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Socio-cultural Significance of Calabash Art among the Nomadic Fulani of Northern Nigeria

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Abstract



So much is known about the decoration and use of calabash in Nigeria. Studies have shown that the nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria are popularly known for their unalloyed attachment to the calabash for which they have accorded time and energy to decorate as well as give character. The calabash as a household utensil and commercial item also has provided countless uses for them. However, extant literature has not sufficiently paid attention to this art tradition of calabash decoration among the nomadic Fulani, which is a rich and significant aspect of their culture. This study, therefore, sought to bridge this gap by surveying the decoration and the use of calabash in nomadic Fulani culture with a view to shedding more light on the importance of their art. This study hence, adds to the existing literature that promotes

this distinctive art piece associated with a unique African ethnic group.

Keywords: calabash, container, decoration, homestead, nomadic

Introduction

The terms calabash and gourd are most often used interchangeably, though some critics claim that gourd refers to the fruit of the calabash while in its unprocessed stage; this however may not be categorically true. The dry and processed calabash or gourd is referred to as *kwarya* (container), among the nomadic Fulani. Most household commercial items made from the calabash or gourds are given the name calabash. Encarta (2009) states that:

The calabash is a kind of creeping and crawling plant and has been observed as one of the earliest cultivated plants in the African continent. They are available in several varieties of regular shapes and different sizes. Calabash also belongs to the botanical family Cucurbitaceae as the bottle type gourd is classified as *Lagenaria siceraria*. The calabash which is an economically important member of pumpkin, squash, cucumber and melon is not edible as the aforementioned ones.

Although the colour of the calabash is mostly warm yellow, they can be darkened by being hung up the cooking fire within a closet. Its fruit when processed is a domestic vessel in most households in many parts of Africa, particularly, northern Nigeria. In fact, Oyelola (2010, p.161) says that:

Calabashes have been used in Africa as vessels for food and drink since at least 1000B.C. Calabash cultivation in Africa dates to as far back as 500 B.C., while 850 B.C has been suggested to be the date on which the very earliest proof of its decoration was observed.

As David (1976, p.254) noted:

The earliest recorded evidence of gourd cultivation comes from excavations undertaken in an Njoro River cave, a Neolithic site in Kenya dated to around 850 B.C., where one fragment of a gourd bottle decorated with dots was recovered. Not only has the tradition of producing these utilitarian objects persisted over time, but so too has the impulse to decorate them.

Calabash decoration, which is basically done in the forms of carving or painting is an old craft associated with many cultures, traditions and institutions around the globe, Africa inclusive. Jefferson (1974, p.158) notes that “sometimes calabashes are decorated with other kinds of materials such as patterned beadwork or beads stitched on with brass or steel wire”.

The origin of calabash decoration is not quite certain, however, in Nigeria, it is uniquely associated with some specific ethnic group among them are the Yoruba people of Iseyin in present Oyo State, the Hausa in most Northern States, namely: Bauchi, Borno, Gongola, Kaduna, Kano, Kebbi, Plateau, Sokoto as well as Zamfara. Calabash is also available in the eastern region of Nigeria. It is uniquely linked to the nomadic Fulani, which serves as the case study of this paper. Among the nomadic Fulani, it is a cherished household vessel because of its great advantages. In recognition of these advantages, Berns and Hudson (1986, p.34) explain that: “the calabash great versatility lies in its inherent properties – it is light, durable, portable, tractable and water tight”. In fact, its lightweight is its greatest asset to the nomadic Fulani, because it is easier for conveying their stuff or items while in their constant mode of transit. This paper attempts to investigate the unique traditional art of calabash carving and painting as practiced by the nomadic Fulani of Northern Nigeria. This will be done by re-enacting what some other authors have written with a view to shedding more light in this specific area of the visual arts.

Calabashes are grown and prepared by nomadic Fulani farmers in their farms or even within their home environment. The calabash is harvested when the pods are ripened as observed in Figure 1.



Figure 1: *A Ripe Calabash ready for Harvesting.*
Source: Oyelola, 2010.

Hodge (1982, p.15), explained that:

The gourd plant is very rapid in growth. It ripens between 4-6 months after planting, requiring heavy rainfall during early stages of growth and high temperature. When harvested, the pods are soaked in water pending when the seeds are rotten. It is then cut open into two equal parts and the seeds removed while the shell is kept in the sun to dry and become hard.

After the shells have become hardened, they are then smoothed both inside and outside with the aid of sandpaper. As noted in Figures 2 and 3, the calabashes are sometimes primed with white emulsion paint as a base, before decoration is applied on them. This is done with a view to give the calabashes a final glossy outlook.



