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ADAPTATION OF *NSIBIDI* SCRIPTS TO CERAMIC ART FORMS: A STUDIO EXPERIMENTATION

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Abstract

Nsibidi, scripts and ideograms were invented in Ekoi (Ejagham) in today's Cross River State of Nigeria. It was used for communication throughout the Cross River Basin of South-Eastern Nigeria, and beyond. In spite of its spread in ancient times, it seems *Nsibidi* is not accorded adequate prominence in modern art forms. Modern industrial and studio products do not seem to adapt them adequately to forms. Thus, the study explored the possibilities of adapting these symbols to studio ceramic art forms. The object was to use *Nsibidi* to create utilitarian and aesthetically sound ceramic wares. The study depended on secondary data for the background information. The signs were purposively selected for adaptation to the realization of novel ceramic forms. The study which used the practice-led approach revealed, through the ceramic forms produced, that *Nsibidi* symbols can be useful for the production of aesthetically sound ceramic wares. It is also found to be useful for the creation of utilization forms as well as forms that combine both utilitarian and aesthetic functions. It is, therefore, recommended that *Nsibidi* should be adapted to ceramic art and other 3-dimensional art forms.

Keywords: Adaptation, *Nsibidi,* Symbols, Script, Ideograms, Ejagham, Studio Experimentation.

Introduction

The rudiment of writing, undoubtedly, is symbolism. Many cultures in ancient times evolved ideograms, which helped the people to communicate among themselves. Today, most of these cultures,

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especially, those in the occidental and oriental worlds are remembered and acknowledged worldwide for their contributions towards writing and civilization; but some, especially, those of African origin appear not to be mentioned even at the national levels. *Nsibidi* ideographic art, invented in Ejagham (Ekoi) in the present day Cross River State of Nigeria is one of such. A close examination of *Nsibidi* symbols in respect to their qualities reveals that they are cryptic – they are replete with hidden meanings that are not easily seen or deciphered. Therefore, systems of the symbols were used for secrecy or brevity. They are indicative by their forms and the relation of their parts to suggest the intended idea(s). They are ideographic - the characters of *Nsibidi* have metamorphosed from the pictorial to the emblematic. They do not depict, rather, they suggest objects and do not speak directly through the eyes to the mind. They pre-suppose in the mind the knowledge of an event, idea, item or fact in which the sign suggests.

Nsibidi does not seem to receive adequate attention; hence, its resonance in modern art forms appears to be inadequate. Even though writing systems have flourished in Africa for thousands of years and have contributed significantly to the global history of writing, they have received little attention outside the continent (Abarbanel, 2009). Similarly, National Museum of African Art and Fowler Museum (2007 – 2008) observes that for thousands of years African artists have incorporated graphic symbols into their arts with great ingenuity and creativity. The oldest found *Nsibidi* symbols which date back to the 4th Century were discovered on pottery, ceramic stools and headrests found in Calabar region (Onyeakagbu, 2020; Endangered Alphabets, 2018 – 2020; Agbo, 2019; and Umoren, 2019). Thus, there have been evidences of the use of *Nsibidi* as motifs for surface decoration on pottery forms. However, *Nsibidi* has not been adapted for the form of any known ceramic art work.

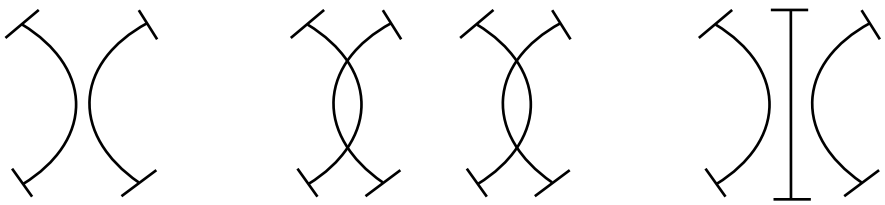
Where *Nsibidi* is studied and used by artists, the concern appears not to go beyond its two dimensional potentials where they are used as motifs for decoration as mentioned earlier. Having noticed these gaps, the researcher was motivated to look at the possibilities of adapting *Nsibidi* script for the formation of ceramics. Therefore, the writer's desire to perpetuate *Nsibidi* symbolism in modern art forms was what prompted the study. This work was also informed by the reasoning that, the art of a region being the mirror of that region, should reflect in no

