

# AN APPRAISAL OF THE FORMING METHOD USED BY OKA TRADITIONAL POTTERS IN EDO STATE

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## Abstract

*Pottery tradition spans through the ages with some isolated locations like Oka Community. It is a craft that looks more like a hobby especially for the women in Oka Community. Oka Community is a traditional setting going by the antecedents it portrays. It is one of the small clans in Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area of Edo State, spreading for about five kilometers along the Upper Sakponba, Benin Abraka Road and having nine villages which include Oka-evbogo, Okabehe, Oghire, Okaniho, Okanawovia, Useni, Iduwungbon, Evboghizenwe and Umogumohen, each spaced out about one kilometer apart. They are descendants of the ancient Benin Kingdom and up till date, still practice the ancient Benin art of pottery in the community. The various pots produced serve different purposes ranging from social, economical and spiritual values. This paper has carefully examined the Oka traditional pottery forming method in its present status, technically and also emphasized the importance of the potters in the eyes of our society.*

## Introduction

Otimeyin (2006:6) described the word ceramics as an offshoot of pottery making. This was a craft that became transformed with the introduction of modern technology such as machines and glaze coating. Traditional pottery making is one of the oldest and greatest of the crafts, which is dated back to Neolithic period between 10,000 BC–5,000 BC. This is the area where Africans have done many fine works and pottery tradition gave room for individual expression, experienced anticipation, most of which served useful utilizations; worship, items, storage and decoration purpose, yet one in which there is still room for a great deal of improvement.

## Oka as a Community

A community such as Oka is a group of people located in a given geographical area

with common goals and aspirations. It is believed that the people of the community may not be of the same stock, creed, religion or tribe; it may be small or large but having the same common geo-political areas with common goals and aspirations. A community could be rural or urban with respect to environment (Onwuuejegwu, Okpu and Ebighbo 2000).

Communities are different in terms of characteristics such as cultural values, norms and beliefs, which form their mode of operation and existence. The following are types of community: Traditional community, Radial community, Adopted community and National community. Oka Community is a good example of a typical traditional community going by the antecedents observed.

### **Geographical Location of Oka Community Pottery**

Oka Community is a small clan situated in Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area of Edo State. It is about five kilometers along the Upper Sakpoba old Benin Abraka Road with nine villages which include Oka-evbuogo, Okabele, Oghire, Okaniho, Okanawovia, Useni, Iduwungbon, Evboghizenwe and Umogumohen. Each of them spaced out about half or a kilometer apart. Okanawovia is the largest among all the villages and has a population of about five hundred to eight hundred dwellers. Closely to Oka are large towns, which include the present Benin City, the commercial and administrative (seat) capital of Edo state. The surrounding markets include Oka Market which is attended every fourth days. This market attracts traders as far away as Abraka Delta State, Onitsha in Anambra State, Okene in Kogi State and Akure and Owo in Ondo State. This market is not only known for its pottery business but also forms a market for large foodstuff trading practice.

### **Origin and Social History of Oka Community**

According to Madam Egbe, oral Interview (2014), the dwellers who presently occupy the Community historically migrated from the Ogbe Quarters of the ancient city of Benin Kingdom (around the site of present Samuel Ogbemudia Stadium outside the city walls). This migration could be traced back to about four hundred years ago. Up till now the ancient art of pottery is being practiced in this part of the city. It therefore means that Oka people must have transferred the art and craft of pottery to their present place of settlement. In the past, the pots made then were crude through hand-building and were heavier pots too, as was confirmed by one of the elder women (madam Egbe), that those pots produced in the past were much heavier than the present ones produced now and they serve mainly as household and ritual activities. Ever since the migration from Ogbe in the ancient Benin in about four hundred years ago, the Oka pottery has not really changed both in terms of the method of preparation of clay, production, decorations and finishing of pots.