Figure 2. *Primed Calabashes on Display*
Source: Nwabuoku, 2010



Figure 3. *Stamping Designs on Gourds*
Source: Nwabuoku, 2010

The designs stamped onto the surface of the calabashes comprise of various geometric shapes usually developed from curves and straight lines as well as Islamic symbols and abstract patterns or shapes. This is exemplified in Figure 4 as depicted.

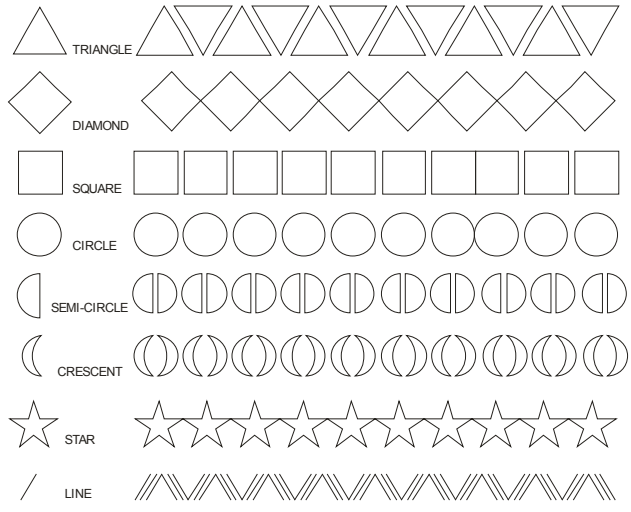


Figure 4: *Basic Shapes that Inspire Calabash Decorations*

Source: Nwabuoku, 2014

Materials and Methods

The research designs adopted for this study are observatory and descriptive. In doing this, the writer had to visit some locations where this art form is practiced, as a result, several issues were observed. Calabash containers are an avenue for art for the nomadic Fulani. The need for its beautification and decoration came about because of its exalted position in their everyday lives. According to Fisher (1984, p.148), “They (the calabashes) are decorated with incised designs, mirrors, coins, thumb tacks, spoons and other ornaments of individual choice which not only indicate the owner’s prosperity and lineage but also provide an outlet for artistic talents”. In the same vein, Adepegba (1980, p.32) identifies “two basic styles in the art of calabash carving among the Fulani nomads namely spiky, which goes freely round the calabash, relating to the face markings of the nomadic Fulani people”. The second as he further notes is “complex and has nothing to do with their face markings”. Oyelola (2010, p.174) explains that “as closely resemble body scarification patterns and some recent pastoral designs which are simplified representation of people, animals and birds”. Apart from the application of pigments, calabash art decorations are also applied through incised methods with the aid of crude but very sharp knife-like, hand-held tools. These hand-held incision tools, shown in Figure 5, are produced by local blacksmiths.



Figure 5: *Hand-held Tools Used In Calabash Carving*
Source: Marla C. Berns, 1981

The information on which this study is built upon were sourced orally, by interviewing nomadic Fulani artisans, also by physically observing them while carrying out their skillful enterprise as well as from some academic writings.

Results and Discussions

Newman, (1974, p.149), opines that “Apart from using ordinary knife in applying designs, the Fulbe (Fulani) also decorate gourds with hot knives, as one knife heating in hot coals while another is being used”. Although there are several different methods by which gourds can be decorated which vary according to ethnic traditions, both men and women decorate the calabash among the nomadic Fulani as the women work in the seclusion of their homes. While the women of the pastoral Fulani use only the engraving technique, as opined by Oyelola, (2010, p.173), the “men favour both carving and engraving methods for applying decoration. They also use brush and vibrant enamel pigments” (as earlier seen in Figures 2 and 3). Similarly, Berns and Hudson (1986, p.29) explain “that decorations are applied by stamping designs on gourd bowls and spoons with enamel”. The use of vibrant enamel colours in decorating calabashes is a modern development in order to attract more customers, particularly tourists. However, the shapes and symbols to be created on the surfaces of the calabashes are not influenced by any pre-conceived patterns at heart. In other words, the designs are applied direct and not made before hand to guide whatever method is being put to use. Mallam Yusuf, an apprentice calabash carver in Kawo market, during an interview with the author (Figure 6), in Kaduna, North-Eastern Nigeria, stated that: “One pattern determine the next or better put, an initial design suggests which comes next”.



Figure 6: *Interviewing Mallam Yussuf*
Source: Nwabuoku, 2014

Often, the designs are repeated either in succession or in reversed forms. In the course of watching the calabash carvers at work particularly *Shugaban Kwarya*, leader of the calabash carvers in Kawo, Kaduna, as seen in Figure 7, one astonishing observation about calabash carving was the complex designs that were achieved at an alarming speed.



