

**Review Article**

## Exploring the Symbolic Meanings and Cultural Significance of Pottery in Africa

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**Abstract:** Western scholarship and media have often emphasized the negative aspects of African culture, frequently employing terms such as “barbaric” or “outdated.” These portrayals, whether deliberate or uninformed, neglect the imperfections of Western societies and perpetuate a biased understanding of global cultural realities. This review article challenges such imbalances by examining the symbolic meanings and cultural significance of pottery in African traditions through the lens of hegemonic theory. Focusing on selected regions in Western, Northern and Eastern Nigeria, the study explores the types of clay pots used by worshippers, the processes of molding and design, and the individual and communal taboos that govern their creation and use. It further highlights emerging trends in pottery that mirror traditional religious clay pots, situating them within the dynamics of contemporary Nigerian society. By assessing the adaptability of these cultural artifacts in an era of rapid technological advancement, the article underscores the resilience of African traditions and their capacity to evolve while retaining symbolic depth and cultural relevance.

**Keywords:** Clay Pot, Traditional Religious Practice, African Culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Western scholarship and media have historically emphasized the negative aspects of African culture, often labeling it with derogatory terms such as “barbaric” or “outdated” (Rodney, 2018). Such portrayals, whether intentional or uninformed, overlook the imperfections within Western societies, as no culture across the world is without flaws. Therefore, ignoring shortcomings in one’s own culture while disproportionately highlighting those of others reflects a biased and incomplete understanding of global cultural realities.

The central concern of African development scholars lies not merely in the derogatory labeling of African culture by the West, but in its internalization by Africans themselves. Since the contact with the West, many Africans do not lay much emphasis on their own culture, but western type. Consequently, it has resulted in the abandonment of the rich cultural heritage that shaped precolonial life and was responsible for historic inventions prior to colonialism (Rodney, 2018). Had the creativity of that era been sustained and refined, Africa,

today, could have emerged a global power in all spheres of life.

The then prevailing creativity demonstrated at the individual level in traditional societies contributed significantly to income generation that was used to better the lots of ancestors Rodney, (2018). Such artisanal skills, if harnessed and sustained, hold the potential to alleviate pressing socio-economic challenges, including high levels of unemployment and poverty, thereby improving overall quality of life in contemporary African societies.

Africans knowledge of pottery, widely acknowledged as one of the continent’s most prominent traditional crafts, reflects a remarkable degree of creativity and innovation. Scholars argue that this expertise was not confined to a single region but was evident across diverse ethnic groups, underscoring pottery’s pan-African significance as both a utilitarian and cultural practice (Atake & Adehor, 2025). The widespread presence of pottery traditions highlights the shared ingenuity of African communities in transforming locally available clay into vessels that served domestic,

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ritual, and symbolic functions. This continuity across ethnic boundaries situates pottery as a unifying craft within African material culture, while also demonstrating the adaptability of artisans to local needs and spiritual contexts.

Pottery, as both a cultural heritage and an economic activity, exemplifies how indigenous knowledge systems can be mobilized not only for cultural preservation but also for socio-economic empowerment in modern contexts. The innovative capacity of individuals engaged in this profession has the potential to generate products that enhance human comfort and satisfaction, while simultaneously contributing to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and promoting exportation to strengthen foreign exchange earnings. The case of India, as cited by Ugwu (2024), is particularly striking: traditional crafts in India contribute significantly to national income, with the handicrafts sector generating over \$4 billion annually. Government initiatives such as the *One District One Product Scheme (ODOPS)* have further enhanced this contribution by successfully promoting local artisans through expanded market access and financial incentives. This example demonstrates how strategic policy interventions can transform indigenous crafts into engines of economic growth, cultural preservation, and global competitiveness, an approach that is urgently needed in contemporary African societies, given the existence of clay in large quantity.

Clay is a natural earthy substance composed primarily of fine-grained minerals, widely distributed across Africa, which made it an accessible and versatile resource for communities. The adaptability of clay enabled its transformation into diverse utilitarian and ritual objects, underscoring its dual significance as both a material of everyday life and a medium of cultural expression, dates back to the early years of civilization.

Universally, the craft of pottery has undergone significant transformation, evolving from rudimentary handmade clay vessels to the highly sophisticated production of ceramics through advanced technologies. Scholars trace this progression as a continuum in which traditional hand-building techniques gradually gave way to innovations such as the potter's wheel, kiln firing, glazing, and eventually industrial and digital methods of ceramic manufacture (Tite, 2019).

