

Rethinking the Preservative Relevance of Pottery to the Development of Nigeria

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Abstract

Pottery was invented largely because of man's storage and preservative needs. However, African traditional preservative pottery seems to be receiving very low attention. This is, perhaps, due to the unnecessary scramble for imported technologies which are, undoubtedly, beyond the reach of many homes. The scramble has beclouded the people of Africa of the preservative functions of her local pots. It has also prevented the African from remembering that things stored in pottery do not necessarily require artificial preservatives which are clinically proved to be a major source of most western ailments (Ekong, 1994). The neglect of the preservative relevance of pottery has equally negated the development of the medium beyond its traditional level. This, therefore, poses the risk of its extinction. It is on this premise that this paper is put up with the aim of reechoing the relevance of pottery to the development of African States. This is in the area of storage and preservation technology. The objectives of the study are to highlight the relevance of pottery to the preservation of: historical materials, oil and perfumes, water and wine, grains and nuts, food items and; cinerary products. It was also set to show the relevance of pottery to holding offering for spirits. Survey method was employed in the study. Data were gathered through interviews, library and internet sources. The study shows that pottery is a dependable medium for preservation of material. It therefore recommends that the preservative characteristics of pottery should be explored, exploited and developed beyond its primitive stage as this would continue to enhance the development of Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole.

Keywords: Cinerary Products, Preservative, Urns, Beer Key, *abang*.

Introduction

Today a considerable number of people see traditional preservative pots as primitive and archaic. The urban dwellers, village dwellers, students, teachers, traders and civil servants appear not to recognize the usefulness of these pottery forms. Its value in the historical times, and contributions towards the development of modern technology seems to be undermined. It appears people have failed to recognize the beneficial influence of pottery on their contents. Perhaps, museums and galleries have also failed to custody these treasures; since they are not eloquently present in such places. The modern artist is therefore deprived of a source of inspiration that would add special grandeur to his works. Thus, it was this writer's intention to use this medium to address this problem, in order to re-awaken peoples' interest in pottery, especially, in this age of want.

The aim of this paper is to re-echo the traditional preservative pottery in the league of present day storage/preservative wares. The importance and contributions of these unique receptacles and storage material, is what prompted this work. Thus this paper is set to awaken in the people the declining state of traditional preservative pottery in the face of modern technology and socio-cultural advancement. People have deserted these traditional pottery forms which used to thrive in the olden days. Pottery has been a part of people's life right from the beginning of civilization, yet people have remained imperturbable towards its unlimited usefulness (Reader's Digest Library of Modern Knowledge, 1978). It is being pushed to the background in spite of its preservative characteristics, among others. However, this could be attributed to innovations in modern preservative wares. Nonetheless, the writer is of the view that traditional preservative pottery could equally be innovated if there were vested interest, thus, the justification for this paper. The work re-echoes the values placed on preservative pots and how they were cherished and appraised in the past. The fear of neglect or even complete abandonment of these age long receptacles and the, even more frightening, thought of the possible loss of the artistic wisdom and treasure involved in the making of these pots are among the things that prompted the paper.

The Concept of Preservation in Pottery

To preserve is to keep safe from loss, harm or danger. It is to keep from decay or from risk of going bad. It is to keep from losing the original qualities. Interestingly, most times preservation is better achieved through art as Wangboje (1982) observes:

The culture of a people and their ways of life can be seen in their works of art; the art of a people represent a more permanent aspect of their culture as it keeps the culture of the people alive.

Early civilization centres such as Egypt, Greece and Mesopotamia preserved their treasures through the visual arts, by building tomb architectures. The Egyptians, for instance, believed that the body must be preserved so that the soul could return to it in after life. It was, therefore, mummified while food and other offerings were served in the tomb both during and after burial (Encyclopedia International, 1982).

