

Pottery: An Instrument of Cultural Sustenance

Dr. Abamwa, Oghenekevwe Elizabeth
Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka- Nigeria
Abanwa_2005@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Indigenous art forms have become part and parcel of today's cultural development and its symbolization process are replete with physical attributes in traditional civilization endeavours, such as are found in clothing, housing objects of religious worship, and ceremonies as dance form, entertainment ecetera. The symbolization process is therefore an enactment of these nuances which have become a way of life. This paper addresses the usage of these symbolic forms in pottery objects as to satisfy, sustain the cultural values and understanding of these symbols.

Introduction

There are so many views and opinions' concerning what culture is. For example, Tylor defines culture as a complex whole, which includes, knowledge, beliefs, morals, laws, custom, art and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society, (1970, 1). This definition highlights two factors: first, that culture is acquired as man finds acceptance within a social framework or society and secondly, that as a member of a society man needs culture that will continue to function, regulated and ensured security. This therefore, makes culture the center of man's existence. In this sense, culture aims at putting together what has been separated by reintrospecting into the initial way of life that put value on our life standard and has once promoted our wellbeing. However, in spite of several definitions explain above, this work decides to look at one of the simplest definitions made by Emekpe, (1985). He sees culture as a way of life of a group of people, that is, the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, even without thinking about them, and these are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Nzimiro (1995:2 1) observes that in the process of living in a society, man develops consciousness and creativity that are vital ingredients for his continue survival. This being the result of an observation of himself and his environment inspires a physical and mental determination of him for self-expression in various ways. This quest for expression in turn, generates a creative desire, which has one of its products as the visual art forms we find today. Also, he emphasized on creativity and consciousness as social qualities which takes shape and developed as acclimatized with culture. This is the manifestation of art through which one can mirror the creativity of man. In the pursuit of this that man evolved ideas which are condensed into symbols being units of a wider reality.

In addition to Greertz (1966), as quoted by Orther in 1976, perceives that art and culture is core practice and one of the most participative, dynamic and social forms of human behaviour. It has the capacity to trigger reflection, generate empathy, create dialogue and foster new ideas and relationships and offers a powerful and democratic way of expressing, sharing and shaping values. However, he argued that 'culture' must be seen as the 'webs of meaning' within which people live, meaning encoded in symbolic forms that must be understood through acts of interpretation analogous to the work of literary critics Otite, (1976 33) did observes that these symbols are agents that are impregnated with messages and invitation to conform and to act.

Geertz also went further to say that some scholars who include anthropologists and folklorists of previous generations sometime in the past lamented that an age of high technology and global capitalism would result in the demise of "traditional' cultures. Today, we often consider culture and tradition as fluid and dynamic resources which interact with the modern world, rather than being overrun or determined by it.

The last sentence seems to bring peace into our hearts but the fact remains that no one knows what the future could turn into. However, today many people from these cultures do not even identify these symbols talk less of usage in any ramification, and if it continues like that there will be a great vacuum left in these cultures. This is to say that these important aspects of these cultures will fade off before notice. Therefore, for this simple reason it became necessity to document the interplay of these symbols as used in pottery imageries, to interpret our way of life. Also, the documentation serves as source of knowledge in future to our children and even the ones yet unborn. The write up uses ceramic imageries as symbol originated form and these symbols are common to the Binis of Edo State, Ukwanni, Ijaw and the Urhobo people of Delta State. The study is to enlighten and motivate potters into appreciating and using traditional symbols that are in culture or tradition as deco and form for pottery or other artistical production. This is believed to improve the attitude of people, especially youths towards understanding the philosophical meanings of these indigenous symbols, their importance and also, to evolve ways of preserving them.

