

Concepts of Some Indigenous Pottery Decorative Techniques in Northern Ghana

Yussif Iddrisu

Department of Industrial Arts, School of Applied Arts,
Tamale Technical University, Tamale, Ghana

Mrs. Vesta E. Adu-Gyamfi

Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry, Faculty of Art,
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

Doi: 10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p77 [URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p77](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n32p77)

Abstract

The aim of this paper was to identify some concepts of indigenous pottery within the three northern regions of Ghana. As a result, emphasis was given to the identification of some concepts of indigenous pottery in northern Ghana. The descriptive approach of the qualitative research methodology was used. Interview and observation methods were employed as the data collection processes to ascertain reasons why they engage in pottery decoration and the concepts behind them. The data was subjected to comparative analyses and the indications were that, the people of northern Ghana make interesting forms of decorative techniques which comes with an authentic concepts. The study revealed that, there are eight identified indigenous pottery decorative techniques which included; incision, impression, staining, blasting, smooking, perfforation, macrame and modeling. With these techniques the researchers realised that there are some basic concepts behind each and every decorative techniques found on the indigenous pottery. These included; conversions of red ferric ironoxide to black ferric ironoxide, reduction of friction, restriction purposes and movement and handling purposes.

Keywords: Concepts, Decorative, Pottery, Northern, Ghana

Introduction

Without the vision and extraordinary persistence of Christo and Jean-Claude, there would have been no gates (Lewis and Lewis, 2009). Of course, without the concept of decorative techniques, there wouldn't be any indigenous pottery.

Indigenous pottery has an immense free will in decoration, an advantage with which our indigenous potters have not failed to lay their hands

on. The plastic stage of the shaped pot presents itself to a selection of controlling decorative techniques such as impression, smooching, blasting, stamping, modeling, incising etc. These create decorative effects which basically includes changes in textures and changes in colours. “The leather-hard, dry stage or even the bisque ware with a soft body can be scraped, grooved, and carved with a strong, sharp tool. In addition to this, the surface of a pot gives the indigenous potter a free hand in painting before bisque firing. Colour patterns can be obtained by painting with various earthy mineral substances that withstand the heat during firing” (Shepard, 1956).

Generally speaking, the concept of indigenous pottery decorative techniques is rich and varies. The reason is that the surfaces of indigenous pottery offer two different working materials (the plastic and the graphic). In these two, a potter has a substantial freedom of expression during the application of his/her decorative techniques.

In line with the above statement, the concept of decorative techniques in indigenous pottery forms an essential part of our lives and has been carried on throughout the world since ancient times in their many forms.

According to Charlotte and Toki (1998) “decorative techniques can be defined in a variety of ways: as the story of humanity, as a glimpse into the wellsprings of creativity, and a challenge to learn the skills that offer a lifetime of joyous experiment and expression in art”.

Frank (2008) also defined decorative techniques as “an idea that informs, inspire, arouse, awaken, and delight us. Decorative techniques can challenge the artist to think and see in new ways, and help each artist to develop a personal sense of beauty and truth”.

By and large, almost without exception, then, such decorative techniques have implicit concepts with which some of them are being studied by the researcher.

Concepts and methods

Concept

This paper aims at identification of some concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques in northern Ghana. This is to create worldwide awareness over the concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques in northern Ghana. In addition, the study was done to contribute to the constructive documentation of these existing concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques in northern Ghana.

Methods

The populations of the study include pottery makers and user in selected pottery communities in the Northern Sector of Ghana. These include seven localities from six districts as presented in table 1, also including

respondents' statistics. This is also supported by figure 1: a display of the map of Ghana showing the location of the sites of the study.

Due to the unpredictability of the data, the qualitative research approach was adopted. In this regard, the researchers sort to understand the concepts of some indigenous pottery decorative techniques in the Northern Ghana through visiting of their respective sites and recording data through personal contacts with the people. Due to the descriptive nature of the research design, the data was subjected to comparative analysis, an analysis fashioned based on researchers' previous experience in literature and field data. The data include photographs of traditional pottery, participant's audio/video recordings based on interviews, direct observations, and participant-observation as the data collection methods.

