

The Traditional Pottery and Social Engineering: Beyond the Apprenticeship Façade

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Abstract

The sustainability lifeline of traditional pottery in Nigeria is hooked to apprenticeship programmes. Not only does it ensure a turn-over of job openings for the teeming jobless populace, it engages the idle mind meaningfully by distracting it from succumbing to anti-social lifestyle. Apprenticeship, in the course of time, matures into mastery of raw material behaviour and the techniques of production. This dovetails into social re-moulding and this re-engineers the benefitting environment for the overall good. The mention of traditional pottery to the uninformed creates the impression of vessels of crudity and the absence of technical excellence. Contrary to that, it is a tradition of incredible product finesse and complicated technical processes, some of which are still being researched into today. The area has matured into a wholesome body of knowledge routinely handed over, through the apprenticeship system, from one generation to the next without the loss of the tiniest fragment of relevant information. This paper peers into the apprenticeship arena and tries to locate other social benefits which lie side by side with pottery skill acquisition. These benefits tend to re-engineer the societal structure and their effects continue to socially multiply beyond the apprenticeship façade.

Keywords: traditional pottery, apprenticeship, generational gap, sustainability, social engineering, conflict resolution

1. Introduction

Traditional pottery centres dot many communities in Nigeria where appropriate clay deposits are found. Such communities include Inyi in Enugu State of Nigeria, Ishiagu in Ebonyi State and Gwari, a frontier community to the Federal Capital Territory. Others are in Benin and Ojah communities, both in Edo State. Many a time, these centres revolve around the local master-potters with depth of experience. These, mostly women, are ‘fenced in’ by skill-hungry females referred to as apprentices for skill acquisition. Such groups form platforms for ‘technology transfer’, and ‘discussion panels’ for other gender issues, and by extension, other issues of social concern.

This paper explains/defines the apprenticeship factor and highlights other social ‘fringe benefits’ which are by no means, at the fringes because of their power of percolation down through the central structures of the society. The writer sees the master-potter, (teacher), and the apprentices, (learners) in an informal and loose sorority which provides conducive platforms for “off-record” discussions. These come under various sub-heads in the body of this paper. They include bridging the generational gap, establishing and maintaining friendship, and oiling the wheel of conflict resolution. Other areas are family life and marriage, child-rearing through parental presence, economic empowerment and self-reliance. All these and more are linked up to the primary aspiration of pottery skill acquisition for which the apprentices have come.

2. The Apprenticeship System

The international community seems to have woken up to the inevitability of apprenticeship and its social and economic contributions via the informal economic sector. The ILO, at the international conference held in Geneva on 3-4 May, 2007, titled “Apprenticeship in the Informal Economy in Africa”, rose up to put strategies on the ground to streamline the system for the benefit of the trainers, the trainees and the society. “The objective of the technical meeting was to bring together experts from ILO, academic institutions developmental agencies to discuss apprenticeship as a main provider of skills and competences in the informal economy”

(http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/employment-report/WCMS_104621/lang--en/index.htm).

The drivers of this all-important informal sector, in most cases, are the unschooled local women who remain the mainline skill conduit from one generation to the next. Referring to the traditional pottery, Speight and Toki, (2004: 10), say that the earliest containers probably were made by women who pinched or coiled the soft clay into simple pot shapes. In line with this, the twin technique-pinching and coiling-seems to have survived generations of traditional potters about whom are being written today. It is the hunger to acquire the pottery skill using the above ancestor techniques that constitutes and sustains the apprenticeship system.

The above system can be described, on the surface, as a look-and-learn process. In this case, learners who are referred to as apprentices, observe the master-potter, and with a few verbal traffic between them, try to acquire the skill in question. The system in actuality, remains a social stimulus which triggers off an avalanche of activities that affect and influence societal re-engineering in diverse ways. It upgrades togetherness through unity of purpose, friendship and economic survival as well as self-employment. Typically, the apprentices learn with a low fee which is normally reviewed upwards in favour of the learner as she perfects towards the master status. At this stage, the graduating apprentice(s) work(s) without or with minimum supervision and augment(s) revenue for her master. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines an apprentice as “a person who is under agreement to serve for a number of years and usually for low wages.”

