REVIVING POTTERY AS A SUSTAINABLE INDIGENOUS VOCATION IN NIGERIA

[1]Bolawole Ogunbodede
Department of Architecture, University of Lagos
bogunbodede@unilag.edu.ng

[2]Segun Okunola
Department of Architecture, University of Lagos
sokunola@unilag.edu.ng

[3]Ifeoluwa Victoria Oyepeju
omotolaoyepeju@gmail.com
Department of Architecture, University of Lagos

Abstract

The decline of traditional crafts, such as pottery, among indigenous communities is a pressing issue that requires attention. This research paper investigates the decline of traditional pottery practices among Indigenous communities. It suggests the establishment of a vocational school in Surulere, Lagos, to revive this culturally significant craft. The study provides an overview of indigenous pottery production, including its process, importance, and history. It identifies key challenges contributing to the decline, such as inadequate infrastructure and inefficient workspaces, leading to decreased engagement in the craft. The study highlights the role of communal workspaces in fostering community engagement and facilitating the transmission of traditional knowledge to future generations. Informed by relevant literature and architectural precedents, the paper concludes with a design proposal for a pottery vocational centre that aims to address the identified challenges and promote sustainable Indigenous craft practices.

***Keywords*:** Vocational education, pottery, traditional craft, Cultural sustainability.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Indigenous craft has always played a significant role in the cultural heritage and identity of communities around the world. Historically, crafts in Nigerian society were vital for economic sustenance, supplying tools, clothing, and household items necessary for daily life. Artisans specializing in various crafts ensured that local needs were met, creating a self-sustaining economy within communities (Murray, 1943). The practice of crafts fostered social cohesion within communities. Artisans often collaborated and shared resources, which reinforced community bonds and cooperation among members. This collective effort contributed to a strong sense of belonging and shared identity. They reflected local traditions and aesthetics, with specific designs and techniques unique to each community, thus preserving cultural heritage.

These practices are not merely artistic expressions but also a means of knowledge transfer and skill acquisition, often facilitated through vocational training. Craftsmanship was typically passed down through generations, facilitating informal education and skill development. Apprenticeship systems played a significant role in maintaining high standards of craftsmanship, enabling the transfer of knowledge and techniques from experienced artisans to the younger generation.

In Nigeria, pottery is one such craft that has a long and rich history. The art of pottery has been practised for centuries by various ethnic groups in Nigeria, particularly in the South Western region. The art of pottery is intricately linked to Yoruba identity and cultural practices. Pottery making, a craft traditionally dominated by women, is passed down through generations, with knowledge and skills shared from mother to daughter. The *ebu*, or pottery workshop, is a communal space consisting of a series of sheds and work areas, and is usually located in a shady area; where trees are usually planted beside, around or within the work area in the town or village, where families gather to work on pots, which are often tied to cultural rituals, festivals, and religious practices (Umoru-Oke, 2017). The process of creating pottery is not an individual pursuit but a collective effort involving various family members. Men typically help with tasks like digging and transporting clay, while women handle the creative aspects of forming, molding, and decorating the pots. This division of labor underscores the communal nature of pottery, which strengthens social bonds and ensures the survival of the craft across generations (Umoru-Oke, 2017).

The historical presence of pottery in southwestern Nigeria is vividly illustrated by the prevalence of specialized knowledge and techniques. Young learners, often within family units, would dedicate years to mastering the nuances of clay preparation, shaping, firing, and decoration, ensuring the continuity of this vital craft (Umoru-Oke, 2017a). Beyond its artistic merit, pottery played a crucial role in the socio-economic landscape of southwestern Nigeria. The bustling pottery centres, often led by women, were vibrant hubs of economic activity. (Olaosebikan, 2022) These skilled artisans provided essential wares for daily life, from cooking pots and storage containers to water vessels and ritual objects, demonstrating the craft's integral role in sustaining the community.

Pottery as a craft thrived historically because of its primary use of clay, a naturally available and renewable resource that is also malleable, with high thermal properties (Osarumwense & Peters, 2017). The wares were hand-built with simple techniques and many artisans source their materials locally, thereby reducing transportation emissions and bolstering local economies (Smith, 2010). Clay can also be reused, reclaimed and recycled, and there is little to no waste products from the creation of pottery products. This makes it a lucrative means of generating economic revenue, coupled with the opportunities for innovation with the use of a renewable resource that doesn’t require overprocessing.