This trajectory reflects not only technological advancement but also the expanding cultural, economic, and artistic roles of pottery across societies. The shift from purely utilitarian forms to refined ceramic art underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, situating pottery as both a heritage craft and a modern industry within global material culture. More than a craft, African pottery embodies a cultural language, a spiritual medium, and a historical archive. It represents the intimate dialogue between human hands

and the earth (Oladapo, 2016), a relationship forged through centuries of ritual, necessity, and artistic expression.

Pottery, defined as the art of shaping moist clay into functional or symbolic forms, involves a meticulous process: sourcing fine clay from sacred pits, sieving to remove impurities, pounding to enhance plasticity, and shaping objects while the clay remains moist and malleable (Areo *et al.*, 2011). These objects are then dried through exposure to sun, air, fire, or kilns, each method carrying its own cultural significance.

Furthermore, it has been described as one of the most affordable arts, practiced across virtually all ethnic groups in Nigeria and traditionally dominated by women (Adebayo, *et al.*, 2018). However, among the Muslim Hausa communities of northern Nigeria, pottery is undertaken mostly by men, reflecting cultural and religious practices in which married women are often kept in seclusion.

Extant literature confirms that numerous pottery centers across Nigeria continue to produce clay vessels in large quantities, with new centers steadily emerging to sustain the craft (Atake & Adehor, 2025). Notable examples include the Ladi Kwali Pottery Training Center in Suleja, the Bwari Pottery Center in Bwari, and the Ushafa Pottery Center in Abuja, all located within the Federal Capital Territory. These institutions not only preserve traditional techniques but also serve as hubs for training and innovation. Beyond the FCT, other prominent centers include the Pottery of Ableworth in Lekki, Lagos, and the Dada Pottery Village in Ilorin, Kwara State, among many others (Atake & Adehor, 2025). Collectively, these centers illustrate the resilience and adaptability of Nigerian pottery, ensuring its continuity as both a cultural heritage and a viable economic activity.

In the Nigerian context, clay pots transcend their utilitarian function to embody spiritual intent and cultural continuity. Crafted from dense, sticky earth, these vessels serve multiple purposes, drinking, washing, storing, and, most importantly, performing sacred rituals. Their persistence underscores the resilience of traditional practices even in an age dominated by digital innovation and industrial production. Comparatively, in developed nations such as the United Kingdom and China, pottery has evolved through the integration of advanced technologies, including 3D printing and digital design, enabling both mass production and customization of ceramic products (Adebayo *et al.*, 2018; Chung *et al.*, 2012).

By contrast, Nigeria's inability to align its pottery profession with global trajectories has created developmental challenges (Afolabi & Oke, 2023). These include the abandonment of cultural legacies, constraints on human capital development, limited advancement of indigenous facilities to replace Western imports, and

impediments to job and wealth creation. Such challenges highlight the urgent need to re-evaluate pottery not only as a cultural heritage but also as a potential driver of socio-economic development. Bridging tradition with innovation could therefore reposition Nigerian pottery within both local and global contexts, ensuring its relevance as a living craft and a viable industry.

Existing scholarship on pottery and related crafts in Nigeria has examined diverse dimensions but remains limited in scope. For example, Emeafor & Eze-Uzomaka (2018) investigated native craft and tourism, though their study was confined to Ushafa in the Federal Capital Territory, it demonstrates contributions to human and societal development. Similarly, Eze & Nwosu (2017) explored beadwork and cultural identity in southeastern Nigeria, while Ogunleye (2023) focused on the revitalization of traditional pottery through modern technology. Ogunlade & Aluko (2022) examined the impact of globalization on the decline of traditional crafts in Nigeria. While these contributions are valuable, they do not address the specific types of clay pots employed in worship, the processes of molding and design, or the individual and communal taboos that govern their creation and use. This gap underscores the need for further inquiry into the intersection of pottery, spirituality, and cultural practices in Nigeria. It is on this basis that the present study was conceived, with the aim of advancing knowledge on the religious and cultural dimensions of clay pots as a living heritage within Nigerian society.