It has been observed from the oral Interview (2014), that there have been very much

conservative in production styles and it might be quite impossible to find pots made in about thirty years ago as to establish whether there were minor changes that might be vividly notice. Therefore, the findings of the past are based on the oral interview of the respondents who have been active in the pottery business for the past 15 years and above.

Observational finding reveals from Madam Uyigüe oral Interview (2014), that their spoken dialect is the same to that which is spoken in the surrounding villages in the present Benin City. Till date they have had a cordial and continuous relationship linked to the ancient Benin, which is believed was their home historically because most of the important ceremonies, which are done in Benin like Igue festival, are also carried out there too. The dwellers of the community are kind and peace-loving people, whom at present claim Christianity to be their major religion, as this has helped them to strengthen their peaceful co-existence that further gave them common foot of sharing their cultural and professional (pottery) heritage. The fact about the existence of pottery practice today rested only on two villages in this community: Oka-Evbogo and Okanawovia respectively.

The data gathered from the respondents, clearly stated that the act of pottery practice is not limited to any tribe, sex or children but women are mostly in the practice.

### **Occupation**

Oka people in the past predominantly are subsistent farmers and hunters and also among other things they grow are yams, cassava and maize, which are the staple crops. In addition they also grow other petty crops such as beans, pepper, tomatoes, okra etc. It is important to note that most of their lands for farming have been developed into houses.

Naturally, the Oka people have made use of that which nature has given to them. The craft of pottery, which was transferred from Benin, and this seems to have fully developed before it was brought from Benin Oka and it does not seem to have deviated too much in forms and the styles of production that which is found in Benin. This however shows that the art of pottery must have fully grown in the ancient Benin Kingdom before the advent of

the Portuguese exploration of the 15th century. Historically, the male folks were mainly farmers whose wives produced pottery to subsidize the family earnings. The women were not full-time potters but they engaged in pottery outside farm days and the wares are sold in the Oka market to enable them buy fish, pepper, salt and oil on market days. While the men folk engaged actively in farming yams, maize and cassava, the women employ them self at taking care of the family at home and in the farms by sending mid-day meals to the husband in the farm. As obligation each year, the husband clears a parcel of virgin land for his wife (or wives) to cultivate cassava and other crops, which she then tends by clearing the weeds. This she intermittently does in between her pottery activities. In addition to this, the women also bring home from the farm some wood and grass for the next pottery burning (firing). If the woman is hard working enough, she is able to keep a steady supply of her domestic needs and also buy herself some jewelry and clothes for the next village festivities. Presently since their plots of lands have been developed into houses, the men have little or no lands to engage in farming, they therefore now engage in other unskilled profession to meet their family needs this have also made the women to learn other trades such as tailoring and hairdressing trades. In the light of the above, therefore one cannot call the Oka potter full-time potters. The women, who practice pottery in Oka, do so on a part-time basis in order to make money to subsidize family expenses. The method of teaching pottery skills is informal, this is done through apprenticeship.

Oka pots are basically used for social and spiritual activities. These are vividly seen in the pots of various sizes and shapes, which are mostly utensils, and ritual pots called akhe-ame, uwawa and ukodo. Sign and symbols of Scarifications or roulette designs could be found on the pots, these make the pots to be more attractive to the buyer or maybe just to satisfy the urge in the potter to express aesthetical traditions. This does not remove it from being a work of art as the essential features of form; colour, texture and ornamentation are there. Some of the traditional technique of colouring and decorating (burnishing) applied by the people

are directed to making the wares both functional and attractive for use.

### **Clay Prospecting**

Clay as an earthen raw material is the basic raw materials use for production of the wares. The clay, which is commonly used by the potters in Oka, is workable secondary clay which is bought from those who mine. This kind of clay is taken straight from the pit, in Ovia River as this clay is known for its little cracking hazards when groged with sand. They include the light coloured (yellowish) secondary clay, which the people call "Obue". See Fig. 2. This is gotten from twenty and a half Kilometers away in Iyekovia in Iguoriakhi near Iguobazuwa, Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State and it is dug plastic from the pit usually with hoes and cutlasses. For example, at Asaba Rural Training College, students succeeded in making clay body suitable for pottery production to produce roofing tiles with the clay locally sourced in their immediate environment (Fowowe 2004:7). The story could be the same if Oka clay is put into use for the purpose of producing roofing tiles and the like.