However, despite their initial success and positive impact, these pottery centers faced numerous challenges that hindered their long-term sustainability and growth (Osarumwense & Peters, 2017). The scarcity of equipment and materials posed a significant challenge. This scarcity not only increased production costs but also made it challenging to maintain consistent production levels. Ironically, despite Nigeria's abundant clay resources, there was limited local production of pottery materials, further exacerbating supply chain issues. Due to these setbacks, as well as the eventual absence of the founders of these centres, initial enthusiasm for these centers waned over time, leading to their decline.

As a result, the practice which once thrived as a vital cultural and economic activity, is witnessing a significant decline. Many artisans are ageing without adequate succession planning, as younger generations show limited interest in pursuing pottery as a livelihood as increasing urbanization has shifted the focus of many young people toward urban jobs and lifestyles, distancing them from traditional crafts (Akingbogun & Ogunduyile, 2009). Colonial attitudes towards African culture also contributed to a perception that indigenous crafts were

inferior. This devaluation discouraged pride in traditional craftsmanship and diminished the social status of artisans, further impacting the arts negatively (Murray, 1943).

This research aims to find out required steps towards improving the local and small-scale pottery industry. With the specific objectives of:

- Understanding trends in the indigenous pottery handicraft industry and identify ways to improve engagement in clay production locally.
- Identifying needs to improve the production and learning, and process of pottery in Nigeria.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND CASE STUDY

This review aims to obtain a deeper understanding of the significance of craft and skill acquisition within the community, the processes involved in pottery production and challenges facing the industry, as well as how architecture design strategies and study of precedents can help improve the learning, production and exhibition of Indigenous pottery, as well as create an environment that inspires creativity and innovation in the use of clay, through the transfer of knowledge and skills, for continued heritage preservation.

2.1 Brief History of Traditional Pottery Practice

Indigenous people's handcrafted ceramics can be explained by how, in an effort to survive, they interacted with their physical and social surroundings (Areo, 2014). Clay wares were used for cooking, eating, storing and preserving food items, clothing, and other household things in ancient traditional Sub-Saharan African communities. They were also employed for traditional religious rites and worship (Umoru-Oke, 2017b). Areo (2014) states that, with a few notable exceptions, traditional pottery making in Nigeria is primarily a female-driven profession that has been preserved through skill transmission from mother to daughter (Umoru-Oke, 2017a). One exception is the Muslim Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, who only employ men for pottery-related tasks. The practice of pottery in Nigeria has evolved over time, adapting to changing needs and influences. While traditional techniques have been preserved, potters have also incorporated new materials and designs. The introduction of the potter's wheel from European traders during the colonial era led to significant changes in pottery production (Shado et al., 2020).

The British colonial administration established pottery centers in various parts of Nigeria, aiming to promote European-style pottery and introduce modern techniques. One of the most significant figures in this exchange was Michael Cardew, a renowned British studio potter who

established pottery centers in Nigeria during the 1950s. Cardew's work in Nigeria was instrumental in introducing British pottery techniques to local artisans and training a new generation of Nigerian potters. His efforts laid the groundwork for a fusion of traditional Nigerian pottery methods with modern British techniques, creating a unique hybrid style that would come to characterise much of Nigerian ceramic art in the latter half of the 20th century.

2.2 Pottery Practices in Southwest Nigeria: A Case Study of Ijaye, Abeokuta

Despite foreign influence and westernisation, the art of traditional hand-built pottery persists in some communities across Nigeria (Busari & Odetoyinbo, 2021). This may be attributed to the symbolic importance of the wares in such communities given that pottery, like other cultural elements, is a product of the people and their interactions; it is central to the contextual realities of societies where it exists. One of such communities is Ìjàyè Abéòkúta where the people still practise hand-built pottery with simple tools and local materials.

Indigenous Yorùbá potters are in Nigeria, and they are mostly found in six States of the federation; Òyó, Ògùn, Òsun, Òndó, Èkìtì, and Kwara States. Yoruba pottery cannot be examined in isolation of the techniques that are involved, which in most cases the techniques are tied to the forms made (Umoru-Oke, 2017). Wahlman (1972) classified the Yoruba pottery making techniques into the direct and indirect methods. The indirect method included the use of moulders (in concrete or clay form) to prepare the base of the pots while sausages of clay were subsequently added to the top of the unfinished pot to form the neck and rim. The direct method involved forming the clay pots from the base to the rim with the hands.

The first step in pottery production begins with gathering the necessary materials, which typically includes clay, water, firewood, and sometimes straws for firing. Men are often responsible for clay prospecting and digging, while women handle most of the production tasks. The clay is sourced from specific areas and then transported to the potters' workshops, known as *ebu*, which serve as communal workspaces for women potters (Umoru-Oke, 2017). These workshops are situated near the raw material sources, minimizing the effort required for transportation.

