

## The Gender Nature of Domestic Pottery in Africa

Dr. LEILA MUKHTAR AHMED

Assistant Professor

Sudan University of Science and Technology

College of Fine and Applied Art

Department of Ceramic

### Abstract:

*The study aims to shed light on the pottery making in Africa (South of the Sahara) to explain its importance as one of the major crafts that satisfy basic and social needs of different communities. It also aims to stress the central role of African women in all the stages of the pottery making process, from clay preparation, forming, firing, ornamenting and selling. Sample pottery products from, Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Niger, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Rwanda, Burkina Faso and Malawi, shows the dominant role of African women in the pottery making process. Inherited traditional techniques are still preserved and practiced. The study concludes by pointing out that pottery is still known as a woman's job in many parts of Africa, and it is still practiced in similar traditional techniques and forms and applications.*

**Key words:** Pottery, clay, firing, modeling, women potters, gender

### INTRODUCTION:

Pottery is produced just about everywhere in Africa. Archaeological excavations both north and south of the Sahara have found pottery that can be dated to between ten and fifteen

thousand B.C., the time when nomadic hunter-gatherers began to settle in permanent communities and use clay for making pots as the basic material for making shelters and utensils.

Throughout Africa, pottery is traditionally being made primarily by women (**Frank Herreman, 2003 p: 79**). Pottery is one of the household tasks that African women has been doing for centuries. Their pottery making process work constitutes digging and preparing clays, modeling, firing and ends by selling it in local markets. The final products (pots and vessels) are also primarily used by women, as they are responsible for cooking and serving food, getting water, and brewing alcohol. Being a potter is a good business for women in rural Africa over which she has complete control.

Men do make pots among a few groups, like the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, but this is an exception (**Frank Herreman, 2003 p: 80**). There are also some groups in which women make domestic pots and men make figurative pots used for religious purposes, but this seems to be a rare division of labor (**(J.W.Crowfoot,1925,137)** ).

Some scholars, mostly men, have claimed that much archaeological clay sculpture, such as Nok, Jenne, or Bura, must have been made by men. As we know nothing about pottery making in those times, this seems to be speculations based on the belief that only men are artists. Also among the little we know about these sites is that they contain huge quantities of shards of the kind of pottery that has been made by women for hundreds of years. There is simply no proof that men made the forms we most value. As in most reels of production in Africa, pottery making is gender specific. It is women's work.

## **PROBLEM OF THE STUDY:**

Throughout Africa, pottery making is historically known as women's' job in Africa.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

- 1- To shed light on the central role of women in domestic pottery production in Africa.
- 2- To point out the shared similarities that African domestic pottery has.

### **HYPOTHESES OF STUDY:**

- 1- Domestic pottery making, in many parts of Africa, is dominated by women.
- 2- Pottery making techniques, forms, and applications are similar.
- 3- The materials, from which domestic pottery is made, however, are different.

### **THE STUDY MEASURES:**

There have been many attempts to explain why women are the potters throughout Africa. As clay comes from the earth which is considered to have feminine connotations by many cultures, throughout the world, it seems natural and appropriate that women should be potters. While it seems natural that women should form pots out of mother earth, we can only observe a given fact but not explain it (**Frank Herreman, 2003 p:80**). The classic ethnographic explanation says: It is like this because it has always been like this. In other words, if pottery is still being made by women in Africa nowadays it must have been made by women before too.

### **The method of preparing Clay and making Pots:**

Except in urban North Africa and in modern art schools, African domestic pottery is not made on potter's wheels. Clay is dug, usually along the banks of streams. It is dried, pounded to separate it from small impurities, and then mixed with water

until it becomes smooth and flexible. Sometimes potters add grog (powder made out of already fired pottery broken pieces).

The mixture is then kneaded with the hands or feet to make it pliable. The potter either punches out the bottom with her fist or begins the molding of the pot on the back of a ready one. The sides are raised by winding coils of clay. The inner and outer sides of the pot are smoothed with simple tools, often seed pods. The pot is allowed to harden and dry before it gets decorated with an incised or raised pattern and finally burnished with a smooth river stone.

Decorative patterns can also be made by pushing a piece of matting, a cob of corn or millet, or a carved wooden roller against the surface. Incised decoration may be carved with a sharp stick, while raised decorations may be molded and attached afterwards. After getting completely dry on the sun, the pot is, usually, fired with leftover wood and straw on the face of the ground. This technique is known as open firing which differs from the more controlled kiln firing one. The pot is briefly fired at relatively low temperature. The pot is often removed from the fire with a long pole, and then, while still hot, brushed with water containing a resinous mixture of plant material to make it shiny and somewhat waterproof. Sometimes it is blackened by a second reduced oxygen firing in sawdust or rice chaff giving it a sense of raku.