small measure, among other things, the cultural inventions of that region. Therefore, this work is an attempt to mirror an invention of a Nigerian society. Therefore, *Nsibidi* being an invention of Ejagham people of the South South region of Nigeria is what this study advocates for its use not just for decoration but also for development of forms.

The aim of the study was to exploit *Nsibidi* symbols with the view of adapting some of them to the formation of ceramics. The objectives of the study were to resolve selected *Nsibidi* signs into ceramic art forms, produce novel ceramic forms based on selected *Nsibidi* signs and; analyse some ceramic art forms produced through the experiment. The choice of signs was delimited to the most common and conventional ones. The study was anchored on the conceptual framework of Natural Synthesis which was developed by members of the Zaria Art Society in the late 1950s. The Society sought for a merger of the best of Western Nigerian art traditions, techniques, forms and ideas in art practice (Rice, 2018). Studio experimentation was employed. Fifty ceramic works were produced using hand building techniques. However, seven are presented in this paper. All the works were produced between 1998 and 2000 during the writers Masters programme. It is believed that the product of this study will be useful for researchers in 3-dimensional arts. It will also be useful for students and teachers of 3-dimensional design. In this work, the words: scripts, signs, symbols and ideograms are used interchangeably.

Selection of Symbols for Adaptation

Only the most widely used symbols were adapted. Therefore, the choice of a sign depended on its commonness to all the cultural societies and conventionality. Dayrell (1911:521) presents some examples of such signs. These are shown in Figure 1.



1. Discord 2 & 3. Love, togetherness 4. Intense Quarrel

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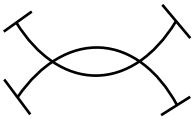

5. Love, togetherness

Figure 1: Some conventional *Nsibidi* Signs which are common to all cultural societies

It is note-worthy that the conventional symbols fall under affection (figure 2) and disaffection (figure 3) classes, respectively; hence, ideograms selected for the study came from these two classes. In some of the works, one sign was adapted and used as the dominant element. One, two or three signs were sometimes adapted for just one composite ceramic art form. This means that some of the symbols adapted for the forms were combined and resolved into the body of the works, thereby, employing them wholly or partially as the forms. In some occasions some of the symbols were used complimentarily on the background as decorative motifs. That is, there were situations whereby a sign(s) was selected from the disaffection class for the form and the affection for decoration and vice versa. Figure 4 shows signs selected for study and adaptation.

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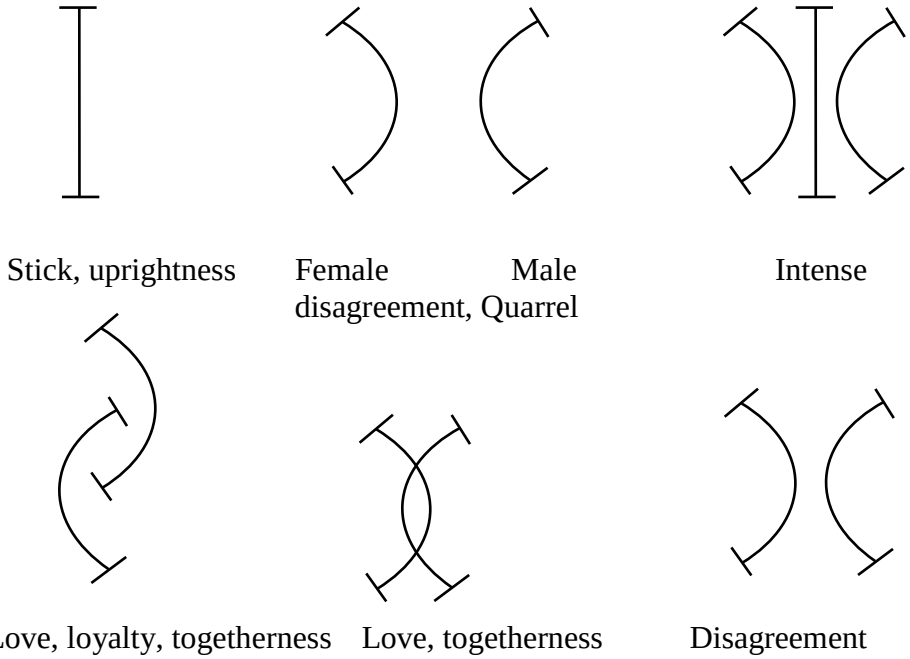

