

# DECORATION IN POTTERY

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## Abstract

Decorations are essential aspects of pottery which the potters employ to enhance the aesthetic and symbolic attributes of the pots. These are achieved through, varieties of decorative techniques ranging from grooving, engraving or carving lines or images; creating of dots; application or sticking of clay or other materials to the application of varieties of colour lines and tints on the surface of the pots.

## 1.0. Introduction

These local potters have a way of decorating their wares, just like the modern ceramists, local pots are usually with some kinds of surface decoration that have functional purposes. A ware with raised design or a design-roughened area is easier to carry and is less apt to slip out of wet hands.

Modeling clay embellishment is usually designs made, and then attach them to the pots while the clay is moist. Design can also be made by incising it on the leather hard clay, or by impressing wet clay with pointed sticks or rough materials, such as braids of straw, coil, burnishing and polishing the wares. The potters move now to pointed designs using brush or knife with mixture of earth colours, such as ochre with water, peanut, roots, leaves, coloured stones, and rocks etc.

## 1.1. Drying

After the wares had been made, they are kept in the house for about a day or two and then taken outside for the sun to dry them. Another method is to arrange the wares around the fire place for the heat to touch them properly, before the real firing. Drying is necessary otherwise when fired, steam would form in the walls of the pots and cause them to break and when pottery is not fired, it is called green ware. The drying of clay is always accompanied by shrinking, as the film of water between the particles draw closer and closer together.

## 1.2. Heat Drying

Here the wet wares are arranged around the fireplace to get dried completely. In this case the products (wares) are not undergoing the normal or natural drying, rather are force to dry faster and within the shortest possible time than expected.

## 1.3. Traditional Firing

This process is the last and decisive hurdle in pottery production. It is because of its crucial and strenuous nature that had traditional potters employ communal effort. The success of this process, however, depends solely on the weather conditions. The day must be dry and still not windy. Hence, the operation is either in the early hours of the day or late in the evening, not when the sun is very high, when it can cause some hazards. The materials for the firing include wood of various sizes, cow dung, coal, saw dust, twigs or grasses, corn steam, and the brewed concoction from the tree bark or locust bean pods. After the firing, when the wares are properly fired and dried up, they are taken outside to keep in a very good and dry place. In contemporary pottery making, wares must by definition, undergo at least one firing which converts the shape irreversible into hard products, resistant to water and chemicals. Unglazed wares are fired only once or as the case maybe. Glazed wares are traditionally fired twice, firstly, the biscuit firing in which all the bodies except hard porcelain are finally matured. The biscuit wares are then glazed and glost fired at a desired temperature.

In the case of porcelain, the biscuit firing does not mature the body, a porous article is produced. The glost firing is then at a higher temperature, body and glaze mature together. Modern tendency is to eliminate the second firing; such wares are termed once fired. Both body and glazed composition must be suitably adjusted for this method to undergo even more heating process. Under-glaze decoration is frequently applied with oils which must be burnt off in the hardening on fire at about

700 -800°C before the glaze is applied. On glaze decoration is fixed on wares by firing between 600-900°C usually between 750-850°C in a decorating kiln (Enamel Kiln). Different colours requiring, different decorating temperature necessitates a number of such firing. The firing of pottery bodies are generally more complex as they are mixture of materials which involves both complex and incomplete reactions, fast and slow ones etc. The firing of pottery wares does not merely involve bringing them to a desired temperature, the rates of heating and cooling are also important. The best firing schedule for a body is governed by a number of different types of reactions, which occurs in a successive change. These in turn, are affected by the factors like, the body composition, the body preparation and firing method.

#### 1.4. Marketing and Distribution of the wares:

On market days the local wares are collected and taken to the markets, EkpeneUkim village market and other markets, like Itukmbang, Ndon Ebon, etc. With the widespread of this trade in the villages then, many people were engaged in it, it was found among the aged and middle aged women, but now young girls and young women who used to assist are engaged in other areas of trades. These make the products not to flourish like before thereby, causing the extinction or semi-extinction of the trade in the village, which leads to the scarcity of the products and high prices of the few seen in the markets compare to what it used to be before now.

However then, with the participation of young girls in the trade and refusal to go to school and learn, on the other hand helped to increase the rate of illiterate members of the village. Many people were limited to the same trade and made it almost the only trade in the village, it therefore means that the percentage of women involved in this trade in EkpeneUkim village were more than any other trade in the village. It was also noticed that with the spread of the trade in the community and many people getting involved then, also lifted the standard of their livelihood as each individual has something doing for a living.