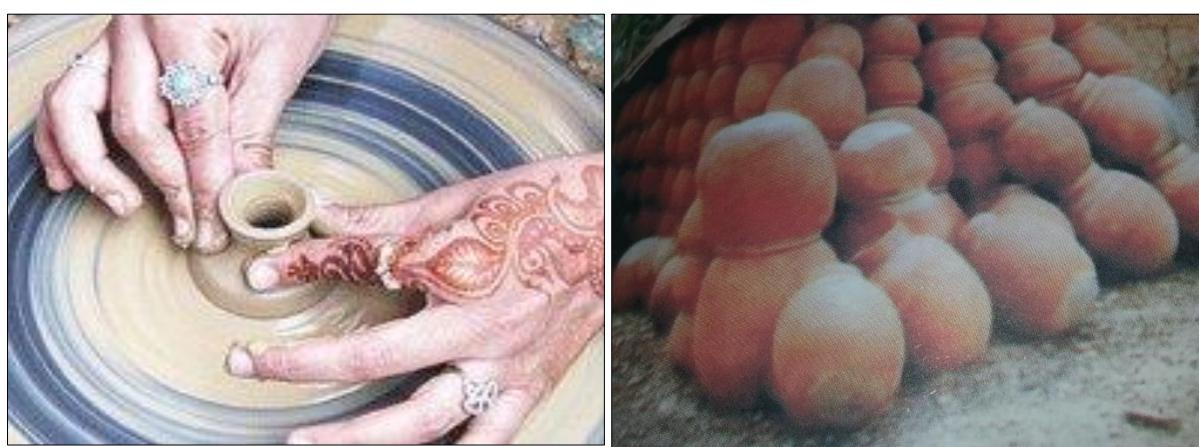
The study further highlights emerging trends in pottery that mirror traditional religious clay pots,

situating them within the dynamics of contemporary Nigerian society.

### The Art of Pottery Making

Traditionally, African pottery has been hand-built (see fig. 1), a process that ensures low cost and thermo-shock resistance, making it products suitable for diverse domestic and ritual uses. The abundance of raw materials such as clay and water, alongside the accessibility of simple implements like shovels, hoes, calabashes, and basins, has sustained pottery production across Nigeria for centuries. Archaeological evidence confirms that pottery making dates back to at least 3000 BC in various regions of Nigeria (Umoru-Oke, 2017). The traditional procedure, digging, pounding, soaking, sieving, kneading, shaping, decorating, and firing, produces a wide range of vessels including cooking pots, storage jars, funerary urns, and ritual objects such as pitchers, lamps, and pot drums.

While these practices highlight the cultural depth and continuity of pottery in Nigeria, contemporary developments in ceramic production in other parts of the world have integrated digital technologies and 3D printing to achieve mass production and customization (Chung *et al.*, 2012). This contrast underscores both the resilience of indigenous methods and the pressing need to explore how modern innovations might complement traditional practices without eroding their cultural significance. Bridging these approaches could open pathways for revitalizing pottery in Nigeria, ensuring its relevance in global craft and design discourse while preserving its spiritual and communal roles.



**Fig. 1: Molding of clay pot and samples of finished clay pots products**

### Decorative Roles of Clay Pots in African Societies

Extant literature provides ample evidence of the richness of African culture (Olowookere *et al.*, 2021; Adetola *et al.*, 2019; Omonijo *et al.*, 2019). Within these accounts, clay pots occupy a prominent place, reflecting their enduring significance in African material traditions. Pottery highlights not only the utilitarian functions of clay vessels but also their aesthetic and symbolic dimensions, particularly as expressed through decorative

motifs and cultural meanings (Ogunlade & Aluko, 2022). In this way, clay pots serve as both practical tools and cultural artifacts, embodying creativity, identity, and heritage across African societies.

These dimensions highlight pottery as a medium through which African societies express creativity, cultural identity, and spiritual meaning, thereby situating clay vessels at the intersection of

functionality, artistry, and tradition. Researchers note that traditional tools such as calabash fragments, maize cobs, pebbles, wooden balls, and other simple implements have long been employed to create impressions and patterns on pots (Umoru-Oke, 2017). As seen in Fig. 1, these decorations require considerable time and skill, and are typically applied when the vessels reach their leather-hard stage. At this point, artisans are able to manipulate the surface with precision, adding intricate designs without distorting the overall form of the pot. Documented techniques in Nigerian pottery include incision, inlay stamping, grooving, painting, perforation, roulette, and splashing, each contributing to the diversity of decorative styles across regions.

These practices highlight the intersection of artistry and cultural identity, as decoration often conveys symbolic meanings tied to community traditions, ritual functions, and aesthetic preferences. The persistence of such methods underscores the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems, which continue to thrive despite the introduction of modern ceramic technologies. However, it could be observed that these technologies have not been fully embedded into national development strategies in African societies, thereby limiting the potential of pottery to serve as both a cultural heritage and an economic driver. Bridging traditional decorative practices with contemporary innovations could therefore enhance the visibility of pottery, strengthen cultural identity, and contribute meaningfully to Africa's socio-economic growth.

Beyond their decorative functions, scholars have consistently highlighted the centrality of clay pots in traditional religious activities across Africa (*see Fig. 2*). Within many communities, these vessels are not merely utilitarian objects but sacred instruments that embody spiritual intent and ritual symbolism. Their presence in shrines, often positioned beneath trees or at designated sacred sites, underscores their role as visible markers of sanctity and communal belief. Building on this foundation, the next section of this article will briefly examine the religious relevance of clay pots, exploring how they function as material expressions of spirituality and cultural continuity.

