



The Economic Significance of Transforming Utility of Pottery in Ghana through Integration of Veg-Tanned Leather, and other Local Raw Materials

V. E. Adu-Gyamfi, J. O. B. Boahin, J. K. Asubonteng

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

ABSTRACT

Wealth creation in the pottery sector of the Ghanaian indigenous craft industry amounts to economic growth which is also largely synonymous with poverty reduction. Indigenous pots produced in the Northern parts of the country are meant for domestic purposes such as water storage, local beer (pito) storage, cooking, bathing, to mention a few. Unfortunately, the advent of plastic, rubber and metal containers have rendered the pots less valuable and useful to society. Since the situation is threatening the survival of the indigenous pottery sector in northern Ghana, modernization of the pots produced to meet modern needs was found crucial. In this study, integrated concepts, materials, skills and techniques have been employed to add economic value to traditional pottery known for obscured conventional domestic purposes into flower vases and coffee tables. Currently, the improved pots have become highly valuable ornamental artifacts befitting for decorating prominent contemporary places including banking halls, hotel receptions, living rooms, conference halls and offices of various institutions. It has been found that enhancement of the aesthetic qualities of locally made pottery can improve on acceptance in various spheres of modern-day Ghanaian lifestyle, and further promote patronage to complement government efforts towards national development.

Keywords: *Pottery, Transformation, Integration, Modernization, Leather, Macramé, Vases*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dependency on local raw materials for improving the livelihood of humanity has been a universal widespread tradition. Although most materials upon which man survives exist as fundamental part of natural resources, their relevance is actualised when a need arises in one form or the other: economically, socially, culturally or religiously. Coleman (2007), has opined that wealth creation in indigenous industries amounts to economic growth which is pivoted by the transformation of locally available resources into marketable resources which readily meet man's current needs. Although wealth creation through indigenous industries is largely synonymous with poverty reduction in society, the potential for growth, such as human and physical resources, invested into the production of pots are not yielding the economic output expected towards improving the living conditions in this case of potters and pottery sellers in northern Ghana.

In Ghana, particularly the northern parts, there is high dependency on clay for the production of pots to serve domestic purposes such as water storage, brewing and storage of local beer (pito), cooking and bathing, to mention a few. Although these pots could serve as a major source of revenue generation to support the livelihood of many people in the clay industry, there is low patronage for the pots (Craven, 2007). Observations made on the ground portray that the causal reason underpinning this unfortunate situation is the influx of plastic,

rubber, metal ware and metal containers to complement the modernity of the Ghanaian lifestyle. The indigenous pottery products are therefore rendered valueless and less useful in society due to their lack of competitive designs, aesthetics and modernism. The situation has been found to pose a serious threat to the survival of the indigenous pottery sector in northern Ghana, hence, the crucial need to experiment on transforming the pots into modern economic products without necessarily losing the indigenous flavor.

Empirically, clay deposits have been established naturally and geologically as source of primary material core to indigenous and industrial pottery and ceramics in Ghana. It is usually abundant everywhere, and has the unique property of being easily fashioned into variety of forms (Robert, 1915). In northern Ghana, the local expertise of potters is employed to create various forms of pots for different domestic functions (Anquandah, 2006; Craven, 2007). Essential in the range of household pottery are the various storage pots, from large to small, for water storage, pito brewing (local beer brewed from guinea-corn), grain storage, and shea butter processing. As long as there is scarcity of water in some rural villages, the households store water fetched from wells streams and communal standpipes in pots (Hands in clay, 1999). Despite the conventional utility attached to the pot, patronage is still low. Various causal reasons could be underlying the inability of the potters to sell their products, but their poor aesthetic attraction to conform to modern lifestyle stands at the forefront.

According to Craven (2007), the strategy requisite for the country's indigenous pottery sector to develop is predicated on the concept of modernization, restructuring and repackaging towards meeting the demands of specific needs of society. The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy Document (2003-2005), also emphasizes that strong economy, built on improved indigenous artifacts and accompanied by the right policy settings will boost national economic growth and reduce poverty; otherwise, indigenous products will continually lack the aptitude of revenue generation.

