



Feminism as a Model in Pottery: Contribution of Women to the Preservation of Pottery Heritage

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Abstract

In Ghana, estimated populations of about 51.4% are women. Majority of these women are engaged in petty trading, craftwork, menial jobs and farming, with unsecured sources of income. This study investigates the contribution of women in the preservation of pottery. The practical activities carried out to achieve the objective of this research was based on development of conceptualization, gathering of materials, forming techniques, firing and decoration. The study identifies the seashell as a metaphor to address the roles women play in pottery production. The seashells are used as feminine symbols that revive female participation in modern pottery production that has been dominated by males. It is recommended that in order to optimize the contribution of women in the preservation of pottery, it is important to design programmes and policies that would empower women to become independent and self-sufficient. This study suggests that, this can be achieved when alternative livelihoods such as access to finance, capacity building, training and development, and technical services are created.

Keywords: Gender Roles; Seashells; Male Dominance; Indigenous Pottery; Contemporary Pottery.

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1. Introduction

In Ghana, estimated populations of about 51.4% are women. Majority of these women are engaged in petty trading, craftwork, menial jobs and farming, with unsecured sources of income. Considerably, in income generation ventures, women are shut out of the workforce consequently lowering their capacity for political influence and rendering them economically incapacitated [1]. The inadequacy of effective policy guidelines to protect citizens in various parts of the continent, have also resulted in social conflicts and deep-rooted poverty, deepening inequalities between various social groups including women. Reference [2] has also made some interesting claims regarding the relationship between the economy and gender equality. With the discrimination against women on the labour front as far as some sectors of the economy is concerned, [3] have also suggested that, economic development automatically leads to an improvement in gender equity. Some researchers believe that empowerment of women usually accrues to generations [4]. Many now acknowledge that to enable women to escape poverty; development policies should place more emphasis on their contributions to the economy. Even though women make up a significant proportion of the economically active population, their contribution is not fully recorded because they are mainly engaged in family, farming or in the informal sector (FFI). In other cases, what they do, such as household work, is not considered an economic activity [5]. In many African regions, women who belong to craft workers' groups are involved in pottery [6]. Pottery is one of the oldest activities of human-kind and the power of fire to transform soft, malleable clay into a robust and durable material [7]. Indigenous pottery as a domestic art has for many years been the exclusive preserve of women, especially the elderly [8]. Reference [9] has pointed out that literature from archaeology, art history and gender studies suggests that women were the first makers of clay objects. In this case, feminism is often linked with features, such nature, earth, domesticity or the home, commonly associated with clay material. Unfortunately, there is lack of strategies and required motivation to bring back the female craft and thus, make contemporary pottery take the meaning of the indigenous model. However, Reference [10] affirms that, ceramic artists and designers have always been inspired by the natural world which makes them feel so connected to nature. Metaphorically, the use of seashells and application of contemporary production methods in clay are seen as model to illustrate the development and sustenance of pottery through contribution of women.

1.1 Feminism as a Model of Aesthetics

Throughout history many who played key role in the feminism have shown generosity in their assessment of exploring how feminist artist devised representational strategies that counter the dominance of male standpoints, [11]. Reference [12] is also of the view that, the ever revolutionary nature of feminist ideas in art illuminates female sexuality and critique the visual representations that limits women to heterosexual and maternal identities. It does this by giving continuous and serious attention to the distinctions of feminist art. Particularly, feminist art critics often relate feminist artworks to the transformative goals of feminism.

