

A REVIEW OF 20TH CENTURY CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POTTERY

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Abstract

Contemporary ceramics in Nigeria assumed a new dimension towards the end of the 20th century. What used to be a mere celebration of western ideals, particularly in surface treatment of forms, has hitherto come to terms with the very source from which it was created. Such treatments which had more inclination to the westernized style of pottery decoration now possesses unique characters reminiscent of its traditional origin. It is the object of this paper to highlight this new development using the exhibitions of Craft Potters Association of Nigeria (CPAN) held between 1996 and 2005, and determines what future it has for contemporary Nigerian pottery.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, ceramics in Nigeria has continued to grow from its traditional origin to modern creative expressions. The early expressions were derived from a tradition that can be traced to the late stone age (period of Nok and Igbo-Ukwu culture) which was later influenced by the introduction of ceramics curriculum in Nigerian tertiary institutions in mid 20th century.

The works of the early ceramists who had undergone training in these institutions marked the transition from traditional to contemporary artistic expressions in Nigeria. Because their creations were still inspired by the traditional art styles, the new expressions gave rise to a blend of the old and new. But by the late 20th century the new synthesis had become so popular with dominant traditional artistic styles that signals a return of the contemporary Nigerian pottery to its traditional origin.

Mid 20th Century Contemporary Nigerian Pottery

Change is the hallmark of the contemporary experience in the area of pottery as in other creative activities. Nigerian contemporary pottery has never remained static but has continued to change in line with the prevailing artistic climate in Nigeria and the world over. Contemporary Nigerian pottery like in most parts of the world developed from traditional pottery culture which has continued to influence its growth even in modern times. It is thus an innovation based on traditional pottery.

In the mid 20th century, Nigerian contemporary pottery received a great stimulus as a creative venture when the Abuja pottery centre was established in 1951 in what was then Abuja but now Suleja, based on a request made to the government of Northern Nigeria in 1950 by Michael Cardew on the need to set up a modern pottery centre at Abuja (Cardew, 1974, Wangboje, 1982:96 & Onuzulike 2004:43). Before this time pottery in Nigeria was essentially the traditional type with its limitations in terms of techniques, equipment and tools used. This development exposed Nigerian populace to the professionalism and artistic possibilities inherent in pottery and its potentiality in nation building. Consequently the Nigerian government became aware of the need to introduce ceramics into the curriculum of Nigerian tertiary institutions in the early 1960s; notably Zaria art school followed by University art department at Nsukka.

Abuja pottery centre was thus a giant stride towards the development of contemporary Nigerian pottery. "With the active" financial "support of the then northern government of Nigeria Abuja has proved to be a centre for a thriving pottery industry" (Wangboje, 1982:96). Michael Cardew, the founder of the centre observed that Nigerian traditional potters have a great artistic potential which could be harnessed by exposing them to a well attested technical and artistic apprenticeship system incorporating modern tools and techniques such as clay testing, kiln construction and firing, construction and use of the potter's wheel etc. According to Cardew (1969: xiii) the idea is to develop and nurse a style which is capable of producing improved table wares "for the rich and the rising middle class civil servants", and which can stand competition from the imported ones, thereby "protecting the indigenous women potters from exploitation". Therefore, the Abuja pottery centre was an attempt to marry tradition and modernity. It was in Abuja that the famous traditional potter Ladi Kwali, was trained, whose contribution in the development of traditional pottery will ever be remembered in the history of ceramics in Nigeria (Akinbogun 2009:90). For instance, "she was awarded the Silver Award of Excellence during the 10th International Exhibition of Ceramic Art held at the Smithsonian Institute Washington D.C. in 1963" (Wangboje, 1982:96).

An important aspect of the Abuja project by Michael Cardew is the application of glazes in the decoration of pots. Perhaps it was in Abuja that the use of glaze to decorate pots appeared for the first time in the history of Nigerian pottery. Another aspect is the fact that the project came at a time when Nigerian independence was being expected; a time when there was the inner necessity for Nigerians in all walks of life to rediscover their roots, to forge an identity that is distinguishably African. This naturally sharpened the creative insight of the contemporary potters and raised the level of their works in line with the new development. There was a revolutionary change from their basically western orientation to the new consciousness that was deeply rooted in the synthesis of old and new. They worked very hard indeed to propagate this new consciousness as was the case with those in other creative arts.