In the same direction, Udo (1994) and Udo (1994) agree that the Africans (Ibibio) preserved their valuables in pots. This means that the visual arts were also used by Africans to preserve their treasures. Archaeologically, the achievement of a people is traced through fragments of non-perishable artifacts; objects that have dependable resistance to the elements. Undoubtedly, much of man's technological progress through the ages is traceable via the ceramics artifacts he has left behind. Typical examples are the Nok and Ife civilizations of Nigeria. Indeed so paramount is the preservative nature of pottery that it was embraced by all cultures from the times of first settlement (Reader's Digest Library of Modern Knowledge, 1978). There were preservative potteries in virtually all regions of the world. The preservative potteries of Greece include Amphora, Krater, and lekythos. The preservative pottery of the Mediterranean includes Ring Flask, Pilgrim flask, Cinerary Urn, Keg, Canopic Jar, Shabtis jar. The preservative pottery of Europe includes Pedestal Urn, Middle Bronze age burial Urn, Romano – British Burial Urn, Thetford ware storage Jar, Harvest Pitcher, Wet Drug Jar or Syrup Pot and Drug Jar. The preservative pottery of Africa includes *Abang – Itie*, *Asid akpakpa*, *Iduen (Ntibe)*, *Abang-isong*, *Abang Ukot*, *Oche erin*, *Oche iku*, *Oche – Iribo*, *Asid Iduen*.

The Preservative Relevance of Pottery

Pottery must have first appeared in high agricultural areas. It is a craft of considerable antiquity, known almost universally to agricultural peoples (Kenny, 1974) Its first appearance is synonymous with the stabilization of food gathering communities and among agricultural peoples in the Mediterranean during the shift from Mesolithic to Neolithic cultural stages (Between 8000 and 7000 BC) (Newman, 1974). Pottery development was fostered by the development of organised agriculture and a more settled existence (Ali, 2010). It involves the product of past civilization, present age of science and the space age (Igwilo, 2006).

Potteries are made to serve many functions. Its functions are as diverse as there are diverse cultures in the world. Its usefulness spread from the old kingdoms of early civilization – Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, Aegean and extends to Europe, Africa and America. In the affirmative, Kenny (1974) declares “potteries are the most widespread of all utilitarian objects”. It has been used in different climes and periods for storage and preservation of food, medicine and other items. In the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, the vessel and the figurative pottery traditions are identified. The vessel pottery tradition produces storage and serving utensils (Diakparomre, 2010).

This paper submits that most potteries were made mainly for preservative purposes. Therefore, the writer agrees with Woodford (1982) that “Pots among other functions are made to preserve water, food items, oil perfume, wine, drugs and cinerary products”. Why pottery was invented could be traced to man’s storage needs. As the early man’s pre-occupation was the procurement of food, shelter and clothing, Lewis (1977) affirms that:

The basic necessity for survival was food; carnivorous man made spears and arrows in order to kill animals to eat, and when tired of eating them raw, made primitive pots in which to cook them, to store his food and to drink from.

Assuredly, one of the prime needs of the early farmers was a dependable means of storing their produce, and their invention of pottery provided

the solution. The preservative relevance of pottery can be discussed in, but not limited to, the following sub heads: pottery for preservation of historical events, pottery for preserving oil and perfume, pottery for preserving water and wine, pottery for preservation of grains, nuts and other farm products, pottery for drying and preserving food items, pottery for mortuary purposes and preserving cinerary products and; pottery for rituals and holding/preserving offerings for spirits.

Pottery for Preservation of Historical Events

Pottery as a medium has given provision for continuous record that will stand the test of time because of its resistant to weather conditions and chemical attacks.

Due to the imperishable nature of the fired clay, ceramics artifacts left by early man provide the most continuous record available of his gradual change from nomadic hunter and cave dweller to the urban artisan of the cities (Clark et al, 1974).

Potteries are resistant to heat, water and chemicals. Since they do not disintegrate with age, they are valuable assets to archaeologists who learn about ancient cultures from ceramic artifacts. It is about the only art through which man knows about generations that have passed, because of the evidences in the fragments of burnt clay objects discovered by archaeologists (Wangboje, 1982). Pottery is the surest index of a people's character, which are observable through the forms and decorations which eventually determine its usage (Cardew, 1986 cited in Nsentip, 2007). Since pottery are durable, and do not shrink they became very useful in archaeological researches (Peterson, 1977). The source adds that, pottery products show fewer signs of age. Similarly, Inyang (2003) observed that a conglomeration of pots dug in a particular area denotes an old residential or preservative area. It is of little wonder that Ekong (2002) observes that it is about the prime source of historical records. Besides, it is the most prevalent cultural remain (Danburi, 2007).