Figure 7: *Shugaban Kwarya Exhibiting his Skills*
Source: Nwabuoku, 2014

According to *Shugaban Kwariya* "a good carver can produce an average of seven (7) calabashes daily, no matter how intricate the designs may be". Although the number of calabashes a carver produces a day is important, the dexterity one applies is also recognised. As a result of the foregoing, Oyelola, (2010, p.175), attests "that a carver is

not only appreciated because of the originality of his or her designs but rather because of the skill with which he/she executes them”.

The great need for calabash beautification came about because of its exalted position in the Fulani homestead. While the Fulani woman decorates her numerous calabashes for personal use and self-aggrandizement, the male on the other hand, does his for economic purposes, either way they cannot do without it. Commenting on the values of the calabash to the nomadic Fulani women in particular, Visona (2001, p.104) avers:

In addition to valuing collections of calabashes as personal treasures, pastoral Fulani women use calabashes for personal adornment. Calabashes filled with milk are carried to the market on the heads of these graceful women, who believe that well-arranged images on the calabashes both attract clients and accentuate their own slender beauty.

There is no doubt that calabash containers are avenues for exhibiting skills in visual art among the nomadic Fulani. The need for its beautification and decoration therefore, is paramount in their everyday lives. In referring to the art of calabash decoration among the nomadic Fulani of northern Nigeria. Adepegba (1980, p.32) states that:

The designs are of high decorative and expressive value, radiant with individually vital elements. They are the manifestations of the nomads’ artistic ideas and capability of their execution, especially in the regions where their needed artistic materials cannot be satisfactorily met from outside.

It is worthy of note here that calabash in the nomadic Fulani context goes beyond a mere domestic use as well as fashion to an indispensable household item. In a separate interview granted by Mallam Lawal Boro (2008), a Fulani veterinary personnel cum staff of Nomadic Education Commission, Kaduna, he opined that:

Calabash carving is no longer a child’s play. In fact in the North, particularly, Kaduna and Kano States, it is now a serious craft that has become a family business or heritage, whereby a father practicing the art, takes up the challenge of training his son or sons as apprentices with the sole aim or intention of

securing the tradition of calabash carving as a family business that will be bequeathed to subsequent generations.

This assertion by Mallam Lawal Boro shows that the art of the pastoral Fulani, especially calabash decoration has indeed gained momentum. The question now arises: with plastic and ceramic factories churning out containers in large quantities, would it not affect the demand for the calabash? Berns and Hudson (1986, p.35) assuaged the fear of plastic containers production dwindling demand for calabash art. They write that:

Decorated gourds are still in high demand, despite the increasing competition from factory-made containers that have reached all but the most remote markets of Northeastern Nigeria... even government agencies actively support its continuation, encouraging local artists to make and show examples of such secular “indigenous crafts” at annual agricultural exhibitions.

The statement above gives credence to the ingenious craft of calabash art as captured in Figure 8. Consequently, therefore, one can boldly state that calabash art of the pastoral Fulani has indeed come to stay.



Figure 8: *A Typical Calabash Carver's Workshop*
Source: Nwabuoku, 2014

Despite the availability of other modern domestic utensils, Oyelola (2010, p.175) is of the view that:

Calabash carving continues, since the calabash is the cheapest and most convenient form of container available, particularly for the pastoral Fulani.... enamel containers which are widely used are seen by the nomadic Fulani as not deep enough to be used as milk vessels and the belief that using a foreign container as milk bowl would have a bad effect on their cattle.

However, the tradition of calabash art has been a major component of what we have come to know presently as “airport art”, which is highly flourishing in Nigeria. The calabash is a necessary household object among the nomadic Fulani, because it comes quite handy in their everyday lives. Although one of the major functions of the calabash is as a container for food and other imperishable items, they also feature prominently at ceremonial occasions among the nomadic Fulani. Ovrati, (1999, p.20), insists “that while it may be difficult to see the nomadic Fulani male without his staff and cattle the female on the other hand, may not likely be sighted without her very elaborately decorated calabash”, which is their preferred vessel for “*Fura da Nono*” (fresh or pasteurized milk) during collection, preservation and dispensation periods.

Calabashes employed for most domestic activities in the nomadic Fulani homestead are used for various purposes depending on their size and shape. Among the several uses of the calabashes in the Fulani household, include using the large ones to serve as water and milk storage facilities as well as a measure for grain, smaller ones serve as meal and drinking bowls and by the extensions as ladles for dishing food, the medium sized calabashes with thick neck usually serve as water-bottle. More so, the very portable ones serve as bead, trinket and jewelry boxes or containers. In agreement with the foregoing fact, Berns and Hudson (1986, p.48) argue that

While bowls cut from globular gourds predominate in daily use, the three other varieties of gourds – the bottle shaped, flattened and tubular – also have a number of specialized applications. Calabash spoons cut from bottle gourds make handy ladles for serving soup or utensils for drinking the sweet thin porridge that is often shared out of one large serving bowl. Bottle shaped gourds are used not only as flasks for liquids, but also to hold various medicines and cosmetics. Smaller (uncut) ones are filled with pebbles and used as babies’ or dance rattles. They

are also used for holding seed.