"The inauguration of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) in 1964" and the Ceramics Association of Nigeria (CerAN) later in September 27, 1986 are "important for the realization of the role" the contemporary potters like their counterparts in other areas of the plastic arts "must play in the contemporary society" (Okeke, 1979:13). The Ceramics Association of Nigerian was perhaps the first important body in contemporary Nigeria to bring together all the creative potters. It was at this time that the contemporary potters began to appear perhaps for the first time in contemporary Nigerian art scene. Among them are B.N. Igwilo, I.A. Ukaegbe, Abbas M. Ahuwan, O.K.Oyeoku, Emeka Arinze, Emma Okuna and Chike Ebebe who incidentally were the pioneer professionals that "initiated and attempted to carry on the ethos of the association" (Onuzulike 2004:46). Their contributions are no doubt relevant to the radical departure from the western orientation that characterized contemporary Nigerian pottery in early 20th century.

Late 20th Century Contemporary Nigerian Pottery

As mentioned earlier, the mid 20th century witnessed a generation of creative potters, potters who searched for new ideas and sought to resolve them through their works. Their works were above mere attempts at achieving the likeness of what they had observed but realized in practical terms deeply felt ideas, ideas that bear relevance to the contemporary issues at that time. For instance, apart from the new consciousness brought by independence, the collapse of the first republic and the

Nigerian civil war also posed new challenges for the creative minds. However, it is apparent that the central focus was the integration of old and new which presupposes the acceptance of change as a means of achieving dynamism in art.

Now, with the introduction of ceramics curriculum into more tertiary institutions in Nigeria, more creative potters began to emerge in Nigerian art scene which led to the proliferation of pottery centres in different parts of the country. Notable among them include Jakaranda and Maraba pottery in Kaduna, Dajo pottery in Benue State, Century Ceramics in Enugu State. Capital ceramics in Niger State. etc. Thus between 1970 and 1980 many new potters appeared in the scene whose divergent views and styles of work reflected the new awareness. These young experimentalists and fertile minds particularly from Nsukka art school and the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu were well known, among whom are Chris Echeta, Tonny Umunna, Bridget Egbeji and many others.

The inauguration of the Craft Potters Association of Nigeria (CPAN) in February 7, 1996 is another important event in the history of contemporary pottery in Nigeria. It is important because after the death of the Ceramics Association of Nigeria (CerAN) as far back as 1990, there was no other body that could bring together the contemporary potters. It came at a time when it was mostly needed. Onuzulike (2004:46) notes that it was the collaborative effect of Joy Voisey and Ben Drew (British Potters) who were working in Maiduguri, Borno State in Nigeria under the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) programme that led to the inauguration of the Craft Potters Association. According to Onuzulike, it was during this period that Joy Voisey observed the state of “underdevelopment of modern ceramics in Nigeria, in spite of the rich material and creative potentials of the country”, which “prompted her to think about contributing her time, energy and initiative to change the situation to the better”. In order to evaluate the artistic progress within the dark period and to keep track of the development of ceramics in Nigeria, the association decided to be organizing exhibitions for its members annually, and this has been the tradition since its inception in 1996. CPAN is therefore an association of exhibiting contemporary Nigerian potters. One thing unique about the exhibition is the integration of seminars, workshops and excursions during which technical issues that hinder the growth and practice of ceramics in Nigeria are discussed. Participation was open to all categories of potters – lecturers, industrialists, students and even the local potters. However, this Association went into extinction in 2006 which limited this paper to 2005.

The author of this paper has actively participated in four exhibitions organized by CPAN which has afforded him the opportunity to study the works of the potters. The range of works, in terms of style and interpretation of themes has been comparatively broad and reflective of the new art culture in Nigeria. Its scope, in terms of participation has also been quite extensive covering every part of the nation. A report by Joy Voisey, one of the curators, on the first National Exhibition of Nigerian Contemporary Ceramics, held in 1996, shows that:

In all, four potteries and 35 individual potters took part from all over Nigeria, some traveling over 600 kilometres to get to Kaduna. More than 800 works were shown at the exhibition, and the diversity emphasized the talent which abounds. A sample of the remarks from the visitors' book underlines public reaction: “An eye opener to the creative talents around us”: “An outstanding display that has brought ceramic activities to fore in this country”: “I am glad this has happened in my life time”. Papers were read on “Gas Freezing problems when firing kilns”, “Sourcing and Refining Rocks and Minerals”, and “What is African Art”?, and the discussions that followed were both lively and

informative. The spirit engendered during the week had culminated in the formation of an association for Nigerian potters. A steering committee was elected, and planning for the next exhibition is already underway.