Pottery for Preservation of Oil and Perfume

As a material used in connection with personal adornment, olive oil was very important in Greek life for cleaning the body. As base for perfume, they were highly preserved and reserved, hence were stored in pots. A Lekythos could hold as much as one litre or two of olive oil and had a narrow neck to restrict the flow. A smaller and rather round pottery was an aryballos, a vessel equipped with a thong for carrying or hanging, which was used by men to hold the olive oil they used to rub down with, after exercise (Woodford, 1982). Osborne (1970) states that oil was stored in pottery, and olive oil was often presented to the dead in a Lekythos decorated with white slip.

Potteries were also used in storing and preserving perfumes. Osborne (1970) avers that besides the red figure, there was in Athens, the white ground style best known as Lekythos which have a tall cylindrical shape. The source adds that Lekythos or aryballos, as they were sometime called were used for storing and holding perfumes. The alabastron, a small flask with a very constricted neck from which a lady could shake a few drops of perfume was also used (Woodford, 1982).

Fitzwilliams (1981) posits that oil, gum, resin, cosmetics and opium were stored in ceramics and carried for trade purposes within Syria, Palestine, Cyprus and Mycenae. According to Higina (1972) Hellenistic pomegranate, a vase shaped in the form of pomegranate with hole in the base and spout was also used to carry perfume oil. The vase was filled by immersing it in a liquid which flowed in through the hole in the base and the spout suspended from a cord around the stem, which could be attached to the owner's waist and taken to public bath. In the same vein, Udo (2018) and Bassey (2018) observe that some of the pots were used for storing palm oil, kenneel oil and cocoa-nut oil.

Pottery for Preserving Water and Wine

Osborne (1970) observes that Hydra (Kalpis) was used by the Greeks as water container, while stamos was used for both liquids and the cinochoe was strictly for wine preservation. Similarly, pilgrim flasks were made throughout Europe and Asia and was used as "a means of carrying drinking water for the journey and also for bringing back home holy water from a sanctuary" (Gina, 1968).

The Greek amphoras were used as water and wine containers, storage and preservers. Fitzwilliam in confirmation of the use of pottery to preserve wine exhibited “the keg” in one of his exhibitions in 1981. According to him, Keg was popularly known as beer key in Roman-Coptic period (30 BC to AD 500). The Greeks drank their wine diluted with water; they therefore needed a wide mouthed mixing bowl called a crater into which they could pour the two liquids for use of the audience in a feast (Woodford, 1982).

Etokakpan (2017) and Udofia (2017) identified *abang itie*, *abang idim*, *abang inwang*, *mfan ukot*, and *abang isong* as preservative vessels for water and wine in Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. According to them, *abang itie* was kept permanently in one place mostly in the corner of the room, so that water fetched in the stream was stored and used as occasion demands. *Mfan*, a special type of *abang ukot* was used for preserving wine and storing them for brewing of gin. These pots were chosen for specified purposes as determined by their sizes, shapes and forms.

Pottery for Preservation of Grains, Nuts and other Farm Products

Most pots were very useful for preserving grains and other farm produce for the next farming season. It has served and continues to serve as a container, dryer, cooler and preserver of domestic and industrial farm products (Nsenti, 2007). Agricultural oriented areas store their farm products in very large pots while awaiting the next farming season (Broom, 1976; Bunn, 1999). Many seeds, nuts and kernel were stored in pots and these kept them safe from insect pests and rodents (Udoh, 2018). Most potteries made by primitive people were utilitarian in purpose. Although their principle functions were for cooking and holding liquids, they were also used for serving dishes and storing corn and beans.

In Ibibio land, pots like, *Iduen (Ntibe)*, *asid iduen*, and *Asid akpakpa* were used for storing farm products and cash crops. Farm products preserved in these pots include *ukan*, *ibaba*, *edomo*, *akpakpa* and *nsama*. To store or preserve farm products, they were stored inside the pot and the rim of the pot completely sealed with mud, after which the pots were kept on bamboo racks above the hearth. The things so preserved could remain safe for one year and above, rather than die, they could shrink

and could swell up again when it is immersed in water or cooked (Inyang, 2003; Udoh, 2018).

