

CONTEXTUALIZING GENDER ROLES IN POTTERY PRODUCTION AMONG SOME NIGERIAN CULTURAL GROUPS

BAKINDE C. O.

Department of Archaeology
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
clemolubak@yahoo.com

Abstract

Gender is neither about male nor female stereotypes but about assigning roles to people within the society and/or a cultural group. A cultural group is an aggregation of people living in a congruous geographical setting and in most cases speaking a common language. Cultural groups in most instances assign roles to individuals within the society based on their gender. Thus it is quite easy to see men in all human society playing different roles from those of women. This differential in roles among the genders affects pottery production. Pottery production is one of the earliest pastimes of people in all traditional societies all over the world. In each society the potters differs from one gender to the other based on their traditions and cultural practices. While in some society's it is the prerogative of men to produce pots, in some other societies it is the women occupation or a mixture of the two genders in some other society. This paper looks at pottery production in traditional societies within the Nigerian cultural space using the Yoruba, Tiv, Igbo and Hausa cultural groups as case studies. The paper is of the opinion that religious belief systems in any cultural group play a major role in the gender of those responsible for the production of ceramic wares. Also the religious belief system of the people to a great extent determines the type of pottery produced by the potters. This stems from the fact that in most traditional societies pottery production is instigated by ritual needs apart from other vital needs such as storage, cooking and general utilitarian purposes.

Introduction

The production of ceramics wares follows basically the same processes in almost all human societies from the earliest times till the present age. However the type of vessels produced differ from one cultural group to the other based on several factors such as their immediate needs as well as the availability of raw materials for the production of the vessel. In some societies men are responsible for pottery production while in some others, it is the women or an admixture of both in some other societies (Gosslain n.d).

There is also gender specific role associated with production processes from one cultural group to the other. In fact in some societies most especially in northern Nigeria, there are some vessel types that women are not allowed to produce. Thus, a correct view of

gender role is very important in understanding the processes involved in pottery production from one cultural group to another. Fundamental to this gender role is the religious belief system of each cultural group. Thus in all human societies, there is a strong linkage between pottery production, religious belief systems and gender roles. In order to properly contextualize the role played by gender in pottery production, there is a need for an overview of the term gender and gender studies.

Gender studies are a social theory that involves the study of gender roles, gender division of labour and the embodiment of gender identity. Gender does not relate to sex alone as biological, but deals with social constructs based on race, class, ethnicity, status and roles within a given society. Thus

gender is the socially or culturally constructed sex – role identity that emphasizes the distinctions between male and female as well as the cultural interpretation of sexual difference that results in the categorization of individuals, artifacts, spaces and bodies. The words gender and sex are often used interchangeably, but sex relates specifically to the biological, physical characteristics which make a person male or female at birth, while gender refers to the behaviours associated with the members of that sex (Gilchrist 1999: xv).

Gender roles in Pottery Production Processes

Pottery making has been viewed as a swing activity which is sometimes associated with males, and at other times with females (Arnold 1985). In all facets of pottery production, gender roles are prominently at play in all human societies. The allocation of pottery making to one sex or the other in any given society is affected by three main factors. First is the compatibility of pottery making with household tasks within the society. Secondly, the subsequent female advantage in making pottery as opposed to other forms of activities such as farming. Thirdly, the male involvement in other subsistence activities such as farming which may require time away from his residence (Arnold 1985).

The importance of pottery in the traditional setting cannot be overemphasized as it plays a vital role in their daily life. For instance, before the introduction of plastic and metal containers people relied heavily on earthenware vessels for most of their domestic activities. The function of pottery in its traditional setting could be seen in three broad categories; storage, processing – this includes various cooking methods and transfer – which includes serving and eating (Orton et al 1993). Thus, the function a vessel is expected to serve by the society will to a great extent determine the type of vessel to be made. In primitive societies for instance, pottery was the primary material used for water storage, fetching of water from the various streams and for cooking meals on a daily basis. Apart from the above they also made use of pottery on all their special ceremonies such as marriages, burials or chieftaincy title celebrations as pots were

used to convey the drinks to the arena of celebration on these occasions.

Traditionally pottery production follows five distinct stages. The first stage deals with the procurement of the clay. Among the Igbo's of Southeastern Nigeria, potters – who are women -obtain their clay from the riverbanks from depths of about 2 to 3 m, or even more, with cutlasses, hoes and at times with shovels. According to Okpoko (2006) who based his research findings on potters from Inyi, Aguleri and Owerre–Ezekala, the procurement of the clay is based primarily on its plasticity as well as the nearness or otherwise of the clay source or sources to the potters. As a result of the depth of the matrix from which the clays are obtained, men are usually employed by the potters to excavate the clay from the riverbank. After digging the clay out from the riverbank, the women would normally transport them to their work station.

