A Discursive Analyses and the Challenges and Prospects of Oboburu Pottery Industry in Ogbaland, ONELGA, Rivers State

By

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Abstract

This paper identifies the challenges and prospects of the pottery centre in Oboburu community. It covers the discussions on the reasons for the declining production activities of the pottery industry of Oboburu. Pottery plays important role in the cultural lives of a people both in the past and in the present time of which Oboburu is not left out. Culture is the manifestation, expression, reflection, and reinforcement of the parent tradition that gave birth to it. Culture differs from society to society and it gives identity to societies. Pottery is generally known to be very symbolic in our traditional society and is faced with the danger of becoming a history in the land of Oboburu community except efforts are made to sustain it. The problems and prospects of pottery production in Oboburu, Ogbaland will be highlighted.

KEYWORDS: challenges, prospects, culture, Igburukwu, Ogbaland.

Introduction

Pottery is described as all objects of clay with or without the addition of other earthy materials that is first shaped and dried, then made hard and permanent by the act of heating. According to Ezeh (1984), pottery is a very

unique and stimulating craft. Encarta (2009) defines it as "clay that is chemically altered and permanently hardened by firing in a kiln".
Elements of ceramic art, upon which different degrees of emphasis have been placed at different times, are the shape of the object, its decoration by painting, carving and other methods, and the glazing found them.
Each Nations of the earth discovered how to make pottery independently, with different approaches, to production. There are relics of potteries that dates back to 9000BC, with the evidence of fired clay objects between the Egyptians, Mesopotamia and the people of Babylon (Talabi 2002).

The pottery centre discussed is located at Oboburu in Ogba community of Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. The Ogba kingdom is situated in the Northern part of Rivers State. Geographically, Ali-Ogba expanses from about 450N to 530N and spreads from about 625E to about 640E. Spatially, it shields an area of 920 km^2 in the northern part of the Niger Delta region positioned within the River Niger flood grasslands. Ogba is enclosed on the west by the Orashi river and Sombrero river on the east. To the core drainage structures, it has the Omoku river and several back swamps, cut offs and joining streams that forms a web of drainage networks overlaid on the area. At the highest of the rainy period, these interlocked waterways are projecting features of the land. The area can be alienated into four environmental regions:

- The Sombrero river grasslands (eastwards)
- The Orashi river downpour plains (westwards)
- The central well drained lowlands and farm mixture (amid the Orashi and Sombrero watercourses)
- The non-tidal stream wetlands basin.

The utmost part of Ogbaland is the well-drained sea-level and farm medley with altitude ranging from 15m to 22m. In general, the land is categorized by a gentle slanted landscape of less than 10 degrees in several areas. This moderately low altitude gives the area its features of flat and repetitious low relief scattered by countless wetland (swampy and creek basins), which

intersect the central low lands and empty into the two main river schemes (Sombreiro and Orashi) (Ellah, 1995). The economic main-stream of the people has been farming, fishing, trading with menial interest in hunting and Pottery production from the Oboburu community of Egi Clan. The Oboburu community is into pottery because of the abundance of clay in the area.

Traditional Approach to Pottery Making in Ogbaland

The origin of pottery making started in 1850 with the activities of some group of women who went to the forest at Ogbo in Igburuku, close to Biseni (Otakpo 2004). They came back with suitable clay, which they in turn introduced to the community.

Since they were not exposed to modern technologies of pottery production, like we have today, they made use of the available locally produced means as their working instruments.

The clay was soaked in water for at least a day, after which the soaked clay was matched thoroughly with both feet, until it becomes plastic enough, they pound crucibles into powder form (an already bisque ware pieces), and mixed with the prepared clay.

With the assistance of sticks, the pots were built to a particular level; the potter then set the piece on the uknwo- an arranged platform under the sun. After some time, the potters' pieces are turned upside down to allow for further drying.

Izogu (2004) maintained that local potters also saw the need to make their work attractive, time was set aside for texturing and decoration of the pot. These works are shined and allowed to dry (lather hard) with the help of the locally made tools known as Ukpo or Akunumagho designs are created.

The last stage of work is on the area of firing. Before this process commences, the local potters make it a duty to ask from their gods special

favour towards a successful firing. They believe that the success and failure of the firing depends on their gods.

