

Integration of Traditional Pottery into Contemporary Design in Kenya: *A Case Study of Kisumu Pottery*

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Abstract

The study aims to shed light on integration of traditional pottery into contemporary design in Kenya. Local potters are faced with numerous challenges due to importation of aluminum and plastic containers that are of high quality, functional and possess aesthetic appeal. Some of the challenges are due to the monotonous approach to production and finishing of indigenous products - conditions that also marred the philosophical impact they are supposed to convey. The study sought to enhance pottery's aesthetic qualities by incorporating contemporary designs in order to increase its use and demand. The descriptive approach of the qualitative research methodology was employed. Interviews, observation and photography were employed as the data collection methods. Data was collected from five potters in Kisumu, Kenya, to ascertain how traditional pottery can be integrated into contemporary designs. The data were then thematically analyzed and the indications were that the potters integrate indigenous and contemporary design to make pottery for different purposes to a minimal extent. The results of the study indicated that new designs, materials and tools can add value and enhance the texture and aesthetic qualities of the products produced. As such, other non-conventional materials, tools and designs could be robustly explored for such products to inspire and educate producers to increase creativity. The study concludes that indigenous pots can be redesigned to enhance the value of the indigenous pottery industry, and this will result in economic empowerment for sustainable development and self-reliance for the potters. The study recommends that indigenous pots need to be redesigned with contemporary designs, such that the negative perception that they are archaic be mitigated.

Keywords: Contemporary design, Economic empowerment, Integration, Traditional pottery.

INTRODUCTION

Pottery is a worldwide practice and a tradition of many communities. Pottery plays a central role in materializing ideology and social meaning through creation and transformation of material object (Al-Dhamari, 2014). Historically, pottery became more and more complex in style as society grew in population, complexity and more sophisticated in its tastes. Pots which in earlier times were constructed with a flowing profile and had simple decoration, now assumed angular complex forms, which imitated architectural designs and were ornamented with complex designs (National Commission on Culture, 2010).

Ūmórù-Òkẹ (2011), defines traditional pottery as 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, traditional pottery emphasizes three main factors responsible for the uniqueness of pottery profession, that is; material, process and product. This view is shared by Gosselain (2010), who noted that pottery making aspects are dynamic and flexible, as seen in the adaptability of certain tools, postures, pottery styles, and other social factors, because the craft does not exist independent of other practices and value systems. Potters may adapt tools which are used for other purposes or even make pottery forms based on market demand.

Adu-Gyamfi, Agyei, Osei and Boahin (2016), emphasize that the local pottery industry faces tremendous challenges from the increasing interest Ghanaians are showing in imported products because of their functional value, quality and aesthetic appeal. This is due, among other factors, to the monotonous

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approach to production and finishing of indigenous products, conditions that also marred the philosophical impact they are supposed to convey. Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2016), further state that pots could either be grouped under indigenous or contemporary, depending on their purposes. Although the researchers carried out a study on integrated flower vases in clayware and wood, the study is lacking a comprehensive documentation on integration of traditional pottery with contemporary designs and how traditional pottery can be transformed. Indigenous pots are purposely made to serve domestic purposes, while contemporary pots are made to serve both domestic and industrial use. Integration of traditional pottery with contemporary designs would therefore enhance products' aesthetic appeal to the consumers and thus, increase economic growth.

Traditional pot making among the Pare and Kisi communities in Tanzania involves the use of hand, no wheel, and is often carried out under one household. Modern potting, on the other hand, means that potting takes place in a workshop built specifically for that purpose. Wheels are often used in the process, and various pottery designs, including decorative pots, are produced (Mteti, 2016). It is noted by Asmah, Frimpong and Asinyo (2013), that due to the establishment of metal and plastic factories in Ghana in the wake of urbanization and the importation of refrigerators, metallic and plastic plates, blenders, metallic cooking pots and plastic buckets into the country, marketing of indigenous pottery has declined in value and use in the urban areas. There is need to transform indigenous pottery, which can be a motivation to the potters that could lead to a positive change in Kenyan pottery industry. Repackaging of indigenous pottery with integration designs in terms of techniques, materials and tools could not only give an appropriate marketing environment, but also add value for the indigenous pottery industries. The current study, therefore, looked at integration of traditional pottery into contemporary designs to complement traditional pottery for improved marketability. Employing the use of contemporary design will effectively help to achieve high quality aesthetic pottery products.