Figure 4: Signs Selected for Study and Adaptation

Sketches/Drawings for Ceramic Production

Several sketches and drawings derived from the selected *Nsibidi* symbols were made. Sketches were necessary because any successful studio practice starts with sketches. This aided quick recording of ideas and definition of forms and textures through the use of lines. Undoubtedly, creativity is begun with pencil since the first registrations of its leaden point are often the beginning of discovery and innovation (Adams, 1991; Ekong, 2001). Sketches were developed into full-fledged drawings. Same were reproduced in clay.

Decoration of the Clay Pieces

In order to break monotony, add interest and enhance aesthetics, the works were decorated. The decorations were done without any lavishness of techniques but guided with appropriate relationship of the decorations to the whole form. Intaglio decorations were employed to

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introduce depth on the surfaces of the ceramic pieces. Applique decorations were also employed to create embossed areas on some of the works. Generally, a variety of techniques of ceramic decorations were complimentarily employed. They techniques used included sprigging, trailing with slip, incising, impressing, cutting and carving. Brushwork with oxides and engobe were also used on the pieces. Each clay piece was decorated in its leather hard stage.

Drying the Clay Pieces

Water of plasticity constitutes about 35% of the weight of a workable moist clay. So when a piece was completed it was left for the water to leave its body before it was bisque fired. As the water evaporated, the clay particles shrunk tightly together and thereby caused reduction of the size of the work as it dried on. In order to avoid cracking, warping or deformation of the clay piece at this stage it was made to dry slowly. This was possible by covering the leather hard piece with polythene sheet for a period not less than two weeks or more depending on the size of the work. The addition in the clay body of non-plastic materials such as, grog, facilitated even drying of the pieces. Its skeletal support accorded the works green-strength and also discouraged excessive shrinkage during drying and firing. Its use as openers in the body created minute pores and channels as the drying clay pulled slightly away from the grog particles. Through these pores and channels, moisture escaped and evaporated. When the pieces were relieved of the polythene coverings, they were shelved until they were bone-dry at which stage the works were ready for bisque firing.

Firing the Clay Pieces

"Firing is the process that transforms clay irrevocably into ceramic" (Scott, 1998). As soon as this is done above 600°C the fired materials cease to be clay, hence can neither be slaked down in water nor made plastic. Bisque firing was done on several occasions during the research. In each firing, the stacking was done with stout pieces below, while tall slender pieces were placed at the top of the kiln chamber. Pieces were allowed to touch one another, as there was no risk of 'marriage' during firing. Some objects were stacked inside one another and placed away from the elements. When the works were adequately stacked in the kiln for their first firing, the firing began with long

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preheating. Although the pieces were bone dry, the researcher always remembered that they still contained atmospheric moisture from the studio and the walls of the cold kiln. This moisture was slowly driven out at very low heat. This was achieved by putting on and turning off the kiln at internals. Since there was neither a timer nor a thermostat, the researcher relied on the table clock. Throughout the water-smoking, early stages of the firing, all vent-holes were left open to allow steam to escape. They were only shut alter the pore water had been removed and the chemically combined water completely released. At this stage the firing was allowed uninterrupted until it was fired off. No kiln load for bisque firing was fired above 800^{o}C. Some were fired off at 700°C or 750^{o}C since it is the removal of the chemically combined water that causes ceramic change. After firing, the kiln was turned off and allowed to cool slowly. When it was completely cool the pieces were taken out for glazing.

