

RESEARCH PAPER

ADVANCING INDIGENOUS POTTERY FOR MODERN APPLICATION: AN APPRAISAL OF A GHANAIAN MODERNIST CERAMIST-JAMES KWAME AMOAH

Adjei, K.^{1*}, Asubonteng, K.², Agyei I. K.¹

¹Department of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

²Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

*Corresponding author: adjei44@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

To critique by the content of African art texts and current trends in the region's curatorial work, it seems safe to say that the use of indigenous aesthetics for modern ceramic art expression has not been given much prominence in Ghanaian ceramic practice. A notable personality who has championed the used of indigenous designs for modern ceramic expression is James Kwame Amoah, a Ghanaian ceramist with a sustained practice, and whose works have evolved in a harmonious interplay between indigenous artistic insight and modernist expression. This study examined James Kwame Amoah's ceramic practice with reference to his appropriation of indigenous pottery forms in his modernist oeuvre and the impact of his practice on the preservation of indigenous pottery heritage in Ghana. Through interaction with the artist and engagement with his works, the descriptive and content analysis methods were used to discuss the artistic and cultural narratives of his works. The study revealed that James Kwame Amoah has contributed significantly to the preservation of indigenous pottery heritage through his appropriation and interpretation of forms and decoration in a modernist orientation.

Keywords: James Kwame Amoah, indigenous pottery, modernist ceramist, forming techniques decorative techniques.

INTRODUCTION

To critique by the content of African art texts and current trends in the region's curatorial work, it seems safe to say that the use of indigenous aesthetics for modern ceramic art expression has not been given much prominence in Ghana. It has been observed that from the modernist period to present, not much has been done by ceramic artists in Ghana to deliberately sustain the indigenous pottery heritage which is gradually facing extinction.

Indigenous pottery projected the norms, folktales and folklores, history, and as well as cultural beliefs (Adjei *et al*, 2015). They sustained and stabilized society through educational messages conveyed through the forms, decoration and uses assigned to the artefact. Beyond the natural instincts of enjoying the manipulative quality of clay, the objects produced mainly defined the livelihood of the people. In Ghana, indigenous pottery has been a major component of the indigenous crafts industry, long dominating the domestic ware industry. Indigenous ceramic industry has been female dominated and more laborious. According to Speight and Toki (1999), the earliest pottery containers were made by women through pinching or coiling the clay into shapes. Loth (1987) explained that ancient African women were involved in a great variety of crafts, especially pottery, and that they are largely responsible for its development. Like their male counterparts, African women played an important role in the material culture of the time. Generally, it is assumed that pottery was discovered in the domestic environment by women because pots were used to cook and store food.

Despite the importance of the indigenous pottery industry, there are some factors that militate against its sustenance in Ghana. Some of these challenges include the seemingly lack of interest by the youth in advancing the indigenous trade, due to its laborious

nature, unfriendly taboos associated with the trade and absence of avenues for career development. In today's globalized world, the situation becomes so enormous considering the fact that many products from the indigenous pottery industry have been replaced with more convenient and easier to use ones through modern technology. For example, the water pot and water coolers have been replaced with refrigerators and water dispensers and therefore these indigenous products with their uses, aesthetic forms and decorations are becoming antiquity. This development makes the future of some indigenous pottery forms and decorations look gloomy.

However, the transition from indigenous production to modern processes which involves some form of mechanization, introduced through formal education, has necessarily changed the status quo: with men dominating the industry today. Nowadays, ceramics production has moved from simple utilitarian to a high level of creativity and innovation where wares are made for decors, planters and sculptures. The current state of indigenous pottery production requires a change in style and representation, from ordinary domestic wares to more sophisticated decorative and sculptural forms in order to be better appreciated by modern patrons.

