

# Implication of Early Pottery Practice by Women in Nigeria: A Focus on Women Pottery Practice in Akwa IBOM State

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**Abstract-** The practice of pottery in Nigeria is commonly found among the women folk. The business of trading with products of pottery is also formulated by the women despite the burden of carrying the fragile wares from one market to another after production. It is in the light of women involvement in pottery business that Ladi Kwali was discovered by the English Potter Michael Cardew when he came to Nigeria in 1950. It has been observed that traditional pottery practice in Nigeria is almost dominated by the women and most of the pottery products are domestic wares which are mostly used by the women. This study is focusing on the involvement of women folk in traditional pottery practice particularly in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The common shapes of oval and round features are identified among the products of traditional pottery easily produced by the women potters. The crucial question which comes to mind in this study's investigation is whether the circular shapes of the products by the women has any leasing or influence from the round features found on ideal, African women. Ideally, an African woman have the characteristics of round face, round chins, round buttocks, round breasts and round tummy during fattening or pregnancy. These characteristics accorded to a beautiful African maiden who undergoes fattening or customary after-child-birth care are celebrated and applauded especially by the Ibibios (Akwa Ibom State). The influence of roundness for beauty affects the shape of pottery products of women who are the custodians of myth and techniques of traditional pottery practice. No doubt, the Ibibio pots found at Jos Museum (Nigeria) and other places are noted as probably the most spherical pots globally. There are many implications in the practice of traditional pottery by the women folk in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria at large. This study also brings to limelight the traditional pottery as an outstanding economic venture for the women as well as the remedy to the plight of women in pottery practice in the face of adverse effect on the practice due technological and social changes.

**Index Terms-** Fragile, ideal, pottery, fattening, roundness, myths

## I. INTRODUCTION

The curriculum of informal education in Nigeria and particularly Akwa Ibom State considers pottery skill among others as important and relevant to the society. The men folk were engaged in house constructions, tapping of palm wine,

harvesting of palm fruits and clearing of bush for farming among many other things. The women majorly practice pottery, weaving, body decoration (Okukin), cooking, farming and others. Indigenous pottery making in Akwa Ibom State is seen as a special area for the women, and it requires high level of devotion to acquire the local but technical and sophisticated skills for a successful practice.

Women who are known for their dexterity and patience have advantage in pottery skill acquisition. The necessary knowledge of identifying and selecting good quality pottery wares especially the domestic wares are done by the women. In Akwa Ibom State women produce indigenous pottery wares and also trade on them despite the fragility and cumbersome transportation of such wares.

Ibibio pottery tradition (Akwa Ibom) from inception considers women as the forbearers and custodians of the unique tradition of pottery before the advent of modern pottery (Peters 2012). The products and practice of traditional pottery in Ibibio land are adjudged as feminine. The water pot for fetching water from the stream is hard carried on the heads by men to fetch water or carries about by men in anyway. It is the women who carry them about to fetch water and also the children carry the small pots made for children. The beauty of women carrying the round pots on their heads from the stream especially the pregnant ones makes the pots create sense of femininity. The corresponding wares from the round or oval pots on the head with the curve of the round tummy of the pregnant women and other curves from the features of the women for repetition create a unique balance. Virtually, the traditional Ibibio pottery shapes are round or oval despite the usage, but the sizes and opening of the rims distinguish the wares for the various uses. Some of the products of Ibibio indigenous pottery products are 'abang mmong' (water pot), 'Oko Ibibio' (cooking pot), 'Usan Ibibio' (bowls), 'Oko ata' (basin), 'etok oko' (small cooking pot), 'etok abang' (small water pot), 'oko ukot' (Palm wine pot) and 'abang isong' (big ceremonial pot for communal palm wine drinking). Food cooked from indigenous pottery pots have good unique taste which differ from food cooked from enamel or aluminum pots. Equally, water stored in fire dried indigenous water pot refreshes the body and with a sweeter taste than water from enamel or plastic pots. Women found joy in producing and utilizing the indigenous Ibibio (Akwa Ibom) pottery wares. It is also observed that pottery practice in other parts of Nigeria is dominated by women folk. According to Ochi (1971) "this renowned and noble Pottery

