

The Place of Pots in the Traditional Religious Practices of Okpe People

By

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Abstract

Among the Okpe people of Delta State, religious beliefs and practices are made concrete and maintained through visual images. In the Okpe world view, the cosmos is composed of two inseparable realms: the visible, tangible world of living (*akpo*) and the invisible realm of the sacred (*erimin*), the world of divinities, spirits, and ancestors who exert considerable influence on the affairs of man in the akpo. For the Okpe people, all entities can assume symbolic religious significance. Such entities that assume religious symbolism include plants and animals, sacred persons such as priests and priestesses that influence dance, and drama as well as artworks like paintings, and sculptural pieces. Some writers such as Pat Oyelola and Leith Rose have reported that while some pots are used for storage, cooking, serving of food, others are made for ceremonial activities such as initiation rites. In spite of these studies, enough attention has not been given to the religious use of pots among the people of Okpe in Delta State. Employing the critical observatory and analytical methods of research, this chapter discusses the usage of pots in Okpe kingdom and their religious significance.

Keywords: Okpe Culture, Pots, Traditional Religion, Okpe Kingdom, Religious Significance

Introduction

Religion is an integral part of traditional African life, and pots serve vital religious functions of bringing the forces of the world within mans control. The word "religion" is seen by Emefie (1988, p. 1) as man's search for extra-human, divine, spiritual or supernatural assistance in achieving a sense of security. He notes further that both art and religion share a common spiritual vision; hence the age-long role of religion as a repairer of art. Emefie notes further that if one looks back into the past, one sees art and religion emerging hand in hand from the deep recesses of pre-history. The African artist creates within the limits of the cultural traditions of his society, which are heavily imbued with religion.

Nahofa (2004, p. 38) declares that the Urhobo people have just one principal name – *Oghene* - for the Supreme Being. In daily religious expressions, however, this name is usually

qualified with other attributive and generic names, including *Osonobrugwe*, *Ukpabe*, *Ovwante*, *Ovwanbere*, *Edobere*, *Uku*, *Ezeneoryu*, *Aghadagbruru* and *Omano mohwo*. The names reinforce the notion that there is indeed an all-powerful, invisible, and omnipotent, and omniscient being that can assuage all life negating experiences. Also, the honorifics, sacred names and prayers help to calm God's anger when people address Him. Nabofa enumerates the names ascribe to *Oghene* as follows: *Oghene Osonobrugwe*: God who carries, sustains and maintains the universe. *Ezeneoryu*: The pure and spotless one. *Oghene Uku*: God Almighty, the mighty one above. *Aghadagbruru*: The thundering mighty one above. *Omanornohwo biko*: The creator of all, we implore you. *Emo wen he oto*: Behold your children are here below. These are all perception of the personage of God in Urhobo worldview which the Okpe people because of their close affinity with the Urhobo people sometime share. The Okpe worldview or cosmos is composed of two inseparable realms: the visible tangible world of the living (*Akpo*) and the invisible realm of sacred, other-worldly forces of gods, spirits, and ancestors collectively called *Erimin* that influence human affairs. The total wellbeing of the people in Akpo (the physical world) depends very much upon the goodwill of the forces in *Erimin*.

In the same vein Abamwa (2001, p. 53) states that in the Urhobo entity, which sometimes includes the Okpe Kingdom, the people worship the Supreme Being *Oghene* (*Osonobrugwe* in Okpe language). The Okpe people believe that *Osonobrugwe* is too big for any mortal being to see directly or make request to. As such, one needs to make his / her request known to Him through other smaller gods who are known as God's messengers or at best intermediaries. In order to satisfy this need, consciously and unconsciously, the Okpe people developed interest in wood carving and clay moulding as various representations of these gods acting as messengers for the Supreme Being.