### **Pottery and Religious Activities**

Within many African societies, traditional religion is organized around shrines, which are frequently marked by the presence of clay vessels. These pots, often placed beneath trees or at designated sacred spaces, serve as visible indicators of sanctity and

spiritual authority. The presence of clay vessels not only signifies the location of shrines but also embodies the material expression of African belief systems concerning spirit beings, thereby linking the physical environment with ritual practice and communal identity. Ritual vessels are often distinguished by decorative motifs, most notably anthropomorphic and zoomorphic reliefs, which symbolize the attributes of the divinities they venerate (Pot Terracotta Anthropomorphic Figure, 2008). These symbolic designs reinforce the role of pottery as a sacred medium, transforming clay into a vessel of meaning that bridges the tangible and the spiritual realms.

Such symbolic decorations underscore the role of pottery as both a functional and spiritual medium. Certain clay pots are crafted exclusively for religious worship, their designs echoing ancestral patterns and ceremonial order. These vessels are not passive tools but active participants in rites of passage, healing, divination, and ancestral communion. Their presence in rituals signifies continuity with the past and reverence for the unseen forces that shape human existence.

Within shrines, clay pots function as indispensable worship items. They are employed to store sacred water, ritual pebbles, medicinal and magical preparations, and to facilitate incense burning. In some contexts, pots are even adapted as musical instruments, such as pot drums. Scholars identify several types of ritual vessels, including hollow pots, covered pots, and ringed pots, each serving distinct ceremonial purposes. The persistence of these practices highlights the intersection of material culture, spirituality, and artistic expression, reinforcing pottery's enduring significance in African religious life.

Having established the religious significance of pottery in Africa, it is important to situate these practices within specific Nigerian cultural contexts. Pottery traditions in Nigeria are deeply embedded in the spiritual and social fabric of its diverse ethnic groups, each adapting clay vessels to their unique cosmologies and ritual systems. The following section begins with the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, whose pottery practices not only serve domestic functions but also play vital roles in religious worship, healing rituals, and communal identity. By examining Hausa traditions, the study intends to highlight how clay pots embody both continuity with broader African religious activities and distinctive cultural expressions within Nigeria.



Fig. 2: Pot with zomorphic decorative motif and Pot under a tree indicating traditional religious setting

### Religious Uses of Clay Pots in Northern Nigeria Culture

The following headings are essential for understanding the religious uses of clay pots in Hausa culture.

#### Oath Taking Pot (*Wisso*)

Among the diverse religious uses of clay pots in Northern Nigerian culture, the oath-taking pot, locally referred to as *Wisso*, occupies a distinctive role. Scholars describe these vessels as large accumulations of used water or local beer pots situated at communal shrines, serving as focal points for public rituals of swearing. The *Wisso* pot typically contains symbolic items such as brass figurines and a ball of red clay, which together reinforce its ritual authority. Within the shrine context, individuals accused of wrongdoing may swear upon the pot to assert their innocence, thereby invoking spiritual sanction as a means of social regulation. This practice illustrates how pottery transcends utilitarian functions to become an instrument of communal justice, belief, and cultural identity in Northern Nigeria.

The quest for justice, in particular, underpins the use of oath-taking, which was often regarded as more effective than the modern judicial system in ensuring truthfulness and accountability. The clay pot employed in such exercises will be briefly described below, highlighting its material composition, symbolic features, and ritual significance.

#### Pot for Justice

In African religious traditions, certain clay vessels function as “pots for justice,” serving as instruments through which ancestral spirits are invoked. Scholars note that these pots are ritually activated through sacrificial offerings, after which they are believed to mobilize spiritual forces to identify and convict offenders within the community. The punishment of the guilty is often understood to manifest through unmistakable external signs, such as afflictions or sudden misfortune, thereby reinforcing the authority of ancestral justice. This practice highlights the role of pottery not merely as material culture but as a medium of spiritual power and social regulation, underscoring its

significance in maintaining communal order and belief systems.

Beyond the pursuit of justice, traditional religious systems are equally renowned for their role in healing ailments. In such contexts, specific clay pots are employed as indispensable instruments through which healing rituals are carried out. The following section of this article will succinctly examine the therapeutic relevance of these vessels, highlighting their material functions, symbolic meanings, and ritual applications in the restoration of health and spiritual balance.