craft may not live day longer than the women who currently engage in it.” Ali (2011) confirms this assertion by noting that out of numerous pottery communities in Igbo land only Afikpo, Inyi, Ishiagu and few others still practice traditional pottery and the craft is left in the hands of elderly women. Ecoma (2011) sees Ishibori women pottery practice and their pottery wares as reflecting the item and values of the culture in which they are made and liken them to these of Nok, calabar, Igbo-Ukwu of Ife and others.

## II. MYTHS SURROUNDING WOMEN DOMINATION OF POTTERY PRACTICE IN AKWA IBOM

The practice of pottery by women and the different techniques except the varying designs used by the women potters in Akwa Ibom seem to be closely related to what other African women are doing. Different pottery communities in Akwa Ibom hold to some beliefs that their pottery practice is unique to them alone. They claim that their ancestors handed the skill of pottery to the women folk and not the men. Peters (2012) observes,

*The issue of initiating newly married young women into the pottery craft society entailed serious maintenance of aged long secrets involving their pottery production techniques. It is undisputed to know that members of such organization in the near-by-villages are ignorant of the techniques and certain tools for some designs used by the people in Ikot Ebom Itam. Some people in this village still believe that pottery techniques were handed down to them by their great ancestors who lived since the advent of formation of the raw material ‘clay’ in the area. This claim still ascertain that the practice of pottery in Ikot Ebom Itam village pottery tradition by the women started from time immemorial.*

Many pottery communities in Akwa Ibom State share similar myths about pottery practice with Ikot Ebom women potters. This belief is likely as a result of the fact that they were born to see their great grand mothers, grandmothers and mothers practice the pottery craft. According to an over 80years old Elder Okon Anyang who was one of the most outstanding elders in Ikot Ebom village, and whose grandmother and mother were experts in the pottery craft, he said “anybody become anything in the area as a result of this old time pottery craft. Since every family in those days was engaged in the pottery business, everybody was therefore benefitting from the art either directly or indirectly (Peter 2012:10). In all the traditional pottery communities in Akwa Ibom State, the practice was pottery skill was practiced by only women since they believe it was handed down to only the women from the ancestors. Some of the pottery communities are: Ikot Ebom Itam in Itu Local Government Area, Ikot Ebidang in Onna Local Government Area, Mbiafun in Eastern Ibibio Ikono, Edemekpat in Etinana Local Government Area, Mbon Ebre in Oruk Anam Local Government Area, Ikot Abasi No. 1 in Etinana Local Government Area, Edeobom in Uruan Local Government Area, Ukpom in Oruk Anam Local Government Area, Ikot Ebekpo in Eket Local Government Area and Ikot Ekwere in Itu Local Government Area. There are many taboos, acts and superstitions attached to the indigenous pottery practice probably to certify or claim that the indigenous pottery practice is

exclusive for women. According Mrs. Eno Edem who also hails from Ikot Ebom Itam, “Women potters in Ikot Ebom Itam and Ikot Ekwere dressed half-naked while quarrying the clay from the clay site”. This was customary to the women potters and it was probably to scare the men folk away from the site or an easy way to escape any unforeseen accident. Although men were not allow to quarry clay or practice indigenous pottery, but were always called upon to rescue accident victims at the ravine clay site.