These symbolic representations include figurines, miniatures, and pots. Most of the pots produced serve as containers for different purposes. Oyelola (1981, p. 73), buttressing the above statements, reports that many special pots are made for special occasions. For instance, among the Hausa people, male potters produce pots for new brides. In Cross River State, large ceremonial palm-wine pots are used at marriages, burials, and meetings of age—grades. In Yoruba tradition, a type of pot is made in Sango's honour, decorated with the double—axe symbol, also found on carvings connected with the same deity, *Olokun*, river-goddess of the Edo-speaking people, has a pot modeled in the shape of cowry shells as the ancient symbol of fertility.

Oyelola (1981, p. 74) also states that in the Northern region of Nigeria, decorations, which consist of geometrical patterns, are cut onto the surfaces of the pots with a sharp bamboo

knife or pattern rubbed onto the surface of clay with a smooth pebble. Sometimes a piece of twisted string or a small carved stick is rolled over the surface of the pot to produce what is known as a roulette pattern. In some areas of Nigeria, pots are painted with geometrical patterns or simplified animal shapes. She stresses further that pottery making techniques in Nigeria have remained unchanged for many hundreds of years. This is because the pots produced by coiling or heating and firing at comparatively low temperatures have been found to be strong and suitable for our domestic, social and religious purposes. Domestically, pots are used for storage, cooking and serving food, drying grains, and for grinding pepper. In ancient times, the number and sizes of pots acquired by an individual were used to distinguish social classification. The reason for this may be that only those who are rich may have had enough money to commission artisans to make customized pots. Artists were highly seen in the palaces of kings and nobles involved in the production of different forms of artwork. The Nok, Ife and Benin cultures and many others testify to this tradition.

The Okpe people, like other African cultures, exhibit their wealth during the marriage ceremonies of their daughters. During these occasions, pots of different sizes are bought for the bride to take to her husband's house. However, the economic power of parents determines the sizes and number of pots the bride takes to her husband's house.

Pots are highly decorated among the Okpe people generally, but potters are employed to produce specific designed pots for individual needs and some notable people who have distinguished themselves socially. It is also important to note here that the use of pottery among the Okpe people is facing extinction. Reasons being that the use of pots is gradually being replaced with enamel, aluminum and china plates as result of westernization and influences from other world cultures.

Although the use of pots for domestic and social purposes has been well established and investigated among African peoples, however, their religious use among the Okpe people has not been adequately investigated and documented. This chapter is an attempt to critically examine the religious use of pottery among the Okpe people. The method of investigation employed in the study is observation of forms and analysis of styles and usage. This instrument is applied because style is the idiom of form. Through the style of representation anti stylistic analysis, a more thorough understanding of form anti function is realizable.

The Okpe People

Okpe is one of the socio-political units whose dialect maintains internal identities of micro-exclusiveness with a distinct and territorial shade of Urhoho (Otite, 1982, p. 251). The Okpe people have a population of over 248, 315 in the 1991 census (Onokerhoraye, 1995, p. 63) which makes them the most populous monolithic ethnic group in Delta State. They share common boundaries with Oghara people, Jesse, Itsekiri and other Urhoho polities such as Agbarho, Agbon, Ughienvwen and Uvwie. Sapele is apparently the largest industrialized town in Okpe kingdom with the significant population of over 300,000 people. Orerokpe, on the other hand, is the administrative as well as the ancestral headquarters of the Okpe people where the traditional ruler, the Orodje, resides

Origin of the Okpe People

The origin of the Okpe people is not quite known. Tradition has it that the descent was from either Bini or from Ife. The movement is said to have taken the Okpe people to Ijo territory near Patani, from where they finally moved to Orerokpe through Olomu. Bradbury states that, "The founder, Igboze, is said to have been a son of Oba of Benin who obtained the title of Ovie and conquered some of the aboriginal Urhobos. He was joined by the Ibo Olomu who persuaded him (Igboze) to make him his heir" (2001, p. 179).

Igboze's son later left the territory at the death of his father due to bitter disputes as to who should succeed Igboze. According to Hubbard (1948, p. 107) in Agberia (2001, p. 179), the emigres settled in Isoko. Okpe has a common boundary with Ozoro in Isoko North Local Government Area. Okpe, which Igboze's son later adopted as his name died during the course of his stay there. Before his death, however, he had four sons: Orhue, Orhoro, Evbreke, and Esezi in the order of seniority.