In terms of tools, the process is notably low-tech, relying on basic implements such as scrapers, knives, and sticks. The primary shaping tool is the potter's hand, as the Yoruba pottery tradition relies heavily on hand-building techniques without the use of wheels or other advanced

machinery (Umoru-Oke, 2017). Tools are often made from locally available materials, reinforcing the sustainability of the practice.

2.3Significance of Pottery Production Towards Innovation and Value Production: a case study

The potters in South Western Nigeria in particular and Nigeria in general offer a ground for a host of new technologies and innovations to researchers, investors and promoters of pottery and ceramics (Akinbogun & Ogunduyile, 2009)

Pottery production in Nigeria has long been a cornerstone of the nation's cultural heritage and economic landscape (Olaosebikan, 2022). Beyond its traditional role as a source of household items, pottery has evolved into a dynamic sector that contributes to innovation, value production, and economic empowerment.

Clay vessels and products offer several advantages that make them highly valuable. They possess excellent thermoregulatory properties, making them ideal for cooking, storing food, and serving beverages. This natural quality reduces the need for excessive energy consumption, contributing to environmental sustainability. Moreover, clay vessels often require minimal processing, reducing production costs and making them more affordable for consumers.

The use of locally available materials and resources for pottery production is beneficial for the Nigerian economy. By sourcing clay and other materials from domestic sources, potters can reduce their reliance on imports, strengthen local supply chains, and support rural communities. This approach also helps to conserve natural resources and reduce the environmental impact of production.

Recent product designs from centres like Atamora Village, Osun state, exemplify the creative potential of Nigerian potters(Abiodun, 2018; Wukich, 2014). Highly respected by his peers and living quietly in the middle of the rural village of Atamora, Ibukun Ayoola was creating fabulous works of art sought after by many. These artisans have successfully transformed traditional techniques into contemporary pieces that appeal to both domestic and international markets. One of such contemporary pieces, the innovation of a water filter pot developed in Atamora Village, offers a promising solution to the pressing issue of waterborne diseases in the region. This simple yet effective device has the potential to become a sustainable business, improving the health and well-being of countless citizens.



Figure 2.2-5 Ibukun Ayoola of Atamora Village (Source: Osupa, 2014)

The filter pot is crafted from clay and sawdust, a readily available and locally sourced resource. The sawdust acts as a natural filter medium, while the clay provides a porous structure for water filtration. To enhance its bactericidal properties, the ceramic vessel is treated with microscopic particles of colloidal silver.



Figure 2.2-6 Ibukun Ayoola with other stakeholders, with first model of ceramic water filter (Source: Osupa, 2014)

The filter pot operates by using gravity to draw water through the porous clay and sawdust. As the water passes through the filter, impurities and harmful bacteria are trapped, resulting in clean, potable water. This simple yet effective process can provide a family of five with enough filtered water for their daily needs.

One of the most significant benefits of the water filter pot is its potential to address the widespread problem of waterborne diseases (Wukich, 2014). According to Wukich (2014), during his experience in Nicaragua, 5,000 people, primarily children, die each day from waterborne illnesses. By providing access to clean water, the filter pot can significantly reduce the incidence of these diseases and improve public health.

In addition to its health benefits, the water filter pot also offers opportunities for sustainable economic development. The production of the pots can create jobs and generate income for local communities. By utilising locally sourced materials and employing simple production techniques, the filter pot can be produced at a relatively low cost, making it accessible to a wide range of people.

Furthermore, the production process can be integrated with other sustainable practices. The sawdust used in the filter pots can be sourced from local sawmills, reducing waste and promoting efficient resource utilization. Additionally, the kilns used to fire the pots can be fueled by sawdust burners, converting a waste product into a valuable energy source.

By incorporating modern elements while preserving the essence of traditional pottery, these designers have created unique and valuable products. One of the most significant advantages of pottery production is the opportunity for trainees to acquire productive skills that can lead to self-reliance. Centres like Atamora Pottery provide training programs that equip individuals with the knowledge and expertise needed to establish their own businesses or contribute to the pottery industry (Abiodun, 2018). These skills not only empower individuals but also contribute to the overall economic development of the nation.