Such was the feature of the first Exhibition of contemporary Nigerian Ceramics held at the British Council, Kaduna in February, 1996. The show was not only “an eye-opener to the creative talents around us” but also an optimistic pointer for the future of ceramics in Nigeria. The following potters have featured prominently in CPAN exhibitions since 1996:

Alex Okoeguale, Alasan Shaibu, Ibude Ikechukwu, Ohimai John, Uzzi Festus, Cuthbert Ilika, Esther Dokyoung, Suzi Shok, Dahiru Makama, Vincent Ali, Okpan Oyeoku, Fatima Bello, Jide Ayodele, Rosemary Tuhemba, Akintunde Oke, Sam Egbadho, Jerimiah Tuhemba, David Olukotun, Habila Gukas, Joseph Gajere, Dave Ampah, Abbas Ahuwan, Sanusi Abdulkadir, Umar Sullayman, Bridget Egbeji, Margaret Mama, Ozioma Onuzulike, Eric Opoku, James Ewule, Umaru Aliyu, Elizabeth Ewule, Mic Aluwong, Adele Garkida, Ruth Yeruna, Levi Yakubu, Rhoda Yusuph, Odesanmi Bayode, Tony Ogogo, etc.

These are generation of creative potters whose well enlightened views on art and life encompass and transcend those of the traditional and the transitional schools; whose works reflect their personal and private views of art and life; who are searching for the theoretical basis of their artistic existence which, indeed, is the total vision of artists in the fast changing world. Their motivation is cerebral not purely emotive. This is why they have of necessity evolved individual symbols and icons which inform their work. And so, the concept of Art for art’s sake finds wide acceptance among this class of contemporary potters.

An important development in the late 20th century contemporary Nigerian pottery as observed in each of the exhibitions, which every potter in Africa and Nigeria in particular, must help to propagate as a means of moving out completely from the enslavement of the westernized style of pottery decoration that has over the years characterized African contemporary pottery, is the deviation from the conventional method of pottery decoration whereby glaze application forms the ultimate means of enhancing the surface qualities of pottery. Ceramics has often been looked upon from a wider perspective as the creation of objects that exhibit unrivalled characteristic smooth surface that is impervious to water and glassy in appearance. Glaze application has over the years remained the only medium through which to achieve these qualities. Thus African contemporary potters became grossly influenced by this formalistic Europeanized style to the detriment of the indigenous concept that is rooted in African ideology not only in form but also in surface treatment of pottery.

But now, the trend has shifted from glaze application to total or partial exploitation of the natural colour of the fired clay body in surface treatment of the form by finishing the production at the “bisque” stage. The potters are beginning to discourage the impression that unless a pot is glazed it cannot be good enough for household use. The ware is either glazed partly or not glazed at all and still retains its functions. For instance, wares for household use such as bowls, mugs, jugs, water storage containers, etc, have only their inside glazed so that they can still be used to serve liquid items without the problems created by porosity. (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5).

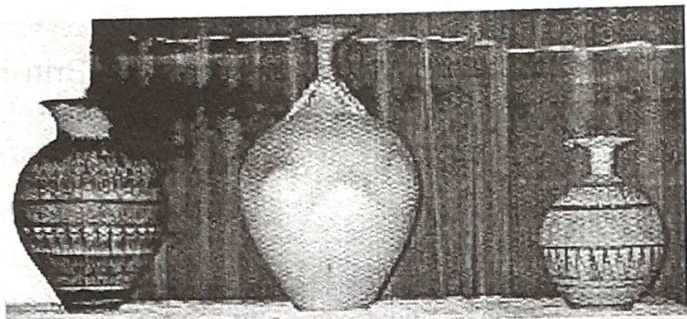


Figure 1: Some of the exhibits during the 1996 Craft Potters Association of Nigeria's Exhibition (Courtesy: Ceramic Voice 1996, Issue 5, Page 5).



Figure 2: Produced by Margaret Mama, the Director of Jacaranda pottery. Here she admires her unglazed stoneware decorated with engobe. (Courtesy: Ceramic Voice 1997, No,7, Page 6).



Figure 3: Glazed pots decorated with engobe exhibited by Gwari pottery (Courtesy: Ceramic Voice 2003 Issue 14, Page 4)

However, in order to create variations as a way of breaking the monotonous bisque surface, the surface of the ware is further enhanced by linear treatment consisting of incision, sgraffito and the popular terrasingillata. It is also important to note that majority of the exhibits were burnished and low fired using either the traditional or modern method or even a combination of both in order to exploit the rich tonal effect created by wood burning without loosing the glossy burnished surface.

In his newspaper report on CPAN exhibition held at Goethe Institute, Lagos in 1998, Onuzulike echoes this development:

“Although ceramists from Zaria explored individual attitudes and sensibilities (with of course, some over lapping ideas here and there), most of their works are essentially carbonized pots, fired by the traditional open-air firing. A good number of the ceramists from Zaria appear to have turned to traditional mode of pottery production, but with an interesting tinge of modernist voice”.