According to [13], a genuinely female aesthetic will come into existence once women have become authentic selves. Reference [13] defines female aesthetics as subject to changes in women's historical situation. References [14] and [15] are of the view that, generally, those who work in aesthetics often inquire into the ways that gender influences the formation of ideas about art, artist and aesthetics. Reference [15] further stress

that feminist perspectives in aesthetics are also attuned to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity; thus the way art reflects and perpetuates social formation of sexuality and identity and how all those features are framed by factors such as race, national origin, social position, and historical situation. As [16] indicates, Judy Chicago's 1979 "Dinner Party" which was termed controversial made its first appearance in Los Angeles and it signalled a renewed interest in a cultural monument that has vexed historians and critics of contemporary art. The "Dinner Party" was a monumental table in the form of a triangle which honours 1,038 women in western history, 39 of whom were represented at the table itself by elaborate needlepoint runners and ceramic figures decorated with motifs. Previous studies show that, the oyster, protected by a shell, is the queen of the coast. In this wise, seashells could stand as a metaphor to represent the feminine stance to offset the inconsistencies in contemporary pottery production. Aesthetic observational metrics indicates that seashells have strong connectivity with femininity. The analogy of the seashells as female metaphor with Judy Chicago's dinner set-off the discourse to honour the relevance of females in contemporary pottery practice.

2. Literature Review

In many African regions, historical perceptions reserve ceramics as an exclusively female activity or "naturalized activity linked to females" [17]. In traditional Africa, women who belong to craft workers' groups are involved in pottery, as a domestic art [6]. Pots are widely used for many purposes and different types of pots are made in different communities for household and religious purposes [18]. Due to this, indigenous pottery has been the exclusive preserve of women, especially the elderly [8,19]. Reference [20] has reiterated that pottery practice has for hundreds of years been sustained by women as in most villages, women collectively contribute to pottery production, ranging from the mining and processing of clay, forming, trimming and firing. Reference [20] further argues that while some women opt for pottery as a complete occupation, others take it as extensions of domestic activity where money accrued from the proceeds go into the provision of household necessities. Meanwhile, [19] has deduced that a closer look at contemporary pottery exposes the gender biases that privilege men's "high" over women's "low" craft, making men the presumed creators of these works. Furthermore, Reference [21] also holds the view that contemporary pottery has become more sculptural and this is widely in its form and approaches with little the field seems incapable of embracing. In spite of feminine dominance in the indigenous practice, female participation in pottery practices in the contemporary era has dwindled drastically as style and representation has changed from the normal domestic wares to more sophisticated sculptural pieces. The craft has therefore become more masculine, thus making indigenous pottery products lose its meaning in the phase of modernity.

Though men were involved in some aspects of pottery, women are naturally endowed with endurance and patience which are attributes needed in the practice. From the foregoing, it is evident that women are the originators of pottery yet by personal observation much has not been documented on female potters and their techniques.

3. Materials and Methods

The practical activities carried out to achieve the objective of this research was based on development of

conceptualisation, gathering of materials, forming techniques, firing and decoration.

3.1 Development of the Conceptual Framework

Reviewing related literature on pottery and its practitioners and the evolution of the craft from prehistoric era to the contemporary era, facts have been established that women were the main creators of the craft because of its domesticity. The trend, however, changed when the presentation and representation of pottery products gradually changed to become more sculptural and sophisticated making the men dominate in the current practice. The indigenous potters conceptualised their shapes and forms to suit what the product was intended for. Most of the wares produced were for domestic use with a few, for religious and magical purposes, thus making them ceremonial. Their wares had meanings but currently the spiritual or symbolic significance of the wares they produced is lost in the phase of modernity. The conception of this project was as a result of the varied cultural customs and habits that have had influences on the development of form in functional pottery wares. It therefore seeks to identify and employ an appropriate feminine idiom to produce artifacts which would employ both indigenous and contemporary studio forming techniques. The products would have an indigenous feel as well as a contemporary touch with emphasis on the dual purpose of their use. The intention, nonetheless, is to resurrect the femininity that once dominated the craft. My geographical location played a role in identifying an idiom as a walk along the coast revealed one of nature's most fascinating creatures which possesses feminine qualities for this course. The physical qualities of the seashell make it very appropriate for any project that seeks to promote femininity. Forms in nature are said to be similar to pottery forms, for instance, there are seed pods that look like vessels. Lines and textures seen in plants and trees are reminiscent of the forms reproduced over the centuries in clay [22]. The same cannot be said of our indigenous potters because pottery forms before the introduction of pottery did not see much abstraction as it is the order of the day now. Our women drew inspiration from their natural environment and their domestic needs and so produced wares for utilitarian purpose. Reference [23] further states that, concepts and mental representations are intangible products of the human mind and they cannot be measured directly or observed spontaneously. This statement is true in the sense that from concept to reality requires the use of art tools and materials to produce a tangible representation of what is on the mind.

