

## *Original Paper*

# Aesthetic Determinants in the Pottery Tradition of the Urhobo

## People of Nigeria's Niger Delta

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### **Abstract**

*Pottery practice is one of the three-dimensional enterprises of the Urhobo people who inhabit part of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The people are also known for the production of massive sculptures in wood and mud. Many of the pottery products of the people are, as is the case with their sculptures, configurations of volumes. The expressiveness of these pots is, in part, determined by the way in which the constituting volumes meet each other. In most literature that is available on this art practice of the people, this structural feature is diminished in importance or not considered as a contributing element to the general aesthetics of the ware. This paper interrogates the structural elements that constitute the pots. This is done by disassembling the pots into their structural components (volumes) and analyzing the manner of their coming together to constitute the pot. The findings show that two basic transitions are used as aesthetic attributes in the pottery products from the study area. The study also reaffirms that the extent to which an object satisfies the purpose for which it is made is a strong determinant of the aesthetic value ascribed to the object by the people.*

### **Keywords**

*aesthetics, determinants, pottery, urhobo*

### **1. Introduction**

Pottery is that art practice that deals with the production of utility objects using clay which is hardened by being exposed to heat treatment. The clay mixture and the temperature at which the object is baked or fired differentiate the type of resultant type of ware. One group of these resultant types is Earthenware. Earthenware pots are also several in types. Each has its own characterizing nature. These

include those which can be glazed, partially glazed, or unglazed. The unglazed, sometimes referred to as redware or terracotta, is the most common.

Historically, pottery tradition is said to date back to the Neolithic period with the discovery of *Venus Dolni Vestoline* figurine whose origin is put at 29,000-25,000 BC (Lienhard, 1989). China is another place with very early history of engagement in pottery or ceramic art. This is believed to have begun about 18,000 BC (Diamond, 1998). The remnants of ancient kitchen potteries found in Southern China provide evidence of this and makes it 2,000 to 3,000 years older than the ones found in East Asia and Greece. The Romans and the Japanese are other cultures that have produced notable pottery ware in the global community.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the earliest pottery tradition has been traced to central Mali (Simon, 2012). Malian pottery tradition exhibits wide opened mouth and their necks are incorporated into the mouths. The majority of these pots have long necks. A few of these, however, have short necks.

The Zulu of South Africa were notable potters. The Zulu produced a wide range of pots. The potteries were entirely constructed with their hands into objects of utility such as containers for rites and rituals like weddings, births, marriages, burials and to symbolize hospitality and communality.

The cultures in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are no exception to the global pottery heritage. There exist many centres of pottery production which have yielded a variety of earthenware objects. The Urhobo people, who live in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, also have strong pottery traditions. Previous studies of Urhobo pottery culture (Granville & Roth, 1898; Abamwa, 2002, p. 111) seem to have been concentrated on their forms and function. In the activities that go into the production of these pots, the Urhobo people hold on to a scale of aesthetics that informs the choices made in the production and even the usage of the pots. Urhobo people see the concept of aesthetics translated as sweetness and goodness. This is what Uyovbikerhi (1981, p. 29) reported as “the aesthetic language and the vehicles of transmission”. This can be interpreted to mean that there are some factors that are executed in an artwork to boost its design which would serve as attractions and being responsible for a choice. These features are also present in the traditional pottery of the Urhobo people of South-West of the Niger Delta.

Little or no attention, however, seems to have been given to an investigation of the symbiotic relationship between the structural features and properties of Urhobo pots and the contribution that these to make the overall aesthetics of these objects of the people. The research burden, therefore, exists to find out what the sensory properties of Urhobo pots are and what features contribute to their aesthetics. This paper interrogates the intrinsic and extrinsic aesthetic determinants of Urhobo pots in order to ascertain the contribution of the structural elements of the pots to their overall aesthetics.

There is, acceptably, a dearth of literature on pottery production traditions in Nigeria in spite of the fact that some forms of pottery manufacture or the other can be found in many communities in the country. However, Danburi (2008, p. 81) writes on the uses of pots produced by the Tarok people in Plateau State of Nigeria who produce three major types of pots including Mbut Mkpang and Mbut Akari.

Danburi explains that these pots are used for cooking. Also, the Ogori people of Akoko-Edo area of Edo State are also identified by Idoko (2016, p. 103) as a pots producing community. The pots produced by the Ogori are of different sizes and are used for different purposes; the smaller ones being used for storage of grains, yams, cassava flour, and the bigger ones used for brewing (cooking) beer. They are all, however, commonly called *Otele*. The use of pottery objects in traditional Benin society is highlighted in Uzzi and Egbon (2014, p. 82) where they state that products of Benin pottery-practice are deployed in secular and sacred spheres of the life of the people.