#### Healing Pot (*Wandipa'ta*)

In Northern Nigerian religious traditions, clay vessels also serve therapeutic functions, particularly in the form of healing pots. Among these, the *Wandipa'ta* is widely recognized in regions such as Adamawa, Sokoto, and Kebbi. Scholars describe these vessels as integral to indigenous healing practices, where diviners identify the spirit believed to be responsible for an ailment and prescribe remedies accordingly. The pot is typically filled with medicinal mixtures and placed in the patient's sleeping room, where it functions both as a cleansing object and as a container for substances applied to the body until recovery is achieved. This practice illustrates the fusion of spiritual belief and material culture in the treatment of diseases such as smallpox, chickenpox, and measles.

Another notable example is the *Baxanda healing vessel*, which is employed to relieve emotional states such as frustration or anger, conceptualized within the spiritual domain. Ritual specialists prepare the pot by sprouting guinea corn mixed with water, which is then applied to the patient's body, on the shoulder, navel, or back, to transfer its cooling effect. These vessels are typically administered by priests, chiefs, or clan elders, underscoring the communal and hierarchical dimensions of healing rituals. Together, *Wandipa'ta* and *Baxanda* pots highlight the role of pottery as a medium through which spiritual, medicinal, and social practices converge in Northern Nigerian culture.

As relevant as the preceding section is to healing practices, which demonstrate the richness of

African culture in health and wellbeing, it does not address the use of clay pots within marital life. To fill this gap, the next section of this article will examine the role of pottery in marriage traditions, highlighting its symbolic, social, and ritual significance.

#### **Detective Bridal Pot**

Among the Okeene people of Kogi State, a distinctive ritual object known as the “detective bridal pot stool” is presented to a newly wedded bride on her wedding night. More ritualistic than ceremonial, the pot stool is believed to serve as a test of the bride’s virginity:



**Fig. 3: Detective bridal stool pot and Spiritual rain water pot**

#### **Ritual Pot for Hausa Bride**

In certain cultural traditions of Yobe and Borno States, the bridal pot occupies a significant role in marriage rituals (see Fig. 4). Scholars note that these vessels are specially molded and decorated, then presented to a new bride as a treasured gift accompanied by prayers for fruitfulness and prosperity (African History Group, 2024). The pot functions not only as a symbolic object of blessing but also as a practical container for valuables, which the bride guards personally within her husband’s household. This practice illustrates how pottery extends beyond utilitarian purposes to embody social values, familial bonds, and gendered responsibilities within Northern Nigerian

if it withstands her weight, she is regarded as virtuous and the marriage process continues; if it breaks, she is deemed otherwise and returned to her parents. This practice demonstrates how pottery functions not only as material culture but also as an instrument of social regulation and moral expectation within marriage traditions.

Another social practice of particular relevance to this article is the ritual pot associated with Hausa brides, which will be briefly discussed below.



**Fig. 4: Hausa’s bridal pot and Perforated Pot (for burning incense)**

#### **Clay Pot for Burial**

Clay pots also play a significant role in mortuary practices across Northern Nigeria. Scholars identify several types of burial vessels, including the Sau

culture. The bridal pot thus represents both material artistry and a medium of cultural continuity, reinforcing the intersection of craft, ritual, and domestic life.

The value Africans place on marriage is comparable to the importance attached to the interment of family members and loved ones, though this section does not address the latter. As a social and cultural event, burial practices frequently incorporate the use of clay pots, which serve both functional and symbolic purposes. The following section briefly examines the role of pottery in burial traditions, highlighting its significance within African religious and communal life.

pot from Dikwa in Borno State, children’s burial pots, and lidded burial pots from Kano. These vessels are specifically employed in exceptional cases, such as the burial of premature infants or individuals afflicted by

disease, functioning as coffins in which the deceased are interred (Jabi & Bawa, 2024). Their use underscores the integration of pottery into funerary traditions, where material culture becomes a medium for managing death and memorialization within the community.

Equally notable is the Banglu, a type of ceramic vessel associated with the Mbula people of Adamawa State. These pots are produced to invoke the spirits of deceased chiefs and are preserved in enclosed grass shrines or sacred groves. Within this context, the vessels serve as conduits for ancestral veneration, ensuring communal protection and continuity of spiritual authority. Such practices highlight the dual role of pottery in Northern Nigerian culture, not only as a utilitarian craft but also as a sacred object central to rituals of death, remembrance, and ancestral worship.

#### Clay Pot for Traditional Graveyards/Shrine

In several Nigerian cultures, graveyards are marked with clay pots, underscoring the role of pottery in funerary symbolism (Jabi & Bawa, 2024). Within the Sukur cultural landscape of Madaki Local Government Area, Adamawa State, shrines are often indicated by ceramic altars that serve as monuments erected by the living to honor and celebrate the dead. Gender distinctions are also expressed through pottery, as

cooking pots are traditionally placed on women's graves to differentiate them from those of men.