From the perspective of Craven (2007), critical assessment of the aesthetics in terms of shapes, forms, colours and appeal, the indigenous pottery produced in Ghana lack variety and have low standards of designs to meet diverse needs of advanced technological society. Empirically, researchers are of the opinion that the situation is due to the fact that the potters' designs have remained static with no creativity, innovation and versatility new to the users of the pots, especially when society is always craving for new things. He further explains that even the finishing techniques used by the potters in the northern parts of Ghana often fall short of aesthetic qualities requisite for contemporary lifestyle or taste. This situation is due to their inability gain access to knowledge on improved skills and technology.

Again, since the indigenous art industries are essential elements in reinforcing macro-economic policies for stability and sustainable growth of society, it is necessary to pay serious attention to it. Anquandah, (2006) is therefore of the view that repackaging local products must play a supportive role in achieving the transformation of the indigenous art industry from its subsistence orientation to a dynamic sector which is commercially attractive, economically viable, and vital for the achievement of sustained equitable growth capable of enhancing livelihood in society. Undoubtedly, when culture is practiced continually over a period of time it becomes a tradition; however, when tradition refuses to be dynamic it becomes colloquial, monotonous and less valuable with time. In such situations, the artefacts and products of such dynamically stagnant culture are rendered less economically and socially important, making them difficult to meet trendy needs. Even in some cases, the go into extinction.

In rejuvenating the socio-economic relevance of indigenous artifacts, Anquandah, (ibid) and Coleman (2007) suggest the strategy of redesigning the concepts of traditional products through art. They believe that whenever production traditions are redesigned through art it creates the opportunity for dynamism and allows modification to meet the demands of contemporary society. This means that with art and design as stratagem, tradition and modernity will always have a meeting point to satisfy the needs of society. They also bring to mind that since concepts, materials and techniques are prerequisite in repackaging indigenous products to serve contemporary purposes; approaches of integration can be adopted. Integration, a Latin '*integer*', (meaning whole or entire) generally means combining parts so that they work together or form a whole. Integration within the confines of enhancing the utility of

Ghanaian indigenous pottery is a process of amalgamating indigenous pots and other locally available complimentary materials for effective integration. This helps to create variety of products and expand existing markets. Commonly used materials for integration with pots include metals, beads, bones, feathers, glass, wood, textile materials, leaves, cowries, and shells. Unfortunately, leather, in spite of its availability in the northern parts of Ghana, has not been experimented that much with macramé techniques.

According to Sharpshouse (1995), leather as material when well treated provides vast natural properties for various productions alone or with other materials. The World Book Encyclopedia Vol. 12 (1972), as cited in Boahin (2008), states that unlike synthetic material, leather is versatile in utility due to its diverse properties. It has durability, workability and beauty that enhances with age. It possesses properties which give it the ability to stretch, to be as flexible as cloth or as stiff as wood and some kinds are thick and heavy. Leather can be dyed and polished until it has a glossy finish expected. Decorative techniques such as embossment, marbling and coating can be employed to beautify its aesthetic appeal. These inherent qualities of leather give assurance of its resistance to dirt and longevity when in use.

Macramé, according to Olsheim (1973) and Dooley (1978), is a knotting technique for a form of textile-making rather than weaving or knitting. It engages variety of knots; however, the primary ones are the square knot and forms of "hitching": full hitch and double half hitches. It was long crafted by sailors, especially in elaborate or ornamental knotting forms, to decorate anything from knife handles to bottles to parts of ships. When the knots are carefully crafted, the technique becomes possible for integration. Leather or fabric accessories are often created via macramé techniques since the knots are made with strands or cords.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Since the main aim of this study is to experiment with avenues of adding economic value to indigenous pottery through integration, the researchers employed the case study and experimental methods of qualitative research to systematically collect information on the enhancement process. The case study was used to select pots from Kukuo, a pottery town in Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana. The integrated approaches towards transforming the economic utility of the pots were carried out by the experimental method. The target population comprised materials such as pots, leathers, macramé techniques, acrylic pigments, rattan, glass and straw. Although the sample was heterogeneous in nature, the convenience sampling technique was employed to select the materials appropriate for the study. Specifically, two different sets of indigenous pots domestically used as water storage were selected for the case study. The rest of the materials such as vegetable tanned leather, nylon cords, rattan, acrylic pigments and straw were

selected from the region's local environment. Simple and basic tools such as tape measure, a pair of scissors, candles, and pencil were used.

