol is used as decoration on a flower pot which could also serve as container for the storage of liquid or prepared mixture of herbs and be used during the installation of a chief as seen in Figure 1.

'Irhie Ekrekre Ighwre': These are seven straight short lines drawn on the ground by the oracle's attendant before the consultation of ancestral spirits in Urhobo land. After drawing these lines which are usually seven, incantations are made along with it as to conjure a force that would help in seeking the presence of these spirits. These lines are called 'Irhie' in Urhobo language. They went further to say that this 'Irhie' symbolizes a manifestation of the spirits. In Ijaw tradition, this symbol is seen as the starting point in the process of seeking the spirits of their gods, that of their ancestors and other deities. It is called 'Eteli' in Ijaw language. It is said that the pattern of lines drawn depends on the kind or which of the spirits one wants to conjure or invoke. This is so because there are other line patterns made for other forces in Ijawland.

In Benin tradition, lines are called 'Uvien'. These lines are drawn on the floor of shrines to enable the oracle's attendant seek the presence of any type of spirit. The kind of lines drawn depends on the type of spirit the oracle's attendant wants to conjure or invoke. Among the Kwale people, this symbol is also in use. Lines are called 'Oshishi' in Kwale language. The usage are related in the three the cultures. This symbol is employed on a flower vase as decoration and the flower vase could also serve as storage and beautification vase as seen in figure 2.

'Evwaro r' Eni' (Elephant Face): Elephant is the biggest and most weighty animal that lives in the forest. Because the size and weight of the animal its foot print serves as pit where water is stored when rain falls. This goes to confirm the common adage that says the footprint of an elephant creates holes which other animals drink water from when it rains. It is called 'Eni' in Urhobo language. The elephant symbolizes greatness, and when it is moving, it is assumed that nothing blocks its way. Due to its greatness, the animal is associated with the dignity given to kings. Hence, its skin is used for decoration in palaces of kings ('Ivie') and also found engraved on furniture in king's places. Its usage in this form helps to remind the subjects of the authority of the over them. This animal is called 'Oku-Obori' in Ijaw language it is used and seen in Ijaw tradition exactly as it is in Urhobo tradition.

The Benin people also hold the same view about this animal as held by the Urhobo and Ijaw people. It symbolizes the same greatness as confirmed in the above traditions. Among the Benin people, the animal is also called 'Eni' as it is called in Urhobo language. In Kwale tradition, this symbol is also put to use and it symbolizes greatness as it were in other traditions. It is called 'Eyi' in Kwale language. The facial view of this symbol is used as a form for wall plaque flower vase as seen in Figure 3.

'Okpohrokpo' – (Lion): This is the bravest animal in the forest. It is highly

honoured and respected by other animals in the forest. It is called 'Okpohrokpo' in Urhobo language. It has peculiar behavioural traits that are noted by other animals. This animal is carnivorous by nature. Whenever, it kills an animal, it makes a lot of movements of pride. In this process if it mistakenly walks over the prey, it does not eat it again. So, because of these special attributes it is associated with the highest people in the traditional hierarchy. These people are the traditional rulers who are known as kings. They are called 'Ivie' in Urhobo language. This symbol is always found as decoration carved onto the chairs of 'Ivie'.

In the Ijaw tradition, kings ('Pere') also make use of this animal as symbols in their palaces. This animal is carved on the furniture found or used at the king's ('Pere') palaces. The skin of this animal is also displayed as to show their social status in life. When this animal is killed by a warrior, the warrior is given a feather ('Ophonipughum') in honor of his bravery. Naturally, it is difficult to kill this animal. But, if that happens and the animal is prepared for food, women are not allowed to pass around the compound where it is being prepared neither would they participate in the eating.

Among the Benin people the animal is seen as a powerful and also full of strength. It is called 'Oduma' in Benin language. It is also associated with kingship because it is used to emphasis the authority and power of the king ('Oba') over the subjects. The animal is used to express the authority of the king ('Oba') in proverbs in Benin land.

In Kwale language, this animal is called 'Edoke' and it portrays power and authority. The animal is also associated with kingship in Kwale tradition. The form of the animal is always engraved on the furniture of kings ('Eze'). This symbol is employed on a flower pot for beautification and also to connote the philosophical meaning of animal as interpreted in different cultures as seen in figure1.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The artistic richness of Urhobo culture cannot be over emphasized. The manifestation of cultural symbols and form on Urhobo pottery does enrich the people's cultural heritage and promote the art of pot-making in Urhobo land. With this, Urhobo art is no longer measured by the western 'academic' standard of ideas of beauty or by the degree of visual appearance but by the conception of new forms which are more real to the people. The resultant effect is therefore the evolvement of a new language of expression through an in depth study of the Urhobo traditional symbols and form.

A critical analysis of these symbols and forms reveal the anthropomorphic and biomorphic orientation as well as the artist's personal intuition in design concept. In each of the cultures studied, one might not be able to say who the original owners of the symbols were, because some persons or group may have come contact with the symbols and forms as a result of inter marriages and ceremonial activities in the past. It could also be true that the Urhobo people developed this artistic language of expressions independently without outside influence.



Fig. 1: 'Aghighon' and 'Okpohrokpo'
Artist: Abamwa, Oghenekevwe Elizabeth
Medium: clay
Year: 2009



Fig. 2: 'Irhie Ekrekre Ighwre'
Artist: Abamwa, Oghenekevwe Elizabeth
Medium: clay
Year: 2007



Fig. 3: 'Evwaro r' Eni'
Artist: Abamwa, Oghenekevwe Elizabeth
Medium: clay
Year: 2008

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