The methodology of this study was based on Sherry B. Ortner's 1979 research formula which says that "a particular possesses a key symbol, if it is signaled by one of the following indicators" These indicators are:

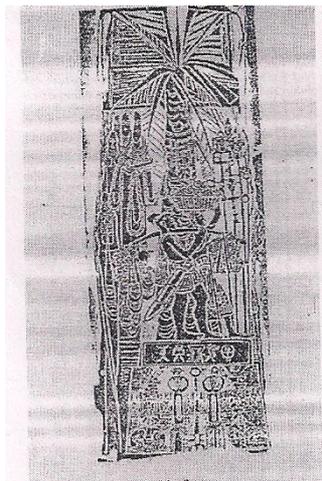
1. The "native" tell us that 'X' is culturally important
2. The "native" seem positively or negatively aroused about 'X'
3. 'X' comes up in many different contexts. This context may be behavioural or systematic, 'X' comes in many different kinds of action, situation or domain (myth, ritual, art etc).
4. There is a regular cultural elaboration surrounding 'X' examples are elaboration of vocabulary or elaboration of details of 'X' nature, compared with similar phenomena in culture.

Examples of Some Symbolic Creation in Arts

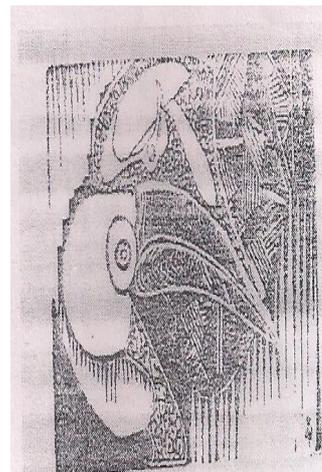
Symbols are defined as avert expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. It is quite usual for a perceiver to express his inner experience, sight or visions and mystical or religious experience in symbols. Words in form of songs otherwise, myths, proverbs parables icons and masks are powerful and enduring symbols for conveying religious truth, Nabofia, (2004:27).

To deepen our understanding of how art imageries (art pieces) impact on our values and to rethink on how and why we should value art, in the regard, some the art pieces produced by Dr Bruce Onobrakpeya and Ladi Kwali were looked at. Bruce Onobrakpeya discovered, innovated and perfected several techniques in both printmaking and relief sculpture that are uniquely Nigerian. Printmaking has interpreted by him is seen as fine art process of producing pictures from a plate which has earlier been created by the artist. The artist then creates an image or images on a plate through any of the printmaking techniques, from the idea that has been conceived. The images are then transferred onto a paper or any other surface by printing or embossing method, and he added that the advantage is that the artist can use one of such plates to produce as many copies of the artwork as required, sometimes giving them various colours. Studying most the works Bruce did, it was clear that he drew his motifs which are encoded as symbols from the environment, Ikpakronye, (1999:21) confirms that the use traditional imageries and symbols through stories in his art pieces has lifted Onobrakpeya to height that is being witnessed today. For example, one of his art pieces titled "Edjokpa is the Urhobo god of palm trees worshipped for bumper harvest. The shrine is usually a live palm tree around which are suspended Efi (climbing ropes), Ibusu and Ukpeyibo (red and white strips of clothes). A wooden platform is erected near the base for offerings. Included in the painting is a palm tree, farmer and his wife carrying bunched of palm fruits to symbolize harvest. Also, he used a print to show Urhobo symbol in a folklore called 'Okpogho', the hornbill, which points to the beginning of time when the land has not been created. The bird's (Okpogho) mother died and it buried her inside its head, hence the abnormal large head that Okpogho has up till date, Otite (2003: 379).

1. Edjokpa

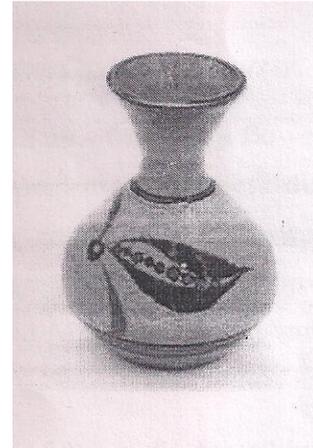


2. 'Okpogho'