For the preservation of grains, a pot called *iduen* also known as *ntibe* was used. According to Inyang (2003) this is a perforated pot made for the purpose; the holes in the pot allowed heat to filter through the grains. He identified, two types of *iduen*, the *iduen* proper for preserving grains, and *asid iduen* which was normally larger than the other was used for preserving *ndisa*. A special leaf was lined on the inside walls of the pot before the *ndisa* was packed into the pot. The rim was then covered with the same leaves and cemented with mud after which it was placed by the fire place. In Ibibio land, *iduen* (*ntibe*) was also used for drying and preserving such food items as cray-fish, pepper, melon, meat and fish.

Pottery for Drying and Preservation of Food Items

Ogbore (1994) identifies *Oche Iku*, *Oche Usi*, *Oche Iribo*, and *Oche erin*” as effective storage vessels for crayfish, starch, pepper and fish. These items, according to him, were dried and packed in the different pots and kept by the fire place. Ogbore noted that the items could remain safe in the pots as long as they are not exposed to moisture. He also identified the pot for storing oil, “*Oche-ewwri*”. He said there are two types of *oche ewwri*, one for preserving dry fish and the other for preserving live fresh fish. Both pots are perforated (like *iduen* of the Ibibio people). Only the top part of the pot used for preserving live fish was perforated while the bottom part was left to hold water, and the rim patterned like a net.

Pottery for Mortuary Purposes and Preservation of Cinerary Products

Most cultures made pottery for mortuary purposes and for storing cinerary products. The pagan – Saxons, Living in south eastern England, cremated their dead and put the ashes of the bones in urns which they made for the purpose (Lewis, 1977). Fitzwilliam (1981) notes that canopic jars were made to hold the organs/parts of the body removed during mummification. In some cultures, after mummification, the vital organs were placed in four canopic jars which accompanied the dead to the tomb (The Encyclopedia International, 1982). Broom (1976) acknowledges that hydra which was used to carry water from the

fountain was adopted by the Greeks of Alexandria for use as cinerary urns.

Pottery for Rituals and Holding/Preservation of Offerings for Spirits

Perhaps, a lot of pottery vessels were made strictly for ritual purposes and for holding/preserving offerings for spirits in shrines and graves. Canopic jars with baboon head lid were used to hold shabtis (Fitzwilliam, 1981), while the Loutro-phoros was used for a bride's ritual bath before her wedding (Woodford, 1982). Religious pots were used in most African societies for religious ceremonies held for the gods (Idowu, 2007) and; there was high demand for pottery made for ritual purposes (Obodo, 2013).

Similarly, *m̄pakpa* was normally kept at the foot of the king pillar of the shrine or by the foot of a totem tree in *anwa* where offerings were served for the spirits. *Mbiam* and similar connections were preserved in pottery among the Ibibio and Efik people of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria. Besides, there were *abang idiong* (sacred ritual pot for divination), *abang odiong eka* (ceremonial pot used during the burial of the elderly such as octogenarians and nonagenarians) and *abang ibok* (medicine pot).

Consumers' Evaluation of the Effects of Pottery Products on their Contents

On the effects of pottery on their contents, Newman (1974) maintains that Huge six quartz porous, unglazed pots were utilized as refrigerated water containers, as water keeps cool due to evaporation on the surface of these pots. This was possible because of the porous nature of the walls of the pottery (Danburi, 2007). *Abang itie* was found in households, serving the people as refrigerators; they provided a ready alternative/substitute to refrigerators considering the epileptic power supply in most African States (Nsetip, 2007; Ekong, 2000). Similarly, Bunn (1979) observes that the pots were unglazed and some burnished, and used as water containers, because water keeps cool due to the insulating properties of the pots.

King Ramesses II commenting on the water cooling characteristic of pottery observes in an address to his workmen, thus:

I have supplied your necessities in every proper way, so that you may work for me with loving hearts ... fishermen to bring fish ... Gardeners to grow vines ... I have fashioned large vases on the potter's wheel making vessels to cool water for you in the season of summer (Hamada, 1938 cited in Fitzwilliam, 1981).