With reference to Creswell (2003), it was clear to the researchers that this research was on participants' perceptions and experiences, and the way they make sense of their lives with traditional pottery. A distinguishing mark of case study research is the use of manifold data sources, an approach which also improve data reliability (Yin, 2003).

Table 1: Distribution of sample sizes made for the research work.

DISTRICT	POTTING CENTRE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	NUMBER OF POTTERY COLLECTED FROM EACH CENTRE
KASINA NANKANA WEST DISTRICT	SIRIGU	15	8
PUSIGA DISTRICT	ZUBULGA	11	7
	PALNABA	15	7
KUMBUNGU DISTRICT	LUGSHIGU	9	4
SABOBA CHERIPHONI DISTRICT	NAAKPILI	20	6
LAWRA DISTRICT	TUGGO	15	8
TAMALE METROPOLITAN	KUKUO	15	10
Total number of sample sizes made for the research			
6	7	100	50

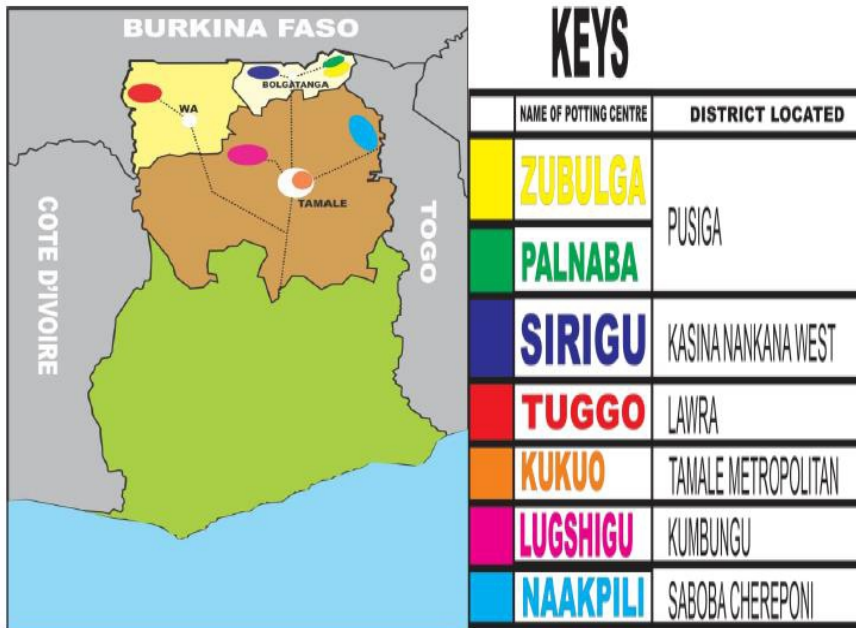


Fig. 1: Map of Ghana with selected areas in the Northern Regions

The subject and methods of the study were explained to the traditional potters and end users when they were first approached. No specific kind of information was mentioned as being of particular importance for the study, nor was any information about the study concealed from them. They were assured that the study required them to spend very little extra time, although any additional time or information that they might be willing to volunteer would be more than welcome. The observation and interviews were with no attempt to control or influence the concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques. Some identified traditional potteries were observed, one by one, as the participants were performing their regular jobs related to the concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques. Using the purposeful sampling design, different types of obvious traditional pottery were observed at each individual traditional home located among the three Northern Regions of Ghana. Some traditional potters and pottery users were asked to think aloud but only to the extent that such verbalization would not interfere with the concepts of their pottery decorative techniques. These verbalizations were recorded and transcribed base on the data collection protocol. Identified traditional potters and pottery users in northern Ghana were observed during pottery activities base on the concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques. Questioning during this observation period was kept to the minimum in order to avoid any possible negative influence on the human behavior that may affect the data. Most indigenous potters however, initiated