According to Abamwa (2020, p. 103), the Urhobo of the northern Niger Delta region also produce pots. She notes that the most common and notable pottery products of the people are *Oche*. The major producers, according to Abamwa, can be found in Orugbo and Ofo-Edo communities of Delta State of Nigeria. The first probable documentation of what Urhobo pottery products look like was conveyed in Granville and Roth's 1898 "Notes on the Jekris, Sobos (Urhobos) and Ijos of the Warri District of the Niger Coast Protectorate" (Granville & Roth, 1898, p. 119). The focus of Granville and Roth in this documentation was on method of manufacture and the practical function of the pottery wares.

## 2. Method

Two research approaches are adopted in this study. These are the formalist approach and the contextual approach. The formalist research method is an intrinsic method that considers truth as unitary. Here, form is the main concern and considers art objects as aesthetic objects. The chief proponents of the formalist approach are Heinrich Wölfflin (June 21, 1864-July 19, 1945), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (August 27, 1770-November 14, 1831), Ernst H. Gombrich (March 30, 1909-November 3, 2001) and Benedetto Croce (February 25, 1866-November 20, 1952). This approach to visual arts studies is considered useful in research because it makes the viewer a co-producer and thereby provides a different kind of aesthetic experience.

The second method employed in this study is the contextualist approach. This is extrinsic in nature. This method is concerned with content. In this approach, truth is pluralistic and advocates that art should be read through multiple prisms. Here, art is evidence of social history and product of the parent culture that gives it birth and meaning. This method emphasizes study of art as product of human society. The chief proponent of this approach is Erwin Panofsky (March 30, 1892-March 14, 1968). He advocates that art should be studied with regards to interaction with religion, politics, ideology, psychology, et cetera, and that this approach provides a better historical understanding.

These methods directed the fieldwork and interviews that were conducted in the study area. The pottery production centres in the region were surveyed and samples of traditional pots (*Oche* and *Evwere*) were collected and interacted with so as to identify their types and to disaggregate the constituent parts of the pots for analysis and inferences. Also, contemporary practitioners of the art were interacted with to ascertain the factors that may have necessitated continuity or change in the form of pots produced in

the area. This synchronized approach was in an effort to enrich and clarify the viewers' aesthetic experiences in a particular way.

### 3. Result

The study found that the range of pot forms produced by the Urhobo is characterized by their formation features. These formation features include the lip or rim, the neck, the body/belly and the "mediating" elements (Figure 1).

The pot-forms of the Urhobo can also be broadly distinguished into broad two typologies. These are the globular, narrow-mouthed pots (*Ochẹ*) (Figures 5a, b, c, d) (Type 1) and the wide-mouthed and bowl/saucer-shaped pots (*Ẹvwerẹ*) (Figures 9 and 10) (Type 2). Type 1 pots are characterized by discernable lip, neck and body. On the other hand, Type 2 pots are devoid of distinctive necks. Each of these two types of pots has varied sizes depending on the use to which it is put into. Generally, however, the mouth of the *Ochẹ* ranges from 15cm to 40 cm in diameter while the body may be between 50 and 60 cm in diameter. *Ochẹ* is used mainly for the storage of liquids and liquid-based medicinal ingredients. Due to the composing materials and method of manufacture, these earthenwares also usually serve as refrigerating vessels for the Urhobo.

One of the ways in which most of Urhobo pottery products may be perceived is that they consist of a configuration of sections of different shapes and sizes. These components segments may be considered and described as regular volumes in the aesthetic appraisal of the pots (Figure 2). The features that are most easily perceived and appreciated in any fully three-dimensional constructs are those features that are found in one simple regular volume such as the egg, the cylinder, the ball and the cone. This is why Rogers (1969, p. 34) says that the visual comprehension of the human figure, for example, is made possible by its perception "as a configuration of single volumes (the head as an egg-shaped volume, a neck as a cylinder, a chest as a barrel, and upper and lower arms as tapering tubes)...".

The single volume is thus a critical unit in the perception of any three-dimensional form. Urhobo pots are majorly three-dimensional constructs made of single volumes. Therefore, the appreciation of the pots needs take into consideration the fact that they owe their existence to the configuration of their constituent volumes. The beauty of the objects constituted by these volumes relies, in part, on the manner in which the volumes are arranged and joined to each other for their character and aesthetic effect.

This study shows that the constituting volumes of the forms are usually joined to each other in a manner of ways. There are two very common of these distinct ways. The volumes are joined either by gradual transition (Figure 3a-c) or through an abrupt transition (Figure 4a-c).