3.2 Forming and firing

The forming process involved plastic clay engobes preparations. Pinching, pressing, throwing, and modelling were the main studio forming techniques employed in producing the clay seashells. Homogeneous lumps of plastic clay were modelled into selected seashells types. Other lumps were thrown on the potter's wheel and later manipulated and decorated into seashell crockery. After attaining desirable forms and features, some of the modelled shells were painted in engobes of white, red, black, orange and ash colours and allowed to dry.

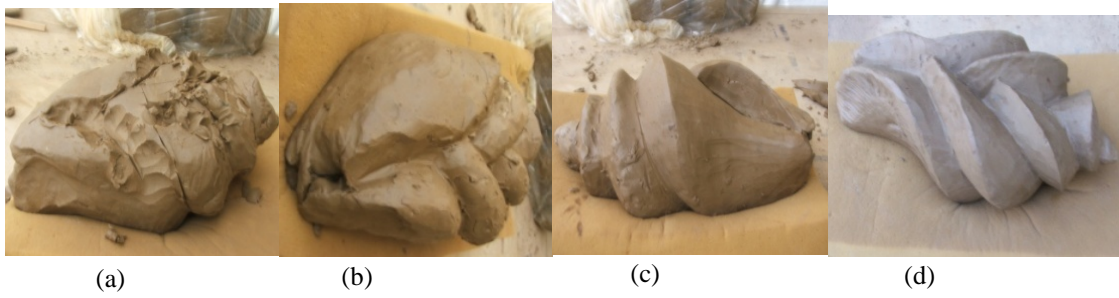


Figure 1: Pictures showing the various modeling stages of a seashell

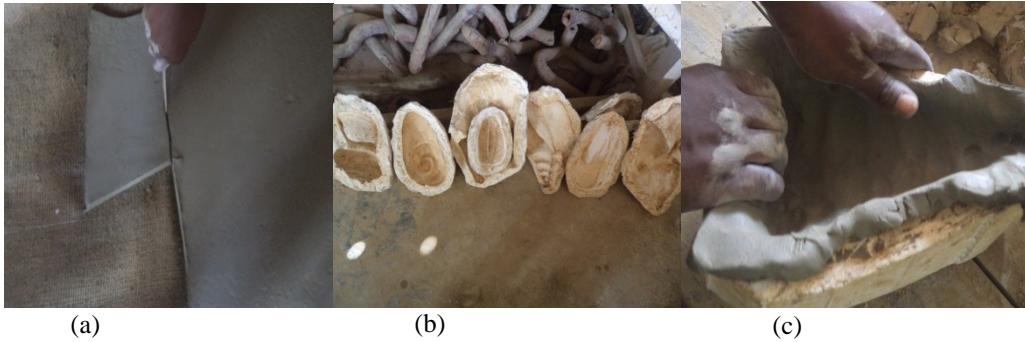


Figure 2: (a) Clay slab (b) P.O.P moulds (c) Pressing clay slab into the mould



Figure 3: Pressed pieces of seashells removed from the moulds

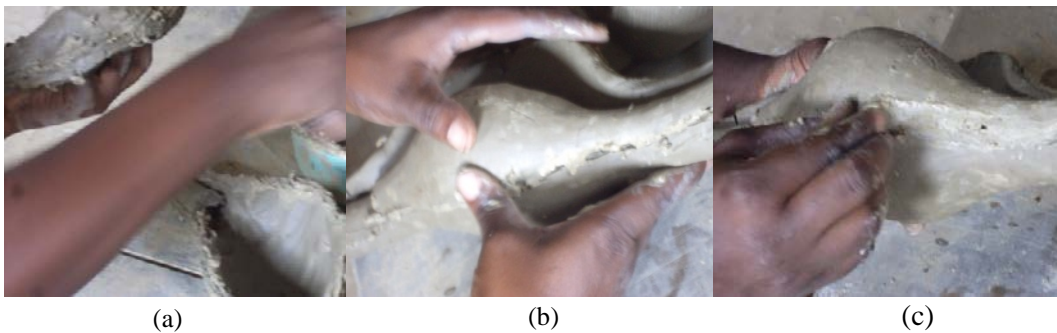


Figure 4: Cleaning of fettles (a) Scouring the surface of the shells, (b) Joining two halves to get a full shell, (c) Removing fettles at the ridges.



Figure 5: The application of clay slips onto the seashells