conservations about their specific ideas on concepts of indigenous pottery decorative techniques. Questions during such instances attempted to keep the conservation alive and were meant to be as nondirective as possible. At the end of the observation period, when the first versions of the description of indigenous pottery decorative techniques concepts were drafted, the potters and pottery users were interviewed. The interviews took the form of informal conservation which was the natural thing for the potters and pottery users to do after the researchers spend a period of time with their observation guide. The researchers asked many questions to clarify issues that arose during the observation period but could not be asked then. In the interview, questions were directed to aspects of the indigenous pottery decorative techniques concepts that were not traditionally accessible by the researchers. The recorded verbalization of the traditional potters and pottery user thought processes during the observation made, the transcribed interviews, pictures took and audio/ video recorded were the data subject to comparative and cognitive analysis to arrive at the results for the study.

Results and Discussion

Not all, having originated in the earliest period in the development of human society, the concept of decorative techniques in pottery for many centuries was the most important and, for many peoples in Ghana, the principal form of artistic expression. The most ancient decorative techniques (dating from prehistoric times), which encompassed an extremely wide range of concepts about man and the universe, contained exceptionally meaningful images and were characterized by concern for the concept of the material used, for the concept of objects produced by labour, and for the concept behind the construction of indigenous pottery emphasized by decoration. This tendency has been retained by folk art, which is devoted to tradition, to this day in the Ghanaian setup (Decorative Applied Art, 1970-1979).

Nevertheless, the concepts behind the artistic eyes of an indigenous potter often enable him/her to create a pot with decorative techniques that enhances its aesthetic qualities, context, and functions. Charlotte et al. (1998) made it clear that the potter's sense of design and awareness of the relationship between a pot's decorative technique and its concept often show a taste of symbolism, context, functionality and other decorative sensibilities. They drew a conclusion by referring to **Plates 1 and Plate 2** which revealed that, the concept of an incision or rough texture on pottery is to make it less slippery to lift when it is wet. Also, an incision is done to reduce friction when children lean against the water storage pot at the time of drawing water from it.



Plate 1: 'Lapia' (A Small Bowl)



Plate 2: 'Luao' (A Water Storage Pot)

It is interesting to note that, African indigenous potters decorate their pottery with tiny roulette, made of wood or string. With this, they use it to create impressions onto the surface of the clay. The concept behind this decorative technique (as clearly illustrated in **Plate 3.1**) is to produce a very charming surface pattern and give stability on the head when clutching the impressed surface area with the hand.



Plate 3: 'Dugu' (pot)

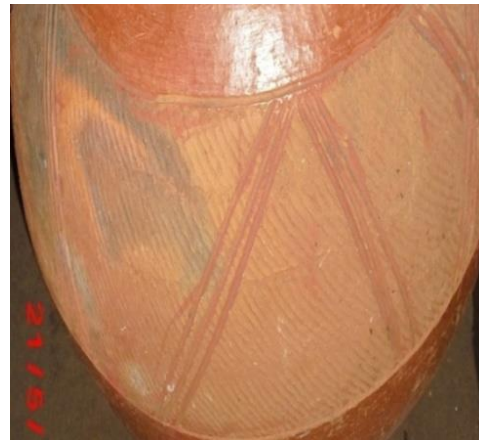


Plate 3.1: Emphasizing on a impressed area

(Source: Field photographs, 21st May, 2013)

It is a well-established fact that, cooking pots and serving bowls in which porosity is a disadvantage, are given a handsome black luster with an

indigenous decorative technique called smoking. This concept is to convert red ferric iron oxied to black ferric iron oxied pottery. Another concept is to make the pottery water impervious. Below are pictures illustrating this decorative technique.