### **Methods of Clay Preparation**

#### **Wedging and Kneading**

After prospecting the clays from the clay pits, they are heaped as balls outside their buildings and protected from being washed away by rains. See Fig.3. Closely followed is clay preparation, this is done through wedging and kneading. Wedging is a method of cutting, beating and reversing a mass of clay to expel air and to make the whole homogeneous (leach 1977). Kneading according to leach (1977) is the process of mixing plastic clay to a homogeneous texture by hand or foot. This is the true process of clay preparation of clay by Oka potters. See Fig.4. The clay is mixed with the burnt sand applied as (Grog) according to the taste of the potters. These they have used in various adequate proportions of 10% and 20% sand to the clay respectively. The results of using burnt sand in the clay helps to reduce the cracking hazard at the local temperature of about 800oc and also help the clay to sinter at that low temperature. When used without burnt sand additive, the water absorption shows a higher percentage. Upon this experimented burnt sand additive to clay, the

traditionally fired wares can stand heat-shock. After mixing, they are at times left under the rains for four or five days or more. This helps the clay to slake. The potters found out that this method of clay preparation helps to loosen the clay and remove some unwanted impurities which might be in the clays when it is required for use.

### **The Shaping Method**

The shaping used in forming pottery or ceramics shapes in Oka is the same with the normal studio techniques. Saibu, (2005:46) postulated that there are several techniques that can be employed in pottery production. Furthermore, Saibu, (2005:46) submitted that the following are the shaping methods: slab, coil, pinch, throwing, modeling etc. Slab method is the art of using a sheet of plastic clay to make ceramic pieces. Also, it involves rolling of clay sheet, cutting, joining with clay slip and shaping to desired form. The pinch pots method is done by pushing the right thumb into the centre of the clay, thin way by pinching between thumb and finger. In pinching pots, only the fingers are tools used. This is one of the most ancient of pottery techniques and it is assumed to be one of the simplest forming methods of pottery production and it is an ancient method of hand building of pottery. Nelson (1971), in Saibu (2005:48), stated that coil method is an excellent way of studio potter to make really big shapes, which could be circular, non-circular and even a symmetric form. Coil method does not require the use of complicated equipment except simple turning device. While the art of using throwing wheel is the modern way of forming with the aid of building plastic clay to pots on potter's wheel.

The potter introduces coils and slabs where necessary and pinched them all together for uniformity to form the required shape. The Potters make their pot on a broken pot-neck and makes a ball of clay on which they build subsequently by pinching where necessary to produce the required pots. See Fig.5. Oka potters sometimes produce their pots with the combination of pinch, coils and slab methods where necessary. But pinch are mostly in use. To make production of slab easier and have even thickness, slab machine can be introduced. Slab machine is an instrument that produces slabs, Ojie and Esosuakpo (2004:58).

The Potter makes large sausage-rolls of clay, five or six in numbers, which they take one at a time to compliment the building of the pots. The potter works round the pot, moving backwards or sits down as it is convenient for him/her and moving the pot neck. The potter normally works on many pots at a time. While supporting the formed pot and rolls the clay with the left palm, the potter uses the forefinger of the right hand to pinch it on and pulls the wall and roll of clay diagonally on. After attaining the required size and height, the pots are left to set, after setting, the potter then uses a kidney-shaped, locally fabricated tool called „ltue“ to scrape the inside to give it an even thickness, smoothness and symmetry while using the left palm to support the pot. See Fig.6.

When the pot required height is attained, the potter then proceeds to use water, form or finger to thin out the lip of the pot. This singulars technique points to a future of a pioneer pottery where the native potters like „Mercy“ could be trained to throw efficiently with the minimum of training on the wheel rotates. This process is carried out with a spinning action, just as the potter slips the clay between the fingers while on the wheel. The Oka potters do this perfectly that the symmetry shapes is achieved and can often be mistaken as if it was achieved on the throwing wheel.

