

# POTTERY DECORATION: AN IDENTITY FOR THE AMAI POTTERS OF DELTA STATE

**ABAMWA O.E.**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts  
Delta State University, Abraka

## **ABSTRACT**

*Amai is a village located in Ukwuani Local Government Area. The origin of pottery in Amai is not very clear, although it is one of the earliest communities in Delta state noted or known for the practice of pot making. Also, legendary account maintains that pottery was found in early times of settlement of Amai people. The potters of Amai are locally known for their art forms and method of pot decoration. The designs used as decorations on the pots are geometrically inclined and are aesthetically different from the kinds of decoration used by potters around and within the environs. This method of decoration has given the Amai potters an identity that is peculiar to them. However, this peculiarity needed to be analyzed and documented. This study, therefore, aimed at documenting the Amai pottery forms and their geometric design that serve as decoration. Also, this study finds out why the Amai pottery motifs and method of decoration are different from all other communities where pots are being produced in Delta state.*

## **Introduction**

The word 'pottery' is seen as a general name for all fired clay ware. These range from valuable decorative ware to household utensils and shrine pots. Pottery extends further to include all clay ware that passed through heat treatment and glazing process. Pottery is therefore, directly related to any process that uses silica and heat treatment to make permanent objects of usefulness from earthy materials. The art of pottery is practiced all over the world. It was found to be common sight in developed, developing and undeveloped nations as well as in towns, cities and villages (Egonwa, et. al., 1998). The only plausible reason for the spread of pottery practices all over the world is the presence of abundance of clay.

The art of pottery making started in Egypt and later spread to China, Britain, Korea, Brazil, and Nigeria. In Nigeria, this art is traceable to at least, the fourth millennium BC, (Carlsen, 1965). Being one of the most enduring materials, and its contribution to the growth of society is enormous. In supporting this view, Ajayi (1976) noted that Nigeria has become famous in world culture

through her fine ceramics ware/pottery. In present day, many Nigerian pottery ware of the past occupy a place of honour in the world museums and galleries, especially in Europe.

Nigeria as of now has immense variety of traditions of pot making. Many of pottery traditions are represented in the unique pottery section of the museum at Jos (Ojie 2002). The art of pot making in Nigeria received great stimuli for development as a venture when the Abuja pottery centre was established by the government based on the advice of Michael Cardew, who conducted several researches on pottery in Nigeria. Agberia (2005) confirms this when he said that first trainees of Michael for the now Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre, Abuja were taken from among the women of Kwali village where pot making had been the major practice. It happens that Dr. Ladi Kwali was among the first trainees of Michael Cardew. It was because the researches carried out by him that he was able to find out that there is a village close to Abuja where the art of pot making was being practiced. He used the opportunity to get his first set of students

from people who are already in art of pottery. The fact remains that art of pot making is common to many communities all over the world, because of the simple reason that clay is abundant in the earth's crust as earlier mentioned.

### **The Amai People and the Origin of Pottery**

The origin of pottery in Amai, a town located in Ukwuani Local Government Area of Delta state is not very clear. However, legendary accounts maintain that pottery was founded in the early times of the settlement of Amai people. It was alleged that a fisherman went out to dig pong (Nmgbo) where he was expected to fish during the dry season. In the process of digging the ponds, it was discovered that water collected in the lumps of clay dug out from the pit. After a while these became sticky and the people decided to form pots from the clay collected to replace the formerly used wooden utensils (plate) and calabash for storing liquids (Ojie 2002). Among their first products were small pots for storing water and for cooking. The largest deposit of clay is however found at Ogbu Ezhi stream at Osele quarters in Amai.

The question of firing of the pots for durability was not deliberately planned. It was reported by Ojie (2002) that the process of firing was accidentally discovered when one of the produced pots packed closest to the cooking fires fell into fire, became hardened and baked instead of melting or breaking. It then turned more useful since it can now retain liquid and as well become more durable. Since the introduction of pottery, the problem of the search for calabashes which are grown within the community was solved and the art discovered was welcomed with excitement. As a matter of fact, this new happening helped the industry to grow very fast and demand for products increases. This consequently boosted the pot-making industry so much that it became a full time job for the Osele women of Umuosele quarter in Amai.