Plate 4: ‘Sa-diri Laa’ (A Bowl for serving TZ)



Plate 4.1: Emphasizing the smoked area

(Source: Field photographs, 25th June, 2013)

Furthermore, almost all the indigenous pottery at Tuggo pottery center is being decorated with a technique called Blasting. This technique which has a very close relationship with the modern way of firing (called Raku firing) has qualities beyond imagination. After their 45minutes to 1-hour approximation firing process, these potteries are drawn from the fire with the help of a long wooden pole. While still scorching, the surface is blasted with a cold whitish mineral water obtained from the mashing of unripe “Kwalah” fruits (Yellow Berry) in the mist of cold water. Looking at **Plate 5.4** the finest concept behind this technique is to ensure the total drying of excess carbon deep inside the body of the pot; changing the colour from bright red to dark brown. In addition, the major concept of this technique is to make the pottery simpler for cooking over an open fire and makes jars more waterproofed and also reveals hidden cracks. **Plates 5.1 – 5.4** show a summary of the blasting process.



Plate 5.1: Kwalah fruits



Plate 5.2: A mixture of Kwalah fruits, water, and straw



Plate 5.3: Blasting technique using millet heads as the brush on a water storage pot



Plate 5.4: Blasted pots

(Source: Field photographs, 27th May, 2014)

The researcher observed that modeling as a decorative technique in indigenous pottery; appears to have concepts that are exclusively and firmly based on cultural symbolism. That is to say, symbols illustrating the moral fibers of the people. Nair (2009) made a general statement by saying that, indigenous pottery decorative techniques which happen to base their concept on cultural symbolism usually has a unique way of intriguing the artists and collectors; It allows potters to showcase themselves and their culture in imaginative postures that suggest personalities and attitudes. This expressive potential is realized in Sirigu soup bowls (“*Lasuliga*”) series (shown at **plate 6** which is decorated with a pair of sculptured human heads (male and female) on the lid. Generally speaking, A-engpae (2014) stated that this type of bowl is purposely decorated for serving special visitors who are a married couple.



Plate 6: ‘Lasuliga la linga’ (A Soup bowl with a decorated lid)

(Source: Field photographs, 7th June, 2014)

In addition to modeling on indigenous potteries, **Plate 7** describes the concept behind the decorative handles which are used to facilitate the movement of hot cooking pots and plates. Also, the concept behind this decorative handles is for steadying pots on the head (Craven, 2007). According to the researchers’ observation, another concept behind the modeling of decorative handles is to provide balance and stability within the body of the pot.



Plate 7: Lapia la linga (TZ serving bowl) with handle as its decoration

(Source: Field photographs, 7th June, 2014)

An idea of macramé as a decorative technique in pottery is employed by Sirigu potters most particularly when they are producing their multipurpose food storage system. In this case, the concept behind the use of this type of

decorative technique is to scare away flying insects from entering or flying closer to the storage system. Plate 7.1 best describes the above information.



Plate 7.1: Storage system with macramé decorative technique

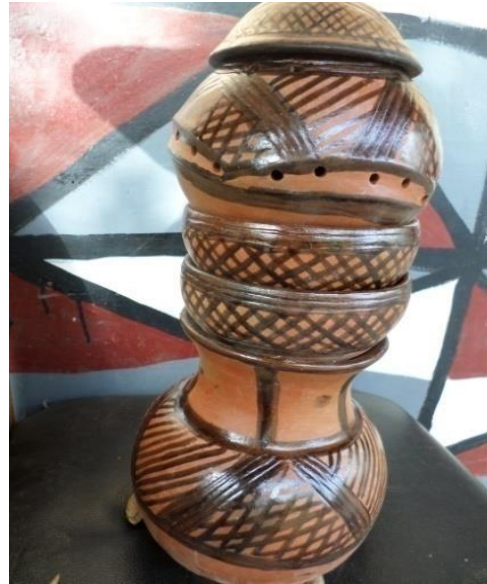


Plate 7.2: Storage system without macramé fringes

(Source: Field photographs, 9th June, 2014)