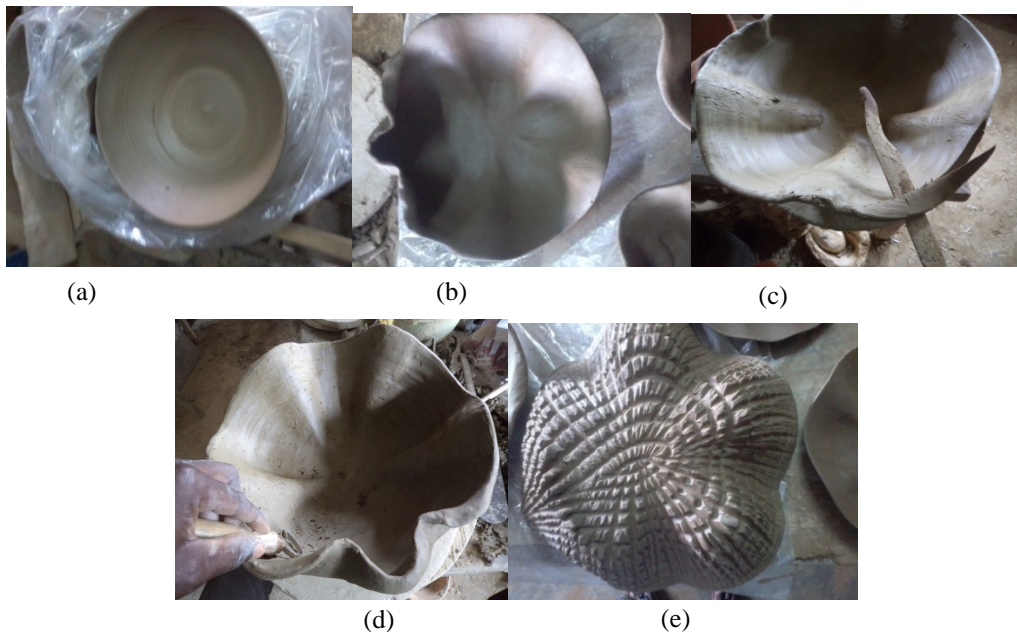


Figure 6: Pictures showing the stages of the making of fruit and salad bowls from seashell concept in clay. (a) A thrown bowl (b) Manipulating to get the shape of a seashell (c) Reshaping the bowl (d) Cleaning the bowl (e) Outer decoration of the fruit bowl

The concept of exhibition demanded numerous shells in varied sizes. Therefore, a press mould technique was also employed for the production of more seashells. Models were made from clay and were used to produce two-piece press moulds from POP. Thin clay slabs were rolled and pressed into moulds, allowed to harden to the leather-hard state and two halves each were joined to form the intriguing seashells. A good number of pieces were produced from the press moulds and were allowed to dry to the green state. The pieces were fired in an electric kiln. The bisque, fired at a temperature of 1000°C and allowed to cool to room temperature. Some of the shells and crockery were coated with a solution of manganese oxide for the second firing at 1150°C. Other shells were finished in acrylic paints to reveal their kinds in nature.