Ornate calabashes, (carved, painted or combined), are a prized household item or possession in the nomadic Fulani culture. This statement is in accordance with Jefferson's (1974, p.8), assertion that: "Man's inclination to decorate objects is deep-rooted and universal. Since prehistoric times, he has embellished a wide variety of his possessions—from his weapons and the walls of his shelter to clothing and even his own body". During ceremonies such as *Aure* (traditional marriages) for instance, the *Amarya* (bride's) matrimonial possessions are grossly incomplete without a couple of calabashes. In fact, Oyelola (2010, p.171) asserts "the presence of a large number of decorated gourds at a Fulani wedding feast adds to the importance and enjoyment of the occasion". She further says "failure to provide such gourds would mean that the parents did not regard the ceremony as an important occasion or that they were too poor to commission decorated gourds and that would result in a loss of social prestige".

Visona, (2001, p.104) explains that "to the Fulani, calabash display proclaims a woman's status as mother, wife and provider also; the wedding collections of decorated gourds are linked to female identity". As presented in Figure 9, Visona, summarises an occasion among the nomadic Fulani where calabashes play a prominent role thus:

During annual lineage meetings, married women bring their racks to a public area to display their calabashes formally. To amass such an impressive collection, a woman must sell many gallons of *fura-da-nono* (fresh milk) and spend many hours adorning or arranging the gourds.



Figure 9: A Fulani Woman's Display of her "Wealth"

Photograph by: Berns and Hudson, 1986.

In tandem with the foregoing, Visona, (2001, p.104), also states “the centerpiece of this array consists of one or two elaborate wrapped packages of calabashes. More so, large calabashes also serve in place of boxes for clothing during such occasions”. In recognition of the calabash as an important household utensil for brides and in fact most Fulani homes, Stenning (1965, p.2) summarises this phenomenon thus: “Household utensils consist mainly of receptacles for milk for which calabashes of many different shapes and sizes are bought in the market and decorated by the women”.

It is also worthy of note that large bundles of calabash is given by a woman to her daughter when the young woman leaves her mother’s home with her newly weaned first born child to establish a household with her husband. In the same vein, smaller package of calabash is also another gift given to the bride by her husband’s mother. These gifts of calabashes signify the bride’s right and ability to fill gourd containers with the milk of her husband’s cows. All these gifts of calabashes are carried on poles and displayed publicly as both the bride and her husband depart to set up their own household or camp. It has also been noted that in appreciation of the beauty of decorated calabashes, they are used as interior decorations in most nomadic Fulani homes, properly arranged on walls to be admired by their visitors. More so, they use calabashes as stools or sitting platforms in homes and festival grounds.

In Africa and in most developing countries, trade by hawking, (the selling of merchandise on the streets, or from door to door), is a very common phenomenon. A traditional trading system virtually cut across every ethnic affiliation, especially, in Nigeria. But while baskets, trays, basins, cartons, head-pans and wheel barrows may be used as container for this purpose by other ethnic groups, namely the Southern, Western, Eastern and most parts of the Middle-Belt, calabashes both the deep and the ones cut to produce a shallow tray are the preferred choice of the nomadic Fulani women, as noted in Figure 10. The reason may not be far-fetched. This is because the calabash among other reasons is light in weight, accessible and gives them the opportunity to exercise or exhibit their creative abilities of painting and carving, which may be impossible with other aforementioned containers used for hawking goods.



Figure 10: *Fulani Women Hawking their Products in Calabashes*
Source Photograph by: Berns and Hudson, 1986

Furthermore, the nomadic Fulani believe that the calabash as a container is all-encompassing for instance, the fresh milk is extracted from the cows directly unto a calabash, it is conveyed in it, stored in it, the ladle for stirring and dispensing it is also a product of the calabash.

Conclusion

Having considered the issues addressed in this paper, there is therefore no doubt that the calabash is an important as well as one of the most cherished possession of the pastoral Fulani household. Despite its functionality as fresh milk container among other vital usages in their homesteads, it occupies a very symbolic place in their lives. Mothers, therefore, take much pride in amassing them with the aim to eventually handing them over to their daughters as a legacy from one generation to another. Some of these calabashes have designs (painted, etched or embossed) not just only for mere artistic considerations. Some of the motifs used are meaningful in their cosmology, religion and peculiar lifestyles, whilst others are simple motifs purely for decorative purposes. In all, the nomadic Fulani have identified with the calabash as a major companion as well as a source of expressing their traditional artistic prowess.

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