Another outcome of this study is that there is a shift in aesthetic paradigms of the Urhobo; a departure from the restrained surface decoration that used to be the character of Urhobo pots (Figures 5a-d) to a new bold, baroque-styled relief surface decoration (Figures 6, 7 and 8). The physical dimensions of

*Oche* could vary but generally, its mouth is wide enough to allow the passage of a human adult's fist to enable the removal of the contents of the pot.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Volumetric Structure as Aesthetic Attribute in *Urhobo Pots*

An apprehension of the distinctive volumes that constitute a pot and noticing the variation(s) that occur(s) on the surfaces of the volumes is important in educating human sensibilities to the aesthetics that inhere in the construct. The manners in which the different single volumes that constitute the pot are joined (deploying the mediating elements) contribute to the aesthetic impact of *Urhobo* pots. The single regular volume was what Cezanne had in mind when he spoke of treating nature by the sphere, cone and cylinder. In Cezanne view, "it is through (such volumetric consideration) that we may begin to comprehend, the more, the complex parts of the human body" (Rogers, 1969, p. 34).

##### 4.2 Transitions as Aesthetic Element in *Urhobo Pottery*

The impression derived from a work of art may depend largely on what happens at the points where the volumes in the configuration meet. This point is referred to as transition. In appreciating the pot as a volumetric construct, therefore, it is important to comprehend the variations that occur at the point where the volumes of the construct meet. This involves educating those variations and building them into an apprehension of the volumes as completely three-dimensional expressive forms. Each of the component volumes of a three dimensional construct is usually joined with its neighbour or neighbours. These volumes may appear to be lying side by side or appear to grow out of the other. Or, they could be impacted as though it is partially embedded in the other.

The most visually important way in which transitions may impact the appeal that inheres in a pot is by being more or less gradual or abrupt. Gradual/smooth transitions are those by which one form closes or is blended into another without any sudden interruption in the continuity of the surface or contour. (Figure 3c). This is, of course, a matter of degree and may vary from a slight softening of the joint between two forms which are still obviously visually separable to a complete blending of volumes that leaves us in doubt as to precisely where one form ends and another begins. One form grows out to meet another so that the transition becomes a concave curve rather than an angle. Gradual transitions convey a feeling of subtlety, wholeness and togetherness.

On the other hand, an abrupt transition is one in which the intersections of the forms show as a clearly defined line and leaves us in no doubt about where one form ends and another begins (Figures 4c and 10). Here, the pot is considered as a group of interconnected but visually separable components. The visual beauty of the pot is impacted by the ways in which the transitions vary in quality in the construct.

In *Urhobo* pots, two of these variations are discernable. Where there is a gradual variation of the directional movement of the volumes, it is said that a smooth transition has occurred (such as is discernible in Figure 3c, 5a, 5b and 5c). Conversely, when there is a sudden variation in the directional

movement of the surface, as in Figure. 4c and the Rim/Neck transition of Figure 8, an abrupt transition is said to have occurred.

### 4.3 Function as Aesthetic Determinant

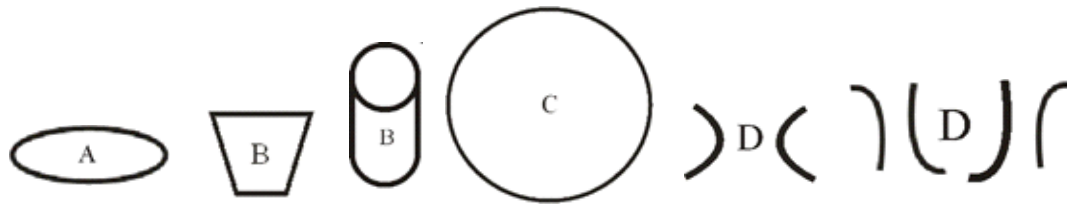
Aesthetics, it is said, belongs to the critical domain of art appreciation. It is intrinsically tied to value judgment. For a decision to be reached that a work of art is either way-beautiful or ugly-there must be some measure of evaluation; some ascription of values. In layman terms, it is a set of rules which helps us in judging a piece of art. In its Greek derivation, aesthetics was used to refer to the study of the sense experience generally. Since the late 18th century however, the perception of aesthetics of has been associated with the inseparable unity of beauty and efficient, inherent goodness or virtue of the products of purposive human activities.