Among the Zuru people of Kebbi State, graves of chiefs, hunters, priests, and other notable figures are decorated with animal figures mounted on clay vessels known as Dakakari. These sculptures, which may depict camels, horses, donkeys, or giraffes, are positioned on pots with bases or fashioned with animal-like rims or mouths. The Dakakari pot symbolizes the greatness of the deceased, particularly when the individual is remembered as having lived a virtuous and socially acceptable life. Such practices highlight the intersection of pottery, commemoration, and social identity, demonstrating how clay vessels function as both material and symbolic markers of status and memory in Northern Nigerian funerary traditions. Examples of clay pots for traditional graveyard/shrine are shown in *Fig 5*.

It may be observed that the preceding section is strictly confined to burial practices and does not account for other vital uses of clay pots, particularly their role in times of war. To address this gap in knowledge, the next section of this article will examine the martial functions of pottery, highlighting how clay vessels were adapted for conflict, defense, and symbolic expressions of power within traditional societies.



**Fig. 5: Lidded burial pot and Dakakari memorial pot**

#### Weapon Clay Pot

Among the Plateau people of Nigeria, pottery assumes symbolic and martial functions through the production of the Akwe-Unga, a distinctive twin-shaped vessel (see fig 6). Scholars describe this pot as being used for the storage of poisoned war weapons, thereby linking ceramic craft to practices of defense and conflict. The twin form of the vessel is particularly significant, as it is said to resemble a mother's breast, an image associated

with life, nourishment, and power. This symbolism underscores the paradoxical role of the Akwe-Unga: while materially serving as a container for instruments of death, its form simultaneously evokes fertility and vitality. Such duality highlights the complex ways in which pottery embodies both utilitarian and metaphoric meanings within Plateau cultural traditions.



**Fig. 6: Weapon clay pot**

### **Religious Uses of Clay Pots in Yoruba Culture**

Like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria possess a long and enduring tradition of pottery. Within their communities, clay vessels are not merely utilitarian objects but are central to traditional religious practice. Their significance lies in the way they mediate between the material and spiritual worlds. The relevance of pottery to the religion of the Isan people was considerable, as Isan pots were employed extensively in virtually every religious festival held in the town.

In traditional Yoruba society, religious pots (Otu) were employed in ceremonies dedicated to the gods and goddesses associated with clay, rivers, and iron, most notably Abadari, Oṣun, and Ògún. Among these, Oṣun, the goddess of the river, held particular importance, as she was believed to be the source of rain and water. Since every stage of pottery production, apart from the firing, requires water, special regard and reverence were accorded to the goddess who supplied this vital resource (Olasebikan, 2022). This practice represents a distinctive aspect of Yoruba religious culture, setting it apart from other ethnic traditions.

The specific uses of clay pot for traditional religion are briefly described below.

#### **Clay Pot for Offerings**

In all traditional religious shrines across Yorubaland, as in Igboland, clay vessels are commonly found and dedicated to deities, popularly known as *òrìṣà*. These pots serve as containers for offerings, ritual water, palm oil, and other sacred substances. Once consecrated, each vessel becomes a spiritual receptacle, embodying the presence of the deity it represents and mediating between the human and divine realms (<https://www.foluoyefeso.com>) (2025).

#### **Clay Pot for Sacrifice**

In traditional religion, sacrifice is a prominent practice carried out for various reasons and typically enacted through rituals. Consequently, clay pots are ritually activated by means of these sacrifices. They may contain blood, herbs, or food items offered to the gods. Through this process, the pot is transformed from a

simple vessel into a sacred medium through which divine forces are invoked.

#### **Clay Pot for Worship**

Unlike other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Yoruba people, particularly those in Isan, Ekiti State, worship Abadari, regarded as the chief god of clay. Abadari was represented by a hill in the clay field, believed to be the source of the clay found at its base. Unlike the annual worship of Oṣun, Abadari is not celebrated every year. The ritual materials of worship are similar to those used for Oṣun, except that they include a black cow and a black pig (Olasebikan, 2022). The worship takes place towards the end of the rainy season, and the ceremony, like others, lasts for seven days. During this period according to Olasebikan, (2022), women, especially potters and traders of clay pots to other towns, chant cognomen in praise of Abadari, such as:

“Abadari, oke lehin Isan” – Abadari, the hill behind Isan  
“Amikan Isan, Oke lila lehin Ipele” – Protector of Isan, the great hill behind Ipele

“Kike jomo Isan I jiya” – The one who prevents the people of Isan from suffering

“Kike jomo Isan sina” – The one who prevents the people of Isan from losing their way

“Sole un o sole un yeye ri a” – Protect this household and another grandmother

This signifies that Abadari was regarded as the protector and deliverer of the Isan Ekiti people from evil. They prayed to him for protection, alongside their mother deity, Oṣun. In addition to the importance of Isan pottery to the religious life of the community, women customarily carried consecrated pots while dancing, and they are usually accompanied by drummers during ritual ceremonies. The use of religious pots produced in Isan Ekiti also extended to the celebration of the Ògún festival in the twentieth century, which was observed on a quarterly basis. For instance, one such celebration was the “Omi Yeye Irefin” festival (Olasebikan, 2022).