The effect of modernity on indigenous pottery production has resulted in the deculturalization and dwindling of the local ceramics industry in Ghana (Nortey & Asiamoaso, 2019). In the face of this challenge, James Kwame Amoah, a modernist Ghanaian ceramist, has over the past 50 years made significant contribution to the development and preservation of indigenous pottery forms and decoration by appropriating them for modern artistic expression and application through the use of modern tools/equipment such as brushes, potter's wheels, kilns, etc, materials and methods. Introduction of

modern ceramics in Ghana, which involves the use of the potter's wheel, kiln and glazes as well as development of concept for practical and aesthetic appreciation, is generally attributable to Michael Cardew who is believed to have introduced it in the early 1940s when he taught at Achimota College and later established a studio and trained some potters in Vume, in the Volta Region of Ghana (Adjei *et al*, 2020, Harold, 2013). Since then, indigenous and modern ceramic art practices have existed side by side to serve their respective roles, however, with steady decline in indigenous production

This study sought to examine James Kwame Amoah's ceramic practice with reference to his appropriation of indigenous pottery forms and decorations in his modernist oeuvre and the place of his practice in the preservation of indigenous pottery heritage in Ghana.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES KWAME AMOAH

The ceramist, James Kwame Amoah was born on 3rd July, 1943 at Agona, in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Amoah had his primary and secondary education between 1949 and 1962 in Nsuta and Kumasi respectively. His vision of becoming a ceramist started to bud when he began his four-year Bachelor of Arts Degree programme at the then School of Art of the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi (now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology).

The structure of the programme was twofold: the first two years allowed him to major in two subjects which Amoah opted for Textiles and Ceramics.

He then majored in Ceramics after the sophomore studies and successfully completed in 1966 with a Second-Class Upper division. According to the artist, the two main lecturers who taught him during his bachelor's studies were Gerd von Stoker and William Charles Owusu. Gerd von Stoker was a distinguished German modernist artist whose sensibilities in ceramics were expressed through the free-hand forming technique (Stoker and Stoker, 1980). Amoah, like his tutor von Stoker, who drew inspiration from nature for his biomorphic forms (Figure 1), also explored the use of animals and human forms through abstraction (Figures 9 and 10). The artist recounting his style of practice, ascribed much of his influences to William Charles Owusu, a Ghanaian graduate of Royal College of Art, who was predisposed to traditional forms and symbolism (Figure 2). The interplay between Ghanaian traditional aesthetics and modernist tendencies in Amoah's artistic oeuvre is a testimony to the rich experience he gained from these two distinct tutors.



Figure 1: Stoker, v. G. (1980). *Candle holders, Topfern – mein Hobby, Stoker and Stoker*

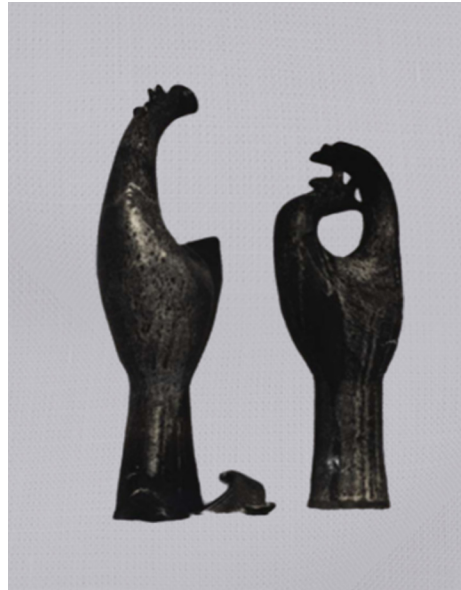


Figure 2: Owusu, W.C (n.d) *Sankofa, Earthenware*, photo source: J.K. Amoah

After graduating with a BA from the College of Art, Amoah was appointed as a Research Fellow at the Ceramics Section where he studied. In 1969, he was awarded a two-year scholarship by the German government to pursue a postgraduate degree programme in Ceramics at the University of Kassel (Gesamthochschule), Germany, where he studied under Professor Walter Popp (Amenuke *et al*, 1991). Upon completing his studies, he returned to Kumasi and was appointed as a lecturer in 1971 and rose to the rank of Senior Lecturer in 1982.

