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The Indigenous Yoruba Pottery: Processes and Products

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Abstract
One thing that is fundamental to all that has ever been or that can be is subject to process. The principle of production in all sectors is attached to process; for instance for rice to have been on the table for the eater, it has gone through planting, harvesting, winnowing, parboiling, drying, packaging which in inclusion is referred to as processing. This paper focuses on the processes and products of indigenous Yoruba pottery, which could not have been without the indigenous processes involved. The paper showcases the efforts of indigenous Yoruba potters in getting pots ready for various uses in African societies and the universe at large. It further observed the various techniques being employed by Yoruba potters such as gathering materials (clay, firewood), preparing, moulding, drying, firing; and types of pots and it uses. The paper employed the use of primary and secondary data sources; field work was embarked upon to collect data from potters in some pottery towns and villages where pottery is still viable in Yoruba communities of Nigeria. Findings revealed that the processes of indigenous Yoruba pot making are multifaceted, however the various processes are entrenched in the five major stages that is general to pottery making; which are clay digging, preparation, moulding, drying and firing.
Keywords: Indigenous Yoruba pottery, Yoruba potters, Process, Products

Introduction

Pottery in the context of this paper is the combination of pots, dishes and receptacles that are hand-built with clay and fired in a clamp or open fire to make them functional, durable and permanent. In this connection, emphasis is laid on the processes and products that are responsible for the uniqueness of indigenous Yoruba pottery profession in Nigeria.

Indigenous Yorùbá pottery is mainly practiced by the womenfolk, and it is usually passed from mothers to their children and from one generation to the other. Traditionally, men are not involved in indigenous pot making but they do assist their wives in clay prospecting and digging, male children also collect clay, water, firewood and straws for their mothers. The indigenous potting activities usually take place in a workplace commonly referred to as *ebu*[1]. Other related indigenous manufacturing sites such as local soap, palm and kernel oils processing sites are also called *ebu* in Yorùbá nation. Fátúnsìn (1992) describes workshop as a place 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. Generally, most workshops are located very close to the place where raw materials are sourced. The number of sheds in pottery workshop is determined by the number of potters practicing together in an area. A shed is usually designed to accommodate potting activities and the various pottery materials, tools and products. This paper therefore discusses the processes and products of indigenous pottery in Yoruba nation.

The Processes

Pot making is classified into five distinct stages, namely; clay digging, preparation, forming (moulding), drying and firing (Hodges, 1964). These are the fundamental procedures of pot making. These five stages are the fundamental steps involved in pot making generally. However, the making of indigenous Yoruba pot involved several stages, which are embeded in the same five major stages. As Umoru-Oke (2016) discovered in an interview with a lead potter (Victoria Oke-owo) at Iganran-Isale, Ogun State that the number of processes depends on types of pots produced, and techniques employed in production in one town or the other. For example, indigenous pottery in Iganran-Isale town in Ogun State Nigeria, demands nineteen distinct stages which are digging *(wíwú)*, collecting it *(gbígbé)*, cutting *(sísá)*, soaking (*ríré),* mashing (*títè)*, kneading *(rírún)*, opening *(títú)*, coiling *(rírán)*, consolidating the rim *(bíbò)*, expanding the belly *(wíwó)*, shaping the pot *(fífí)*, scraping the pot *(fífá),* smoothening of the pot *(dídán)*, drying *(fisóde* or *fisóòrùn),* colour application *(ferowo),* pre-heating *(finfin),* stacking *(tito)*, actual firing *(munaa),* and lastly off-loading of pots *(yerun)*.

The nineteen processes identified, can be categorized under the general five major processes of pot making. The digging involves *wiwu* and *gbígbé.* The preparation of clay involves *sisa, rire,rírún*, *títè*. The forming or building of pots involves *títú*, *riran, bíbo*, *wíwó*, *fífí*, *fífá,* and *dídán.* The drying of pots involves *fisóde or fisóòrùn* and *fèròwo*. The firing of pots involves *fínfín, títò*, *múnáá,* and lastly the *yerun.* All these processes (procedures) are germane to the successful production of pots in the town, and this can only be achieved by potters who are intelligent and physically stable (Umoru-Oke 2016).

[1]*Ebu* is regarded as a workshop where pot and other women related occupations are practiced.