Another artist whose works also rested on traditional motifs that are drawn from tradition symbols is Dr Ladi Kwali. She employed various design elements on her pots and these are clearly visible from the techniques and approaches she adopted in achieving the desired beauty of forms. She combines the geometrical and real forms either in linear and curvilinear to derive her decorative and forms for pots. Agbaria, (2005:2 1) says that some of the pots produced by Ladi showed profuse use of spiky rectilinear vertical lines: In order to breaks this repetition; she does deliberately, by filling the gaps with zig-zag lines. She also showed her speciality in the use of zoomorphic elements (motifs) which were initially referred to as real forms in the above paragraph,

where she showed diversity of themes on a pot. These themes are mainly zoomorphic or figurative elements such as snakes-like motifs in waves of bands that are composed with their heads as arrow spikes terminating in triangles. However, Ladi Kwali motifs also include birds, lizards, chameleon, butterfly and wall gekkos which may have been representation of symbols interpreting one happening or the other in the environment. Her designs are composed into blocks of vertical lines. These lines develop into blocks of vertical lines, and they progresses into bands. Sometimes, the lines are highlighted with textured incisions thereby appearing like parallel bands. It is within these bands or blocks that other motifs are placed for balance. In some cases vertical demarcations are applied to blend with the pictorial elements using a butterfly, or an animated figural element; and sometimes, chameleon is composed to walk on a bough, which is represented in a vertical line. Most importantly, in her compositions, the motif appears only once on a pot.



Traditional Symbols and Pots Creation

The coded connotations of these symbols were studied in regards to philosophical meaning(s) of culture, although the symbols were used on potteries, as serve as decoration and beautification abets. Some of these symbols were found as forms for utility or decorations amongst the cultures mentioned above are: 1 “Aghighon” - (A String of Round Brownish Beads). It is a string of round brownish beads threaded together to make a necklace.

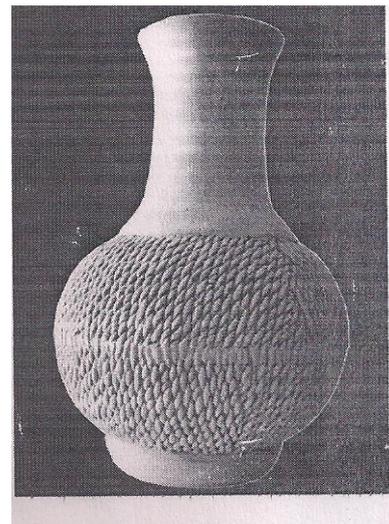
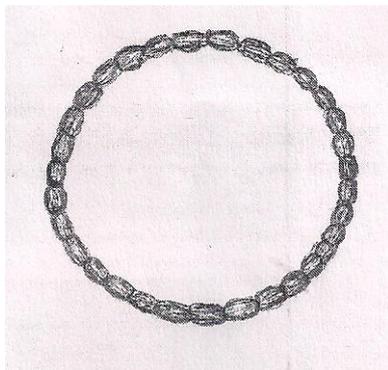


Fig. IA: The symbol of “Aghighon”. Fig 1 B: Adaptation of “Aghighon” symbol. Courtesy: Abamwa

Here, “Aghighon” symbol is used as ornamented deco on or adapted as a form on a flower pot. The Urhobo people call the treaded circle as “Aghighon” and it is presented to chiefs during their installation ceremony. It is an important part of a chiefs dressing and it creates an awareness for strangers to identify the status of the wearing of The Aghighon as a chief (“Ohonvworen or Olorogun”) as noted by my informants, Papa

Emuedaye Iboye and Madam Otite Ejemudaro. The object symbolises an authority for chieftaincy title in Urhoboland. Among the Ijaws, ‘Aghighon’ is seen as an important part the full regalia for a king (‘Pere’), although, the object is also used by chiefs among the Ijaws. The object symbolises kingship and to some extent, chieftaincy as confirmed by Papa Akpoebi Akanebe and Mr Tamarapreye Enekeye and they also established that the object is called “Le-Ila” in Izon language.

The Bini people are not left out in the use of this symbol, and they see it as an important object that completes the dressing of the Oba cum chiefs. The object also used during the installation of chiefs and it symbolizes chieftaincy. This symbol is called “Ivi” in Benin language as inveterated by Mr Nosa Ikpewonsa and Mrs Esther Osareme. Within Ukwuani people, this ‘Aghighon’ is mainly associated with the king (Eze). It is an object used to complete the kingship attire. Although in recent years, people who not in the position to be found using the object now purchase it for use. This object is called “Esuru” in Ukwuanni language and it also, symbolizes kingship in Izon tradition. according Mr. Peter Osaro.