Exhibitions, Residencies, Conferences, Awards and Commissions

Amoah's practice spans a period of over 50 years with many solo and group exhibitions at both local and international levels. He has also attended many residencies, Conference/symposiums and workshops in Ghana, Europe, Asia and the United States of America. Among his solo exhibitions are "The Ceramics to the

Miners" at the Tarkwa School of Mines- 1996; "James Kwame Amoah and his Ahina Pot" at Artist Alliance Gallery-1994, all in Ghana. In Europe, he held "Contemporary Ghanaian Ceramics" in Museum of African Art, Belgrade - 2003; "Special Ceramics Exhibition", Gallery Bowig, Hannover, Germany- 1993; "Ghanaian Contemporary Ceramics", Hannover- 1983; and "Meister der Keramik-Forum", Leverkusen, Germany in 1981.

Some of his group exhibitions include; "Ghana @50 National Exhibition", at Trade Fair Centre, Accra - 2007; "Coming Together" at Adwinsa Gallery, Kumasi- 2006, "The Three Ghanaian Artists", Novotel Hotel-1996; "FESTAC", Lagos Nigeria- 1977; "Coleagues North Hessen", Castle Wilhemstal, Kassel, Germany- 1993; "Specials Show", Handwerkskammer, Koblenz, Germany- 1984; "Walter popp and Kassel Students", Syke, Germany - 1971; "End of Symposium Exhibition", Gmunden Austria -1967 and many others have been held across the globe.

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James Kwame Amoah also attended some important residencies such as: World of Ceramics “Marble and Sounds”, Arandjelovac and Zlakusa Serbia- 2003, Shigeraki Ceramic Cultural Part, Japan-2002; National Ceramic Symposium (Egypt Blue), Ceramics Department, Kassel, Germany-1997; International Ceramics Symposium, Gmunden, Austria-1967. In addition, Amoah has many residencies and symposiums sponsored by DAAD at the Ceramics Department in Kassel, Germany.

In the area of conferences, Amoah has participated and presented many papers at both local and international levels. He attended and presented a paper in the following conferences: Ghana Chemical Society, KNUST- 1997; Traditional and Contemporary Ceramics Conference in Ghana, Accra - 1995; Ghana National Tourism Conference, Accra -

1995; International Society for Ceramic Art Educational Exchange (ISCAEE), Creative Arts, Farnham, UK-2007; SECAC Conference, NC, State University Raleigh, USA - 2003; Clay and Fire, Stanley Conference on African Art, University of Iowa -1994; African American and Japanese, African Conference, Tokyo University of Foreign studies, Japan- 1993.

In 2004, Amoah won an Honorary Diploma Award from the Zepter International Design Award with his design titled; the “Cup”, which explored the concept of calabash that are traditionally used for drinking water, palm wine and porridge in Ghana (figure 3). Some of Amoah’s commissioned works include; Abusua Kruwa for the Palace Museum, Kumasi; Ancient and Modern, National Museum, Accra; Ceramic Mural at Bank of Ghana; Ceramic Mural at Cedi House, Accra; Abusua Kruwa, Handwerkskammer, Kobenz, Germany.



Figure 3: Amoah, J. K. (2004). *Cup*, Porcelain, 5”x3.5”.2.5”, Artist’s collection, photo source: Authors

Indigenous Pottery Concepts

In this study, the term indigenous pottery is used to define pottery production techniques and products that are carried out without any machinery which are practiced by the local folks in traditional communities. Indigenous

pottery involves the manipulation of earthy raw materials into objects and firing them for permanence at relatively low temperature. They are usually utilitarian with aesthetic appeal. Clay, the main material used for indigenous pottery, abounds in almost every part of the world because there is a constant

decomposition of certain igneous rocks on the surface of the earth's crust (Hamer and Hamer, 2004). Early pottery production might have emerged in different cultures with relatively similar forming techniques and purposes (Speight and Toki, 1999; Tsetlin, 2018). Throughout civilization, clay has perhaps been the most consistently used material for improving the quality of life of people. According to Hopper (2008a), looking at pottery in museums or as illustrations in books, one cannot help but be amazed by the vast and subtle diversity of forms into which human beings have moulded clay. Furthermore, Hopper claimed that beyond the natural tendency of enjoying the pure plastic quality of the material and the function of the formed objects, pottery developed as a response to real needs of mankind (Tsetlin, 2018).