Giblin and Kigongo (2012), study on the social and symbolic context of the royal potters of Buganda in

Uganda argues that designs can be improved to better the values of pots, hence positively changing the perceptions of the communities towards pottery and potters in general. Even though incision, stamping, embossment, sprigging, graffito and glazing are some of the decorations applied on contemporary pottery designs in Kenya (Otieno, 2020), they are no match to compete with the influx of foreign ceramic wares, which are more aesthetically appealing in terms of attainment of variety in colour and desired finishing effects. This trend can be mitigated by enhancement of traditional pottery incorporated with contemporary designs that include other non-conventional materials such as wood, leather, fabric and integrated techniques. This paper therefore explored how traditional pottery, that is quickly being replaced by exotic technologies for a more dynamic production, can be integrated with contemporary designs. Introduction of new design approaches may encourage potters to be more innovative and make products that fit in with emerging patterns of modernity and increase their creative abilities. This step will serve to offer limitless opportunity for self-expression for the potters, and also add value and enhance aesthetic quality of the products.

THEORY

This study was guided by Vygotsky's Art and Creativity Theory as informed by Lindqvist (2003). The major tenet of this theory is that creativity is the foundation of art and it helps people advance within society by releasing aspects that are not expressed in everyday life.

Vygotsky regarded the psychology of art as a theory of the social techniques of emotion which reflects the artistic process. When the artist creates his art, he gives realistic material an aesthetic form, which touches upon the emotions of the viewers and makes them interpret the work of art and bring it to life by using their imagination. Initially, an emotion is individual, and only by means of a work of art does it become social or generalized. According to Vygotsky, this is how human beings become part of a culture by being provided with cultural methods. An artist works with forms and techniques that have been developed historically and "turned into" art. The connection between art and life is a complex one. Essentially, the aesthetic emotion brought about by art creates new

and complex actions, depending on the aesthetic form of the work of art.

Vygotsky developed his view on the creative consciousness process, the relation between emotion and thought and the role of imagination, and discussed the issues of reproduction and creativity as two aspects that relate to the entire scope of human activity. Vygotsky claimed that all human beings, even small children, are creative and that creativity is the foundation of not only art, but also science and technology. The creative ability referred to as imagination is the basis of every creative action: it manifests itself in all aspects of our cultural life, making scientific and technical creativity possible. Reproduction, on the other hand, means that people repeat certain behavioral patterns that were created and shaped much earlier, such as found in pottery production. Reproduction, Vygotsky said, is closely linked to memory. If human activity would be limited to reproduce the past, man would be a creature totally focused on the past, only capable of adjusting to the future if this was a reproduction of the past. Creative activity is thus what makes man a creature focused on the future, capable of shaping it and changing his current situation. Creativity is essential to the existence of humanity and society, and it is not only a question of artistic creativity, but also something that is necessary for the process of consciousness. Findlay (2019), affirms that arts have the capacity to communicate ideas, demonstrate beauty and skill, and provide purpose, meaning, or even transcendental experiences. The arts speak to the creative side of our humanity and inspire people to strive for that which lies beyond every day. They invite people to look at, and think about the world and places in it in new ways. These are some of the qualities needed in integration of traditional pottery into contemporary design.

Creativity is essential to the existence of humanity and society, and it is not only a question of artistic creativity, but also something that is necessary for the process of consciousness. Creativity is central to human growth and learning processes and, as such, helps people to advance within society. Promoting creativity through engagement of artistic activities in pottery could stimulate growth in the potters and provide them with knowledge and skills to enhance their work in pottery. The theory was applied in

the study by using pottery as a trigger to potters' creative potentials, allowing flow and realization of their creative ability. Potters use their imaginations to "make up" something new and valuable, thus transforming "what is" into something better. The potters would therefore be able to advance themselves within society by engaging in integrative design processes in production of aesthetic and functional forms that are appealing, unique and of high quality.

RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative research method, which involves describing and understanding phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005), was adapted for the study. Qualitative method was used to understand the factors leading to production of pots and integration of indigenous and contemporary pottery making. The factors influencing the integration of pots were analyzed.