In manufacturing their wares the Igbo potters make use of “big clay bowl for soaking the clay; mortar and pestle used for grinding potsherds into grog. A wooden board is at times used in mixing the clay and grog materials used for making a pot include clay, an inverted shoulder and neck of a broken pot which acts as a stand and a trimming knife or a sharp – edged object ...decorative tools include pebbles, pieces of calabash or coconut shells for burnishing; cylindrical objects, carved or made of twisted frond/cord, used as roulette; a hollow stick possessing two projections, used for grooving; a spatula or sharp pointed stick used for incision; net and sack for impression”, (Okpoko 2006).

The potters most especially those from Inyi makes use of two types of clays in manufacturing their pots; *uloocha* ('white' clay) and *ulooji* ('black clay'). These two clays are independently dried in the sun after which they are then soaked in water for between 12 and 24 hours. Then both are mixed together and puddle. As this process continues water is added to the clay which becomes softened; unwanted particles are removed from it and ground potsherds (grog) is added to the clay as temper (Okpoko 2006).

Among the Yoruba, using the Okun people as case study with particular reference to Ife and Ogga pottery centres, Bakinde (2007a) and

Akinade (1995) said the clays were collected from some quarries within the locality of the present settlement such as Esaghara, Teku and Addo in Ife – Ijumu, and from river beds such as Obe Lolo and Isale Obe for Oga. The potters in Okunland are women as that happens to be their specialty but not on a fulltime basis. These clays are then transported to the factory site or work station where the pots are to be manufactured. The process of making the pot is carried out at the potter's work station, usually under a tree near the house of the potter or at her backyard. There are no special buildings designated for pottery-making. Before the pots are made, the clay has to be treated to a homogenous mass. This treatment is carried out in order to remove all the impurities in the clay. The treatment of clay to a homogenous mass is usually done with the potter treading on the clay until it acquires a plastic state to the potter's heart desire. In carrying out this treatment, water is usually added to the clay depending on the state of hardness of the clay to be treated. If the clay is too plastic, fillers are added to make it more malleable.

Among the Tiv people of the Benue valley according to Ndera (2006), the clay locally called *inya – tyu*, used for pottery production is mostly mined near the villages engaged in pottery production in shallow valleys by the potters. After the clays have been mined they are brought home and soaked in water for about 3 or 4 days in large pots, unused buckets, basins and in mortars that are no longer suitable for pounding yam. This is done so as to remove lumps and work the clay into a plastic and homogenous mass suitable for moulding vessels.

After the clay has been treated to a homogenous mass, the potter moves to the next stage of forming the ware. The people have two basic methods of forming pots. The first method has to do with hand modelled pots while the second is called the coiling or slabbing method. Under the second method, the potter will normally move round the pot being made as layers of clay are being placed over the previous ones. This is the common method of manufacturing pots among the people as none of the people interviewed could produce hand modelled wares. As a result of the fact that the system of pot manufacture is not regularized by the use of

template or even the wheel, vessels manufactured in traditional societies are always irregular in shape. The size and shape of the pots to be manufactured is determined by their functional utility.

The coiling or slabbing method is carried out by taking well prepared plastic clay and rolling it on a flat surface until it forms a somewhat cylindrical shape like a sausage roll. After this shape has been achieved, it is squeezed between thumbs and fingers so that it becomes thinner at the two ends. The tapering of the ends is a deliberate action aimed at making it easy for the potter to use the clay more effectively. The pots are made beginning with the making of a base for the pot. This base is made from a ball of clay formed in the palm of the potter and pressed flat on a board until it is a little more than about 6mm thick. This base is then placed on a square board of wood of about 20cm wide. After the base has been formed, the addition of a number of rings of coiled clay of the same circumference as the base layer after layer follows. Once a ring is added to the base, it is flattened with a wooden paddle in order to make it look homogenous with the initial base material. This process of adding layer after layer of coiled clay continues until the final stage in the forming process is reached. When this process is being carried out, that is the process of building the wall of the pot, the inner side of the pot is smoothed by smearing the coils together before and after flattening the outside with the wooden paddle.

After the pots are manufactured, they are allowed to cool and dry out under a regulated atmospheric condition. This is done by placing the manufactured wares in a well-ventilated room without much exposure to the adverse atmospheric conditions such as excessive sunshine or rainfall. Once the pots get to the leather-hard stage, decorations are applied. The type of decoration applied depends on what the potter wants to achieve both functionally and aesthetically.