Obviously, the Amai potters do produce different pots to serve different purposes as earlier mentioned. No matter the kind of pot and the purpose for their production, the

peculiarity of the finishing by way of decoration is precisely what this study is looking at. This technique of decoration of pots by potters has been with the community, yet not much has been known about it. The problem of lack of documentation has not allowed this unique technique of finishing (decoration) of pots in their production process to be exposed to Nigerians and the world at large. However, from preliminary study made by the author of this paper, it seems it is only in Amai community that the art of pot making is being practiced in the whole of Ukwuani clan. If the above statement is true, why is Amai apparently the only community where pottery production is done among the Ukwuani communities of Delta state? Also, why have the neighbouring villages and towns not learnt this lucrative skill of pot making from the Amai potters? Why is it that the style of the decoration of Amai pottery is not the same with their neighbours such as Isheagu in Aniocha South, the Urhobos of Ethiope East and the Isokos? These are closest pottery centres to Amai. With these differences one is tempted, therefore, to ask these questions about the Amai people and their art of pot production:

1. Why is Amai the only community involved in the art of pot making in Ukwuani clan?
2. Why have other communities within Ukwuani refused to learn the skill of pot making from the Amai potters?
3. Why is Amai pottery decoration different from other pottery traditions?
4. Why are Amai pots decorations not having philosophical meanings?

The research findings in this write-up is based on the answers provided to the questions listed above, and the interviewees cut across different age groups and gender. The questions were thrown open to people of Osele quarters and other natives of the Amai village who came from other quarters where pots are not produced in Amai. The paper is delimited to documentation of the unique decoration technique of the Amai potters.

### **The Need to Decorate Pots**

Hornby (2000) defines decoration as the act of beautifying something with the hope of making it more attractive. Decorations on ceramic/pottery are made either directly on clay surfaces before or after bisque or

glazing. Any application that makes the ware more attractive is simply regarded or known as decoration. There are basically some techniques that a ceramist/potter may apply depending on the purpose the ceramics ware/pot is to serve. Some of these decorations include: clay surface, slip, glaze colour, painting, and sgraffito decoration. The essence of these decorations on clay surfaces is to create different tonal effects of colour harmony and contrast, as well as to eliminate the feeling of monotony. It improves the surface texture of the wares and sometimes helps to compliment the form.

According to Peter (1998) in using slip or engobe for decoration of ceramics wares, one needs to first understand that slip or engobe is a thin slurry of clay base, with an added colouring medium. However, engobe is easily made. The process is to put a lump of clay on the table and then press your thumb into it to form a well. Fill the well with water, then twist a brush around in the hollow until a paste forms. To the paste any choice of oxide can be added to foster a good finishing. When making slip or painting, it is important to have a recipe book because many potters do forget the percentages of components of the recipe they may have used. Unlike paints, oxides in the raw state do not indicate their natural colour or what your fired result will be, but catalogues and lists available from suppliers usually give details of what colour they will fire to. Some oxides are toxic in nature; therefore, one needs to be careful with them.

Sgraffito is another form of decoration that is used by potters. In using this technique, the surface to be worked is painted with engobe and allowed to dry for some time. Thereafter, a motif is sketched on it and scratched to reveal the original surface of the clay. Also, there is another one called impressed decoration. Here, a tool having blunt edge is used to create impression onto the body of the pot to form designs that serves as decoration. There is yet another one that is known as hollowed decoration. Here, a sharp object is used to pierce holes into the body of the wares to form designs.

### **Amai Pots and Techniques of Decoration**

The aesthetic taste of people differs from one person to the other because of cultural groupings and affiliations. When we talk of physical beauty from the point of texture, there are classes of taste which might come to mind, be it smooth or rough surfaces. The smooth textured surfaces are usually soothingly agreeable in touch while rough surfaces are hostile to feel and also generate sharp pin-point impulses that are stimulating to tissue and nerves. This type of texturised feelings are embedded in an art work depending on the design type and media used. Textures can activate our emotional sensations by the action of seeing and feeling. This is why Nwoko (1978) states that in times of emotional stress, man takes recourse and solace in artistic experience to smoothen his nerves to attain maximum relaxation.