Inyang (2003), Udoh (2018) and Ekanem (2018) agree that water from the pots was and still is normally cool and pleasant to drink especially in the dry season. In addition to the cooling effect, it lends a special earthy aroma to the water. This keeps the water fresh all the time.

Conclusion

It is shown in the study that there was widespread embrace of pottery in many traditional cultures. It has been widely explored and used in most, if not all, traditional cultures of the world. This undoubtedly, was due to its preservative attributes; the attribute which made it an unparalleled medium to others. Nevertheless, traditional preservative pottery, a vital receptacle and historical transmitter has been given a very loose attention in modern day Nigeria due, perhaps, to unnecessary scramble for foreign products. As a step towards correcting this anomaly, this paper has reechoed the preservative importance of pottery in civilization and national development. It focused on the importance of these unique receptacles and storage utensils in the area of preservation of its contents.

In view of the myriad preservative relevance of pottery as reechoed and highlighted in this paper, it is glaring that the humanities have dependable roles to play in the development of African Nations. Therefore it becomes expedient to make a rethink about disciplines in the humanities as they have direct utilitarian benefits to present day African societies just as it had in the olden days. Thus, Nigeria in particular and African in general should rethink the relevance of pottery to her development. The rethink should ensure that government policies concerning the teaching, learning and practice of pottery are adequately addressed and adhered to. The national policy on education should not be a lip-service; the ideas captured in the policy should be enforced sincerely. The curriculum should be reviewed from time to time in consonance with prevailing national challenges. Thus, the development

of pottery should go beyond mere receptacles/containers. Importation of pottery and allied products should be discouraged. The citizenry should be encouraged to patronize locally made products. Peoples' perception of pottery as a vocation for the weak should be change. Pottery is a lucrative industry and should be seen and presented as such. This would deal with any perceived stigmatization. Pottery concerns should be adequately funded. The mining of pottery materials should go beyond the use of hoe and machete; processing of the material should go beyond the use of mortar and pestle. The mining and processing industries should ensure that the materials are readily available in shops. Finally, the issue of power supply to ginger the establishment and running of small and medium scale potteries and other industries should be practically done with.

The rethinking as envisaged by this paper is supposed to be holistic, not one-sided. Thus, Nigerian governments, institutions and individuals should be involved alike. A general consciousness of the Nigerian people concerning an indigenous technology such as pottery needs to be reawakened. This, undoubtedly, would be possible if all concerned look back at the roles of pottery, first, as a preservative medium as invoked by this paper, secondly; its general role in traditional African/Nigerian societies. It is believed that if a sincere rethink of the preservative, relevance of pottery to the development of Nigeria is done; and positive practical steps taken, pottery in Nigeria would revive its potentials as a source of Nigeria economic development and self sufficiency.

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Interviews

Name: Madam Adiaha Etok Akpan Udo
Occupation: Farmer
Date of Interview: February 2, 1994

Name: Madam Ima Udo Obot Udo
Occupation: Farmer
Date of Interview: February 2, 1994

Name: Mr. E. W. Inyang
Occupation: Lecturer. A well-seasoned art educator and one time winner of the Gold Gong in the National Festival of Arts and Culture.
Date of Interview: February 2, 1994

Name: Chief Edet Udo Ekong Etokakpan
Occupation: Tapping and farming
Date of Interview: March 5, 2018

Name: Chief Jackson T. Ogbore
Occupation: Fishing and Farming
Date of Interview: February 2, 1994

Name: Obong Effiong Udoekong Etokakpan
Occupation: Farming and Tapping
Date of Interview: March 5, 2018

Name: Sculptor Ben Ekanem
Occupation: Retired Academic
Date of Interview: September 10, 2018
Name: Effiong A. Udofia
Occupation: Artisan
Date of Interview: June 8, 2017

Name: Dr. Ekwere Bassey
Occupation: Ceramics Technologist
Date of Interview: March 5, 2018

Name: Dr. Enoidem N. A. Udoh
Occupation: Ceramics Lecturer
Date of Interview: June 8, 2018