If the pots are to be used for ritual activities as among the Tiv people of central Nigeria, then the emblem of the society is applied on the vessel at this stage. Also among the Yoruba the type of decoration applied on the vessel is indicative of the purpose the vessel was meant to serve. If for instance, it is for general

purposes then the decoration applied would not be complicated but simple decorations such as roulette or grooves. However, when the vessels are to be used for ritual purposes then zoomorphic and anthropomorphic decorations are added. Thus, based on the face value of the vessel, the probable function(s) of the vessel could be gleaned from their decorations. In Hausaland, pottery used for burial are in most cases undecorated. This might not be unconnected with the fact that there is always a readymade market for such pots at the various cemeteries and there was no need for aesthetics on the vessels since they are to be buried with the dead anyway.

The third stage after the decorations have been applied is that of firing. Firing is carried out after the pots have dried out under a regulated atmospheric condition. This is achieved by placing palm fronds round about the pots to be fired after the pots have been placed on logs of wood in the forest zone region while in the savannah and sahel region corn stalks are mostly placed on the logs of wood. This reduces the amount of oxygen that could come into contact with the wares to be fired. The firing could be done a day after the pots were manufactured or kept for a long time before it goes for firing. The firing arena is usually about 1m in diameter. The firing arena is usually demarcated using small stone boulders. Also, in some cases the firing arena could be located on a small rock outcrop some few metres away from the village which has a small elliptical depression.

Socio – Cultural Setting of Pottery Production

Pottery production takes place within a socio – cultural setting in all human societies. A lot of factors come into play in deciding the type of wares produced and the people responsible for the production as well as the timing of production. In most societies the production of pottery is seasonal on account of it having conflicting interests with subsistence activities. Thus, the primacy of agricultural tasks whereby all the members of the household would be required to help in the fields undermines the ability of potters to produce pottery all the year round. Also, the inclement weather during raining season will adversely affect its production (Arnold 1985).

Therefore, in most traditional societies in Africa, pottery production activity is mainly practiced during the dry season (January to April). For instance, Hausa potters, just like their counterparts in Southern Niger republic, are of the view that this time of the year is more appropriate, as there are no agricultural works in the farm to be carried out. Also, they opined that the clay sources are accessible during this period and the fuel for firing vessels is drier. Many clarify that they may also work at other times, albeit on a purely casual basis, (Gosslain, n. d)

Just like in Hausaland, Okpoko (2006) reported that in Igboland, 'pots are manufactured in commercial quantities mainly during the dry season'. This is because during the raining season, the potters might not be able to get enough firewood to fire their pots as they use open firing technique. Also the women are engaged in farming activities during the raining season since they are mostly part time potters. This notwithstanding, the potters produce small vessels that could dry easily during the raining season.

The same scenario is reported for the Tiv by Ndera (2006). He maintained that the Tiv potters of Shitire produce their vessels mainly during the dry season when there is less farm work for the women. Also in Tivland the women are not full time potters but they combine their potting tradition with farming activities.

Among the Yoruba, there is no time specific for pottery production. Thus, it is a tradition carried out all the year round. However much prominence is given to pottery production during the dry season as the potters are not at this time of the year at the mercy of the elements.

Tracing Cultural Boundaries through Pottery

Here, two categories of pottery are considered; in the first category are vessels for everyday usage in terms of fetching water or water storage as well as for cooking. In the second category are vessels meant for special purposes, in this instance vessels meant for religious and cultural purposes. Vessels in each of these categories could be used for demarcating cultural, social and environmental boundaries.

The formation of a pottery type is precipitated on the functions such a vessel is envisaged to perform. Apart from utilitarian functions each linguistic group have cultural functions in which pottery perform important roles. As such the cultural practices of the people dictate the type of vessels to produce. Thus, the cultural boundary of each linguistic group could be traced through the type of vessels manufactured by them (Bakinde 2007b). Apart from the cultural practices of the people, the decoration of the vessels could serve as a useful guide into the demarcation of the various linguistic groups.

The Tiv people for instance, have the same pattern of pottery tradition. Their decorations among other things include emblems which has deep cultural significance to them. These emblems are depicted on specialized pots associated with *igbe* and *akombo – adam* rituals. Thus among the Tiv people once pots with this type of emblem are discovered it has a lot of cultural and religious significance to them. The pots used for these rituals are always decorated with knitted net impression or carved wooden roulette with perforation apart from the emblem of the occultic group. What differentiates these ritual pots from all the other Tiv pot types are mainly the emblems depicted on them with other decorations.