Preparing the Glazes

Batches were prepared using dry glazes. The glazes did not require further grinding. The work was really more of re-mixing the various ingredients together and dispersing the colouring oxides(s), which were added to the batches. Since the batches were small, they were satisfactorily prepared by mixing with the hands. Each batch was stirred in sufficient water to provide a creamy mixture, which was passed through a 120s sieve. The glaze slop was easily passed through the screen by rubbing the surface of the screen with a brush as the glaze was going through.

Glaze Application on the Bisque Pieces

A bit of fettling and sponging of the selected bisque pieces was a routine in all the glazing sessions. This was to rid the wares of any noticeable and unnoticeable specks, dust or oil which could have caused glaze defects/flaws on the wares. Few colours were employed to create effects of multiple colours used on the pieces. In order to achieve this feat, a rhythmic application of the glaze was done around the work causing overlapping parts in each action. These overlapping areas created interesting new colours. More colour effects were achieved by more overlapping areas on the glazed wares. The variation in the thickness of

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glazes gave the impression of the use of multiple colours on the works. These were used decoratively to enhance the forms of the works.

Methods used for application of the glazes were dipping, pouring and spraying depending on the size of the work and or the effect(s) desired. The insides of the pieces were glazed by filling them with glaze and then quickly emptying them while turning the forms to ensure even coating of the interior. To avoid an extra thick coat on the rim, the form was immediately dipped before the inside was dry. This was done by turning the ware upside-down and immersing vertically in the glaze slop. Overlappings were achieved through rhythmic dipping or pouring, where practicable and appropriate. Dipping was however, most favoured by the researcher. This was to him the easiest and most comfortable way of achieving even coatings and neat edged-glaze overlapping. The setback here was that it was only practicable with small pieces that were easily handled and gripped. Another drawback with this technique was its requirement of sufficient glaze in a container large enough to enter the piece without the glaze overflowing when the ware was immersed. However, since each batch of the clay was insufficient for dipping all works, some were glazed by pouring. The big, heavy works were supported on two wooden slates over the container and then glaze was poured over the area to be glazed. Pieces with over hangings were problematic with this technique, though. Nevertheless, with a spray gun and a compressor, the problems of glazing big heavy pieces (with or without over hangings) were overcome. The major advantage enjoyed in spraying was that it required only a small quantity of glaze to be mixed in a batch even for large pieces. Initially it was difficult to know when sufficient thickness has been achieved and whether it has been sprayed evenly. A common mistake was under-spraying some areas. After some exercises, the researcher became systematic in spray glazing.

A banding wheel (whirler) was used on which the work to be sprayed was placed. A band of masking tape was placed on a point on the edge of the banding wheel. This was used for making a sort of reference so as to know when a full circumference of the piece has been completed especially, with an all-rounded form. Depending on the thickness of the glaze slop, two coats were the minimum needed. The difficult inaccessible areas (details, undercuts, and interiors) were first glazed before the whole body. The glaze thickness was checked at

various points around the piece by piercing with a sharp needle or scalpel. Alter the whole glazing exercise, the feet of the pieces were cleaned to avoid 'marriage' of the wares to the kiln shelves.

