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Sacred Ceramics: Investigating the Production and Significance of Ewe Ritual Ceramics in Ghana

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Abstract



This article outlines the beginnings of a new study of the ritual ceramics of Ewe traditional religious practices in Ghana, which play a unique role in the visual expression of indigenous Ewe worldview and cosmology. Ritual ceramics are fundamental to indigenous religious practices of Ewe and are worthy of examination yet have not received significant attention from scholars. In African-Atlantic religion, handmade pottery is being usurped by commercial ware, but the tradition remains vibrant in Ghana. The author's position as a practicing artist with experience in making pottery for African religious practitioners in the US, and 20 years studying West African and African Diaspora religions, give a unique perspective to this study.

Keywords: West African ceramics, West African traditional religion, Ewe culture, Ghanaian ceramics, pottery

An altar to the deity MamiWata sits in the corner of a shrine in a village in the Southeastern Volta Region of Ghana. Offerings of brightly dyed cloth, morsels of food, beads, statuary, and ceramic vessels populate the altar. The pottery, carefully handled, decorated, and fired, communicates a spiritual grammar that is visual, conceptual and pleasing to the spirits. The potter shaped these pots in the image of her understanding of the spiritual world. Many very similar altars exist in Havana, Salvador de Bahia, Miami, Los Angeles, New York and New Orleans, and many commonalities exist with the religious space in Ghana. However, a major difference, from a craft-centric point of view, is that the ceramic pots used in the altar arrangements in the African Diaspora would have been industrially mass-produced whereas in the Volta Region of Ghana these pots constitute a vital living tradition.

Ritual ceramic arts are fundamental to the practice of traditional West African religions. The vessels and other accouterments are worthy of examination and classification as a unique material expression of Ewe cosmology, yet the methods and thoughts regarding production of those objects is just as essential to understanding the religion and the connection between spiritual and material-culture. The making of spiritual *and* utilitarian pottery among the Ewe in southeastern Ghana is imbued with cosmological significance (Aronson, 2007). Largely neglected by scholars, and at risk of extinction by way of mass-produced imported products, this particular pottery (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) tradition plays a crucial role in the visual expression of traditional Ewe cosmology. Women dominate the production of utilitarian and ritual pottery in the Volta, but cheaply made mass-produced pottery may eventually undermine their significant roles in upholding artistic and spiritual practices. As ceramics artist, Ewe potters and I share a basic vocabulary of material and technique. I produce ritual ceramics in collaboration with practitioners of African-Atlantic religious traditions, and to my knowledge I am perhaps the only academically trained ceramic artist in the U.S. engaged in this production and exchange, and uniquely positioned as a practicing studio potter, scholar, educator and artist.

Key research questions are: 1. What are the practical and spiritual processes of making ritual pots among the Ewe in Ghana? 2. How many distinct shrine pottery forms/types may be identified, and what is the cosmological significance of each? 3. How does gender impact Ewe pottery and women's place in traditional religion? 4. How do the ritual ceramics "live" or "speak" in shrine arrangements? 5. To what degree is this pottery tradition at risk due to competition with mass-produced, imported products? 6. How are Ewe potters and their sacred ceramics connected to related traditions of a greater West Africa regional religious complex?



Figure 1. Pottery at Kuli Village, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

In her seminal book, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power*, Suzanne Blier recognizes the important role played by ceramic vessels in the thought and practice of traditional West African Religion:

Like gourds, pottery vessels (*zen*) are associated with a range of worldly and religious signifiers. Many such pots are linked to *vodun* because of the prominent place of terracotta vessels in temples and shrines, each deity being identified with a distinctive vessel shape or pattern (see Savary 1970; Blier forthcoming). Moreover, accounts of deity origins frequently refer to the gods as having been born in clay pots... With both gourds and pots, ideas of engendering are thus important. (Blier, 1995, p. 259)

In a telling quote one of Blier's informants, a traditional priest, expresses the significance of pottery in traditional spiritual practice thusly, "pottery does the things of *vodun*." (Blier, 1995, p. 302) Metalworking and pottery have been instrumental to the evolution of complex societies. However, ceramic industries have not received the same scholarly attention as metallurgy. Herbert argues that even though "the potter should stand on

a par with the smelter/smith as culture hero, peer of kings, and master of the bush, she does not." Men dominate metalworking; women dominate the production of pottery in sub-Saharan Africa (Herbert, 1994, p. 200). Some scholars presumed that women made cruder utilitarian pottery while men produced artistic and ritualistic objects of greater finesse and beauty. To the contrary, women dominate ceramic production in much of sub-Saharan Africa and they are especially integral to the manufacture of ritual pottery. However, women do not simply form a pot and fire it. They shape the pot as they visualize and manifest the cosmos in the object (Norman, 2014).

Concerning the significance of gender in the making of religious pottery, a deeper investigation is critical. While Aronson suggests the existence of taboos regarding the making of shrine pottery being the exclusive province of women (Aronson, 2007), in a July 2016 research trip to Ghana, discussions with Ghanaian potters, both women and men who made both secular and religious work, point to less definitive designations, at least contemporaneously. It was noted that people *once thought* that making pottery was detrimental to male health and virility. This notion was found laughable by a group of male potters making utilitarian work in a rural village outside Kumasi (personal communication, July 2016). When I asked a group of Ewe women potters who specialized in ritual work in Kuli Village in the Volta Region about this notion, they claimed that "men were not interested," but that there was no special taboo against men making these or any other pots (personal communication, July 2016). I hope to investigate this issue further.