Because of the low temperature firing, the resulting pottery is not vitrified. While it is somewhat fragile, this fragility gives it definite advantages; it can expand and contract and thus resists thermal shocks. It can be placed directly in fire without shattering. Because it is somewhat porous, water stored in the pot passes through the wall and evaporates on the exterior. This keeps the water inside cool and pleasant for drinking, unlike water stored in a metal or plastic container. As cooking and water storage are primary uses for African pottery, these are among the many examples of the way traditional methods are well adapted to the African climate and life style **(James Miliart,1925,page 125)**

Some African pottery is painted, and some has had simple slips applied, but most of it is made by the methods described. Although kaolin, the additive that turns pottery into porcelain, is readily available in Africa, it isn't widely used in this type of pottery. This is because kaolin would not give the low fired pottery the required described advantages. While much African pottery is made for everyday uses, rituals are still performed in the course of its production.

Clay is usually dug from the banks of a stream or collected from the bottoms of hills and mountains, sometimes only by women, sometimes by men and women. A sacrifice is often made to propitiate the spirit of the site. The digging of clay may be forbidden on particular day of the week that is sacred to the earth, as among the Baule in Ghana. Senufo potters in Malawi must make small double pots for the spirits of twins, and must include them in every firing, or else their pots will break. In many areas, menstruating women are not allowed to dig clay or mold pots. Some special ritual forms can only be made by elderly, postmenopausal women (**Frank Herreman, 2003 p:83**). In today's Muslim communities most of these practices have diminished, although traces of it are still found.

### **Pots uses:**

Pots often have ritual or medicinal uses. Special shapes have to be used for medicines and protective shrines. Across West Africa pots are covered with points, like the Lobi pots (figure 2) which seem to be associated with protective medicines. Often a shrine or alter will be covered with pots, figures, or both that contain medicines or are the abodes of spirits. Pottery seems to have widespread associations with death. Many figurative pots, as among the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast, are funerary figures for cemeteries, which are called "the place of pots". Among many other people, a woman breaks a pot that has had a hole punched in it, and places it on the grave. This seems to be a very old tradition, dating back at least to Bura

burials in Niger in the first millennium. It is tempting to see symbolic connections among pots, the earth, death, and burial, but again this is an area that needs study (Adelabu, O., S. Ogunwat T: p. a Akigbogunl 2014. p1.).

Domestic pottery made in area 4,500 miles wide and about as long, and by hundreds of different groups presents an enormous variety of styles. Nevertheless, certain general points can be proposed. Pots throughout Africa tend to have similar uses; they are used for carrying and storing water, for cooking and serving food, for brewing and serving beer in dry areas, and for fermenting and serving palm wine in forest regions. Pots are similar, the walls are built up of coils and the firing is done at low temperatures.

## **RESULTS OF STUDY:**

Leaving aside details of surface decoration, African pots show great similarities of size and shape. They tend to be round, because the method of their construction leads to a round shape (figure 11). Water pots tend to be similar in size, perhaps because the women who carry them are similar in strength. Cooking pots are related to the quantities to be prepared (and so to family size) and to the amounts a woman can carry and maneuver. Large Alcohol pots relate to the quantities of beer prepared or sold. Serving dishes and prestige drinking vessels tend to be relatively small because of their function; a pot from Burkina Faso often basically resembles a pot from South Africa (figure 18). Their decorations vary and there are differences in form, a wide neck, a narrow neck, no neck, a tall neck. Many of these differences are related to function, a high neck, for example, makes sense in a pot used to transport water or Alcohol, while a low neck makes sense if liquid will be served with a ladle. Aesthetic preferences are important, but practical consideration should not be ignored as influences on form. The study concludes by pointing out that pottery is still known as a

woman's job in many parts of Africa, and it is still practiced in similar traditional techniques and forms and applications.