Also, sixteen (16) distinctive processes of pot making are equally identified amongst the Onílarú potters of Ilorin in Kwara State, which are digging *(wiwu),* collecting *(rírù),* drying *(sísá),* soaking *(ríre),* pounding *(gígún),* kneading *(yíyi),* rolling into ball *(sísù),* making into a flat surface *(pípa* and *tìmù),* moulding on pre-mould *(ape-dídé),* rim forming *(fífá),* smoothening *(sísá),* smoothening of the outer surface *(sèyìn),* drying *(sísá),* firing *(sísun),* basting *(bòléyò)*. However, the processes itemized are peculiar to potters that engage in the making of smaller vessels, such as *ìsáàsùn*, *agbébi* and *agbada* which require burnishing and perhaps reduction firing. The sixteen processes mentioned are also entrenched in the general five major distinct processes.

Digging

Generally, pot making starts with clay digging and ends with the firing of pots. The potters collect their clay in groups of two to six and each of the groups is usually large enough to pay the cost of men to dig the clay and to transport the clay back home where the clay is spread or expose on the floor to get dry before clay preparation process begins

Preparation

There are different ways in which clay can be prepared after it has been dug and collected. Most of the indigenous potters interviewed established the fact that clay preparation is the most procedural task in pottery making because a successful firing of pot is determined by the clay used. Since no clay is suitable immediately after digging, it has to be prepared and mixed properly to make it workable. The clay is spread and cut into pieces *(sísá)*, soaked (*ríré),* mashed (*títè)*, kneaded *(rírún)* and worked into homogenous mass. In view of this, clay preparation is not treated with levity. It is when clay has been properly and manually prepared that the indigenous potter starts to form her pot.

According to Nimota (a potter) of Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè in Ogun State, clay preparation is always accompanied with pottery related songs to ease potters of the labourous task before her, thereby making clay preparation an interesting task in disguise. Such songs included:

Àtèkan pèlú owú monjan monjan
Àtèkan pèlú owú jainjain jainjain
Ma fi rán omo lúèbó o àtèkan pèlú owú eeee eeee a
Kú àbò, àtèkan pèlú owú
Ma fi rán omo léèwé o a àtèkan pèlú owú o eeeee a
Kú àbò, àtèkan pèlú owú
Àtèkan with *owú* are mashed together dynamically
Àtèkan with *owú* are mashed together energetically
I will sponsor my child to the overseas with *Àtèkan* and *owú*
You are welcome*, àtèkan* and *owú*
I will sponsor my child's education with *Àtèkan* and *owú*
You are welcome*, àtèkan* and *owú*

In this song, the clay types are being referred to as *ateekan* (red clay) and *owu* (black clay). This invariably means that when the two clay types are thoroughly mixed together the pots moulded will yield successfully; and the potter will be able to sponsor her children's education and be fulfilled in life.

Forming

Cardew (1970), David and Hennig (1972) note the major method of pot forming in West Africa which is hand building; the indigenous potters mould pots without the use of any sophisticated machine. Wahlman (1972) identifies two distinct methods of hand-built pottery in Yorùbá land; the direct and indirect methods. However, Akinbogun (2002) and Idowu (2007) aver that there are different types of hand building techniques which could be direct or indirect method of moulding as previously identified by Wahlman.

The direct method of pot making is employed without the use of any pre-mould; a new pot is built directly from onset while moulding or coiling method is used to complete the pot. The processes involved in direct method are, opening *(títú)*, coiling *(rírán)*, consolidating the rim *(bíbò)*, expanding the belly *(wíwó)*, shaping the pot *(fífí)*, scraping the pot *(fífá)* and lastly, the smoothening of the pot *(dídán)*. The indirect method on the other hand, allows for the use of a pre-mould on which the base of a new pot is cast, and the pot is completed with only coiling method. The processes involved in indirect method are rolling clay into ball *(sísù),* making into a flat surface *(pípa* and *tìmù),* moulding on pre-mould *(ape-dídé),* coiling *(rírán)*, rim forming *(fífá),* smoothening *(sísá)* and smoothening of the outer surface *(sèyìn).*

The coiling method (*ooran*) is perhaps one of the commonest methods employed in indigenous pot making. It is a process of building up the wall of pot with superimposed rolls of clay coils (Shephard, 1956). Coil is a long rope-like form, which is added to the top of leather hard pots or rims. However, moulding and coiling methods are commonly used for wall building, but coiling is usually utilized at some levels to complete most

pots which have been started with either direct or indirect method.