It is instructive to note that the *Igbe* cult among the Tiv is believed to have the power of cleansing the land if the *Mbasav* people had caused havoc on the land. Also the knitted net impression is uniquely symbolic to the Tiv people and to some extent the people of Northern Igboland. Thus this type of decoration could be used to demarcate the geographical spread of the Tiv people as the Igbo knitted net impression do not have any emblem attached (Ndera 2006).

Also among the Hausa, there is a specialized type of pot associated with burials. Hausa burial basically is based on Islamic burial practices. Thus, the dead is buried facing the east. The pots used for burials are large pots manufactured in most cases without decorations on them. They are used to cover the dead after they have been buried. The pots in most cases are about 50cm in height and about 39cm in circumference. For each

burial about three or four pots are used as cover for the dead. In each burial, the dead person is placed on the ground, covered with a white cloth and the pots placed on top of the dead from the head to the toe. Thus areas used for burials are always associated with the deposition of a lot of pottery materials so as to make them readily available during burials.

Among the Igbo, most especially people of Ezeagu, two specialized pottery types could be inferred which separate them from the other cultural groups. In the first instance is the *Ngala ozo* pots made for traditional title holders. This is a miniature pot with handle and a poorly burnished appearance. *Ngala Ozo* pots always come with perforated mouth and an inverted rim with grooved lip. On the body of the pots are U – shaped impressed decorations round the neck with double horizontal incision lines round the body (Ibeanu 1992). These are vessels specially manufactured for traditional title holders for the washing of their hands.

The second pottery type is that called *ite owoko* or *ite odo*. These are vessels for water storage which also form part of the bridal wealth of the people of *Ezeagu*. The *ite owoko* pots have well marked neck with funnel – shaped profile and inverted rim with grooved lip. Apart from the grooves, net impressions of between 7mm – 1cm spacing is the predominant body decorations with thumb impressions round the neck, possibly in the fashion of necklace/ beads worn by Igbo women (Ibeanu 1992).

Among the Yoruba, Fatunsi (1992) assert that ritual and ceremonial pots can easily be differentiated based on the decorations depicted on them. Ritual and ceremonial vessels among the Yoruba are characteristically decorated with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic symbols and instruments of traditional worship. These pots are referred to as *aawe* by the Northern Yoruba people and as *otun* by the southern Yoruba people. These ritual pots are usually kept at the shrine because they are used for storing important worship items such as sacred water and pebbles. They are also used as containers for storing medicinal or magical preparations called locally *esi*, which is believed to have the capacity of warding off

epidemics in the land or for bringing good luck and well being to the citizens of the land (Fatunsi 1992).

Discussion

The role assigned each individual in the society is based on their biological sex. This applies to pottery production in all human societies. The gender role assigned is based on the premise that pottery production is primarily a household craft. Most societies assign pottery production to women because the females tend to be closely attached to the household on account of the requirements of pregnancy, infant care and other household tasks (Arnold 1985).

Apart from gender, the role inferred in pottery production is also based on the religious belief system of the cultural group in question. In traditional societies, the worship of traditional gods is the norm, for which specialized pots were produced for use during their religious obligation to the gods. Thus pottery has been used as a means of cultural change and/or practice when they are employed for rituals and cultural ceremonies (Arnold 1985). There are various categories of ritual vessels. At the first level, there are vessels used for ritual offering. Among the Northern Yoruba this type of vessel is called *Awodin*. It is a specialized form of pottery wherein objects for sacrifice are placed and the vessel deposited at T-junctions at the dead of the night (Bakinde 2007a). Also among the Yako people of Cross River in eastern Nigeria, pottery is used in ritual by the male lineage head (Arnold 1985).

Another form of ritual pottery are those produced as special containers used for ritual, eating and drinking activities. Among the Northern Yoruba group for instance are vessels specifically produced for this purpose. In this regard *Ogaa* and *Agba* comes to mind. These are vessels produced for serving liquor during traditional festivals. *Ogaa* is used for serving wine during marriage ceremonies while *Agba* is used during other ceremonies such as chieftaincy and burial ceremonies (Bakinde 2007a).

Additionally there are ritual needs that permanently remove ceramics from use. The most obvious of this is the practice of placing ceramics in burials. Among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, the dead are buried with large pots based principally on their Islamic

belief system. In carrying out the burial, the dead is placed in the grave facing the East. Then sand from the ground is poured on the dead after which large pots specifically manufactured for the purpose are placed on top of the dead before the corpse is finally covered up.