Pots became containers and dispensers for household and religious activities. The shapes and forms of these pots were developed for a variety of reasons: practical, religious, as a substitute for more precious materials, etc. Ghana's rich history in indigenous pottery production dates back as far as 4000 BC (Anquandah, 2006). Due to the abundance of clay in many localities doubled with the fact that indigenous pottery wares were the main stay of many domestic and ritual performances, its production could be found in almost every community in Ghana. The indigenous pottery products in Ghana have generally been utilitarian, taking the form of utensils for cooking and eating, fetching and storage of grains, water, tapping and storage of wine from the palm tree, herbal preparations and many other households uses (Adjei *et al*, 2017). In addition to sculptural forms, indigenous pottery vessels are generally built using three basic container forms; cylindrical, oval and spherical forms.

METHODOLOGY

The study began as an investigation into the life and practice of James Kwame Amoah. This was informed by the scarcity of information on the artist in the body of literature on ceramic art, in spite of the enormous contribution he has made in the field. The study employed the descriptive and document analysis methods of the qualitative approach. Unstructured interview guide, in the form of open-ended questions, was used to gather information from the artist. Four formal visits were made to the artist which involved interviews, observation, photographic documentation and document analysis, in addition the close relationship that had existed between him and the authors, particularly the first author who was tutored by Amoah both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Again, photographs of the artist's works were taken by the authors from galleries, public collections, the artist's house and studio. The selection of works was done based on their indigenous attributes such as; form, surface decoration and title/theme of works. The authors analyzed these works based on how the artist employed these indigenous characteristics in his works. In addition to the artist's collection of his personal ceramics works, Amoah had also kept archive of documents, in the form of photographs of works, certificates, citations, exhibition catalogues, residencies, conferences/symposiums and awards. These documents were used to authenticate the validity of the information obtained from the artist.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Forming Techniques

James Kwame Amoah employs throwing and hand building techniques in the forming of his works. He explores slab building and sand moulding as the main hand forming techniques. The artist deploys mastery of skill on the potters' wheel and manipulates clay slabs into forms. Generally, the artist employs throwing technique for all his cylindrical, oval and spherical forms that measure between any small size to one and a half feet diameter. Amoah's large forms are usually built by combining both throwing and slab building techniques. He begins by throwing the base of his pots, then builds on the thrown section with slab to complete the pot. He also employs slab building and sand moulding techniques for making anthropomorphic forms such as "Lover" and "Mourners" (figures 9 and 10).

His works are rendered with smooth surfaces, reminiscence of indigenous burnished pots, that allow for the effective application and free flow of engobes, glazes and colouring oxides, his chief decoration materials. The smooth texture on his works is achieved through meticulous turning of the pieces when they are leather hard. Some of the wares are subsequently painted with white slip at the green state as a means of priming the surface, as in the case of canvass painting. They are allowed to dry to bone-dried state before packing them for bisque firing. The wares are always fired twice because his decorations which are carried out with brush application of glaze are applied after bisque firing to a temperature of 1000°C, close to cone 6.

Forms and Decoration Concepts

Amoah explores his themes through forms and, generally in surface decoration. Forms that have inspired Amoah in his creative

endeavours have emanated from indigenous pottery forms, traditional Ghanaian symbols and philosophies. As indicated by Kok (2021), most proficient artists are influenced by master artists and their backgrounds - place of birth, community of development, family type, friends, education, and most importantly exposure to the world. Amoah has always been inspired by the rich indigenous Ghanaian cultural symbolism, values and expressions. These elements are modified and reinterpreted in a language that appeals to modern sensibilities. Amoah references "adinkra" symbols, traditional textiles motifs, and tales of Ghanaian traditional society, composing them to harmonize with the contour and form of his works as seen in figures 4 to 8.