Setting the Glazed Wares in the Kiln

As a rule, the kiln chamber was washed before glazed wares were loaded. The crown and the walls were especially washed to prevent loose crumbs of firebricks falling on the glazed wares during tiring. The kiln shelves and props were also carefully dusted off and batt-wash applied to the shelves. For the bat-wash (kiln-wash) flint and kaolin were mixed with water to the consistency of emulsion paint. This was for easy lifting of the pieces without damage to the shelves in an event of glaze run. The wares to be set in the kiln were arranged on the workbench according to size and intended positions in the kiln. There were cool and hot areas in the kiln chamber, which accounted for uneven firing. Thus, some pieces were positioned in the cool or hot spots in anticipation depending on the glaze used. Pieces with similar heights were grouped; this simplified the job of deciding what heights of props to use for each shelve and made the setting easier. The props were placed first, three to a shelve and then the wares rested on the shelve; making sure they neither 'kissed' one another nor the props. When a shelve was filled, the next was lowered and loaded, and this continued until the kiln was filled. The wicket was then closed and firing began.

Firing the Glazed Wares

There was no much preheating hence temperature advances of l00°C per hour was usual. The melting temperature of the glaze used for the research was l080°C. Pyrometer was used for the reading of the temperature. This was connected to the thermocouple inside the kiln. On the attainment of the melting point of the glaze, the temperature of the kiln was kept constant for half an hour. This soaking period helped to ensure complete melting and smoothing out of the glazes. All firings done were oxidation since "the atmosphere in the electric kiln is always neutral or oxidizing" (Rhodes, 1969). After firing, the kiln was shut off and cooling began. The spy hole was usually closed to prevent too rapid cooling. The kiln was opened only when the temperature had gone down, below 200°C. The completed ceramic art forms were then off-loaded.

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Presentation and Analysis of Some Ceramic Art Forms Produced in the Course of the Experiment

The experiment gave birth to a corpus of ceramic art forms. Some are presented in Plates 1 – 7 and analysed accordingly.

Plate 1: "Innocent Victim 1"
Earthenware; 25 pieces; Tallest: 5 cm x 7 cm x 25 cm; 1999

"Innocent Victim 1"

A perfectly rounded, most often, immaculate white leather is tossed and pursued by twenty-two well-nourished energetic young men. People (an audience) sit and watch in amusement for a period stretching between 90 and 120 minutes, sometimes above. Have the people ever sat back to ask themselves what offence(s) the poor leather has committed. In "Innocent Victim" Plate 1, the artist tries to liken the human situation to the football game. The running figures are attacking, pursuing and kicking the scapegoat, the 'innocent victim' initially placed at the centre of a 50m by 100m pitch. At one extreme of the work is a cage representing the goalpost which keeps its mouth widely opened as it desperately awaits the forceful entry of the defenseless and tormented round leather – the innocent victim.

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The goalpost, the final 'ball stop' represents yet another prison for the down trodden underprivileged members of the Nigerian Societies suggested here by the ball. Here they suffer captivity, delayed stipends, underpayments, denial of rights and benefits, blackouts, shortage of water, high bills, high taxes, levies and rates.

Plate 2: "I Am Caught, That is the Difference between You and Me"
Earthenware, 40cm x 36cm x 18cm; 2000

"I Am Caught, That is the Difference between You and Me"

The work "I Am Caught, That is the Difference between You and Me" Plate 2, is derived from a looped *Nsibidi* symbol. It represents the police net, Paddy Wagon (Black Maria) and the prison cell. Inside are figures portraying the languished captives. The wire netting represents the iron bars in which prisons are made. Looking at the work, the artist 'hears' a voice from within wailing: "I Am Caught, That is the Difference between You and Me". This, perhaps, is directed to the cops who prosecute; the members of the National and State Houses Assembly who pass the bills, the judges who pronounce the sentence and; of course, the other members of the society who stand in knots to receive, 'garnish' and spread the news. The work is a fit metaphor for the availability of other certificate and allied fraudsters in Nigeria besides Buhari and Evan(s) Enwerem whose sagas have made the rounds in the prints and electronic media again and again.