The designed pots are arranged under the uknwo (chimney) for at least four to five days for pre-heating. The heat from the fire set under the uknwo allows drying out of the remaining matter in the pots.

Amari (2005) observed that after the pre-heating at the uknwo, the pottery wares are carried with Ekite (basket) to anuar (place where the final firing will take place).

The pottery wares are arranged on rounded iron objects, dry palm leaves, wood. Other combustibles are cut into small sizes to enable them pass between the arranged pots. This is done to allow the heat from the fire have a uniform distribution within the arranged pots.

It is interesting to note that after firing, the fired piece assumes another attractive colour depending on the nature of the original clay. One thing we must note is that locally produced wares still have their own peculiarities and respect when it is well handled. Ladi Kwali a famous Abuja traditional potter became internationally recognized throughout the world over her locally produced pottery. Ogbo (1972) who took over from Michael Cardew as Pottery Officer in Abuja experimental Centre in 1965 stated that, Cardew did not stop Ladi Kwali from using her local methods to produce her ware, he rather encouraged her to improve on her local methods. Cardew even exhibited her works along his own in 1958 in America and other European countries, before he started going solo. In recognition of her achievements, she was awarded a Doctorate Degree.

This has been so until a man named Onyije Matthew traveled overseas and discovered the technological advancement of pottery production. Though being an Economist, he took a crash programme on glazing only with the

intention of glazing the wares produced locally by the people. On his return back to his home land, he met the TOTAL oil company in Egi land and solicited for funding a ceramics industry. The company helped in procuring two electric kilns and some locally constructed kick wheels. The establishment of Matthew ceramics industry in the locality has brought some changes to the approach and procedure of work in the art of pottery making amongst the people.

Traditional pottery is among the important crafts practiced by the Oboburu people. Pottery is valued mostly because of the essential roles it played and still plays in the economic and socio-cultural life of the people of Oboburu.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional pottery is becoming a thing of the past in Oboburu. It is almost at the verge of collapse. Many of the pots that were produced in the past have been broken. The only surviving ones can be found in shrines. Unfortunately, this rich cultural heritage of the Oboburu people has not been properly documented. And with the rate at which the tradition is declining, there is every indication that it will go into total extinction in no distant time. The pottery centre brought in by Matthew has been facing challenges which made the place seem closed down. With the prospects of this pottery centre in the area and the state at large, the challenges should be tackled for a better tomorrow.

Clay Preparation

Oboburu traditional potters do not sieve their clay prior to the introduction of Matthew pottery. They pound their clay into finer particles after sorting out impurities such as roots, leaves, pebbles or stones etc. When the clay is still in its powdered form, water is added and mixed thoroughly by kneading with legs to achieve the required uniformity. It is finally covered with polythene material for preservation and this helps to improve the plasticity of the clay body.

Oboburu traditional potters use any tool that serves the purpose of pottery tool. There is no specified tool for pottery productions.

Challenges of the pottery industry in Oboburu community

The slow pace in the capacity development of ceramic cottage industries and institutions in Nigeria can be attributed to various factors among which are under-utilization of materials and inadequate techniques to enable effective production. Some of the challenges are:

a. The location of the clay site
   The Igburuku clay site is located very far from the pottery centre. The collection of clay is only done when there is vehicle to get to the Igburuku where there is abundance of clay, without which, it takes hours to get there.
b. No professional ceramist to manage the pottery centre
   Mr. Matthew being an economist do not have the idea to manage a pottery centre. The centre requires a good ceramist who would manage the place professionally.
c. Attitude of the indigenes of the community and nearby residents towards the centre and its products:

a. The foreign pottery products are preferred to the products of Matthew ceramics centre. The centre is also looked down as nothing good will come out of there.
b. The lack of maintenance attitude by the director: one of the kilns donated and few kick wheel has been packed up and allowed to be destroyed by flood, termites and rodents.
d. Lack of managerial knowledge: the director on his own should have met the oil company to help in the management of the pottery centre. Finance is the life wire of any business. If he is not capable of handling the centre, consulting the oil company would not have been a bad idea.
e. Insecurity within the Local Government Area: lives were threatened in the area for a period of time and it negatively affected the centre. No

patronage as the community where the centre is located was the heart of the cult groups activities.

f. Theft of equipment: some of the equipmentswere stolen during the crises in the local government, ranging from fired ceramic wares to armored cable used to power the electric kiln.