Direct method of moulding pot is adopted in Isàn-Èkìtì and Ìlafòn in Èkìtì State, Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè and Ìganran-Ìsàlè in Ògún State and Erúsú-Àkókó in Òndó State. However, there are variations in the procedures involved. In Erúsú-Àkókó, (direct method) pot forming starts from the rim, the building of the pot's wall commences with moulding method immediately the rim is leather hard and moulding terminates at the base of the pot *(figs. 1 & 2).*The direct method of pot making in Erúsú-Àkókó town differs from the one employed in Ìganran-Ìsàlè, Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè, the Isàn-Èkìtì and Ìlafòn-Èkìtì towns, where a pot is formed on an improvised whirler which is called *òyíìté* in Ìjèbú area, and often referred to as *àpándè* among the Èkìtì. In these towns, a new pot starts directly from a ball of clay that is hollowed at the centre and completes with (coiling method) coils which are added onto the wall of the pot, and this is usually pulled to form the rim, while the pot rotates on the whirler independently as work progresses *(figs. 3 & 4).*

The indigenous pots of Ìlorin, Ìpetumodù, Odeòmu, Odi-Odéyalé and Ìjàyè in Abéòkúta are made with indirect method of pre-mould making. In this method an old inverted pot called *ìdé* pre-mould *(fig. 5)* on which the base of a new pot is made. Wood ash is used as separator; this is dusted on the base to prevent moist clay from sticking onto pot while casting. The unfinished pot is completed using coil method *(fig. 6)*

The pinching method is another one, which is also very important because it is the elementary way of making tiny form of pots; the method is a derivative of direct method of pot forming. It is adopted for the making of smaller cups and bowls, most especially the *fìtílà* (local oil lamp) and *kóló* (safe pot). Adédojà (a potter) of Ilorin claimed that pinching is the most rudimentary and pleasing way to make tiny wares, particularly, the *konjo, kóló* and *fìtílà*[1].

Fig.1: Direct forming from the rim (Erúsú-Àkókó). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, February, 2012.

[1]Personal communication with Adédojà Jimoh at Ile Agaa, Onílarú compound, Òkelèlè in Ìlorin, Kwara state, Nigeria. January 7, 2014.

Fig. 2: Direct forming to the base (Erúsú-Ákókó).Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, February, 2012.

Fig. 3: Direct method on the *Oyíité* (Íganran-Ísàlè). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, August, 2015.

Fig. 4: Direct method on *àpándè* (Isàn-Ekìtì). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, June, 2014.

Fig. 5: Indirect method of *ape-dide* (Ìpetumodù). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, December, 2015.

Fig. 6: Coiling method (Ìpetumodù). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu. December, 2015.

Decorations

The potter completes the forming of pot when she applies decorative elements to enhance its beauty. This is done when the pots are wet or leather hard before it hardens completely. Gonen (1973) attests to decoration of pots as a way of embellishing, adorning, and honouring a new created piece of pottery ware before it completely hardens. Decoration is made on pots to make them more attractive, reveal status, and also to enable pots to be handled with ease; to allow firm grip.

Vasina (1984) observes that decorative elements on pottery vessels among the Kuba is an indication of status because it is believed that only wealthy people could afford the expenses incurred in the production of such decorative ware. However, the decorative elements and motifs adopted by most of the indigenous Yoruba potters in contemporary times do not only designate such pottery as decorative pots but to attract customers, and to enhance sales.

Decorations on pots is classified into two: the primary and secondary. The primary decoration is the textural effects made on pots usually to attract customers' attention. Primary decoration is further classified into three; plain undecorated, applied and impressed decorations (Willett 1967). The secondary decorations are the motifs and designs that are emblematic, they reveal and tell one thing or the other about the purpose to which such pots are made, for example, the religious pots, the Sango pot, Erinlè pot, Òsun pot to mention but a few. This decoration is what William (1974) called "type" motifs. They are typical of a given cult, which exemplify and symbolize a particular attribute of the deity concerned. They are combined together to form a stereotype or the cult objects. The type motifs that typify Sango include *edunàrá*; thunder stone, *osé Sango*; Sango wand, *omoodó*; pestle, ò*yà*; comb among others. The type motifs are generally derived from the paraphernalia of the deities.