3.3 Mediums and Exhibition Strategies

The hundreds of clay sea shells, crockery and other functional sea shell objects take on the femininity, female beauty, female responsibilities, and females as originators of pottery production as its inspiration and subject

matter.



Figure 7: Clay seashells



Figure 8: Variety of clay seashells and a vase

These have their groundings and philosophies as presented in femininity [24,25]. Seashells are the external skeletons of soft-bodied molluscs and the oyster shell is perhaps the queen of the beach since it is very strong though it looks so thin [26]. We admire seashells with their intrinsic beauty yet may be unaware of how they are formed and the many years of tossing in the sea before they are washed ashore. The replica seashells came in varying sizes and were finished in bright colours to portray them as symbols of warmth, comfort and belonging; typical female characteristics. The artistic concept of the seashells as female idiom offers an ideal space for women to further explore forms and objects from nature to establish and reclaim the autonomy of the craft.



Figure 9: Seashells displayed at the beach

4. Discussion of Results

The seashells represent the major expression for the artworks. It is acquired as natural but trendy and beautiful. Viewing the shells through the feminine lenses is relevant to assessing the qualities of the shells in relation to female participation in families, communities and nations as a whole because seashells are mostly collected by women and children [27]. Seashells are a delight to watch because their intrinsic beauty can be likened to the inherent beauty of a woman that makes her adorable. The compositional qualities of women are made up of forms and features that are harmoniously and symmetrically placed to reveal both their inner and outer beauty. This gives the shells a captivating aesthetic impact upon looking at them. Most sea shells are the hard protective coverings of marine animals, and a critical look at the forms and features of these shells make them highly protective shields for the molluscs. These form the special attributes of motherhood. At least, 25 named handicrafts that utilise seashells are made by women, though some are very fragile; they are seldom used [27]. The fragility of a seashell can therefore be linked to the fragility of a woman within the context of this study. Though they look fragile, some are very solid and pleasant to hold. The shells we find at the beaches are mostly wrecked by the waves and before they arrive at the beach, they hit against the rocks with some cracking and others losing some parts. A woman may look fragile, but one can be sure that she can stand against any storm in her life once she sets her mind on it. The seashell was not chosen only as a female idiom in consideration of tensions to counter male dominance in the practice but also as a reflective tool into my personal life; “schooling, teaching, managing a home and creating life in my womb” concurrently. The fragile nature of women and sea shells also has a reflection in clay products. The products of clay look durable but very fragile, and should be handled with care. The arrangement of the shells in their own habitat as shown in Figure 9 seeks to reintroduce certain forms of artificiality to natural environment for aesthetic considerations. It is symbolically, a representation of ancestral/descendant’s relationship through artistic manipulations and their derivation. It explores exhibition strategies that evoke the indigenous presentation and representation in the contemporary practice. Indigenous potters mostly displayed their wares with no hard and fast exhibition rules as it is the case in today’s practice where the wares must be displayed on plinths in a gallery. Reference [24] has indicated that, vessels are generally the universal feminine symbol; the womb of the Great Mother, shelter, protection, preservation, nourishment and fertility. He further stressed that, they represent inwardness and inner values. The study focuses on symbolic connections between female potters and the biological and social process of giving birth. One belief about pottery-making is that the experience can be likened to creating life and the possibility of recognizing the vessel symbolically and literally as relating to life-giving food, water and the womb [28]. However, the female body in many cultures is seen and often lived as an envelope, vessel or receptacle. This symbolism emphasised the unique capacity of the female body to undergo childbirth and bear life, just as pots can hold and sustain food and water. In relating the roles that the original makers played in the lives of their families; the protective role of mothers can be likened to how shells protect the molluscs from predators. Almost all shells have peculiar forms that allow safe and comfortable hiding for the molluscs. Likewise, a mother will protect her child at all times irrespective of the child’s age and position in life. Reference [29] says. “A mother’s nurturing love arouses in children, from their earliest days on earth, an awakening of the memories of love and goodness they experienced in their pre-mortal existence.” He declares, “Because our mothers love us, we learn, or more accurately remember, that God also loves us.” The protection

that mothers offer possesses great warmth, strength and passion, and naturally women are stronger vessels in their protective roles than men within this context. The serenity of the shore that these shells have been displayed buttress the key roles that mothers play in the development of the society.