2.1 Transformation of Traditional Water Storage Pot into Art Piece (Flower Vase)

The pot used (*Plate 1*) was designed and produced in Kuku, a suburb of Tamale. Conventionally, it serves as household

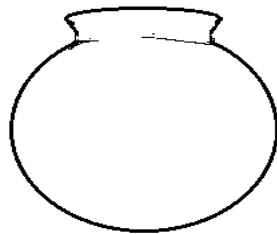


Figure 1.



Plate 1.

Figure 1. parts of the storage pot and pedestals Plates 1: Typical indigenous water storage pot

The pot was first given a background painting with acrylic from the belly to the base, and the rim to the inner part of the neck, using two inches paint brush, and allowed to dry under shade. With rattan, a ring was formed to conform to the circumference of the belly of the pot, and the macramé cords were used to wrap over the ring after placing it on the belly. The macramé cords with a measurement of two yards doubled were mounted on the ring to form half hitches.



Plate 2: Process of mounting the cord on the ring

The cords were then knotted to form Josephine knots (plate 2), and two double lengths of mounted cords were obtained. One double length of mounted cord was secured at the left hand side to form the working end, and the other one to the right hand side to form the standing end. The standing end was then moved over the working end for about 3 to 6 inches to make a clockwise loop. The working end then passes over the standing end in ascending (upward), and brought in descending order (downwards) across the centre of the first loop when it is finished. It is then passed at the back of the standing end

water cooler, however, through integrated techniques; this study converts the pot into a giant flower vessel towards opening up and lifting its economic significance to a wider society. To ensure that the pot does not lose its originality, the enhancement processes of integration considered the indigenous characteristics of the pot with regards to its shape, contours and pedestal. The transformation processes carried out are as follows:

through the middle of length of cords to create the second loop. Weave the working end through the two loops. Pass over the left portion of loop 2, under the upper portion of loop 1, over the right portion of loop 2, and under the crook of loop 1. Pull on the working end, so it can pass through the knot, on the right side. Tighten the Josephine knot by adjusting all three loops as needed.



Plate 3: Fourth stage of knotting around the pot

The above steps (plate 3) were repeated in several knottings over the circumference on the belly of the pot to enable the knots to pick the shape of the belly of the pot. The Josephine knotting covered exactly 8 inches of the height of the pot. Reef (square) knotting was introduced after the Josephine knotting. The reef knots were formed by tying a left-handed overhand knot (using the left cord of the working end), and then a right-handed overhand knot (using the right of the standing end), or vice versa. A common mnemonic for this procedure is "right over left, left over right", which is often appended with the rhyming suffix ", makes a knot both tidy and tight". This knotting technique continues to the tail end on the belly of the pot (9 inches height).



Plate 4: Last stage of the Josephine knotting

After the square knotting (plate 4), combined two working ends and two standing end were obtained and tied together with the help of a new single cord. With the help of a candle light, cords

were burnt together after marking a 17 times wrapping (this is done to form a short clove hitches). This was repeated around the pot. With scissors the working ends and the standing ends were trimmed at a distance of 3 inches away from the clove hitches. Fraying was done with needle and the next step was the measurement and cutting of templates of the incised small triangles that go around the neck of the pot. With the templates, the shapes were transferred onto a sheet of tie dyed leather and the shapes were cut out with pair of pinking shears. An embroidery machine was used to sew them together with fringe and elastic.



Plate 5



Plate 6

Plate 5 and 6: Shows tie-dyed leather cut into shape and sewn for the neck of the pot

Straw obtained from the local guinea grass (*Panicum maximum*) was dyed in violet, blue, green, yellow and pink colours using suede dyes by boiling them for twenty four hours. At this stage a wooden bowl was lathed to fit at the diameter of the rim of the pot. The base was cut off (plate 7) to create a hole that could hold a bulky stock of straw (guinea grass) into the pot.



Plate 7: Shows the piercing of a hollow disk bowl

With sand paper, smoothening of the whole surface as well as the perfection of the edges was done. Acrylic paint was then applied and further smoothening with emery paper was carried out. Another coat of acrylic paint was applied over the disk bowl and allowed to dry. The parts were finally assembled to obtain ornamental vases as shown in *Plates 8 and 9*. They were exhibited at three different venues to test their social acceptance.