Drying

The drying of pots involves *fisóde, fisóòrùn* and *fèròwo*. Drying is the stage that precedes firing. Drying is necessary, otherwise when pots are fired, steam will form around the walls and this can cause pots to break and explode during firing. Drying of a new pot starts immediately a potter commences the building of a pot. It is observed that most indigenous potters do not finish their pots immediately at a stretch but work in stages. Drying is in stages; the first stage is the leather hard, pot is exposed to sunlight or air (*fisode*) for some hours to stiffen to a state where it can be bended, textured, scraped and perhaps, burnished. Definitely the bottom or rims of new pots are left to harden or dry a little so that the pots will be strong enough to receive further loads of clay. Naturally, sunlight and air are the major sources of the final drying (*fisóòrùn)*; the rate of drying depends on the sizes of pots, thickness of the wall of pots and the weather. Pots, especially big ones, are turned in the sun; from time to time, for a perfect drying process. The last stage of drying is after which the application of colouring oxides (*fèròwo*) is made on pots (if required).

Firing

The firing of pots is the process when the clay work is transformed into a more permanent structure; it is the final stage in pot making. The turning of clay into pottery is a slow progression and it involves the dispersion and loss of "free water" and the chemically "bound water (Johnson, 1988). To the indigenous Yoruba potters firing

involves this processes, pre-heating *(finfin),* stacking *(tito)*, actual firing *(munaa),* and lastly off-loading of pots *(yerun)* and basting *(boleyo),* when the two basic firing techniques are adopted; the oxidation and reduction firing techniques. Oxidation firing is the firing done with ample supply of oxygen, making pot to come out with clean body, while the reduction firing is a type of firing using insufficient oxygen, carbon monoxide thus formed unites with oxygen from the body to form carbon-dioxide; producing black colour ware.

The indigenous Yoruba pots are usually fired in an open firing atmosphere and potters usually engage in joint firing exercise (where two or more potters come together to fire pots). 'Make shift' kiln is constructed each time firing is to be conducted, which to some extent conserves the needed heat for earthenware bodies. The arrangement *(tito)* of the open firing place (*ojú-ada*) mostly precedes the firing, and it involves the arrangement of potshards, baked clay, stones, twigs and firewood on which the pots to be fired are carefully stacked. The pots to be fired are stacked on the arranged bed. While stacking, the bigger pots take precedence; they are stacked first before the smaller ones and most times the smaller pots such as *agbébi, orù, kóló, fìtílà* are arranged inside the big ones.

Pre-heating

The stage that precedes the actual firing is the pre-heating stage (*finfin).* Apart from sun-drying of pots, big pots such as dye pots, storage pots and water pots should be properly pre-heated with either dried straws or grasses before the actual firing takes place. During pre-heating the remaining water of plasticity which is the chemical bond water is driven off slowly in order to avoid sudden intake of intense heat which could cause shattering of the pots when the temperature is above 100^0C. For instance in Ìganran-Ìsàlè and Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè pots are pre-heated one after the other either singularly on local stoves *(figs. 7a & 7b)* or arranged jointly before the actual firing.

The actual firing kick-starts immediately the pots are preheated and lasts for about two hours. For instance in Ìganran-Ìsàlè and Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè the stacked pots are covered with firewood perpendicularly while in Ìlorin and Abéòkúta towns, pots are covered with corrugated iron sheet to ensure that the heat generated in the firing is conserved to some extent (*figs. 8, 9 & 10*). When the firewood is consumed and pots are exposed red hot, it is assumed that pots are matured. This indicates the end of the oxidizing firing process and the temperature is allowed to fall slowly before pots are offloaded.

The reduction firing is common among the Ìlorin potters in Kwara State, and it usually lasts for about one hour. Pots are off-loaded when they are red hot with a long stick called *òpá ifòn* and placed or rolled on wood shaving (*séfìnì)*, the wood shaves cause smoke to smolder on the body of the pot and carbon monoxide settles on the pot. At this the potters do basting *(boleyo)* by immersing the hot pots quickly inside the dye infusion from either the bark of *irà* (*Bridelia feruginea*) or *lásàngbá* (*Parkia clappertoniana*). This action seals the carbon to the surface of the pot, making it easy to handle and clean (*figs. 11 & 12).* This marks the end of pot making processes.