Successful women with their elegance are admired by all in the society. It is possible that we only celebrate their breakthroughs and ignore their being through. Juggling career and the general acceptable domestic responsibilities is not easy yet many women have excelled in that regard. Some potters, manipulating the clay, reacting to the material and how it is handled is the entire motivation they need; others find inspiration in a diverse array of sources [30].



Figure 10: Serving bowl and Lamp shades



Figure 11: A Tea set and Fruit/Salad bowls

The crockery as seen in Figure 4 further espouses [24] assertion that maybe by contemplation and study of the uses and meanings of pots of the past, we can infuse a greater understanding and content into our own developing works. Our varied cultural values, habits and geographical locations greatly influence the kinds of objects to make; thus whether functional or decorative or to serve both purposes. Each piece that was produced was very useful in essence because of its shape, form and function. If facilities available make it almost impossible to compete with imported white wares and plastic products, we can enhance or improve upon our indigenous techniques with available local raw materials to produce highly competitive products for local

consumption. The loss of the feminine principle of containing, enclosure or the womb coupled with the quest to respond to the needs of mankind on the proliferation of plastic products formed part of the basis of this study. Using the seashells as research idiom brings on board a viable source of inspiration in nature that can spur up women's productivity in contemporary pottery. With seashells as the main object of inspiration, women could produce variety of domestic wares that meets the aesthetic demands of contemporary pottery. This hunch is established in the manner the sea shells have been manipulated into tea sets, bowls, fruit bowls, light holders and flower vases. Though the wares are functional, their attractive features derived from the sea shells give them other aesthetic qualities that promote feminine participation in contemporary pottery production. The crockery was produced to hold food and water which are very essential basic needs of every living thing. Women generally are responsible for the preparation of food in every family setting and thus, the crockery becomes one of the tools needed to enhance the cooking and serving of food.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, owing to the fact that women ceramists (both potters and ceramic sculptors) are faced with unique participatory challenges in pottery production, this study identifies the seashell as a metaphor to address the roles women play in pottery production. The seashells are used as feminine symbols that revive female participation in modern pottery production, which has been dominated by males.

The study concludes further that being interested in feminism does not mean females feel oppressed by men because of their physical, emotional and psychological awareness, even though there are concerns that gender identity and gender specific behaviour in pottery could be attributed to instinctive influences.

In this study, an attempt has been made to map out roles of physicality and femininity within the many relationships between gender and pottery. This study has touched on space in terms of domestic area and work spaces as they impact, define and are defined by women's artistic processes and prowess which means that an emphasis on women is currently important in this field.

6. Recommendations

From the research findings and conclusions drawn, it is recommended that in order to optimize the contribution of women in the preservation of pottery, it is important to design programmes and policies that would empower women to become independent and self-sufficient. This study suggests that, this can be achieved when alternative livelihoods such as access to finance, capacity building, training and development, and technical services are created.

Additionally, there should be an education which enlightens and gives a sense of freedom in understanding the history of pottery and its makers. In understanding the history of the practice and the effects of colonialism, feminism can serve as a source of validation and empowerment to female students and practitioners. This education can focus on the difference between pottery and ceramic sculpture to help students and potters carve a niche for themselves in designing and producing outstanding forms for their pieces.

Finally, since gender identity and gender specific behaviour in pottery could be attributed to instinctive influences, it is however recommended to investigate the role of physical, emotional and psychological awareness in female participation in modern pottery production and their relative importance to create an opportunity that would rejuvenate female roles in the practice.

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