All of traditional art in Nigeria can generally be said to serve functions that are simultaneously existential and aesthetic. Diakparomre (2008, p. 21) observes that in addition to the existential character of the art objects, “there is, also, an aesthetic value ... because they are created with a consciousness for visual beauty and symbolic meaning”. Diakparomre further states that “a traditional Nigerian art object depends primarily on the traditions and beliefs of the artist’s culture”; and that “an art object ... must, first of all, perform its function well. Beauty is considered merely as an attribute that enables the object to do so, especially when an object acts as an intermediary between the human world and the world of spirits” (2008, p. 21).

This contextual perspective to aesthetic valuation makes appreciation of beauty a complex mental process. Even if there are universal canons or laws of beauty, popular taste can also be influenced by a large number of factors including personal factors such as individual peculiarities of experience, temperament and abuse, as well as social factors such as local customs and contemporary fashion. This is why Malraux (1953) holds the view that in addition to the existential character of objects, the objects are intended as stimulus to satisfying aesthetic experience in such a way that the perceived stimulus and the meaning it suggests, or both, are felt as beautiful, pleasant and emotionally moving or otherwise valuable.

Among the Urhobo, the functionalist approach is very dominant in aesthetic value ascription of pottery products. This, most often, could be non-verbal. The appraisal process by the Urhobo of a pottery object includes trying to ascertain its weight by throwing it up and catching it. Then, it is tapped with the knuckle of a finger to determine the extent of firing and strength. Lastly, the pot is viewed from a distance for overall shape and especially, bi-symmetry.

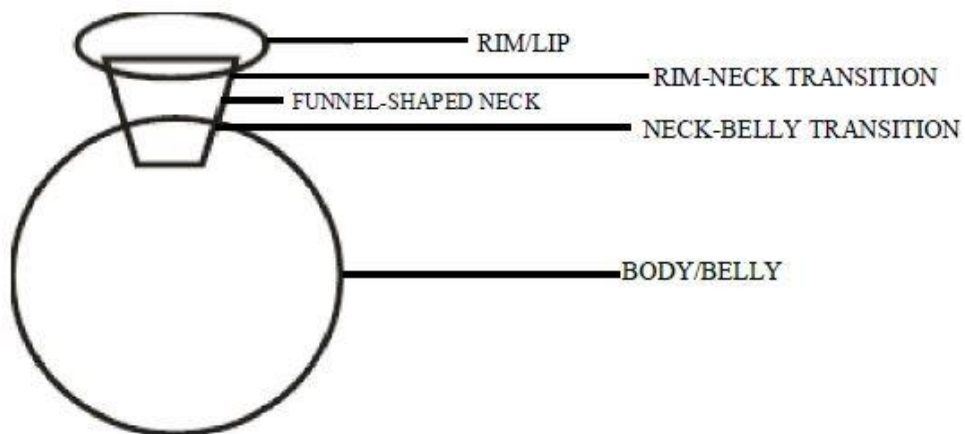
Probably more intriguing in the aesthetic determination of Urhobo pottery is its functionalist attribute. An *Oche* is generally intended as a container-vessel for cooling of water. It would only attract favourable aesthetic response if it is, for instance, able to efficiently cool water. If it does not, its aesthetic valuation would be minimal. Similarly, a low aesthetic value would be ascribed to a pot that is intended as a water vessel if it does not allow the hand to go into the pot and come out easily when taking water.



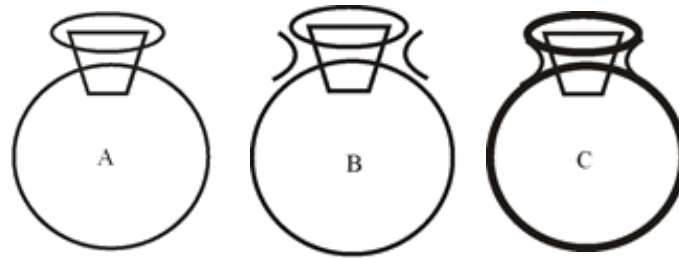
**Figure 1. Disaggregated Volumes and Parts of a Pot**

**KEY (to Figure 1):**

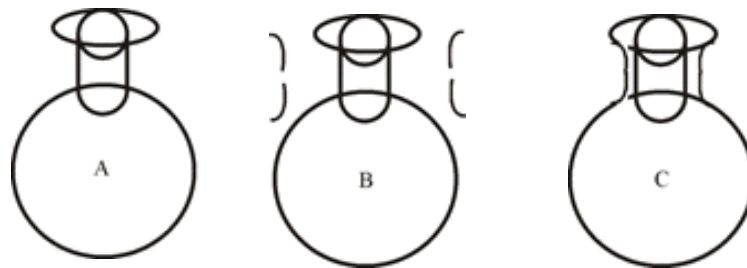
- A Rim/Lip
- B1 Funnel-shaped Neck
- B2 Cylinder-shaped Neck
- C Body
- D “Mediating” Elements for funnel-shaped neck Pot
- E “Mediating” Elements for Cylinder-shaped neck Pot