It is imperative to note that if clay is not well prepared, the moulding becomes challenging and when pot is not properly dried, the pots may shatter during the firing. However, most of the potters interviewed claimed that they dread the firing process to the extent that all precautions are taken to minimize the occurrence of mishap during the firing of pots; hence, the spirituality of pot making in Yoruba land. Generally, most potting activities are engaged with religious connotations in Yoruba culture; potters always seek for spiritual assistance and support for the success of their work. For instance, the Igaran-Isale potters of Ogun State who believe, and associate with the cult of the goddess of pottery worship and appease the goddess for successful pottery endeavors, while Christian and Muslim potters in Yoruba communities supplicate to God or Allah, especially, during the firing. When Munirat (a potter) of Ilorin was asked on how she always feels whenever she is about to engage in firing, she answered calmly in Arabic language "tawakalitu" meaning "In God I trust"..

Fig. 7a: Pre-heating (Ìganran-Ìsàlè). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, December, 2015.

Fig. 7b: Pre-heating (Ìjàyè, Abeokuta). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, June, 2015.

Fig. 8: Pots covered with corrugated iron sheets (Ilorin). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, February, 2010.

Fig. 9: Open firing in progress (Ìganran-Ìsàlè). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, December, 2015.

Fig. 10: Open firing in progress (Ìjèbú-Ìmòpè). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, December, 2015.

Fig. 11: Pot rolling on "*séfìnì*"; wood shaving. Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu, August, 2014

Fig. 12: Pot basting (Dada, Ìlorin). Photograph by Umoru-Oke Nanashaitu August, 2014.

The Products

Indigenous Yoruba pottery in the recent past served significant functions in the daily lives and activities of the Yoruba people. The functions ranged from domestic, economic, religious to socio-cultural, and as such, potters were respected in the society and regarded as the custodians of culture and tradition. The relevance of pottery wares in the pre-colonial periods cannot be overemphasized. The pottery wares used for manufacturing purposes included; *ládìrò* which is used in soap making and dyeing industries, frying pot *(agbada)* and big storage pot (*odù*) are used in cassava processing industries. The household utensils included the pitcher *(kete),* local stove (*àdògán),* water pot, (*àmù),*sieve (*ajere*), cooking pot *(ape)*, soup pot *(ìsáàsùn)*, pap cup *(kólòbó èko)*, and local oil lamp (*fìtílà)* to mention but a few.

Pots were extensively used for therapeutic and magical (herbal pots) and religious purpose. The Òrìsà related pots included, Òsun pot, Sàngó pot Ògún pot, Òrúnmìlà pot and Òrìsà Oko pot to mention but a few. These pots are decorated with emblematic motifs that typified the deities for which the pots are made. The socio-cultural and religious functions of indigenous pots accounted for the patronage that the indigenous potters enjoyed in the recent past.

The indigenous pottery products today included, water pot (*àmù)*, cooking pot *(ape ìdáná)*, money box *(kóló)*, local stove (*àdògán)* flower pot (*ìkòkò òdòdó)*, frying pot (*àlàtí/agbada)*, herbal pot (*orù)*, local oil lamp (*fìtílà),* plate (*àwo ebo),*soup pot (*àsèje)*, placental pot (*agbébi),* sieve (*ajere*), and coal pot (*kólùpótù).* Though, Orisa related pot is still in existence but not as viable as it were in the pre-colonial and colonial periods because of the absorption of Christianity and Islamic religions.

It is imperative to mention here that efforts are being made to keep indigenous pottery business alive, hence potters embrace change and their pottery forms had been adapted to suit contemporary patronage while their conventional forms are still produced, patronized and prized in their cultural environment. Indigenous pottery vessels are patronized by the rural dwellers as well as some urban dwellers who are comfortable with the daily use of the products.

Conclusion

The paper brings to fore the salient but silent stages that are involved in indigenous pot making, and the use to which the products are put into in Yoruba land. The ways and manners in which the essential material; clay is sourced, prepared, formed into shape, decorated, dried and fired are discussed to bring out the indigeneity in Yoruba pottery practice in the contemporary times. The socio-cultural and religious significance of indigenous Yoruba pottery products in the pre-colonial and colonial periods were also discussed to refresh and sustain the age long artistry for posterity. The paper thus concludes that indigenous Yoruba pottery will continue to enjoy patronage because of the inherent values attached to the products in their cultural environment which perhaps cannot be substituted with plastic, enamel or metal containers that infiltrated Nigeria local market.

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