Indeed, the trend reveals a total departure from the modern method of pottery decoration with less emphasis on glaze application.



Figure 4: Pot from Maraba pottery by Umaru Aliyu showing glazed stoneware with surface enhanced by linear treatment consisting of incision and sgraffito revealing the clay body. (Courtesy: Ceramic Voice 1997 Issue 7, Page14).

The protagonists of this ideology include Tony Ogogo, Margaret Mama of Jakaranda pottery and Umaru Aliyu of Maraba pottery. Others include Gukas Habila, Abbas Ahuwan, Cuthbert Ilika, Rosemary Ojugbana, Okpan Oyeoku, Adele Garkida, Ashinze Obata, Sam Egbadho, Umar ullaيمان, John Ohimai, Eric Opoku, Elizabeth Ewule, Ozioma Onuzulike, Vincent Ali and Ibude Ikechukwu.

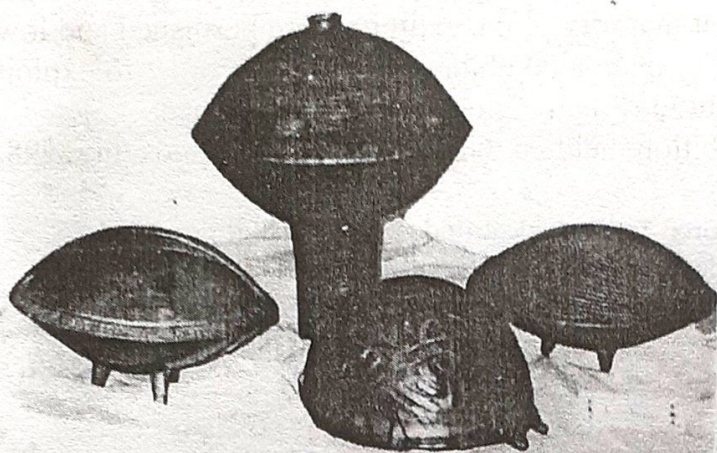


Figure 5: “Contemporary works by Dr. Abbas Ahuwan showing his strong links to traditional pottery. The works are unglazed, simple in form and pattern-allowing the clay to dominate” (Courtesy: *Ceramic Voice* 1997, Issue 7 Page 11)

Commenting on the works of the individual potters which celebrate the new creative development, Onuzulike in the same article reports:

While Adele Garkida explores abstracted feminist forms, sensitively burnished to a very smooth feel, Abbas Ahuwan and Umar Sullayman activate the surfaces of their equally burnished pots through the employment of profuse incisions and a very thoughtful use of sprigs or embossed decorative motifs. Sullayman has married these decorative techniques successfully in his elegant forms titled sprigged alter tusk”. The poetic interplay of reduced and oxidized areas of the pots produced very emotional sensibilities that offer a lasting impact on viewers’ mind. This same effect is found in the pots by Eric Opoku and Elizabeth Ewule.

The Future of Contemporary Nigerian Pottery

However, the new approach is rather not surprising, for the Nigerian contemporary potters like their counterparts in the visual arts, should as a necessity be part of the struggle towards the search and maintenance of African identity through art. After all the environment in which an artist works largely dictates the conceptual framework that gives birth to his creations. No wonder the works are reflective of the techniques of Nigerian traditional pottery, for instance, the popular Ladi Kwali techniques. Therefore, the stone which the builders rejected, “the same is become the head of the corner”. (Matthew 21:42)

In fact, this trend is a welcome development because Nigerian contemporary potters, especially the future generation potters, have a lot to benefit from it. Apart from fashioning a course for Nigerian contemporary ceramics, it has the advantage of reducing some of the problems that hinder the practice of pottery, particularly those associated with the use of glazes, as potters can now work independent of glazes and still achieve the desired aesthetics and functionality. Above all, it has

the added advantage of encouraging the growth and establishment of cottage pottery industries in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Contemporary ceramics in Nigeria has in its effort to march to maturity employed a lot of diverse elements both local and modern. In fact what started as a mere celebration of western ideas in the mid 20th century has at the end of the century grown into a revolutionary struggle to achieve and maintain an enduring and more lasting identity. This fact is borne out of the diverse views and techniques of production anchored in the concept of the synthesis of the old and new as amplified in the works of this generation potters. It can therefore be affirmed that contemporary ceramics in Nigerian has grown and will continue to grow in harmony with the goals which the creative potters have set for themselves and the society at large.

Finally, the rate at which the trend is being embraced by Nigerian potters shows our consciousness towards carving a future for contemporary Nigerian ceramics. Let us, therefore, not allow this spirit to die.

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