**REFERENCES:**

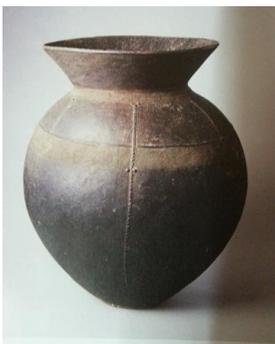
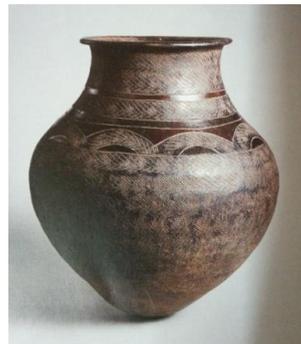
1. Herreman A. Frank, *Material Differences: Art and Identity in Africa* - New York (2003).
2. w.w.crowfoot.1925.
3. African Pottery Arts- traditional, contemporary(February, 2013
4. Challenges of Glazed ceramic production in Nigeria Materials to Method. By A Delabu, o, s Ologunwat T:p.a Akigbogunl 2014.

**LIST OF FIGURES:**

**Figure No (1)**

Sudan H 62.2cm

Source: *Material Differences Art Identity in Africa* Frank Herreman, 2003



**Figure No (2)**

Senufo people Ivory Coast H 84.4 cm

Source: *Material Differences Art Identity in Africa* Frank Herreman, 2003

**Figure No (3)**

Water jug from the Jerma tribe- Niger  
Source:  
(African Pottery Arts-traditional,  
contemporary(February, 2013))



**Figure No (4)**

Traditional pottery from Nigeria.  
Source:  
(AfricanPotteryArts-traditional, contemporary (February, 2013))



**Figure No (5)**

African Water vessel. A ceramic jar  
Which is worn by women on their backs fetch  
water from wells and springs and then to  
store it in their homes

Source:

(African Pottery Arts- traditional,  
contemporary(February, 2013))



**Figure No (6)**

Grassland Region Cameroon

Source: Material Differences Art Identity in Africa Frank Herreman, 2003



**Figure No (7)**

Traditional Zambian pottery

Source:

(African Pottery Arts- traditional, contemporary(February, 2013))



**Figure No (8):**

Small to medium sized pots were owned by the north Sotho, Tsonga – Shangaan, South Sotho and Venda. Source:



**Figure No (9)**

Clay Pot Nyakyusa Tanzania

Source: African Beer Pots- Water Vessel



**Figure No (10)**

Azande Vessel – Africa, Angola

Source:

(African Pottery Arts- traditional, contemporary(February, 2013))





**Figure No (11)**

Malawi traditional pottery

Source: African Beer Pots- Water Vessel

**Figure No (12)**

The Maconde live on both sides of the Mozambique and Tanzanian border in East / South-East Africa. Source: African Beer Pots- Water Vessel



**Figure No (13)**

The Traditional Art from Zimbabwe. Source: African Beer Pots- Water Vessel

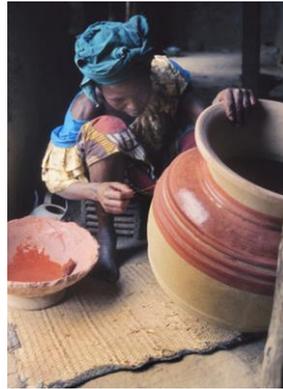


**Figure No (14)**

Akalabougou women applying a red Stone slip for glazing, from an art Market, to the formed and dried pot before firing.

Source:

(African Pottery Arts- traditional, contemporary(February, 2013))



**Figure No (15)**

Tribal Women forming the a pot- Kalabougou Village

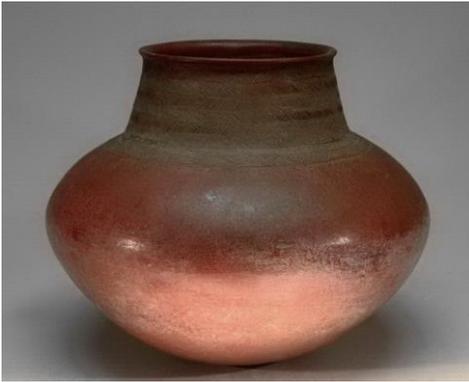
Source: (AfricanPottery Arts- traditional, contemporary(February, 2013))

**Figure No (16)**

Nyanja Pot  
Mozambique.

Source: African Beer Pots- Water Vessel





**Figure No (17)**

Nyanja water pots.

Source: African Beer Pots-  
Water Vessel

**Figure No (18)**

A pot from South Africa

Source:

(African Pottery Arts- traditional, contemporary  
(February, 2013))



**Figure No (19)**

The women making all process of  
pottery in Nigeria

Source: Challenges of Glazed  
ceramic production in Nigeria

Materials to

Method. By: A Delabu, o, s

Ologunwat

T:p.a Akigbogunl 2014



Figure No (20)

Firing process  
Source: similar