#### 1.5. Pottery Classification and Production.

There are four basic forms of geometry that can be identified and which constituted and still constitute Ibibio /Igbo pottery forms. The first category is made up of globular and oval forms with or without necks. The

second category consists of hemispherical and semi-oval form that suggests, they are part of the globular or oval forms. They are made up of forms and shapes that range from the bottom to half (higher diameter) or slightly above the half of the globular oval forms. This group of wares; are usually neck less. There is now the introduction of functional hand less, covers, spout and bases of the forms indicating the influence of Western technology.

The same classification characteristics of the traditional pottery of other centers in Igbo land, have been adopted in the classification of Ishiagu and Afikpo pottery. In examining pots, they first of all are grouped into the two main categories- *ite* and *oku* type. Thereafter they will be re-grouped into the categories that refer to collective usage. Utilitarian, ceremonial, ritual, musical and decorative, each category is useful in determining and explaining the uses of each of the pots. The decorative category is quite recent, it has been included here because Ishiagu patterns evolved this kind of pottery from much earlier than Afikpo and perhaps some other pottery centers in Igbo Land and can be seen as one of their characteristic forms.

#### 1.6. Miscellaneous Group

In this category are those whose shapes or forms do not conform to either the spherical or hemispherical characteristics of the above categories, such forms can only be found in Ishiagu *mmuoite* (sacrificial wares) which were later modified into *itemmaor iteoma* (ornamental flower or decorative wares), *okpoko* (smoking pipes) and some *okwaoji* (kola dishes) with distinct sculptural appeals. Also included in this group *njaogodow* which has long foot (pedestal of about 5cm high; the type that can also be found in Afikpo. Forms outside this category and spherical and hemispherical can be said to be as a result of the influence of Western technology.

#### 1.7. Pottery Production

Traditional pottery production processes appear to be similar in virtually every part of the world. "Though the potter's clays and materials differ considerably from place to place", as a result of variation in soil chemistry, their general methods are everywhere much the same. The four main stages in pottery production, clay digging and preparation, hand-building, decoration and firing

apply in every part of the world. However, there is variation from one place to another or from region to another, in the methods of handling the various stages. In any case, the end product has been creation of vessels for domestic and several other purposes. In the two areas of study, even though the potters adopt the same stages of production the sequence of steps in some of the stages is not exactly the same in both communities. In discussing the pot making process in these areas, efforts are made to highlight some of these variations.

The availability of good clay is the primary factor that encourages pottery making in any community. However, the clay must be dug out of its deposit and prepared before it can be workable. In other words, the quality of clay is enhanced through thorough preparation. Generally, in virtually every part of Igboland, the native name for clay is *uro*, though there is slight variation as a result of dialectic differences. For instance, while in Ishiagu it is called *uro*, Afikpo people refer to it as *ura*. This *urais* the general name for all types of clays of secondary origin. In the two areas many types can be identified which the potters exploit because of their distinct characteristics qualities. Ishiagu potters made and still make use of three types of clay- the main which is dark yellow in colour and which has no other name except *uro*; *nchara*, the red clay which is mainly used in colouring and *ujiji* which serves as grog. In Afikpo the same types predominate, each named according to its nature and place of location. *Ururo* clay, so named because it is found along streams, creeks, and rivers, it is dark in colour and highly plastic. *Uhe* clay found in dry areas (besides hill and valleys) is brown in colour with less plasticity; while *ezi-urais* a very fine yellowish material used as grog.

In order to enhance the workability of the clays the potters first of all subject them to certain levels of purification. It involves not only the preparations of the individual clays but also their combination in order to arrive at a workable body. In Afikpo, this is achieved by first sorting out from the individual clays large aggregates of debris and foreign materials before combining them in certain proportions. 'Ezi-ura' is first spread on the floor usually concrete or rocky floor that has been thoroughly cleaned. This is followed by most *ururo* and *uhe* clay in that order and again *ezi-urais* finally sprinkled on the over-all layer. As the potter treads on the clay layers, she introduces water and *ezi-*

*uraat* intervals until the three materials are thoroughly mixed together and the desired plasticity is achieved. It is then wrapped in dried banana leaf to keep it moist in readiness for use. In Ishiagu, instead of threading on the clay layer, the various clays are measured into a mortar and thoroughly pounded with the addition of water and *ujiji* until a homogenous mass of the right plasticity has been achieved. The only known method of pottery making in parts of Igboland is hand forming. The method has been in use not only in Igboland, but also in Ibibioland and some other parts of Nigeria for millennia. Hand forming involves the use of clay coils or cylinders pressed out of the potter's palms. In Afikpo the potter produces the base of the pots by drawing and pulling upwards a lump of clay. She first rolls the clay lump into ball and with her thumb shapes it into a miniature bowl which is carefully pressed on a dried leaf placed on a low stool (*nkoro*) before drawing and pulling to produce the base. The dried leaf prevents the base of the pot from sticking to the top of the stool.