Finally, in societies that have embraced either Christianity or Islam, the type of pots they produced is also reflected in their religious belief system. Thus, religious belief system of a cultural group plays an important role in the type pottery produced and the type of gender that produce them.

Apart from their belief system, gender roles have a deep underlying factor in pottery production in most Nigerian societies. In central Hausaland most of the potters are men while in other places such as Bauchi area women are allowed to produce some types of pottery. Even at that, there are some specialized vessels called *Tulu* that women are not allowed to produce on account of the manner in which they spread their legs wide open during the production process (Giade 2016 Per. Comm.). In Yorubaland, Igboland and Tivland, the potters are mainly women even though the men might help in digging the wares from the matrix at the riverbank.

The prominence given women in pottery production within most cultural groups in Nigeria might not be unconnected with the fact that pottery production as has been stated elsewhere is an household craft. The women are more domesticated than the men on account of the biological nature of women with regards to pregnancy, childbearing and other household chores. As such they tend to be more inclined in pottery production than men.

Apart from religious consideration, societies where agricultural practice of slash and bush burning is predominant have women as the main producers of pottery. This is based on the fact that land clearing and burning tends to be a masculine task which is usually carried out in the dry season which sets the women free to engage in their pastime of pottery making in their backyards when the men are away in the fields (Arnold 1985). Consequently, the role assigned individuals within any society could be based not only on

the gender of the people but on the environmental situation confronting the people as well as their ideational orientation. The religious belief of the people in most cases greatly influence the roles assigned each of the gender groups in pottery production.

Conclusion

Pottery or ceramics is in most cases interrelated with other aspects of culture. Therefore it can provide information about those other aspects of culture. Thus, ceramics could potentially be used to infer and reconstruct the non – ceramics aspects of culture such as gender roles within the society. Therefore engendered changes in ceramic production process reveal changes in

the culture of the society being studied (Arnold 1985). Ceramics it should be noted are related to the area in which they were manufactured through the material used for the pottery fabric. Thus from the study of pottery the changing pattern of the people of the land could be ascertained. The role each individual plays in the process of ceramics making are based on the ideational orientation of the society being studied as well as their cultural practices. Because art production is inextricably linked to belief systems, social relationships, and behaviours, it does make a difference in our reading of history to understand and reconstruct what women have made as well as what men have made (Berns 1993).

References

- Akinade, O. (1995). Pottery Production at Ogga, Kogi State. *Nigerian Heritage: Journal of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments*. Volume 4, 113 – 123.
- Arnold, D. E. (1985). *Ceramics Theory and Cultural Process*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Bakinde, C. O. (2007a). Ufe Pottery Traditions. *Zaria Journal of Liberal Arts (ZAJOLA)*. A Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 192 – 202.
- Bakinde, C. O. (2007b). Traditional Pottery as a Channel of Group Identity. *ASHAKWU: Journal of Ceramics*. Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 40 – 46.
- Bakinde, C. O. & Assa, A. E. (2008). The need to promote gender archaeology in Nigeria. *Archaeology, Heritage Management and Tourism development in Nigeria, AAN Proceedings, 2007, 77 – 86*
- Berns, M. C. (1993), Art, history, and gender: women and clay in West Africa. *The African Archaeological Review*, 11, 129-148.
- Fatunsi, A. (1992). *Yoruba Pottery*. NCMM Lagos
- Gilchrist, R. (1999). *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past*. Routledge. London and New York.
- Gosselain, O. P. (n. d). Thoughts and Adjustments in the Potter's Backyard
- Ibeanu A. M. (1992); Pottery Function: An indispensable criterion in Igbo Pottery Classification. *Imprints of West Africa's Past. Special Book Issue of West African Journal Of Archaeology*. Vol. 22, 159 – 164.
- Laurie Primmer, T. T. D. (1974); *Pottery Made Simple*. W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd. London.
- Ndera, J. D. (2006). Pottery production in TiMand, Benue Valley of Nigeria: An Ethnoarchaeological Perspective. *Ethnoarchaeology: An African Perspective. ZAP Volume 10*, 112 – 119.
- Okpoko, A. I. (2006). Ethnography and the Archaeological Study of Material Culture. *Ethnoarchaeology: An African Perspective. ZAP Volume 10*, 88 – 111.
- Okpoko, P. U & Okonkwo, E. E. (2008): Pottery Making and Heritage Management in Sukur Kingdom. *Archaeology, Heritage Management and Tourism development in Nigeria, AAN Proceedings, 2007, 127 – 142*.
- Orton, C., Tyers, P., & Vince, A., (1993). *Pottery in Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge