

## **The Old Wine in the New Skin: Integrating Acholi Ritual Pots in Contemporary space**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study is to design and produce pots derived from indigenous Acholi ritual pots for contemporary space and their resultant effect in promoting sustainable development that is pro-society. Specifically the study analyzes how Acholi ritual pots can be used in contemporary space, design pots for specific contemporary spaces inspired by the ritual pots, and produce pottery ware suitable for contemporary spaces. Guided by the componential theory of creativity by Teresa Amabile (1983), the study is qualitative and employs ethnographic research technique in collecting data from four potters in Atanga Sub-county in Pader district and Boma Hotel in Gulu district both in Northern Uganda. Using participant observation, interviews and photography, data was collected and thematically analyzed through studio experimentation to come up with designs that resulted into functional pottery for using at Boma hotel in Gulu town. The conclusion reveals that indigenous ritual pots can be redesigned to fit in the contemporary spaces and community accepts them. The study recommends that indigenous pots need to be redesigned for contemporary spaces such that negative perception that they are archaic could be mitigated.

**Key words:** Acholi ritual pots, contemporary space, pottery, sustainable development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Pottery is a worldwide practice and tradition of many communities. Pottery plays a central role in materializing ideology and social meaning through creation and transformation of material object (Al-Dhamari 2014). Pottery is the craft or profession of making pottery and is also referred to as the ceramic material which makes up pottery ware, of which majorly types include earthenware, stoneware and porcelain. Mahran, (n.d) observed that pottery making is as old as man's existence on earth which began way back when man attempted the idea of forming human settlement and started forming pots are objects such as bowls, plates made out of clay using hands and then baking them at high temperature so that they become hard.

Several factors contribute to the production and use of pottery in different societies worldwide. For example, Rathke (n.d) observed that China decorate their pots to depict religious beliefs and the surroundings. Mostly used images included those images depicting warriors, animals and concubines. On the other hand, other factors that influence production of pots include personal relationship whereby pots are produced to represent different personalities in one's life. In this regard, Stumpf (2010) produced a set of pottery that captured different characteristics of several people in his life such as his mother, father, brother, in-laws and friends.

Furthermore, Lawton (1965) observed that although pottery was an important component of people's lives and history which led to its production, pottery was regarded as a hereditary craft. Roberts (2013) further argues that other factors for producing pots in Africa include the domestic functions and traditional values of the different communities such as cooking, storage, ritual performance among others. Jose (2013) explains that Inca state extensively used pottery for

ceremonial affairs as a way of establishing social relations with local ethnic groups found in the entire Empire.

Designing pottery items was and is still based on the need of particular community. Gosselain (1992) studied the Bafia of Cameroon and reveals that traditional potters linked style and technology in production to the needs of the community and this helped the community to survive. However, the coming of imported items such as plastics, aluminums or glass containers have made pottery production to be relegated with a few women still practicing it. The women produce items which are collected by tourist and town dwellers for ornamental purposes (Gosselain, 1992). One therefore wonders why the tourist and town dwellers buy pottery while the rural poor where it is produced are using plastics and other imported alternatives.

The issue of production was analyzed by Halluska (1999) by studying methods of producing pots in Ghana. Halluska studied both hand building and contemporary methods so as to establish if production of pottery is informed by culture or the utilitarian aspect of the product. He found out that both traditional and contemporary methods were being used among the communities of Vuma. The patterns were following the needs and interest of the community and the designs were aiming at improving the quality of the products.

In the Eastern African Region, pottery was and is important to several communities. Nangendo (1996) observed that several communities such as the Bukusu society in Western Kenya attach both historical and cultural significances to their pottery which reflect many aspects of their culture today and in the past. Nangendo quoted Tsing & Yanagisako (1983) and Hodder (1986), that both significances were usually inscribed in the manufacturing techniques as well as in the forms, sizes and functions of the pottery vessels. In addition, pots were used by Bukusa society to perform their daily vital utilitarian functions such as carrying and storing liquids and solids. However, despite the fact that pottery carries historical and cultural significances, some cultural practices are so negative and this has made a number of people drop the use of indigenous pots.

In Uganda, pottery making is practiced in all regions. Trowell (1953) writes about pottery in almost all tribes of Uganda. Trowell observed that pottery was produced by both men and women in different communities in Uganda. Although Trowell (1953) explained how pottery production is carried out by most ethnic groups in Uganda, little has been done by potters today in linking traditional pottery to contemporary spaces. Although Giblin and Kigongo (2012) recorded the history of the royal Ganda potters in central Uganda and how pottery was not only technical and functional but also social and symbolically constructed reflecting the moral values of society, potters continue to be sidelined. For example, Giblin and Kigongo, (2012) argued that modern industries at Busega and Kajansi are dominated by potters from the descendants of the Colobus Monkey and Leopard clans who were masters of pottery yet these potters cannot produce pots on their own.

Pots among the Acholi community, a tribe found in the Northern part of Uganda mainly in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Agago, Nwoya, Amuru, Lamwo, Pader and Omoro are similar in shapes, forms and sizes and serve different purposes just like pottery elsewhere. Pottery was so much

valued by the Acholi people for domestic use such as storage, cooking and ritual ceremonies and performances. The ceremonies in where pots were used included initiations, birth, naming, marriage and appeasing the spirits. Pottery was very important among the Acholi community and it helped people in almost all their daily activities. However, the insurgency that lasted for over 25 years (MFPED, 2003; Davenport 2011) disrupted the Acholi cultural set up and the Acholi culture to the level that people adopted different life styles while they were in the Peoples Displaced Camps (IDPs). In fact, Davenport (2011:7), argued that the war in the north not only did it cause the displacement of thousands but also caused the breakdown of family life, social roles and the Acholi culture”.

As a result of the war, many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) distributed kitchen utensils such as saucepans, Jerry can, cups, plates, bowls. Basing on the fact that people were in the camps, the art of pottery making was forgotten because in the IDP camps, movements were limited and people could not go out of the camps to collect clay. When the government of Uganda finally closed the camps after the insurgency, people returned to their original homes to continue with their lives. They could not easily adjust to the old life style. Many could not afford the basic requirements but also found it difficult to adjust to pottery use. In addition, the modern living style is further supported by beliefs or faith that is based on Western religious practices which associated the use of traditional items such as ritual and initiation pots with evil worshipping. Most families today use fridges, others store their drinking water in Jerry cans and serve food using imported bowls which to them seem more descent and trendy than the use of indigenous pots, yet most of them do not have the capacity to buy modern quality items for use in the kitchen. As a result, some families continue using old plastic and ceramic wares which could be dangerous to their lives yet, they could use indigenous pottery which they have a lot of experience with and safer to use. Such use of old plastic and ceramics wares make pottery production less important in the community. Potters who still practice pottery today do it to sell to those who cannot afford imported items or to sell them to town dwellers or tourists who collect them as works of art.

Whereas the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and especially SDG 12 aims at ensuring Sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 2015-2030), one wonders why the Acholi indigenous pottery cannot support their sustainability through production and consumption of their indigenous products. Since most members of the community prefer modern life style, ritual pots could be easily integrated in the contemporary spaces as long as they are designed to fit that particular space. Basing on the fact that indigenous pottery can co-exist with contemporary pottery (Hallusk 1999), designs can be improved to better the values of pots (Gosselain 1992, Giblin & Kigongo 2012) hence positively changing the perceptions of the communities towards pottery.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was qualitative and it used ethnographic research design to understand the factors leading to production of pots and how the pots were produced. The factors influencing the production of pots were analyzed; designs of specifically three pots with more than one opening were used in the study in order to produce functional pottery ware for contemporary space.