### **Decoration Technique**

Emodah, (2006) postulated that decoration of pottery in Africa could be said to be rustic. Glazes have not been traced to African pottery. Decorations are mainly scratched Pattern for beauty. He submitted further that line or incised decoration on pots from Abuja by Ladi Kwali have seen mainly of stylized animal forms (like lizards), as the main theme. The Oka potters do abstract designs like patterns just like any other African motifs. They engage the use of locally fabricated tools called “agben” or wooden tools to incorporate the patterns. See Fig.7.

In fact the potter uses these tools to make a textured design on the pot and in some areas the pot are polished to a good surface finishing. The patterns are given to the pot while still wet; or a tool called “Agaen” which gives their regular scratched pattern. See

Fig.8. This method of decoration has been in existence among potters all through the century since the inception of it in the Benin Kingdom. The Decorations on Oka pottery are complex but highly in pattern.

### The Various Shapes, Types and uses of Oka Pots

The potters have developed and improved on the traditional style with but without much deviation from the original Benin style of pottery making. For example the small pot called "Uwawa" is mainly used for sacrifices, See Fig.9. While the "Akhe" is used for storage of water and grain. See Fig.10. While the pot called "Ukodo" serves many purposes, it could be used for cooking of women medicine when pregnant and for storing of Osun Water at the shrine. See Fig.11. Other shapes include the wide and big uwawa which is known as soup-pot and the wide elliptical bowl shaped Uwawa.

The Oka potter is popular for the making of the Ukodo and Uwawa pots for ritual and used for the storage of water, sacrifices and domestics. The contents are able to receive withstand and retain heat from the fire while being preserved from rodents and carnivores. Some of the respondents (potters) confirmed and reported that the more functional pots were preferred and marketable to the less functional or ritual pots. In this era of Christianity, for instance, the use of ukodo pot for "Osun" is no longer fashionable.

### Conclusion

It is evident therefore that the Oka women (potters) have a built-up tradition of a technique which is very unique, which is not dissimilar to that of spinning (throwing) clay on a pivot as does the potter on the throwing wheel. It is very obvious that with the raw materials of clays and with the use of the throwing wheel training and the traditional design in form of pattern, would be of immense results, ceramic industry would be very viable.

It seems important that Government and concern individuals should make a careful survey of existing traditional pottery in Nigeria. This survey should work along two lines; first, a detailed study of Potters, their tools and implements, their techniques, their sociological position; for we must never forget that we are aiming at building up indigenous Potters and not introducing new and foreign industries. Secondly, the survey should study local materials; clays of different pottery districts, for instance, should be analyzed and compared; and the possibilities of using them. So far we have seen little of the present importance of Oka Potter to the community and we have no real knowledge of this capacity or his material resources. Until some such survey is made it is difficult to plan how he should go forward. Only when it is done can we see just how far the training of Craft Potters should be centralized in the community and how far it should just consist in apprenticeship under the Potters, who in their turn might receive advice and help from the educationist.



Figure 1: Community location Sign-post



Figure 2: Brownish ball of clay



Figure 3: Balls of clay



Figure 4: Portions of Balls of clay kneaded into plastic



Figure 5: Pinching of Pot



Figure 6: Scraping the inside of the pot for even thickness and smoothness



Figure 7: Locally fabricated tools such as Itue, Agaen etc



Figure 8: Imparting pattern to the pot while wet using "Agaen" tool



Figure 9: Small pot called "Uwawa"



Figure 10: Small pot called "Akhe"



Figure 11: Small pot called "Ukodo"

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## **Notes**

This paper was mainly written from a fieldwork carried out on Oka Community, Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area of Edo State and personal interview of respondents like Madam Egbe Mercy Atiti and Blessing Uyigwe in April 2014.