## III. AFFINITY OF WOMANHOOD WITH INDIGENOUS POTTERY SHAPES AND PRACTICE

There is a strong cultural relationship between Nigerian women and pottery practice. Eluwa et al (1988:83) observes that “pottery involved intricate process and was usually produced by women. Different sizes and shapes of pottery were made by Nigerian women for different uses. There were the small mouthed pots for fetching water from streams, the wide mouthed ones for storage and cooking, and those that were used as plates and bowls. Certain pots were also used for ritual purpose and in Borno, it is believed that the ‘sao pots’ were originally used for burial. Pots could also be identified by their colour. Some were grey block, brown, red or black”. Clay which is the basic raw material for pottery making has many colours and usages. Almost all the indigenous activities which involved the use of clay are predominantly practiced traditionally by the women. The various colours of clay are white, brown, red, gray, yellow and black and this depends on the clay site. Among the activities which involved the use of clay and dominated by the women are: body painting/decoration using white clay, red and yellow ochre, traditional house building and painting; medicinal use of clay; traditional fire chambers for cooking, pottery production especially the domestic wares, and trading with clay products. The activities of women with clay products create affinity between them, especially in the production of pottery domestic wares, usage and trading with the wares. The various indigenous pots produced by the women and their designs using local motifs are testimonies to their expertise in traditional pottery practice.

Eluwa et al further states that “the most popular method was the coil method in which coils of the prepared clay were added progressively until the maker came to the required height. While still wet, the pot was decorated with designs or motifs. Some people used maize husks to roll over the surface of the unified pot. It society of pots on display at the Jos Museum reflect the emphasis on surface decoration”. While the display of unique pots with unique shapes and decorations at the Jos Museum worth something to remember, Peters (2012:9) posits that “the Ibibio water pots ‘abang mmong’ is noted as one of the most spherical pots in the world. The Ibibio pots from different parts of Ibibio land such as Ikot Ebidang are seen in most museums in the country for instant the Jos museum” The pots in the museum which are indigenous are produced by women. The Ibibios (Akwa Ibom State) are known for high quality pot production by the women. The cultural symbol of a young girl with decorated calabash to depict an indigenous symbol from Northern Nigeria is similar to an Ibibio cultural symbol of a young girl with a decorated clay pot which is a pride to the people. In Akwa Ibom State pot was dear to the heart of the people especially the

women before the advent of plastic and metal pots. The close relationship between the women and indigenous pottery can not be overemphasized. Pots were produced for the youths and women respectively for fetching water. Women produced pots and also admired them, while the round shape of the indigenous pots resemble some feminine features.

#### IV. INDIGENOUS POTTERY AS AN OUTSTANDING ECONOMIC VENTURE FOR THE WOMEN

Women potters enjoyed enormous benefits and co-operation among themselves in the course of producing and communal firing of their pottery wares, as well as trading with the indigenous pottery products. Social relationship and monetary benefits were often associated with every activity of pottery of practice by the women.

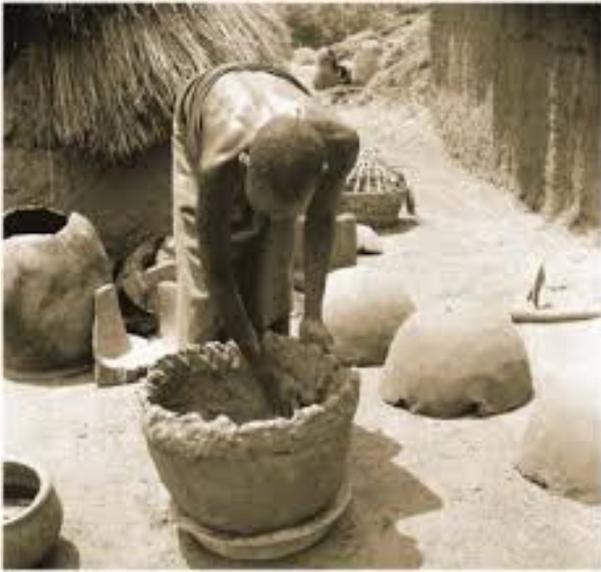
*Statistics are not available to show the number of pots made by an individual but it must have been very high enough to allow for local and long-distance trade in pottery. For example Ibeku women were known to have sold their pots in markets as far away as Ntigha in Ngwaland. However pots are fragile wares and occupy more space when finished. This certainly limited the sale of pots to those markets to which women could carry them safely stocked in the long baskets. In the 1950s, pots produced by Ishiagu women were transported by rail from Afikpo-round to other railway towns in the then Eastern Nigeria (Eluwa et al 1988:83).*

Pottery making was a dignified occupation of women in Nigeria about a hundred years ago, but the advent of new containers with plaster as metal has replace some pottery products.