Orhue was a hunter and, in one of his expeditions for food, settled near Ehwerhe, a village of Agbarho whence it is believed he finally moved and founded Orerokpe, which became the capital of the Kingdom and subsequently the administrative headquarters of Okpe people. Orerokpe was thus marked by the symbolic planting of the Ohimi tree at the *Adane* or the crossroads. Shortly, however, Orhue was joined by his other brothers and following the resultant expansion and incipient disagreements, movement away from the *Adane* which soon became necessary. It became the ancestral shrine and meeting point for very important celebrations for all the one hundred and fifty towns and villages of the Okpe kingdom.

Nabofa (2001, p.37) claims that in pre-colonial times, the Urhobos were part of a fragmented society of smaller communities. The communities were led by their elders, but

virtually all of their inhabitants were regarded as equals; there were no servants and no masters. Individuals respected their parents and elders on the grounds of age. The spiritual world was also believed to follow the same arrangement; the people believed that individual spirits of equal status occupied the spiritual world. At the same time, they believed that the Supreme Being. "Oghene," governed and controlled both spheres of existence. Quite remarkable, the Okpe people have maintained their kingdom status from ancient time.

The only spiritual being that the Okpe people worshipped is *Osonobrugwe*. However, when expansionist drives and struggles over territorial boundaries (both within Okpe and its contiguous neighbours) led to conflicts, shrines were set up for war charms for the preparation of herbs and other medicines were also prepared to enhance fertility in plants and animals. These shrines gradually became places of regular worship. For example, according to Abamwa (2001, p- 54), *Orise* is a stand that consists of table—like structure called *Agbada*, where yam peels and soft drinks are kept. There is a bamboo stick (*Ukpogho*) is planted by the side of the *Agbada*. At the extreme top of the bamboo stick is tied to the miniature fish trap (Uge) pieces of white and red (*Ukpoyibo and Ibosu*) fabrics are also tied on one side of the fish-trap to signify the presence of the Supernatural being. It is at this stand that traditional religious men or women go to every time they want to make a request to God. They also believe that the fish—trap helps to retain answers to request they earlier made. It is from the fish-trap that each of the answers begins to come out and fulfill the purposes for the request.

The Okpe People and Symbolic Objects of Worship

To the Okpe people, all manner of entities can assume symbolic religious significance. Living things like plants and animals, sacred persons like priests and priestesses, natural objects like stones, molehills, valleys, rivers rapids, sun, moon, stars, wind, water and fire, human properties like saliva and blood, man made things like boats and abstract things like numbers, the square or the circle can be considered sacred religious objects. Typically, an Okpe person can transform any object into a religious symbol, both consciously and unconsciously, endowing it with religious importance and using it in both religion and visual art. As a matter of fact, the African religious man or woman believes in using art work at any time in his/her beliefs on deities or spirits. The Okpe people like every other African uses pottery to embody this pattern of thinking in their worldview. The Okpe people have different types of pots employed in Okpe traditional religion. These include: *Abarhan*, (giant pot), *Erie* (big pot), *Adagba—Ogwe* (big cooking pot), *Okalogwe* (used for cooking or serving food depending on size), *Okalogwuguibe* (smallest of the eating pots), *Akara* (women is eating pot) and *Abukoro* (Used for cooking in the farm). While the *Abarhan*

and *Erie* are used for storage *Ogwe* group of pots are traditionally used for cooking and serving food.