The study was carried out in Atanga Town Council, Atanga Sub-county in Pader district. The study involved families that benefit from pottery production where the producers of pottery items and those with knowledge were purposely selected as respondents. They included five (5) producers, two (2) elderly persons, one (1) LC leader, a Community Development Officer (CDO) and one hotel owner. In-depth interviews, participant's observation and focus group discussion (FGD) were used to collect data. The collected data were transcribed and thematically analyzed. Emerging patterns were isolated and subjected to studio practice. Using different media, several sketches and designs developed into designs for production of pottery suitable for contemporary spaces. Out of the sketches, four projects were produced to serve the hotel reception area.

## **Findings**

### **Factors influencing the production of pots among communities**

According to the two elders who were interviewed in Otudowiye ward, Atanga town Council, pots are produced to meet community needs. They are used for serving food and other drinks, storage, brewing and ritual purposes among others. Whenever there was a need, such pots were provided because they were readily available within the communities. In the past, people in the Acholi communities received pots as special gifts and others received them in exchange of other items for example food (batter trade). For the twin celebration, a pot with more than one opening was used by members of the community. It was a special pot that remained indoors and never allowed to be brought outside unless there was a twin ritual performance. These ritual ceremonies were done to thank the gods for blessing the family with twins, to seek good health and appreciate the gods. The celebrations were done right after birth, whenever they saw that the twins were falling sick and to give thanks to the gods. Below are some of the pots used by the Acholi people for various purposes. Figure 1 shows the various pots produce and used by the Acholi people for various purposes while Figure 2 is a demonstration of how the ritual pot is used during the twin celebration.



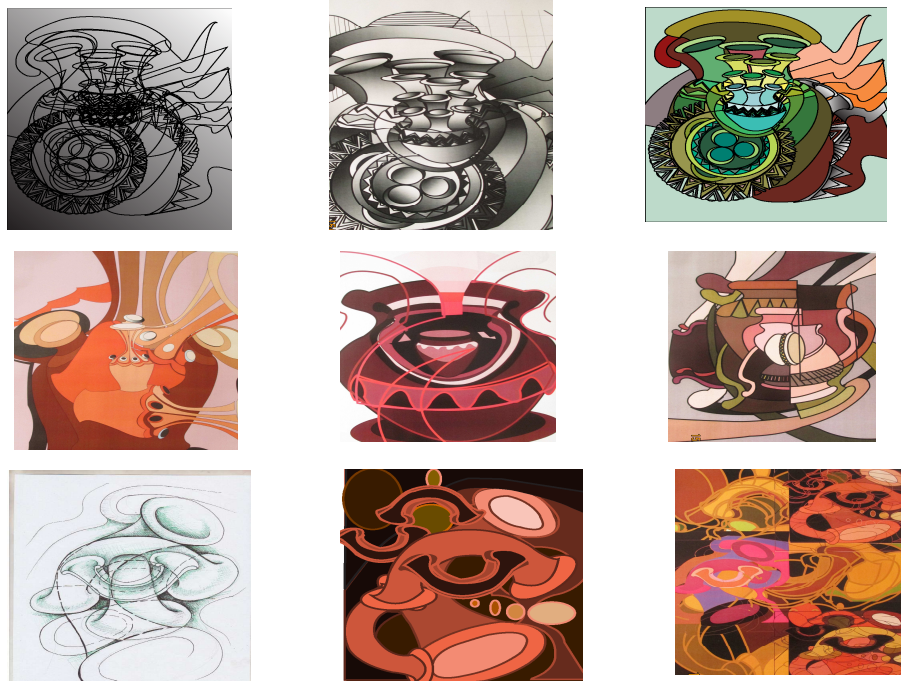
**FIGURE1;**VARIOUS POTS PRODUCE AND USED BY THE ACHOLI PEOPLE FOR VARIOUS PURPOSES