Also, Oyewole (1995) discloses that aesthetically, society has been transformed socially because everybody is conscious of the beauty that exists in his environment. Today, many private homes, offices, churches and public places are being decorated with works of art such as paintings, textile materials, sculptural and ceramics pieces, in a bid to beautify such environment for the aesthetic pleasure and comfort of the people. He noted also that designs in art plays vital role in every life of an individual when themes are orderly arranged to achieve a desired effect. In the same vein, Carlsen in Oyewole (2002) says that art designs are planned, arranged for making decorative patterns that are appealing to the eyes and at the same time purposeful in the main ingredients for relaxation.

In achieving these peculiar designs that are appealing to the sense of sight, specific materials and tools are used by the Amai potters for the decoration of their pots. The potters specialized in the production of pots of different sizes and methods of production are not different from the traditional process of hand building known to be coi, slab and pinch. However, the point of interest here is the techniques and tools used for the decoration of the pots produced in Amai. The tools include, wire, wooden spatula (Epama) this is used for smoothening the

inside of pots. There is another tool also that is like a twine-like rope, called Nziza, knotted at close spaces, which is used to create the designs found on the body of pots when the desired shape and weight has been attained. The "Nziza" is placed on the palm of the potter, exacting some degree of energy on the palm, it is rubbed over the outer part of the pot. This process is repeatedly done until impressions have been printed on the body of the pot to form the Amai potters' decoration. Then a native glaze called "Nmna" is rubbed over the body of the pot before bisque firing. The incisions at the mouth of the pot are done with aid of a sharp pointed object and this object could be carved wood or any pointed implement. Then, around the neck region an instrument called "Egayakai" meaning cowries is used to make the incisions as seen in figures 1, 2 and 3.

#### **Pots from other clans sharing boundaries with Amai**

Isheagu and Amai are Ibo speaking communities although situated in different local government areas of Delta state. The method of pot building is close to an extent, but the decoration techniques are very far apart. The Urhobo are found at the southern part of Amai village and the people are also greatly involved in the art of pottery. The method of pot building among the potters of Amai and Arhagba, which is the immediate community it is sharing boundary with, Amai do have some similarities building up of pots form to some degree but techniques of decoration are very different. Below are images of pots from Isheagu and the Urhobo.

#### **Findings**

The Amai potters have been able to preserve this style for themselves; and have been able to hold on to it over the years. An interview with two potters and an elderly man from Osele quarters in Amai (Mama Comfort Nkoye, Mrs. Alice Nwankegho Ifeanyi and papa Johnson Ossai), they were asked to ascertain how long this style of decoration has been with them. Papa Ossai said as a child, he grew up to see his mother make pots. But surprisingly, the style of production and decoration has not changed. He continued by saying that the style of women's hairdo and the clothes being worn

had slightly changed. Another question then asked was why the neighboring communities within this clan were not interested in learning this skillful trade. The women interviewed answered simultaneously and said that from when they started helping their mothers in pot making, no woman, even from other quarters of Amai, has been allowed to be involved in the practice. As such, no persons from other communities or clans would be given the same opportunity denied even the people from Amai village. They added that the art was specifically practiced by women from Osele quarters in Amai, and as such not every woman even from Amai is eligible to be among the practitioners of this trade. From their statements, it became very convincing that the trade was made for Osele quarters women in Amai and this was an indication that the pottery tradition in Amai is sacred in nature than a mere practice.

Yet, another question was asked: "why it is that decoration style of Amai is not being used by other pottery producers within the neighbourhood?" The interviewees answered by saying that this method of pottery production is as old as the community, because no one was able to tell precisely when this form of decoration started with the community. They went further to say that whether it was the man who discovered the clay that also told them the style of the decoration, they cannot say. However, this prompted another question, which was: "what is the line of your immigration movement in the olden days or where was their original dwelling before coming to Amai as your present location?" One of the women, Madam Comfort Nkoye said that her grandmother told her that the Amai people came through two different routes. One of the routes was from the Auchu speaking area, while the other source is from the Ibo of across the Niger. However, a man who was not from Osele quarters said that for him, he believed on immigration from Auchu because of the similarity of the motifs used by Amai potters and the decorational marks used by the Oloku worshippers. Meanwhile, within Amai tradition, this form of decoration does not have any philosophical meaning in regards to Amai cultural norms and values. All the

same, these forms of designs are beautiful and also elicit aesthetical attraction that makes the pots to have an identity that is peculiar to them. They said further that incisions around the neck and the mouth of the pots do not portray any form of symbolism; neither do they have any philosophical significance in Amai culture.