Having formed and positioned the base, she rolls a coil of clay in between her palms and with her right hand presses the coil to the rim of the base form with the aid of her fingers working from left to right in a clockwise direction. This process is continued until the pot is built to the desired form and size, particularly while building a large pot, when the potter can no longer work from the sitting position, she stands up and walks round the pot in a clockwise direction as she lays the coils. Also, at intervals the pot is allowed to set, it prevents the wall from collapsing under the pressure of the wet soft wall. Having completed the form, she uses a soft dried leaf (*ohihiha*) soaked in water to smoothen the rim. This is done by folding the leaf over the rim drawn right round. In most cases, she presses her thumb nail against the leaf thereby creating a beautiful incised decoration on the rim which is the beginning of decoration typical of Igbo wares. This is followed by scraping, smoothening, burnishing usually carried out at the leather-hard stage and on the outside of the closed forms (those with narrow neck), since the inside is usually smoothened during the forming process. However, for open forms (those with wide neck or rim) like bowls, both the inside and outside are involved in these stages. This stage provides bases for the application of the various types of decorations.

### 1.8 Types of Pots/Wares

**Utilitarian Wares:** Within this group are *okunri, njaohe, njamanu, njammiri, njankwu, `ochanja and okwaose; `itenri, iteoku, iteohe, iteofe, itemmiri, ite mini, iteakpu, iteiwa, itenche, ngigaeju etc. Oku nri, njaohe, njamanu* are bowls or dishes for serving food of all kinds. In Afikpo some bowls are named according to the type of food to be served, hence *njaohe* is called so because it is used to serve soup (*ohe*) while *njamanuis* used to serve palm oil (*manunri*). They have various sizes and the use of any size is determined by the type and quantity of food to be served. The biggest or medium sized being those used for serving soup, foofoo, garri, yam, grains and other food items, usually 25cm in diameter, while the smallest fall within other uses such as *njamanu*, etc. In Ishiagu especially among Amaeke community, some of these bowls were beautifully decorated with incised and embossed decorative designs; some with raised foot termed *njagodoby* both communities. While those from Afikpo are characterized by a band of parallel incised decorative patterns, usually on the region of the rim,

**1.9. Ceremonial Wares:** Include in this group are wares used during important ceremonies such as marriage, title taking, festivals etc. *Itemmany/itemia* feature prominently in this group. They refer to group of pots used for tapping, selling, serving, transporting and storing raffia or palm wine. The smallest are used for tapping wine, especially (*oguduali/ogidiani*) from fallen raffia or palm tree, *Ogudualiis* a type of wine derived from a fallen raffia or palm tree. In form, these wares are identical *tomgbuku*, a term used by Afikpo potters to classify spherical or oval (globular) pots with neck. In Ishiagu, Wine pots are not known for wine tapping. As a result their production was and is still on demand and were never produced in large quantities like most Ishiagu pots. They are of various sizes; those for wine tapping assume smaller shape with short or long narrow neck and flared rim which make pouring easier and provides grip for the rope, the narrow neck lessens the amount of air that comes in contact with the wine thereby reducing the rate of fermentation which leads to sources. In Afikpo, *iteokpogore* refers to those graded in gallons used as standard for measuring the quantity of wine to be provided during a given economy. Their sizes range from one to five gallons. A celebrant is always

given the number of *iteokpogo* (gallons) to be provided depending on the nature and type of ceremony.

**2.0. Ritual Wares:** Wares meant for ritual purposes are commonly called *njaarusi, okualusi*. Ritual wares comprising of pots and bowls constitute the smallest setoff wares produced in Igboland. This, notwithstanding, they cost more because of their sociological and spiritual functions. They constitute the principal deposits found in family, personal and community shrines, intended to serve various ritual functions, such as protection, storage of medicine by native doctors, procreation, strength, peace and many others. In igbo communities, ritual wares make symbolic reference to the people's belief system. In Afikpo and perhaps in other parts of Igboland, ritual pots are the least decorated, sometimes without any decoration, the commonest type of decoration found on them incision, usually of no intricacy. In Afikpo, for instance, they are regarded as sacred objects with inherent powers and elevated to the level of dieties worthy of worship and capable of attracting good or bad,