In addition to this, another decorative technique employed by our indigenous potters in northern Ghana is the holes perforation technique. With this kind of technique the holes vary in sizes; depending upon the purpose of the product it is being applied. Studies shows that pottery produce for the feeding of fowls and other domestic birds with water are decorated by means of perforating holes that are big enough for the head of the fowl or bird to pass through. The concept behind this decorative technique is to prevent larger domestic animals (such as sheep, goats, cattle, dogs etc) from drinking the water in that pot. This type of pot is best illustrated in **plates 8.1 and 8.2**



Plate 8.1: Fired perforated pot for feeding poultry with water



Plate 8.2: Unfired perforated pot for feeding poultry with water

(Source: Field photographs, 22nd May, 2013)

Not all, holes perforation as an indigenous decorative technique is also done on pottery purposely meant for steaming meat, fish, cassava, yam and the burning of herbs. Having a careful study of the indigenous herbs burner and meat steamer at **plate 9.1 and 9.2**, the researchers observed that the herbs burner is decorated to prevent the herbs from having a direct contact with the firewood. Basically, the concept of this decorative techniques is to separate the carbonated herbs (that is, the charcoal form by the herbs) from the carbonated fuel (that is, the charcoal form by the fuel in other words the firewood). Below is a picture of the herbs burner.



Plate 9.1: indigenous herbs burner decorated with perforated holes



Plate 9.2: a discarded indigenous meat steamer decorated with perforated holes

(Source: Field photographs, 21st May, 2013)

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the study revealed that, there are eight identified decorative techniques which included; incision, impression, staining, blasting, smocking, perforation, macrame and modeling. With these techniques the researchers realised that there are some basic concepts behind each and every decorative techniques found on the indigenous pottery. These included; conversions of red ferric ironoxide to black ferric ironoxide, reduction of friction, restriction purposes and movement and handling purposes.

On the simplest level, be it public, personal or private, the concept of decorative techniques in pottery is the transfer of ideas from one person to another (that is; from the producer to the end user). The measure of how anything that proposes to transfer the concept of decorative techniques in pottery is the reaction it animates on the surfaces of the pottery. In very different ways, the concept of decorative techniques in pottery provokes strong and profound reactions from the viewer.

References:

1. A-engpae, A. (2014, June 13). The concept of indigenous pottery decorative techniques in northern Ghana. (I. Yussif, Interviewer)
2. Charlotte F. Speight, John Toki. (1998). *Hands in Clay*. New York: McGraw - Hill College.
3. *Concepts of Experimental Design* . (2005). Retrieved March 18, 2015, from SAS: <https://support.sas.com/resources/papers/sixsigma1.pdf>
4. Craven, A. (2007). The Pottery of Northern Ghana. *Interpreting Ceramics* , 10.
5. Creswell, J. W. (2003). *RESEARCH DESIGN (Qualitative, Quantitative, and mixed methods approaches)*. Thousand Oaks London New Delhi : SAGE Publications .
6. *Decorative Applied Art*. (1970-1979). Retrieved June 15, 2014, from The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 3rd Edition: <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Decorative+Applied+Art>
7. Frank, P. (2008). *Prebles' ARTFORM*. New Jersey: Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.
8. Nair, U. (2009, December 7). *A Potter Exploring Buddhist Philosophy through Ceramic Art*. Retrieved June 21, 2014, from The Economic Times: <http://www.theeconomictimes.com>
9. Richard Lewis and Susan I. Lewis. (2009). *The power of art*. Belmont: The Thomson Wadsworth Publication.
10. Shepard, A. O. (1956). *Ceramics for the archaeologist*. Washington D.C: Carnegie Institution of Washington.
11. *The University of York*. (2012, November 21). Retrieved August 18, 2014, from What is philosophy?: www.york.ac.uk/philosophy/why-philosophy
12. Yin, R. K. (2004, January 10). *Case Study Methods*. Retrieved April 25, 2015, from COSMOS Corporation: www.cosmoscorp.com/Docs/AERAdraft.pdf