The study was carried out in Kisumu. The study involved traditional potters and those with knowledge were purposely selected as respondents. They included five producers and one community leader. The methodology focused on exploring and describing how Kisumu pottery is integrated into contemporary design. The main data gathering tools used were interviews and observation. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before the interviews and observations were made. They were assured of secrecy and were told that any information given was strictly for academic purpose. Assurance of confidentiality was also given to respondents in order to encourage participation. The collected data were transcribed and thematically analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pottery tradition

An interview with one of the potters revealed that clay sources are neither owned nor controlled by any single family. Clay sources are considered corporately held resources which can be accessed freely by the potters. For instance, a woman who marries into a homestead and shows an interest in potting will be granted access to all the resources available to resident potters. Likewise, a young girl who learns to make pots in one homestead will take the 'rights' to clay sources

with her when she moves out of the homestead once she is married. Girls who show interest in potting are encouraged to engage in the activity by the potters. According to one of the potters who was interviewed, pots are produced to meet community needs. They are used for; serving food and other drinks, storage, brewing and ritual purposes, among others. This view is shared by Adong and Mutungi (2018), who note that, in the past, people in the Luo community received pots as special gifts, whereas others received them in exchange of other items, for example, food, through the batter trade system.

Pottery decoration processes

Potters mentioned that they produced a variety of pots, ranging from cooking to storage pots and other decorative pots. This morphology of pots depended on the recognition of its uses by potters and user. Both traditional and modern designs which were popular with their customers were used. Decoration of pottery was done using different motifs. The decorations were done mostly on drinking, storing, cooking and serving pots. The potters reported that they use both traditional and modern designs, though not extensively due to lack of more exposure. The potters made decorative impressions on the pots using materials around them, such as; sharp edge of a knife, pieces of wood to impress lines on pots' surfaces, roulettes, coins, fabrics, baskets and maize cobs, among others. This allowed them to create variety in their products that blended with the modern market. On this, Gosselain (2010), observed that the social aspects of a community are also reflected in pottery making processes and tools. Pottery making aspects are dynamic and flexible, as seen in the adaptability of certain tools, postures, pottery styles, and other social factors, because the craft does not exist independent of other practices and value systems. Potters may adapt tools which are used for other purposes or even make pottery forms based on market demand.

The study observed that potters made clay cooking stoves and water pots, which has become a robust activity. This is in response to a high demand for clay cooking stoves because they are energy efficient. **Figures 1a to 1d** show the process of making a clay cooking stove. Production of the main body was a group activity. 2 or 3 potters' made clay handles while another potter worked on the finishing. This indicated

that pottery production in Kisumu, Seme has become more organized with division of labour, as compared to the past.



FIGURE 1a
Assembling equipment used to make clay cooking stove
Source: Author 2020



FIGURE 1b
Teamwork in building up the clay cooking stove
Source: Author 2020



FIGURE 1c
Part of the clay cooking stove in leather hard stage
Source: Author 2020



FIGURE 1d
Finished clay cooking stove
Source: Author 2020

Pots' decoration was done at the end of the drying stage by burnishing using smooth stones. Again, at the end of firing stage, pots were glazed using leaves, which when spread over pots while hot, left a shining colour, as seen in **Figure 2**. Commonly, pots used for carrying and storing water were generally burnished all over the exterior, whereas cooking pots may be burnished interiorly and exteriorly. **Figure 3** shows an example of pottery that has been fired.

Marketing pottery products

Some of the factors influencing the integration

of traditional pots for improved marketability, as reported by the potters, were that pottery products had not been selling well. The potters were in agreement that selling of items takes long and they get little income from the poor sales, leading to them feeling discouraged. The business is no longer thriving, and it was done to complement incomes. One of the potters wondered how they could improve their products without design knowledge and wished for more exposure.



FIGURE 2
Burnished pots with faint incised patterns
Source: Author 2020



FIGURE 3
Some of the traditionally fired vessels in the store for sale
Source: Author 2020

Kwesiga and Kayamba (2014), observed that with the changes in lifestyle, particularly among the educated, there has been an increase in alternative uses of pottery products in addition to the traditional ones. This has called for innovative activities in pottery production in response to changes in demand associated with

urban market. These innovations have improved the income levels of the potters. **Figure 4** shows the finished clay cooking stoves ready for sale. Today, pottery is regarded as a thing of the past, not part of 'modernity'. Integration of traditional pottery with modern designs could result in a range of different, more appealing shapes and forms.