#### **Clay Pot for Healing**

For those who believe in traditional healing, they usually patronize traditional religion practitioners for solutions to their health and vitality. In their respective

shrines clay vessels are used to prepare herbal medicines and ritual concoctions. In divination practices, they may hold sacred items or substances that help priests interpret spiritual messages. Their role in healing highlights the Yoruba belief in the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual wellbeing.

#### Clay Pots for Funeral and Ancestral Rites

In the honoring of ancestors, clay pots are prominently employed in epitaphic and ancestral rites. These vessels may contain offerings or be placed at gravesites, serving as symbols of continuity between the living and the departed (<https://www.facebook.com>, 2021). Their ritual use reinforces communal identity and expresses respect for lineage, thereby sustaining the cultural bond across generations.

These pots are decorated or shaped to represent attributes of specific *òrìṣà*. For example, pots used in rituals for Oṣun (the goddess of rivers and fertility) often contain water, honey, and cowries, symbolizing her nurturing qualities.

#### Religious Uses of Clay Pots in Eastern Nigeria Culture

In the cultures of Eastern Nigeria, including the South-South, South-East, and Niger-Delta riverine areas, clay pots are widely recognized as essential items for worship and ritual practice. Scholars emphasize that these vessels embody both material and symbolic functions, serving as conduits for spiritual belief and communal identity. National Museum of Unity, Aleshinloye Exhibition guide, (2002)

#### Spiritual Water Pot

Similarly, among the Ishibori people of Ogoja in Cross River State, clay pots are employed as instruments of spiritual protection and daily ritual. Large water-carrier pots are placed atop conical grass roofs as finials, believed to safeguard households from rain and spiritual harm. In addition, flat-bottomed clay pots are used for morning ritual ablutions, symbolizing preparation for spiritual contact and well-being throughout the day. These examples highlight the diverse religious uses of pottery in Eastern Nigeria, where vessels function not only as utilitarian objects but also as markers of ritual purity, protection, and spiritual readiness (<https://www.transcorphotels.com>, 2018).

#### Communal Drinking Pot

In the Ogoja-Obudu-Tiv cultural area of Cross River State, palm wine drinking occupies a central place in ceremonial life. Scholars note that at significant occasions, particularly burials, palm wine is ritually served from a communal pot, reinforcing collective participation and unity. The act of drinking from this vessel is not merely social but imbued with spiritual meaning: men, women, and even children partake, symbolizing inclusivity and communal solidarity. Importantly, cultural belief holds that any individual guilty of wrongdoing, such as theft, murder, or witchcraft, who drinks from the ritual pot will face supernatural retribution, often understood as death. This practice underscores the dual role of the communal pot as both a medium of hospitality and a mechanism of moral regulation, highlighting how pottery functions as a material anchor for ritual, justice, and social cohesion in Eastern Nigerian traditions.

**Table 1: Comparative Religious Uses of Clay Pots in Nigerian Cultures**

Culture	Religious Uses	Symbolic Significance
<b>Yoruba</b>	Clay pots are used by herbalists (Babalawo) in <i>òrìṣà</i> shrines to hold offerings, sacred water, palm oil, and ritual substances. These pots are consecrated and become spiritual receptacles.	Embody divine presence; decorated to reflect attributes of deities like Oṣun (fertility, rivers). Serve as channels between humans and gods.
<b>Hausa (Northern Nigeria)</b>	Clay pots serve as ritual oath-taking containers ( <i>Wisso</i> ) used in shrines for justice. Clay vessels are also used to store water for ablution ( <i>wudu</i> ) in Islamic practice.	Symbolize truth, justice, and purity. Function as instruments of communal regulation and spiritual accountability.
<b>Igbo</b>	Clay pots are used by Dibia in ancestral worship, libations, and burial rites. They are often placed at graves or shrines to honour lineage.	Represent continuity between living and ancestors. Decorations symbolize fertility, protection, and spiritual authority.

Source: Abakun & Omonijo, (2026)

#### Some Customs, Traditional Worship and Taboos Associated with Clay Pots

Scholarly accounts of pottery in Nigeria highlight the deep entanglement of clay production with customs, worship, and taboos. In many Eastern Nigerian communities, clay pits are communally owned and regarded as sacred spaces. Before clay is collected, women customarily break kola nuts to appease the

goddess of pottery, reflecting the spiritual dimension of resource extraction. Certain restrictions also apply: pregnant women and those menstruating are prohibited from collecting clay, underscoring the intersection of gender, ritual purity, and craft practice.