***Erie* – Big Drinking Pot**

Normally, this pot serves as a container, which could be used to store things like liquid, grains and concoctions. Traditional religion worshippers use it to either cook or store concoctions that are used for spiritual purposes. The *Erie* has a big oval shaped belly with a sitting curve that would enable the pot to sit when not assisted or supported by anything. Usually, *Erie* pot has a narrow neck, and wide open mouth to enable its content to be removed easily. Sometimes it has a lid that is used to cover the wide open mouth when used for storage. Moreover, the content of the *Erie* and the significance of the objects tied onto it, imbue the pot with religious or spiritual significance (*Ebo* or *Orhan*). According to Bernard Ighumu, red cloth (*Ibosun*) or cowries (*Ikerigho*) are tied onto the neck of the pot in addition to the content, which might be known to the owner or group of owners alone. The pot is kept at a sacred place that has been purified with *Ebelirhienrhien* (popularly known as scent leaf). The owners sweep around the pot (*Erie*), because they believe that the *Erie* (*Ebo* or *Orhan*) for which the contents are prepared) is a spirit or deity that needs to be worshipped. Benard Oghumu further stated that sometimes it is suspended from the ground with well arranged sticks. Irrespective of the content of *Erie* it is the pot that is seen as the *Ebo* (intermediary).



Title: *Erie* (Drinking Pot)
Artist: Unknown
Medium: Clay
Year: 2007

Mrs. Agnes Ayomanor (July 5, 2008) confirmed that the *Erie* containing a concoction covered with a bunch of grass as lid can be kept at the corner of a living house. In such situation, the pot is referred to as *Evi* (to stay alive). The essence is to stop the death of children, especially at birth. It is usually prepared for a woman who is experiencing loss of children at birth.

There is another type of pot having almost the same shape as *Erie* but smaller in size. It is called *Abarhan* among the Okpe people. This pot can be used for fetching water from wells. It is also used as a container for sacrifice. Sacrifice is referred to in Okpe language as *hobo*, meaning one of the stages in ritual processes that helps to avert a feared experience or appease a deity that might be responsible for certain misfortunes that could come as a result of offences.

Sometimes, red and white pieces of cloth are tied to the neck of the pot. In an explanation given by Pa. Ukpeserava Orhere (July 12, 2008), he confirmed that the red and white pieces of cloth tied to the pot symbolize the presence of two deities: the spirits of anger and peace. The spirit of peace can avert danger while the spirit of anger avenges offenders.



Title: *Okalogwe*,
Artist: Unknown
Medium: Clay Year: 2007

Okalogwe (*Okalogwe* singular *Ekalogwe* plural) is another type of pot that is used by the Okpe people. The *adagba-ogwe* which is the bigger version of the *okalogwe* is primarily used for cooking while the *okalogwe* is used primarily for serving food. They come in various shapes and sizes. Usually, the shape, size and use the pots determine its given name. In religious practices, the *okalogwe* is used as container for cooking concoction and for the preparation and serving of traditional medicine and sacrifices such as *Izobo*, *Ekpofia* (defence). Food and other items offered to the gods and ancestors are sometimes served in the *okalogwe* before it is offered as sacrifices in the shrine of deities or ancestral shrines. *Izobo* is commonly planted at crossroads (*Adesa*). For the Okpe people, it is believed that the junction where three roads meet is a point of convergence where spirits and deities meet to converse and take decisions that affect man in the physical world. It is the size or type of *Izobo* to be offered that determines the size or type of *okalogwe* to be used.



Title : *Okalogwe*, Artist : Unknown
Medium: Clay, Year: 2008

Conclusion

Pots and pottery have been part of the traditional religion of the Okpe people from ancient times. Pots of different types and sizes are used during both secular and sacred ceremonies. The chapter has highlighted and documented the significance of pots in the traditional religion of the Okpe people of Delta State, Nigeria. The use of pots and pottery among the Okpe people serves both aesthetic and spiritual purposes as it tends to connect the people to the earth from where all life springs and through which they also return to the ancestral

world when they die. The paper has also noted with concern the gradual extinction of this very important culture and economic practice of the people as a result of the encroachment of modernity. There has been a gradual replacement of pots in the lives of the people with plastics, enamel plates, glasses and china wares which are less environmentally friendly thus separating the people from their spiritual and cultural base.

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