Uzzy, F. O. (2014: 149) observes that “Oka which is used to be a pottery village near Benin has been taken over by modernization, making it difficult for potters to carry out open air firing, while clay which used to be gotten free is now very expensive and difficult to get.” The ignoble expensive of women potters in Nigeria and particularly in Akwa Ibom State adversely affected the indigenous pottery which was an outstanding economic venture of the women. In Oku, the mass production of traditional pottery flask and coolers dropped drastically because of alternative products as investigated by Uzzi. Ekwere (2002) says that “Our domestic markets have witnessed the influx of industrial containers such as aluminum pots, pans, plastic plates, buckets and basins porcelains and enamel wares”. This observation by Ekwere in Akwa Ibom State market and in Nigeria at large supports the claims by Uzzi of the near extinct of Local pottery wares in Oka near Benin City in Edo State. Another view by Udeme (2006) still asserts to the reason for abandonment of pottery practice and products in recent times as so indicated:

*The introduction of Christianity and formal education has had a serious effect on the traditional pottery. New converts were made to believe that everything indigenous is fetish. For this reason the converts stopped making pots.*

Many issues culminate to act as barriers in the production of traditional pottery wares by the women potters in Akwa Ibom State and other parts of Nigeria. The mentioned barriers were not calling for a close door to pottery practice by the women but rather a change in approach to the practice to meet up with other changes in the society.



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## V. REMEDY TO THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN POTTERY

Traditional pottery practice by the women suffered near extinction which brought about abandonment of pottery centres in almost everywhere. Any environment or society that gives very little or no encouragement to pottery products experienced gross discouragement by the pottery products makers.

Ladi Kwali, a popular Nigerian woman potter who vigorously practiced traditional pottery before the 1950s was fortunate to have met the expertise modern potter – Michael Cardew. According to Agberia (2997:63):

*Hence, by 1950 when the plan for the potters centre was being conceived, Ladi's fame had extended beyond Kwali Village to other neighbouring villages and districts in the Abuja Emirate. This was why between 1954 and 1958 when Ladi Kwali was a trainee at the centre, the pots she produced were reported as products of very high quality that they attracted exhibitions in international circles.*

The wise decision of the women potter – LadiKwali to align herself to the current change” in pottery then. The training she got made her to stay on the career and got exposed internationally. She thrived among the men to stand out and her reward was enormous. Numerous women potters from Akwa Ibom State and other parts of Nigeria never had such glorious opportunity and the harmer of “Current change” in the practice then caught with them and got them to abandon the pottery practice.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The practice of pottery by women which brought fortunes to them and their families before its hitting the wall due to lack of conformity to the necessary “Current change” then, still has great potentials to revive their economic endeavours in pottery. In the era of entrepreneurial ventures, pottery practice has a tremendous role to play. According to Peters (2015:52), “Interesting potters in these areas have actually displayed different skills in pottery making, used for different purposes from cultural, religious to social and decorative”.

All that women and others require involve sourcing for funds and updating their knowledge on modern pottery to boost production of glazed wares which are highly cherished by all. Women have very high concentration and intimacy for clay work

production as found in different parts of the world. The establishment of pottery or ceramics cottage industries and their utilization of the abundant pottery material-clay found everywhere will boost income generation by the women.

Traditional pottery product designs are yearning for innovations and re-invention to properly sustain the culture of the people, so this research anticipates a greater involvement of the women in the modern pottery production and practice.

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