### **Conclusion**

This paper looked at Amai style of pots decoration, the processes and tools used to make the decoration called “Isu lte Amai weni Ekpresearu” (rough surface pots of Amai) in Ukwuani language. In other communities that are within the same environment, they do not decorate their pots in the same way the Amai potters do. The paper also asked some sensitive questions concerning immigration pattern of the Amai people. The essence of this was to find what

informed the potters about the kind of decoration, which is quite different from all other communities that are within the environment.

The paper therefore, recommends that individuals and communities should try to find ways to inspire creativeness that could bring the individuals or set of individuals to the lime light. Also, learn to depend on their senses of creativity and they should be original in expressing themselves through the usage of the norms and values of their traditions. Though this paper has not been able to ascertain when and how this style of pots decoration started with the Amai potters. The paper nevertheless recommends that interested researchers should carry out more research work on how this style of decoration started with the Amai potters.



**Fig. 1: Full pot with decoration style of Amai potters**



**Fig. 2: Cross section of decorated style of Amai pot**



Fig. 3: Neck to mouth region of decorated pot by Amai potters



Fig. 4: Fired pots from Amai pottery traditional center



Fig. 5: Isheagu pots and decorations



**Fig. 6: Isheagu pot and decorations**



**Fig. 7: Urhobo pots and decorations**

## **References**

- Agberia J.T. (2007): *Ladi Kwali: A study of Indigenous and Modern Techniques of Abuja Pottery*; Port Harcourt, Kraft Books Limited
- Ajayi C.O. (1976): *Introduction to Art and Designs*; Ibadan, Ilesanmi publishers
- Barley N. (1994): *Smashing Pots: Feat of clay from Africa*; Britain, Trustees of the British Museum.
- Carlsen E. (1965): *Graphics Arts* Peiril III Chas A. Benneth
- Egonwa O.D. et al (1997): *Nigerian Art Forms Evolution and Significance in Nigeria People and Culture; History and Philosophy of Science*; Onitsha Mas Founders Publishers
- Hornby A.S. (2000): *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*; 6<sup>th</sup> Edition
- Nwoko D. (1978): *The Aesthetics of African Art and Culture*; New Culture: A Review of Contemporary African Arts; Vol.1 (1).
- Ojie G. (2002): *Historical Perspective of Selected Pottery Producing Centres in Delta State*; in *Design History in Nigeria: Abuja, Nigeria* (ed) John Tokpabere Agberia, National Gallery of Art, Abuja and Association of Africa Industrial Designers
- Oyewole B.K. (2002): *The Aesthetics of Mural Design in Interior Decoration: Types, Prospect and Challenges*; in *Design History of Nigeria*; Abuja, Nigeria (ed) John Tokpabere Agberia, National Gallery of Art, Abuja and Association of Africa Industrial Designers.
- Oyewole B.K. (1995): *Dialectics of Artistic Creativity in Development: The case of Nigeria*, *Atunda Journal of Artifacts*, OAU, Ile-Ife.
- Peter D.J. (1998): *Clay Modelling for Everyone* (ed) Peter D.J. Great Britain, Search Press Limited.
- Wangboje I. (1982): *Art for Junior Secondary School*, Ibadan, Evans Brothers Publishers

## **Interviewees**

- Mama Comfort Nkoye of Amai community, aged 63years old: 14 September, 2011
- Mrs. Alice Nwankegho Ifeanyi of Amai community, aged 48 years old: 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2011
- Papa Johnson Ossai of Amai community aged 68years: 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2011
- Mr. Peter Okoye of Amai community, aged 27years old: 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2011