**Figure 2;**Demonstration of how the ritual pot is used during the twin celebration.

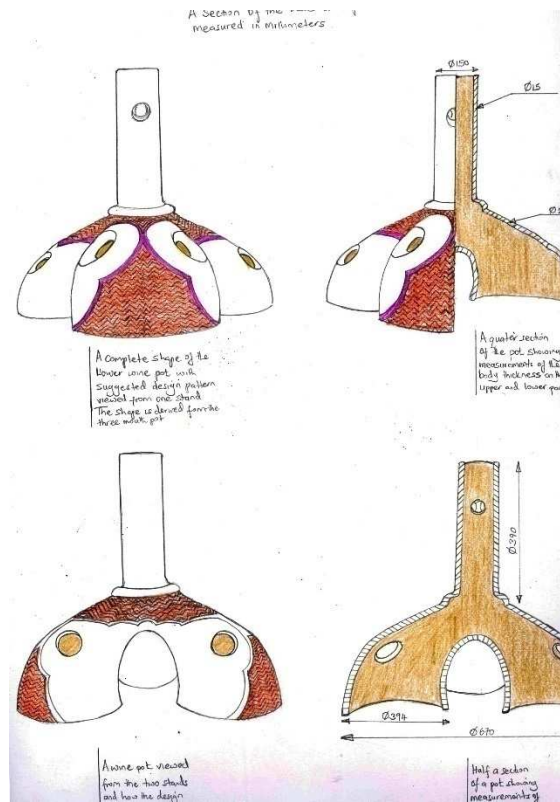
## DESIGNING POTS FOR CONTEMPORARY SPACES DERIVED FROM THE SELECTED ACHOLI RITUAL POTS.

Having understood the factors that influence the production of pots among the communities in Acholi. The researchers selected the two, three and four mouthed pots (*kirubi la doge aryo*, *Kirubi la doge adekand Kirubi la doge Angwen*) as their inspiration to design pots for the contemporary spaces. The pots were selected because they have become very scarce and almost getting lost and yet we can study and link the Acholi culture to contemporary life through the production of functional pots. In order to produce design patterns that suit the pottery ware to be produced, the researchers made design tools out of small pieces of wood and wove a palm leaf and registered the patterns on clay slabs. We also observed the shapes and design patterns on the traditional pots and produced drawings which later were improved using adobe illustrator (Figure 3)



**Figure 3;** Drawings rendered with adobe illustrator

To develop the pots for contemporary space, the researchers used the drawing for the structural designs which were derived from the multi mouth pots. Four projects were selected; front office key holder pot, the wine bottle holder pot, newspaper display shelf and wall hanging for soft drinks, in the hotel reception, bar and lounge. The process started with observational drawings of the selected pots, generating drawing ideas which led to the concept development of the idea and how the sets of pots would be. Later computer drawings were done giving dimensions, in scale of 1.5 and the pots viewed from different sides and lastly the cross-sectional drawings of the pots were developed (Figure 4).



**FIGURE**  
DRAWINGS OF THE POTS WERE DEVELOPED

**4;CROSS-SECTIONAL**

## PRODUCTION OF POTS

The researchers did not only use the designs on the ritual pots but also designs on traditional pots elsewhere. The material used in production included those that were not necessarily used by traditional potters. Mixtures of different clay bodies and oxides were prepared; ball clay, kaolin, grog, so-dust, black and red ceramic oxides were used for decoration. Clay preparation was done following the basic standards of clay preparation and sets of pots produced for the hotel reception, bar and lounge. The researchers prepared clay using the wet clay preparation process which involved sourcing, soaking, sorting, plunging, sieving, drying, pug milling, wedging and kneading. The forming technique was limited to hand forming where small and big pieces were produced.