Historical ritual ceramics such as a Yoruba vessel or a Fon medicine-statuary object (*bocio*) abound in museums and collections. Yet little attention has been paid to contemporaneous vessels and other religious items utilized in the current traditional West African religion. Writing for *African Arts*, art historian Lisa Aronson emphasized the importance of ceramic sculptural pots to Ewe tradition "(A) more comprehensive survey of Vodun pottery production and use throughout the Ewe and Fon areas would not only fill in the gaps, but also help trace the history of this tradition and better understand its role and related means of production within the complex world of Vodun." (Aronson, 2007, p. 85) Aronson notes the regional trade in ritual pottery across borders in Benin, Nigeria, and Togo as well. By undertaking comprehensive documentation and categorization of Ewe ritual pottery, this project will by extension lead to a broader survey of the ritual pottery of an expanded area of West Africa and the African-Atlantic Diaspora.



Figure 2. Pottery at Dzodze market, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

Modern travel and the Internet have facilitated exchange between practitioners of traditional religion in West Africa and those in the Diaspora (Bay & Kristin, 2001; Canizares-Esguerra, Childs, & Sidbury, 2013). An excellent illustration of this exchange was the recent program “Osun-Osogbo,” a segment of the PBS documentary series *Sacred Journeys*, which featured American scholars/practitioners of West African tradition as they traveled to a major religious festival in West Africa (PBS, 2013). Another film, “Black Atlantic: On the Orixas Route,” documented a touching exchange between traditional practitioners in Brazil and Benin (Filmmaker’s Library, 2001). My project will introduce ceramics into this contemporary dialogue.

My work as a studio potter, scholar and artist is intimately bound to religious traditions of West Africa and the African Diaspora. I have worked extensively with practitioners of West African and African Diaspora religious traditions from Cuba, Brazil, Benin, and Nigeria to make pottery vessels for religious practice. Ceramic pots house the sacred icons and ritual substances associated with the divinities. This specialized pottery

represents a significant and unique facet of the material culture complex associated with West African traditional religion. Within the African Diaspora, mass-produced, low quality, imported pottery has mostly replaced handmade pots for religious practice (Brown, 2003). Cheaply made and impersonal imports are presently threatening the handmade, regionally produced pottery for religious shrines in West African traditions as well, making my study time sensitive.

I am first and foremost a ceramics artist, but I have found that I cannot limit my personal designation as “artist,” “academic researcher,” “participant-observer,” “contemporary gallery artist,” “religious artisan,” etc., but rather, have to fluidly move from one role to another or inhabit multiple positions concurrently. I have extensively studied West African religious traditions in order to make pottery for ritual use with a keen mind to cultural sensitivity. The necessity of becoming a student of tradition is an important and significant aspect of my work in Ghana, in order to become versed in the cosmology necessary to understand the pottery. Though I have engaged in research related to West African tradition for many years, I will prioritize learning first hand from scholars, religious artists, and religious specialists in Ghana.



Figure 3. Pottery at Dzodze market, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

My first goal is to document as many different Ewe religious pots as possible, examples of which are depicted in Figures 1-4. I will document the making of these pots in order to illustrate the unique techniques and materials utilized by Ghanaian Ewe potters. I will prioritize investigating how Ewe potters visualize the spiritual world as they form the pots for ritual use.



Figure 4. Pottery at Dzodze market, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

A second goal of the research and documentation will be photographing the use and placement of ritual pottery in contextualized settings, such as public and private shrine arrangements. This aspect is of particular significance to understand and document the “life” lead by these singular pots. To further an understanding of the role and meaning of pottery within West African traditional practice, I will consult religious and ritual specialists regarding aspects of traditional religion generally and the role of pottery specifically.

There have been few studies of the work of Ewe ritual potters in Ghana, and little attention paid to this tradition by either the anthropological community or the contemporary world ceramics community. Studies of traditional practices exist, however, the majority of these have focused on communities further east, primarily in Benin and Nigeria. By researching and documenting the contemporary tradition of Ewe ritual pottery in southeastern Ghana, and by the publication of articles, the exhibition of artwork, future panel discussions and conference presentations, I hope to draw attention to this dynamic Ceramics tradition, the contemporary potters who are making the work, and especially the pottery unique functions within the religious complex. In this way, art, and ceramics specifically, would become a unique facet of the lively cross-continental exchange within the African-Atlantic cultural and religious landscape.

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About the author

I arrived in Ghana in late August 2018, intent on spending a year researching Ewe ritual ceramics and the traditions in which they function. I was afforded this opportunity because my wife Jeannie Hulen, also a ceramics artist and educator is serving as a Fulbright Scholar in Ceramics at KNUST in Kumasi, during the 2018-19 academic year. With our two children, we relocated to Ghana for a year, excited to participate in the vital academic, contemporary and traditional art communities. I am convinced that the pottery made for ritual use in Ewe traditional practice has not received deserved attention from art historians, anthropologists, or the art world at large, and I look forward to beginning a deep investigation of the tradition.

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