**2.1. Decorative or Ornamental Pots-** These refer to as wares which forms and uses have been influenced by the introduction of modern containers. They resulted from the modification of some of the traditional forms that have been discussed so far (especially the ritual types) to enable them fit into the uses of modern containers such as flower vases/ pots, candle stands etc. as can be found in most homes today. Decorations are essential aspects of pottery which the potters employ to enhance the aesthetic and symbolic attributes of the pots. These are achieved through, varieties of decorative techniques ranging from grooving, engraving or carving lines or images; creating of dots; application or sticking of clay or other materials to the application of varieties of colour lines and tints on the surface of the pots. The colours being referred to are natural pigments or plant metals, wood and building surfaces. In fact, the use of synthetic paints or emulsions to plant pots is not the characteristic of Igbo pottery; a practice that can be found in Northern parts of Nigeria. Available ethnographic studies identified four main methods of decorations prominent in parts of Igboland, the following types incised decorations, net decorations impressed or pressed decorations (rouletting) and applique, relief applied or

embossed decorations. There are however, other variations outside the four categories which, refers to as miscellaneous decorations is burnishing which in most cases serves technical function especially when used alone as it helps to render the surface of the pot impervious to water and other liquid substances. But when used in combination with other form(s) of decoration it merely serves as decorative techniques. Another type of miscellaneous decoration are perforations which are employed on pots designed “for drying or steaming meat or fish on a fire” perforations, in some cases, provide a base to tie ropes that can serve as handles used to hang the pot on the wall or on any elevation Burnishing which helps to reduce the porosity of making it water tight, sometimes forms the base upon which further decorations can be applied. Since most pots are designed to accommodate liquid substances, burnishing is perhaps the commonest type of decorative techniques employed by potters in the study areas. Incised pattern appeared singly or in combination with other forms(s) of decoration as observed on majority of the pots. In Afikpo, virtually all the pots have this character; it can therefore be considered as the dominant type of decoration employed by the potters. Incisions involve the use of sharp pointed objects to engrave fine grooves or pattern on the surface of the pots. In Ishiagu the term ‘akara’ is synonymous, with incisions except; that the pattern created appear in form of relief beneath the surface of the pot. Akarasimply means lines drawn vertically or horizontally on the pot surface using bamboo stick with concave tip. In most parts of Igboland it is commonly referred to as *nde*. Akarais not known among Afikpo potters. Impression, however, is not common among Afikpo potters. In Ishiagu the commonest ways of creating impressions on the pot surface were through the use of *Ugbali or Kpakpali* (roulette) *akpa or ekpa* (net). *Ugbali* is a tool made of two or three twisted raffia palm string (*ekwele or ekwere*) which when rolled on the surface of the pot creates repeated pattern during the leather-hard stage. It is rope produced with two or three strings of raffia palm designed to roll or rotate on the surface of the pot. Net impression is created by beating to the leather-hard surface of the pot, a net woven with simple fibre, usually the type used as costume for the masquerade. The designs rendered on pots depend on the size of the ropes and on the mesh. Net with a small mesh and thick rope

will give an intricate decoration”. Net decoration is not a feature of Afikpo pottery decorations. Embossed decoration involves careful and skillful use of clay coils, wads, stumps, slabs and all forms of clay pieces to create projected abstract or naturalistic designs on the surface of the pot. Because of its nature, it is not common, only the prolific among the potters employed it. In Afikpo, for instance, embossed decoration featured prominently on *mgbere* the biggest ceremonial pot in the area, produced only by the most creative and renowned potter, the most experienced among them. Thus only very few have the creative ability to handle this type of decorative technique. Also in Ishiagu, it is no longer common to see many potters engaged in this type of decoration. Colouration is another form of decorative technique employed by Ishiagu potters to enhance the beauty of the pot. Colouring is applied mainly after the pot has been fired. The characteristic dark coloured pots of Ishiagu were results of colouration. In Ishiagu, colouring was achieved by applying pounded *calapogonum* leaves on the pots and ‘turns it into the dark tan which stands out clear against the buff or pinkish colour of the fired pot added that a more permanent application of ‘ahuhugbe’ coloured liquid can be achieved when the pot is fired again after the application. He also revealed that colouring does not only change the colour of the pot, but also helps to seal the pores making the pots less permeable to water, and improves the hygienic quality probably employed as an imitation of glaze, just like rouletting and net decorations, colouring was not and is still not the feature of Afikpo pottery decorations. The only form of colouration employed by Afikpo potters is the use of ‘*nzu*’ (chalk) to outline the rim of already fired ritual pot.