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Plate 3: "Bitter Pills"
Glazed Stoneware, 36 cm x l8 cm x 40 cm, 1998

"Bitter Pills"

"Bitter Pills" Plate 3, is a three dimensional rendition of two basic *nsibidi* ideograms in a composition. The work is accentuated with conflicting, disagreeing *nsibidi* ideograms used as decorative motifs. The work portrays the end of a keen contest between two individuals or groups. The vertical form suggests the winner on the back of the loser who, in his attempt to rise, forms a horizontal loop kissing the ground at both ends. The all over rough texture on the body of the work denotes the effects on the ground as would in the case of two elephants fighting; but in this case, suffice it to say, the mark left by a wounded worm before its final demise. The work is a reflection on what happens in the polls and all other formal and informal local or global combats/contests. "Bitter Pills" can serve a utilitarian function as a flower vase if it is so desired.

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Plate 4: "Oil Doom I"
Glazed Stoneware, 25 cm x 10 cm x 37 cm, 1999

"Oil Doom I"

More often than not there is feud in many sections of Nigeria and other nations where God has blessed with petroleum and or other natural mineral resources. The feud, undoubtedly, is always caused by arbitrary usurping attitude of government agents at the centre. In Nigeria, the most affected include Ogoni, Bakassi, Bonny, Eket, Esit-Eket, Ibeno, Obolo, Ijaw, Urhobo and Ishekiri; indeed the whole of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The work, "Oil Doom" shown in Plate 4 represents the people of these communities facing different directions. This is suggestive of their resentment of the ill treatments. These are people who have lived harmoniously together before the advent of oil exploration in their respective regions.

The three props extending into the air represent the oil pipes in the different oil wells. The concentration of the pipes and the variation in sizes and height are suggestive of the probable cause of the squabbles – the unequal or un-proportional distribution of the oil proceeds. A hole on the body of the work marks the wound created on the people due to constant friction that may result in outright disintegration of the communities. The hole also represents the impact of Petroleum mineral exploration on the affected regions. The impacts which are usually

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negative are evident in the permanent destruction of the regions' farmland, fishing ports and indeed, most times, the entire ecology.

Plate 5: "Armaments: By Who, for Who 1"
Installation with Glazed Stoneware and Bisque Earthenware; tallest, 47.5cm, 2000

"Armaments: By Who, for Who 1"

As the human race strives to continue, it also strives to discontinue. The resources – time, money and manpower lavished in the laboratories and the armaments industry to produce terminal ballistic missiles and warheads elucidate this point. The human situation is such that as he budgets to feed, he also budgets to kill – to kill himself. This is what the nations of the world engage in. In the work as shown in Plate 5, pipes of various sizes and colours are pushed out into the outer space. These suggest the limitless series of attacks on humans by humans. The four barrels are set each against the respective four cardinal points of the compass. The dominant rough, seemingly uncontrolled patterns of the body of some of the components of the work show something akin to the wanton profusion of armours and armouries in the world. The unordered figures suggest the confused man grappling with what to feed himself, heal himself and kill himself. "Armament: By Who, for Who I" is a reflection on the continued production of weapons by world powers, a pointer to man's inhumanity to himself. The work is an indicator to man's resolve to glue himself to the drawing board to design for himself the object of his annihilation.

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Plate 6: "The Crying Child 1"
Glazed Stoneware, 26 cm x 12 cm x 31 cm, 1999

"The Crying Child 1"

"The Crying Child 1" Plate 6, is a work imbued with lots of visual statements. It is a piece derived from two *Nsibidi* signs, adapted and resolved onto a thrown bowl that 'cried' on its collapse on the wheel-head. His lean neck extends upwards as if it would not end. His jaws sunk in as if to create additional orifices to the mouth. The mouth opens wide submerging the nose and he cries as he finds himself entangled with tropical problems, namely; poverty, slavery, injustice, oppression and degradation of the environment perpetuated by power dipsomaniacs. "The Crying Child" is an apt metaphor for the description of the state of an average Nigerian and, of course, the nation.