Figure 4: Neck Gear (Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, slip, oxide and glaze

Dimension: 18"x18"x16"

Year: 2017



Figure 5: Love and Justice
(Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, slip and glaze
Dimension: 17"x17"x20"
Year: 2012



Figure 6: Kuntunkuni
(Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, oxides and glaze
Dimension: 13"x13"x36"
Year: 2006

Ceramics have been decorated in variety of ways. The use of glazes, slips, oxides and impressed surface details are only a few of the decoration options available to the ceramic artist (Speight and Toki, 1999; Chavarria, 1994; Hopper, 2008b; Taylor, 2011). The technical approach to slip and oxide application and emphasis on surface decoration presented in brush strokes and free flow of glazes bring Amoah's ceramic practice into the modernist paradigm. He uses modern surface decoration techniques to turn ordinary water pot shape and cylindrical forms into works that are appreciated for their aesthetic qualities. His decorative concepts relay themes from nature, tradition, modernity, history, love, birth, life, and death (Figures 6-11).



Figure 7: Crocodile (Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, oxides and glaze
Dimension: 14"x14"x37"
Year: 2010



Figure 8: Tarted Cloth (Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, slip, oxide and glaze

Dimension: 10"x6"x18"

Year: 2018



Figure 9: Lovers (Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, slip, oxide and glaze

Dimension: 10"x8"x26"

Year: 2021



Figure 10: The Mourners
(Photo source: Authors)

Medium: Clay, slip, oxide and glaze

Dimension: 20"x20"x30"

Year: 2007



Figure 11: Kruwa

(Photo source: Artist's Collection)

Medium: Clay, slip and oxide

Dimension: 15"x15"x26"

Year: 2003

A modern ceramic artist akin to James Kwame Amoah is Magdalene Odundo who brings together the influence of indigenous pottery sensibilities into the modern aesthetics presentation (Cooper *et al*, 2004; Silverman and Mark, 2013). Odundo explores the art of sculpture and the craft of pottery to create unusual ceramic vessels whose inspiration range from early Greek Cycladic sculpture to traditional African pottery, from Kenya and Nigeria (Owens, 2020; Cooper *et al*, 2004).

The form and decoration on Amoah's work are guided by formal elements and principles of design. They follow the principle of harmony, variety, rhythm, repetition dominance contrast etc., with bold free lines, matt earth colours, shapes and tones of brush strokes which create surface effects reminiscence of Ghanaian traditional batik textiles (figures 4, 6,7, 8 & 11). Amoah's predilection for round, spherical and semi-spherical shapes is informed by his belief in perfection and his connection with the concept of "*Ahina*", which is a life sustaining container in traditional Ghanaian society. "*Ahina*" is a pot of varied sizes that was mainly used for fetching and storage of water in many traditional homes in Ghana. His favoured colours are shades of brown, orca, cream, black, and buff which are derived from engobes and oxides of red iron and manganese (Figures 4-9 & 11). He also employs brown glazes fired to a temperature of 1080°C, which fuse the oxides and melt the glaze unto the surface of the forms which serve as his canvass (Figures 4-9 & 11).

From the general observation of the ceramic works, it comes clear that Amoah pays critical attention to the structural forms of his wares. He ensures that his works are balanced in shape, form and size. Amoah's works are well constructed with free-flowing forms which eliminate any form of distortions. The principal sources for his forms are the "*Ahina*" (Figures 4, 5 10 and 11), "*Abusua kruwa*" the family cup (Figure 10), "*Akuaba*," fertility doll

(Figure 9) and "*kruwa*" (figure 11). These forms permeate his oeuvre exhibited at various important venues globally. His ceramic expression provides a juxtaposition of tradition and modernist ideologies. James Kwame Amoah tries to understand his materials by testing them to ensure his products stand all tests. His glazes, clays, and engobes, which he prepares himself, and the oxides he uses are all well tested to meet modern standards.