Finally the pot is allowed to dry thoroughly (Bone dry) before being subjected to heat treatment in open system. Drying is completed as the pots are loaded in a warm room usually beside fire place or on a platform (*ogbege*) built on top of the fire place. In Ishiagu, the process is the same, except that potters in this area make use of the neck of a pot (*olu-ite or alulo*) as stand for the pot being built instead of a wooden stool. It has the advantage of being turned round and round like a whirler as the potter works on the pot. However, this becomes difficult and risky as the pot grows large; at this stage the potter is forced to move round the pot.

In most pottery communities, firing is the final and the most crucial stage in the creative process. It is crucial in the sense that the potter stands the risk of losing her wares, if adequate precaution is not taken to ensure normal heat input and distribution; such that will reduce cracking and bursting to the barest minimum. Consequently, the potter puts in her best to ensure that this stage is passed smoothly with minimal losses. The commonest type of local firing is called 'open firing' so called because it is usually conducted in the open place located at the outskirts of the village. In Afikpo, open place where pots are fired is known as *ohuhu* while the firing process is referred to as *ohuhu*. But for Ishiagu people, it is called *onunu* and *onunui* respectively. Local firing like the modern type (kiln) is made up of five stages- loading, pre-heating, full firing, cooling and offloading. However, in local firing, the last two stages are reversed; the wares are off loaded and allowed to cool.

Among Afikpo, holding or stacking involves first spreading *ekirika* (dried palm front) followed by *nkuite* (fire woods) on which the pots are arranged in inverted position upon one another starting from the biggest until a considerable amount is formed usually up to a height of six feet or more. The stack is finally covered with *ekirika*, *nkuite* and *eta* (dried grasses), the three types of fuels employed by the potters. Fire is set simultaneously at the various sides of the mound, and as the burning progresses, the temperature rise is maintained by the introduction of *eta* at intervals until the wares are matured. Maturity is determined when the wares become red hot, usually an indication of a temperature range of about 600°C to 700°C. At this stage, the fire is allowed to die down. While the wares are still very hot, they are off-loaded with long stick or bamboo (*nkoite*) by gently pulling out the wares from the fire pitch to the surrounding in stages starting from the ones on top. Finally the wares are allowed to cool for at least two or three hours, the good ones are then sorted out and carried home. The whole process of full firing lasts for not less than two hours.

In Ishiagu, however, apart from the loading arrangement, every other aspects of the firing process is similar to that adopted by Afikpo potters. First the biggest pots are each arranged to stand on *iluite* (neck of a pot) pedestal in such a way that a space is created in between the pedestal. On the bigger pots, smaller ones are arranged

progressively in diminishing sizes until a considerable heap is achieved making sure it does not stand the risk of collapsing when the fuels burn out. Fire woods are stuck in the spaces in between the *oluite* and the whole heap is finally covered with dry grasses and palm fronds before setting the heap ablaze. Unlike Afikpo potters, those of Ishiagu used to re-fire some of their pots in a smoky flame with dried palm fronds and grasses after the application of *ahuhugbe*, a colouring substance derived from the leaves of *ahuhugbe* plant (calapagonum). As noted earlier, the process is a typical decorative technique intended to alter the colour of the ware giving it the characteristic shiny dark surface (an initiation of glaze) characteristic of Ishiagu wares. Also, it has been observed that Afikpo wares are hard fired than those of Ishiagu because of the variation in firing time. While Afikpo potters subject their wares to a full firing temperature for more than two hours, Ishiagu potters spend not more than two hours, at most one hour forty five minutes (Ezeagwahi, p.95). It means that the firing ends at a temperature range of less than 600°C.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a discussion of pottery production is incomplete without making mention of the tools used. Because apart from the potter's fingers and her creative ingenuity, the success of the creative process depends; to a certain extent on the type of tools employed in process. In our areas of study, the potters employ a variety of tools of various sizes and functions grouped according to the different stages of production. Some of these tools are simple and can be sourced within the vicinity of the potter's workshop. In Afikpo, the following tools can be identified; *ogu* (hoe) used to dig clay; *nma* (small knife) and *mgbisite* (sharp edged tools derived from the hard back of the raffia palm frond or bamboo) used for scraping the wall of the pot. *Oba* (calabash shell), *okwukwo* (roundish small stone) and *ukwuagba* (flat tool derived from the smothering and burnishing. *Mkpisi* (various sizes of pointed tools usually derived from broom sticks) designed for the application of incised decorations, and *ogboroaru* or *ohihiha* (a damp died leaf) used as a sponge in shaping the rim of the pot. *Nkoite* (a long stick or bamboo) used to carefully put the wares from the fire pitch to the surroundings of the fire place.

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