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Plate 7: "Globalization"
Glazed Earthenware, 27 cm x 14 cm x 40 cm, 1999

"Globalization"

"Globalization", Plate 7 is a fusion of two forms representing groups of people coming together as one. The artist attempts to call, through the work, for the abrogation of the obnoxious dichotomies existing among human races, tribes and religions of the world. It calls for the revoking of the decree and consent that permits impartial treatment of art, science and technology; where the former is treated with disdain in most climes. Thus, the work calls for the repealing of education policy in respect of admission quota for art and science students, especially, in Nigeria where the ratio is 60% for science and 40% for other disciplines. The work suggests the existence of artists as a family devoid of the complex created by the modern western division of the plastic art into 'major' and 'minor', 'fine' and 'applied', 'high' and 'low', 'art' and 'craft'. In the work, two figures grow out from the same stock, spread out at the belly and finally interlock at the apex. This signifies the oneness of humanity at creation and; the indispensability of team work approach to solving human problems.

Summary

Using practice-led approach, the study explored the possibilities of resolving *Nsibidi* scripts into ceramic forms. It was used for the creation of purely aesthetic and utilitarian ceramic forms. The signs were

purposively selected and adapted for novel ceramic wares. Signs selected for the study and adaptation were dependent on their ubiquitousness and conventionality. Some signs were used in combination with others while others were used alone. Some of them were used for the forms and also repeated on the surface of the same form as decorative motifs. These were done for the purpose of emphasis and or complementariness. Signs were selected from the classes of affection and disaffection. Sketches were done in order to concretize ideas generated. Selected sketches were developed into full – fledged drawings. Same were reproduced in clay. The products were fired. Fifty ceramic works were produced. Seven of them are presented and analysed in this paper.

Conclusion

Humanity needs symbols at all periods of civilization. In view of this fact, *Nsibidi* ideographic art was invented in Ekoi (Ejagam) and was used as a means of communication throughout the Cross River Basin of South Eastern Nigeria. These scripts are what the writer explored and adapted for ceramic art forms. It was realized through the study that, *Nsibidi* is undoubtedly an inexhaustible repository of ceramics design inspirations. Sketches adapted from *Nsibidi* symbols are realizable in three dimensional ceramic forms. Figures 1 – 7 show that *Nsibidi* signs are adaptable to ceramic art forms. Art forms produced using *Nsibidi* signs as derivatives are analysable.

The study has achieved its set objectives. It has enlarged and improved the local ceramic design content. It is obvious through the study that ceramics is an important vehicle for communicating cultural information. The study has presented a new frontier of sources of inspiration for creative ceramic forms. Unlike the use of *Nsibidi* as decorative motifs as was discovered since the 4th Century (Endangered Alphabets, 2018 – 2020; and Onyeakagbu, 2020); the work has created a new vista which is resolving the scripts into ceramic forms. It was a conscious attempt at enhancing and expanding the local ceramic design content and should be viewed as such.

Recommendations

The study recommends that as ceramists continue in their creative search, they should not lose sight of the motifs from their local

environments. The link between the audience (public), environment and the ceramic artist should be conveyed by the use of striking traditional symbols. The ceramics artist should endeavour to re-socialize the society through traditional symbols. The symbols in the artist's locality should be adequately popularised and propagated, via their visibility in art forms. This should go beyond the frontiers of their cultural origins and traditional usages. In view of the saying that to be absolutely traditional means that one is not yet out of the cave, and to be totally modern is to accept that one is a poor cultural bearer: There should be a blend of traditionalism and modernism in order to strike a balance. This would curb the problem of receiving too much from outside at the detriment of what is inside. Therefore, Ceramics artists should study others' people's cultures and symbols in order to relate professional experiences realistically with the ceramists' own environments. Thus, the Natural Synthesis upon which the study was anchored should be adopted by artists, especially those of African origin.

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