In Enugu Agidi, potters celebrate the Anina Ulo festival on Eke market day, carrying their finest

productions to sing praise songs and offer sacrifices (Ritual Vessels, n.d.). Similarly, in Awgbu, cultural taboos dictate that a woman whose husband is still alive, regardless of age, is forbidden from making perforated pots. Among the Urhobo, men are responsible for digging clay, but the molding and firing processes are exclusively women's affairs. During firing, men are prohibited from passing through the arena unless they symbolically throw sticks into the fire, a ritual act believed to neutralize potential disruption (Hand-Built Open-Fired Pottery, 2011).

Pottery mishaps during firing are interpreted not as accidents but as signs of spiritual imbalance. To prevent such occurrences, potters maintain harmony among themselves and offer sacrifices to the goddess of pottery, Okpana Uro, seeking success in production. Furthermore, the final funeral rites of deceased potters are performed at the firing arena to ritually remove their hand from the craft, a practice believed to avert future mishaps. These customs and taboos illustrate how pottery in Nigeria transcends its utilitarian function, becoming a medium of spiritual negotiation, social regulation, and communal identity.

### New Trends in Clay Pot

Recent scholarship emphasizes that pottery in Nigeria remains resilient despite social change, owing to its deep entrenchment in traditional religion and cultural practices. As long as these practices persist, pottery is unlikely to face extinction (National Museum Lagos, Nigeria, 2023). Contemporary observations reveal that some potters now produce household clay items adorned with motifs that closely resemble those of traditional ritual vessels, blurring the line between domestic utility and religious symbolism. This continuity of design demonstrates how cultural memory is embedded in

material production (National Museum Lagos, Nigeria, 2024).

At the same time, new trends have emerged through the establishment of art galleries, cultural centers, and pottery studios across Nigeria (see fig. 7). These institutions are actively engaged in refining, redesigning, and promoting clay pots and related items, ensuring their relevance in modern contexts (<https://www.facebook.com> 30<sup>th</sup> 2022). The production of household vessels that visually echo ritual pots illustrates both adaptation and preservation: while the functions of pottery expand into contemporary domestic and artistic domains, the aesthetic and symbolic heritage of traditional forms remains intact. Such developments highlight the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, positioning Nigerian pottery as both a cultural artifact and a living art form.

Beyond its aesthetic role in beautifying environments, pottery has historically fulfilled important practical functions within African societies. Scholars emphasize that clay vessels provided indigenous alternatives to Western plates, bricks, and cooking or water-drinking pots, thereby sustaining local economies and cultural practices through the use of readily available materials (Tite, 2019). However, this sustenance has been restricted by the inability of many African societies to consistently subscribe to the use of locally produced pottery. In principle, there should have been little need for the importation of plates, cooking, and drinking pots, given the abundance of clay resources and the skill of local artisans. Similarly, clay bricks, products of the same material, are sufficient to construct and beautify houses in ways that could rival Western societies. This underline both the potential and the underutilization of indigenous pottery traditions in Africa.



Fig. 7: New trend of clay pot similar to Ritual Pots

The production and use of clay pots in Nigeria have undergone significant transformations over time, largely influenced by social change, industrialization, and shifts in religious practices. These developments have contributed to a decline in the everyday demand for clay vessels, as modern alternatives and industrial products increasingly replace traditional forms.

Nevertheless, the cultural and spiritual significance of clay pots remains intact. Their role in traditional worship and ritual practices continues to ensure their relevance, even as many potters now produce colorful ceramic wares designed to appeal to contemporary consumers. Importantly, the enduring use of clay pots in religious contexts demonstrates that their production cannot be

entirely compromised or eradicated. Pottery thus persists as both a cultural heritage and a living tradition, bridging the past with the present and sustaining its place within Nigerian society (The National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria, 1990)

### Concluding Remarks

Clay pottery in Nigeria is far more than a craft, it is a vessel of memory, ritual, and identity. This study has shown that clay pots used in traditional worship are deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual life, governed by taboos and shaped by centuries of practice. As Nigeria navigates the complexities of modernization, these vessels remain resilient, adapting to new contexts while preserving their sacred essence. The continued relevance of clay pots in religious and cultural settings underscores the importance of indigenous technologies and the need to protect and promote them. In a world increasingly driven by speed and innovation, the slow, deliberate art of pottery offers a counter-narrative, one that values connection, meaning, and the wisdom of the earth.

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