## PROJECT 1

Project one was designed specifically for hanging keys at the front office or reception in the hotel. It was an inspiration from the two mouthed ritual pots usually in two. After forming the lower pot, the upper pots and symmetric lines were drawn and shaped. At this point, small holes were created using a metal, and red ceramic oxide was applied in the selected areas. When they became leather-hard, simple design patterns were registered using the design tool made locally from natural

materials so as to keep the traditional feel and identity on the pots. It should be noted that, the shrinkage level for project one was greater compared to the rest of the project when they were still green ware and after biscuit firing. That was because the researchers put very small amount of grog and much so-dust. The piece was wired to produce light (Figure 5)



**FIGURE 5;PROJECT 1-KEY HOLDER WITH FLOWER VASE**

## **PROJECT TWO**

Project two was designed in a set for displaying the wine bottles. The idea was generated from the three mouthed pot and the beauty with this project was that, it wasn't only inspired by the three mouthed pot but it also gives the impression of African cooking stove built on three supports. The idea gives a strong link of African tradition to contemporary spaces. The project was created in such a way that the upper pot sit on the lower piece an idea that did not come easily. To serve the purpose, holes were created that could be used to place the bottles. A cylindrical shape was created at the center point of the lower pot to allow the bottles placed on the upper pot find a resting point(Figure 6)





**FIGURE 5; PROJECT2- KEY VASE**

**HOLDER WITH FLOWER**

### **PROJECT 3**

Project three was inspired by two and three mouthed pots. The researchers explored the two pots, derived shapes and produced a newspaper display shelf for the Hotel. The lower pot was built in phases because the piece was quite big, about 90C long. Sections were created and partitioned using slabs until the form was complete. When it was leather hard, a section of the piece was cut off to create the opening space for putting the newspapers. The decorations used where a combination of computer decoration in figure and the decorating tool. Two pieces were designed for the top pot suitable for project 3. When the first top pot was designed, in the process of drying, it developed cracks due to poor joining. When it tried, the researcher thought it would be safe to produce another top pot in case the first pot broke during firing.



**FIGURE 6;PROJECT 3-NEWSPAPER HOLDER**

**PROJECT 4**

Project four was inspired by all the three mouthed pots (two, three and four). The researchers looked at the several opening and derived abstract pieces for wall pots for functional use and decorative purposes, and table pieces. Pots with exaggerated opening were designed, formed and decorated. This project was made in smaller sizes compared to the first three projects and they varied in shapes and form(Figure 7)



**FIGURE 7;PROJECT 4 - NEWSPAPER HOLDER**

**CONCLUSION**

The study established the factors which include the functionality of pots, religious, social economic and political factors. In Africa, the daily domestic functions of pots in the communities include cooking, storage, serving among others, Roberts (2013). With the arrival of religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, many households embraced Christianity and their attitudes have since been influenced by religion. The current pots produced have to be not in conflict with religious practice. Some social- political factors of pottery production are linked to ritual practices, kinship for example in Buganda kingdom and Luo community of Nyanza, Giblin D&Kigongo R (2012) and Ceri (2005). In places like Kajjansi and Busega, many industries have been set up to produce pottery ware such as roofing tiles, building blocks, facing bricks, wall and floor tiles among others for economic purposes although in the rural communities, pottery production is still being done at household levels so as to raise household incomes to support the families.

The study further designed pots based on the two, three and four mouthed ritual pots for contemporary spaces. The researcher began with the conceptual drawings, idea generation, computer aided drawings, dimensional drawings which included sections of the pots and different views such as top, side and front view showing the design appearance from such views. Producing for the contemporary space, all these factors were put in consideration and four projects were produced to suit the needs of the contemporary space. Project 1 was a front office key holder, project 2 was a wine bottle holder pot, project 3 was a newspaper display shelf with some small table flower pots and project 4 was a wall hanging for spirits or soft drinks and wall decorative pieces.

Acholi traditional pots are very rich artifacts with symbolic meanings. Their production was influenced by the needs of the community however, currently production is influenced by other needs such as financial, hereditary. Even the current designs of the pots are now influenced by what the community believes in and practices. The study observed that pottery can be redesigned to fit in the contemporary spaces.

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