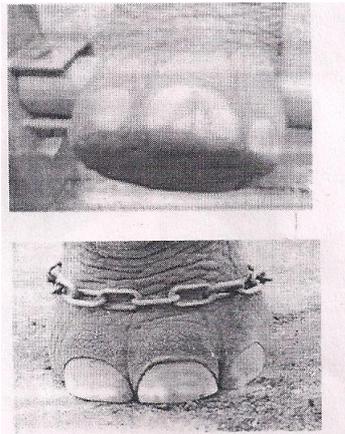


Fig. 2A: ‘Ohwo r’Eni’(Elephant Foot). Fig.2B :Adaptation of ‘Ohwo r’ Eni’ .Courtesy: Abamwa

Eni is a very big and weighty animal, because of these attributes its foot-prints create holes large enough to store water for other animals to drink. Apart from this quality there is another important natural endorsement that the animal possesses that is known and called tusk. The tusk is essentially valued by Africans. In this part of Africa, especially in communities under this study, the object has an immense importance such as: Among people of Urhobo, Izon, Ukwuanni, Binis the object is used as one instrument for singing praises to the “Ovie”, ‘Pere’, ‘Eze’, ‘Oba’(king) and to herald his entry into Royal Court in the Palace during important ceremonies and their exist. This tusk is also used by chiefs (“Ilorogun”) in one of their important dances called “Ema” in honour of the king (Ovie) among the Urhobo people, and may be some other dances in the rest traditions mentioned in this study.

According to Papa Izonebi Oyinkro and Madam Ekisara Obribai the animal- Eni has the same connotation in Ijaw exactly as it in Urhobo tradition. They went further to say that the animal is called Oku-Obori in Ijaw language. The Binis hold the same view about this animal as held by the Urhobo and Ijaw people also. The Binis called the animal Eni as it also called by the Urhobo people-‘Eni’. While, the Ukwuanni people the animal called ‘Eye’. The leg is stylized to produce a pen/biro holder. The essence of using this is to prove that education brings about development and discovery that makes a country to move from one class of recognition to another. The most important instrument of education is the pen or the biro that originated from the use of bird feathers as instrument of writing in the ancient times. Here, the animal’s (‘Eni’) leg is used to create a decorative piece.

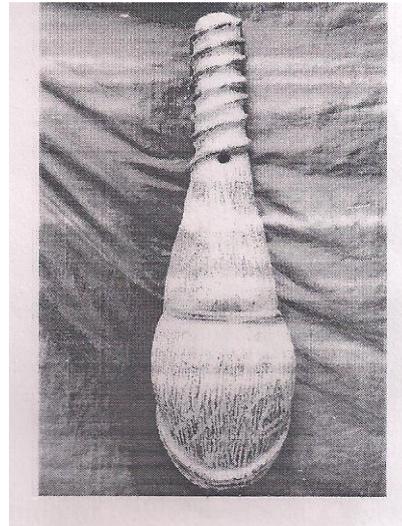
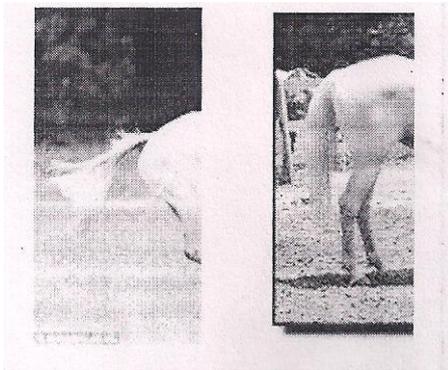


Fig.3A: Real of Ujo (Fly Whisk).