**Figure 2. Schema of Typical Constituting Volumes of Urhobo Pot**



Figures 3A-C. Aggregation of Funnel-shape-neck Pot



Figures 4A-C. Aggregation of Cylinder-shaped-neck Pot

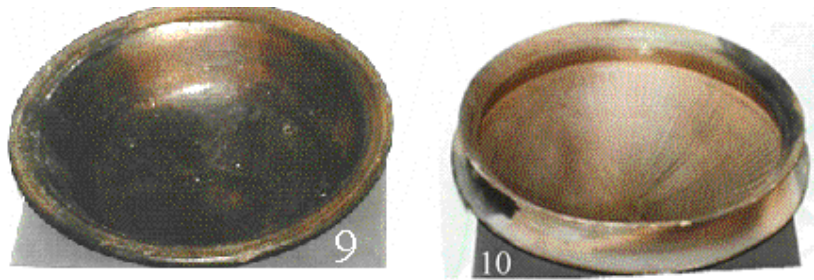


Figures 5a, 5b, 5c and 5d. Variety of Conventional Urhobo *Oche*



Figures 6, 7 and 8. Formal and Decorative Changes occurring on *Oche*





**Figures 9 and 10. Conventional *Ewweṛe***



**Figures 11a, 11b and 11c. *Ewweṛe* with lid. (Formal and structural changes to *Ewweṛe*)**

Another instance of functionalist aesthetics is illustrated by Figures 7 and 8. *Qmọtoto* (Figures. 7 and 8) is one of the most aesthetically valued pottery wares by the Urhobo. It features two of the Urhobo aesthetic determinants. This is in spite of its miniscule physical nature. Its function as receptacle for medicinal ingredients is what imbues it with positive aesthetic value ascription. This precept of function also informs the aesthetic valuation of *Okpa* (pot or calabash sherd) which serves as one of the therapeutic tools deployed in traditional Urhobo society for the healing process of the severed navel of newly-born child. Here, aesthetic ascription derives purely from ability to fulfill its purpose of being. In Figure 7, *Qmọtoto* is modelled in the likeness of an Urhobo calabash maraca (an instrument that plays a role in the rituals associated with religious rights). In Figure 8, *Qmọtoto* assumes another form that combines a cylindrical neck with abrupt transition at the “rim” and “neck” transition point and gradual transition at the connection between the “neck” and the “body”. In addition, the decoration has changed from the seedy surface to a baroque-like linear decoration.

The preceding underscores the aesthetic attributes of the Urhobo artefactual corpus. The concept of beauty, from a formalistic point of view, does not appear to be of primary concern to the Urhobo artist as the existential purpose of the objects and their being “symbols of spiritual experience and means of conveying truth by concentrating essence into visual form” (Hoffman, 1939, p. 17) are considered more aesthetically impacting. This notion finds expression in Urhobo world-view of art which suggest that transmitted aesthetic value does not reside only in visual and tactile qualities of form but also in the practical and meta-physical purposes of their existence.

It is evident from the study that the Urhobo have highly variable aesthetic determinants that are often culture-bound. The pots that emerge from the Urhobo potters' creative endeavours are media through which the aesthetic sensibilities of the people are expressed. It is evident from this study that the aesthetic language of the Urhobo and the vehicle for aesthetic transmission in their pottery practice are the constituting volumes of the pots, the mediation of these volumes at their transitional points and their semiotic significations.

Volumetric conception of the pot, the utilization of mediating elements and manner of the transitional points of the constituting volumes are crucial to the aesthetic apprehension of Urhobo pots and their aesthetic comprehension. It is the manner of modification of the transitions between the volumes of the pots that create the difference between abrupt and gradual transitions in the pots. The mediating elements, which connect the lip of the pot to the neck and also connect the neck to the body of the pot, are very important determinants in the aesthetic impact of Urhobo pots.

The relativist attitude of the Urhobo to the ascription of aesthetic value in the pots arises from a practical interaction with the object. This is because of objective standards which can be valid for the members of this particular culture as each culture forms its own standards. It is, therefore, possible to conclude from this that Urhobo aesthetic value judgment lies in the culture and that judging pottery objects using parameters from other cultures is undesirable. The adoption of relativism criterion becomes compelling for an understanding of the intentions of the artist and, therefore, aesthetic judgment has to be made in terms of the extent of achievement of the potter's aim.

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