Prospects of Matthew Pottery Centre

The local potters in Ogba had for a long time looked forward to having a pottery industry in their environment, equipped with modern technologies. As a result many pressure group were formed to help seek for funds, streamline and moderate the activities of the local pot industry. All these efforts did not really yield the financial benefits expected. Matthew Akiri Onyige, a native of Oboburu who studied abroad, came back to establish a modern ceramics industry in this community.

It was a dream that came through for all the local potters because the industry boost of modern equipment such as: the throwing wheel, Electric kilns, Jigger Jolly and so on. although, the pottery centre had not been functioning properly it is envisaged that several benefits could emanate from its activities.

1. it will serve as the back-bone of ceramics research in Rivers State;
2. it will encourage youths to embrace these skill in the community and improve the standard of living;
3. it will generate income for the investors;
4. it will serve as a bench mark for investors interested in rural development;
5. it will provide employment for the local people and improve their standard of living.

Matthew's ceramics industry can be compared to other modern pottery industries in other part of the world because the industry has different sections right from the clay processing to the firing and display sections.

The company, unlike the local pottery industry can boast of specialized manpower at the different sections of the company. The combination of the British and Nigerian skill by the management, with the technical support from the British experts, will enhance the production of quality ceramic wares/products suitable for local and export markets.

Matthew ones noted that staff will be given the opportunity to attend in-service trainings at Epsom, England, Abuja. He reiterated that Opportunities would also be provided for people who may wish to acquire skills towards employment or personal development.

Matthew Ceramics Industry has been able to produce more quality and durable products into the market more than the local pottery industry. The industry can boast of the following products, which were hitherto not produced by the local potters.

1. Wall tiles
2. Screen and fancy bricks
3. Dinner wares such as plates bowls, saucers, trays and cups,
4. tailor made souvenir products for occasions
5. Seasonal products such as Christmas trees
6. Tailor made Plaster of Paris (POP) ceiling, wall brackets and wall bricks, etc on requests, by consumers.
7. Electrical insulators and insulating bricks.
8. Supply of glaze and processed clay materials
9. Production of sanitary wares.

The modern ceramics industry in the community had gone a very long way to influence the local potters, that some of them are even gainfully employed by the new industry.

The success of the organization was able to encourage Elf, an oil company operating in the area to periodically send in candidates for Skills Acquisition Programme.

Matthew Pottery in Oboburuturn out pots of different forms that serve different uses, fetching of water, cooking, storing grains of different types and drinking water. Most at times, some of the wares serve in dual capacity, both utilitarian and ritual purposes.

In Matthew Pottery, there are those pots that are designed for household functions, for table wares, cooking wares, storage containers for liquid substances and grains.

Recommendations

Having identified some of the problems facing the pottery centre in Oboburu, below are suggested ways the situation may be remedied. These include the followings:

1) As suggested by Ali (1991) there is need for the introduction of more mechanization into the pottery production in Oboburu community. There is also the need to educate potters on total ceramics production. Modern ceramists visit the potters centre to educate them on the use of modern techniques of pottery making (Oyeoku, 1976).
2) There is need to improve on the quality of the wares both in design and creativity to stand the competition between plastics and other related products.
3) The government and private sectors as well as individuals should encourage the pottery centre in financing the production of ceramic wares in the area

Conclusion

Mining of clay which is the main raw material the potters use in their production is faced with a lot of difficulties. The potters as old as they are, are finding it difficult to source clay for their production. The boys who had been of great help to dig out clay from the Igburuku clay deposits are no more interested, and some have become cultists. The preparation of clay which involves grinding, mixing and kneading with legs is another tedious

aspect of pottery production; the elderly potters are finding it extremely difficult.

People have lost total interest in the usage of the local pottery wares in the area. This is because they appear fragile in character and their inability to last longer. Rather, they hold close to the use of the modern wares such as, enamel, plastics, etc thereby making the demand of local pots to reduce to almost zero percent. It is expected that the narrative will change positively if the recommendations made in this work are strictly implemented.

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