Fig. 3B: Ujo as in pottery form. Courtsy: Abamwa

Ujo - It is an object made from the horse tail. Among the Urhobo, the object is used for “Ema” dance. This is a special dance for kings; the dance is performed by royal fathers. ‘Therefore, it is a status symbol for kings (“Ivie”) over their subjects. Although, chiefs (Ilorogun) carry it about in Urhobo land, the honour goes to the kings who have been installed by them as an overseer of traditional activities.

The Ijaw people call this object “Opoborise”. It is an object commonly used by chiefs. It symbolizes honour for the titled people among others. It complements the chieftaincy regalia in Ijawland.

The object is called “Ugbudian” in Benin language. It is an object associated with chiefs in Benin tradition. It complements the regalia for chiefs in Benin tradition also. It symbolizes chieftaincy that is, through its usage, one recognizes title holders.

This is used to produce a wall plague. The object was used because it came from animals that have qualities of preservation. The animals could run for hours without slopping down. Apart from that, it has enduring beauty especially from the head and the tail region that cannot be compared to most other animals. It is also very subtle and quiet unlike tiger, lion and other powerful animals. Because of its qualities, the animal is greatly appreciated among a lot of people including Urhobos, Binis and Ukwuanni people.

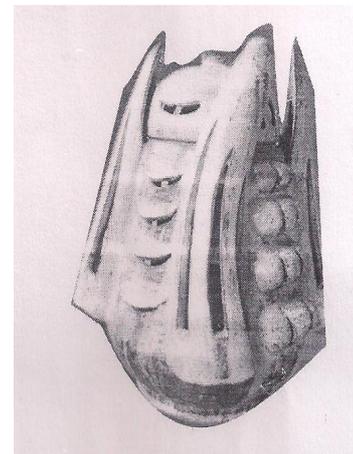
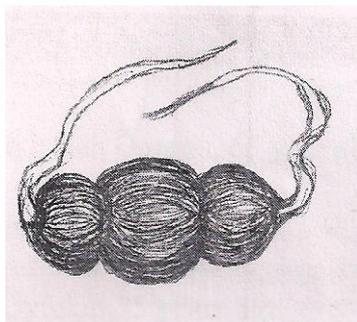


Fig.4A: The Real Symbols- Urhue.

Fig.4B: Adaptation of Urhue symbols. Courtsy: Abamwa

Conclusion and Recommendation

The artistic richness of Africa cultures cannot be over emphasized. The manifestation of cultural symbols and form on pottery does enrich the people’s cultural heritage and promote the art of pottery in the cultures are elicited. Thus, bringing to reality the new standards of appreciating art and judging traditional art pieces. With this, traditional art practitioner no longer measured by the western standard of ideas, beauty or by the degree of visual appearance but by the conception of new forms which are more real to the people. The resultant effect is

therefore the evolvement of a new language of expression through an in depth study of the traditional symbols and form.

A critical analysis of these symbols and forms revealed anthropomorphic and biomorphic orientation as well as the artist's personal intuition in design concept. Whether these traditional symbols are borrowed or not, we cannot tell but these could be as a result of interactions among different cultures within the area of study in the past. It may also be true that the people developed this artistic language of expressions independently without any outside culture or artistic influences.

Nevertheless this unique identity is fast fading away, a situation that should be arrested if cultural art is to be maintained and developed. In the light of the above, a negation of history and tradition would cause a setback in the development of any society. Thus, the symbolic use of traditional symbols as decorative patterns on pots by potters and their applications enhances creation of a new form of expression, carving a unique cultural identity for the people. It enables us to design useful and meaningful objects of appreciation and also increasing the basis of livelihoods and as well as sustaining the culture that is highly valued.

NOTES

Papa Emuedaye Iboyi, 72 years old.
Papa Umukoro Isaiah Oniovo, 65 year old.
Mr. Peter Osaro, 52 years old.
Papa Izonebi Oyinkro, 75 years old.
Madam Ekisara Obribai, 68 years old.
Mr Nosa Ikpewonsa, 63 years old
Papa Akpoebi Akanebe, 66 years old
Mr Tamarapreye Enekeye, 59 years old.
Mrs Esther Osareme, 49 years old
Madam Otite Ejemudaro, 61 years old.

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