Plate 8



Plate 9

Plates 8 and 9: Water storage pots transformed into flower vases

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Originally, the indigenous pot selected for this study possesses the capacity to perform its intended purposes for water storage and cooling pot conforming to the African Philosophy that an artifact befits its purpose when it is functional (Amenuke, 1995). However, the terracotta or bisque fired colour makes the pot less attractive considering the current trends of vibrant colours of plastic, rubber and ceramic containers which are comparatively cheaper, but equally serve the functions of the pot. Therefore, the aim to improve the economic value of the local pot required the considerations of ornamental factors towards enhancing the aesthetic appeal to uplift the pot's diversity in utility, attraction and capacity to compete favourably on both the local and international markets.

The coffee brown acrylic painting from the belly to the base of the pot serves as a background colour which shades and projects the cream nylon macramé knots. The consistent use of the coffee brown and cream colours to contrast the original earth colour of the pots makes it pleasantly prominent from external looks. With the cream colour of the fringes on the triangular shaped tie-dyed leather robbing on the neck of the pot, there is conformity with the aesthetic balance of the enhancement in terms of shape, colour usage, contours and patterns. The straw obtained from guinea grass (*Panicum maximum*) which was dyed in violet, blue, green, yellow and pink colours to serve as giant flowers appropriately present another opportunity for maximizing the economic potentials of the grass aside its usage for baskets and visor hats.

Aside the positive contributions of the leather and grasses, the most prominent characteristics of the flower vase is the knotting of nylon cords through macramé techniques. The macramé integration which takes dominance of the external appeal measures 9 inches from the neck through the belly towards the base of the pot. The consistent flow of the patterns of the knot as well as the loose ends of the fringes integrated with local glass beads create regular designs which appeal peacefully to the eye. This effect has been achieved due to the effort exerted

to ensure equal tension in the repetition in the tying of the macramé knots (half-hitch, clove-hitch, square knots and Josephine knots). The fringed decorative appeal created by the macramé techniques makes the knots complex in looks, however, the skills requisite to execute them can be taught both formally and informally to the potters and other artisans or craftsmen. The equidistant nature of the knots, alongside the firm and solid actual and visual textures, portrayed by the knots as a result of the three-ply nylon cords used create a compact protection around the pot, and makes the vases look elegant.

Following the diameter of the wide rim of the pot, the hollow wooden disk plate fits perfectly into the mouth and holds the bulk straw in place into the pot and releases them vertically in a conical form to form the flowers. Also, looking at the pedestals of the vases in the *plates 8 and 9*, it is realized that naturally the pots were crafted by the local potters to stand firmly in truncated cones. The pedestals could therefore be used in alternative manner to support the flower vases to stand independently. Considering the integrated dynamisms exhibited in the transformation of the indigenous water basin into the enhanced flower vase, the pots look transformed and relatively more useful since it projects high level of aesthetics and functionality. This gives it modern qualities of aesthetics to enhance its utility as flower vase befitting the ornamentation of places of importance in contemporary lifestyle such as banking halls, offices, living rooms, church auditoriums, conference halls and shopping malls. This is in addition to its conventional usage for water storage.

According to the comments in the visitors books from the three exhibitions (*the Great Hall, the Museum and IRAI Gallery all in KNUST*), where the flower vases were on display to test their level of public acceptability, 250 comments were received. Statistically, 210 people appreciated the integrated concept as a repackaging approach to make the local pots more valuable, pleasant and marketable. They recommended expansion of the project for job and, wealth creation, all as poverty reduction among potters in the country. Also, 30 people encouraged the dissemination of the idea to potters towards building capacity to meet contemporary needs of pottery wares. On the other hand,

10 people supported the idea but questioned the sustainability of the supply of the pots since they are made by indigenous potters who produce in very small scale normally. Further research to conclude on the ability of the potters to produce bulk supply to serve industrial needs is therefore prerequisite.

4. CONCLUSIONS

With the application of integrated concepts, materials, skills and techniques, this study has unearthed strategies of adding economic value to traditional pottery known for conventional domestic purposes. Several of such pots found in pottery villages across the country can be enhanced to bring their socio-economic, as well as contemporary relevance to bear.

Also, it has been found that enhancement of the aesthetic qualities of locally made pots can improve on societal acceptance in various spheres of modern lifestyle, and further promote patronage to complement national economic development.

Currently, the improved pots have a potential to become highly valuable ornamental artifacts befitting for decorating prominent contemporary places including banking halls, hotel receptions, living rooms, conference halls and offices of various institutions. Although the conventional utility attached to the pots as storage for water still exists, the study has established another avenue to boost the sales of the pots towards job and wealth creation, for potters and pottery entrepreneurs.

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