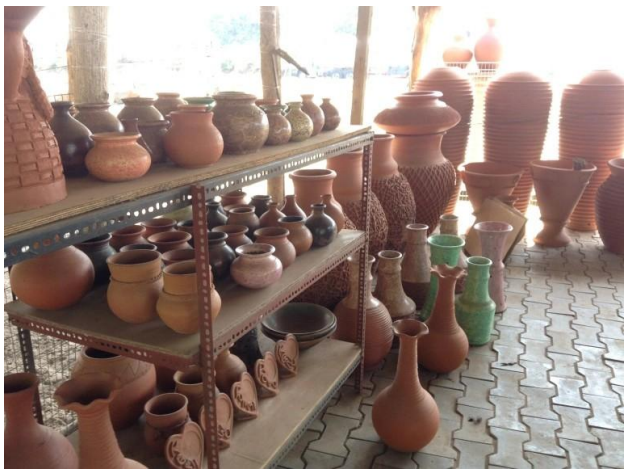


Figure 2.2-7 Gallery showcasing works from Atamora pottery

In conclusion, pottery production in Nigeria continues to be a significant contributor to innovation, value production, and economic empowerment. Through creative product design, skills development, and the use of locally available resources, potters are playing a vital role in shaping the nation's cultural and economic landscape. As the demand for unique and sustainable products grows, the pottery industry in Nigeria has the potential to further expand and contribute to the country's prosperity.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach in data collection. Relevant literature were reviewed. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including local potters, community leaders, and potential trainees to explore perceptions of traditional pottery, interest in learning the craft, and desired features in a vocational centre. Participants for interviews were selected based on their experience and knowledge of the field.

Site observations were conducted at existing pottery workshops and community spaces to understand traditional practices, spatial configurations, and social dynamics within the settings. The case study shows precedents towards developing an in-depth understanding of the subject.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Methods and Techniques

The process of pottery making in Yoruba culture is divided into five major stages: clay digging, preparation, forming, drying, and firing (Umoru-Oke, 2017). These stages reflect the universal structure of pottery production but with specific local adaptations.

1. **Clay Preparation**: After the clay is dug and brought to the workshop, it undergoes a thorough preparation process. This involves cutting, soaking, mashing, and kneading the clay to achieve the right consistency for molding. Successful clay preparation is critical, as the quality of the clay determines the pot's durability during firing. Potters treat this task with great care, often incorporating songs and cultural rituals to ease the laborious work and enhance focus.



Figure 2.2-0-1 Clay that has been prepared being stored in an airtight nylon wrap to keep clay moist for future use (Source – Umoru-Oke, 2017)

2. **Forming and Shaping**: Pot formation is primarily carried out through hand-building techniques, which are classified into direct and indirect methods. The direct method involves shaping the pot directly from a ball of clay, gradually expanding the vessel by coiling and smoothing the walls. The indirect method, on the other hand, uses a pre-mould, typically an old inverted pot, as the base upon which the new pot is built. In both methods, the potter relies on her hands and a few basic tools to shape the clay into its final form.



Figure 2.2-2 Potter moulding rim of pot using indirect method with moulders for base (Source – Author, 2024)

3. **Drying and Decoration**: Once the pot has been shaped, it undergoes a drying process that ensures the pot does not crack or explode during firing. This drying process is done in stages, beginning with the pot in a leather-hard state, where it can still be manipulated for final smoothing or decoration. Decoration is an important aspect of Yoruba pottery, with designs often applied while the clay is still wet. These designs can be functional, enhancing grip, or symbolic, conveying the pot's intended use or the social status of its owner.



Figure 2.2-3 Moulded pots left to dry and harden indoors (Source – Author, 2024)

4. **Firing**: Firing is the final and most critical stage, transforming the raw clay into a hardened, durable material. In Yoruba tradition, pottery is fired in open-air kilns, with pots carefully stacked and covered with firewood or straw. Firing techniques vary, with oxidation firing producing a clean finish, while reduction firing creates blackened wares through the controlled use of smoke. The firing process is often a communal activity, with multiple potters working together to ensure success herbs or serving certain traditional dishes.



Figure 2.2-4 Firing process of pots stacked and covered with straw (Source – Umoru-Oke,2017)

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Engineering, Architecture and Craft are disciplines that work towards finding solutions to issues of technology, innovation and culture, taking into account the stakeholders' comfort and well-being vis a vis the surrounding natural environment. To develop the clay related concepts and make them sustainable culturally, economically and environmentally. The right technology must be in place.

To continue to have indigenous craft with a sense of identity and continuity. Ther should be technological models that can enhance learning, skill development, and knowledge transfer of pottery process and heritage for the empowerment of people in the communities.

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