FIGURE 4

Clay cooking stoves in the store ready for sale

Source: Author 2020

Innovative pottery training

The potters maintained that diversifying their products, such as making of clay cooking stoves and brooders for chicken (**Figure 5**), has increased their income. Most people preferred the clay cooking stoves because they use less firewood. According to the potters, incorporation of the indigenous and contemporary designs could result in meeting modern demands since the market is now looking for innovative ideas that can result in improved sales. Okewu and Deborah (2014), explain that integration of ceramic vases with other materials can add value and improve the marketability of indigenous ceramic wares. Thus, employing the use of mixed media materials will effectively help to achieve high quality aesthetic contemporary ceramic products.

The group, a majority of whose members were women, learnt the art of making clay cooking stoves from a church organization. It was the potters' wish that more of such trainings be organized so that they could make more innovative items that can sell in the modern market, and subsequently improve

their income. Kwesiga and Kayamba (2014), find that although clay pots are a preferred method for storing drinking water, the repeated hand contact contaminates it quickly, which is a great disadvantage. This has called for the development of new improved pot designs fitted with taps, which are ideal for rural communities. The production of modified pots has benefited the rural poor by selling the pottery products to urban centres. The potters indicated that the new designs and tools can add value and enhance the texture and aesthetic qualities of the products they produced. One potter pointed out that people were fond of the stoves they made. They also agreed that if they were exposed to new design approaches, they would be able to improve their economic base. As such, other non-conventional materials, tools and designs could be robustly explored. Integration of traditional pottery with contemporary designs could act as a motivator to potters towards increased creativity.



FIGURE 5

Pot made for brooding chicken decorated with the Perforation Technique

Source: Author 2020

It was clear from the observation made that some of the pots were decorated at the end of the shaping process while the clay was still malleable. Other kinds of decorations, such as the use of motifs, macramé, painting, excising, inlaying and drawings, were missing in the finished products. Designs that used mediums such as painting, surface treatment of pots using slip made from other types or different colours of clay, and integration of other materials

into the products was lacking. There are limitless possibilities that potters can employ to add value to their artworks for artistic expression and creative manipulation. Adutwum (2013), emphasizes that transforming the indigenous pottery industry can be a catalyst for changing its fortunes. Repackaging selected indigenous pottery using contemporary techniques will considerably add value, as well as give an appropriate marketing environment for the indigenous pottery industries. Potters can use artistic genre known as “mixed media design” that allows for mixing of a wide array of materials, tools, techniques and styles to create new, different forms of pottery. The integrative approach, therefore, is not to eliminate the original concept, but to enhance it by incorporating modern pottery designs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study set out to explore the enhancement of traditional pottery through its integration with contemporary designs. This study has shown that integration of pottery with contemporary design and introduction of modern equipment could be emphasized to achieve high quality aesthetic pottery products. Designs integrated with indigenous pottery products could be an effective means to provide unlimited opportunities for traditional potters to explore and enhance their wares for maximum economic benefits. There is need for the traditional potters to explore unusual designs to furnish indigenous pottery products. More exploration with contemporary designs - such as incision, stamping, embossment, sprigging, graffiti, painting, glazing and integrated techniques such as use of mixed media and macramé - will inspire and educate potters to improve their creativity and enhance their wares to meet contemporary expectations and demand.

The making of improved clay cooking stoves has contributed to a safe cooking environment, is economical in terms of fuel, and it is also cost effective. However, there is still need to improve on the marketing strategy if the pottery industry is to develop, which could eventually assist in job creation for the group members. Hence, integrating traditional pottery with contemporary designs is an approach towards sustaining the nation's heritage values. However, potters and designers need to put in mind proportionality when integrating these elements in

order to ensure that the local identity of traditional pottery is preserved. The results of the study are that exploring with different tools and designs, such as mixed media, can add value and improve the marketability of indigenous pottery. The study revealed that traditional pottery can be integrated with contemporary designs in production of high quality, functional products with aesthetic appeal. In this regard, enhancing indigenous pottery can foster economic cohesion by improving indigenous pottery productivity capacities. In areas like Seme in Kisumu, potters rely on the pottery sales to raise incomes to support their families. Therefore, integration of traditional pottery is key to raising the standard of living, ultimately helping to reduce household poverty. The approach bridges the gap between the traditional and modern pottery practice.

There is need to redesign indigenous pots and integrate contemporary designs so that the negative perception that they are archaic be mitigated, as well as give potters an appropriate marketing environment for the indigenous pottery they produce.

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