Concepts and Philosophical Foundations of the Works

James Kwame Amoah, as a modernist ceramist has made a significant breakthrough by making the past live in the present by referencing the indigenous "*Ahina*" (water pot), "*Abusua kruwa*" (family pot), *Kruwa* (ceremonial pot) and the "*Akuaba*" (fertility doll) (Adjei *et al*, 2015), in his work. Amoah explores these indigenous forms which are fundamentally static and repetitive in their presentation in a modernist forward looking and experimental manner. His wares are both functional and decorative and responds to the modernist notion of functionalism and aesthetics (Hansson, 2005). The artist always ensures that his works meet functional and aesthetic demands of his patrons. Amoah believes that pottery can be produced by incorporating indigenous influences, looks, concepts and touch, within a modern environment to appropriately serve the present society. His deliberate intention to merge indigenous and modernist concepts has persistently and consistently permeated his practice and this is what has identified his works with unique characteristic features. The ceramic vessels he produces are unique in terms of practical and aesthetic diversification. In an interview, he stressed that he uses the same concepts of indigenous practices to create exciting pottery and ceramic art that continue to bring delight and fascination to modernity.

Amoah's ceramics aim to deepen awareness and appreciation of the past in the present through exploration of indigenous ceramic forms and motifs in modern subject matters. The themes of his works project the contemplative practices of social occasions and ceremonies in Ghanaian cultural performance, including the rites of passage – birth, puberty, marriage and death (Figures 6, 10 and 11). These ceremonies bear direct reflection on Amoah's studio practice and artwork. For example, "*Kuntunkuni*" is an Akan funeral cloth worn when a body is lying in state. It depicts a dull melancholic state of the bereaved family; the external reflection of the inner state. According to Amoah, he was inspired to do this work after his wife died in 2006 and it demonstrates his personal state of anguish during this period (Figure 6). It could be observed from the above discussion that Amoah's work has contributed greatly to the preservation and sustenance of some Ghanaian indigenous pottery forms by appropriating these purely utilitarian and ceremonial wares into forms that are priced for their aesthetic and modern applications.

CONCLUSION

James Kwame Amoah, for the past 50 years has demonstrated a sustained practice of advancing indigenous ideas and concepts in his ceramic practice. Amoah's works explore indigenous pottery forms and Ghanaian traditional themes and subjects through the use of modern materials and application, tools and processes as well as product application. Amoah's work has contributed greatly to the preservation and sustenance of some Ghanaian indigenous pottery forms by transforming these purely functional and ceremonial forms into art works that are priced for their aesthetic and modern applications. The artist transforms simple forms such as the water pot (*ahina*) family pot (*Abusua kruwa*), the fertility doll (*Akuaba*) and

Kruwa (ceremonial pot) into art forms that go beyond their traditional application into one that equally contests for modern aesthetic appreciation and contemplation. The artist employs techniques of modern forming and decoration techniques that correspond with his themes. Amoah's art forms situate well within the modernist concept of functionality and aesthetics. They function both as decorative wares as well as for practically holding plants (both natural and artificial). Amoah's contribution to the preservation of indigenous pottery is centred on the promotion of forms by transforming purely utilitarian or ceremonial wares into forms that are priced for their aesthetic and decorative functions. Forms such as the "*ahina*", "*abusua kruwa*" and "*kruwa*" are at the verge of getting extinct but have been made available by Amoah through his appropriation of them in a more acceptable form.

Through Amoah's extensive practice and influence on the students he taught, the use of indigenous pottery ideas and concepts are being explored by contemporary artists. The study has demonstrated that James Kwame Amoah has contributed significantly to the preservation of indigenous pottery heritage through his appropriation and interpretation of forms and decoration for modernist consumption.

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