Apprenticeship venues are “schools” where knowledge or skills are taught and learnt. They run on the bottega scale where apprentices graduate to approximate their master’s level of craftsmanship before securing independence. Quoting Ladi Kwali in Agberia, (2005), “Life is a school, you can never know anything unless you listen to people and accept corrections. Nobody who claims to know everything ever knows anything”. “**Ladi Dosei Kwali** popularly known **Dr Ladi Kwali** was born in 1925 in Kwali town in the present Federal Capital Territory, Abuja,Nigeria. Probably she is the best known of the Abuja potters” <http://www.kwalilobwoiunion.org/dr-ladi-kwali/>

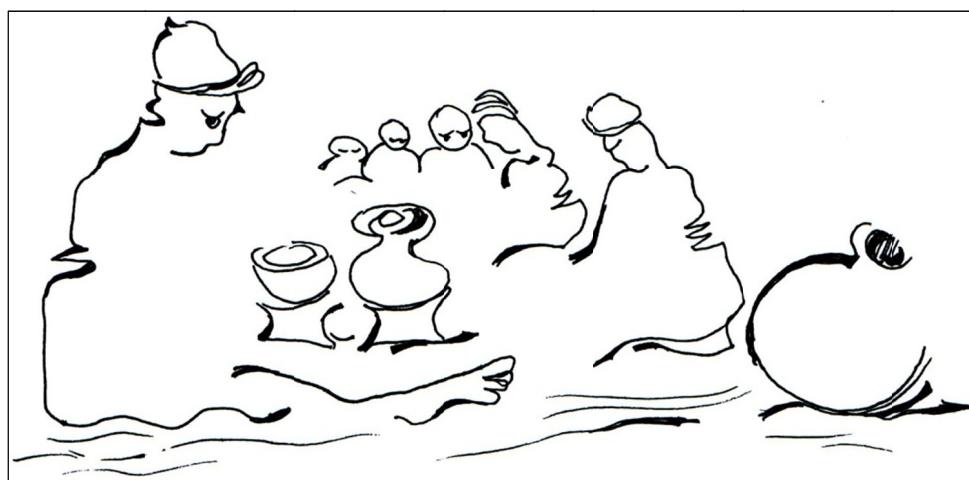


Figure 1. The master-potter and her apprentices

The apprenticeship system provides the platform for such a school. Clusters of young girls/women from a neighbourhood usually sit around a master-potter to learn the art of pottery-making. This practice is found in Inyi Community in Oji-River Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. Between the on-set of this apprenticeship and the mastery of the art, lies a stretch of an invisible training centre where various aspects of social and family responsibilities are cultivated in the virgin hearts of young females. These trainers take the advantage of their experience to instruct the ‘students’ on the above areas, not in a formal way, but as ‘asides’ which later metamorphose into indispensable aspects of social life. Such groups-the learners and their teacher-constitute loose and informal sororities that are not guided by formal constitutions save being present when needed and notifying the master ahead of time in cases of absence. This circumstantial learning fits into the learning theories and models known as the Situated Learning Theory originated by Jean Lave. “Situated Learning Theory posits that learning is unintentional and situated within authentic activity, context, and culture”. <http://www.learning-theories.com/situated-learning-theory-lave.html>

In contrast with most classroom learning activities that involve abstract knowledge which is and out of context, Lave argues that learning is situated; that is, as it normally occurs, learning is embedded within activity, context and culture. It is also usually unintentional rather than deliberate. This Lave and Wenger call a process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This teacher/learner union provides the platform to informally address many social areas which are potentially explosive whose subheads are discussed below.

3. Bridging the Generational Gap

In Nigeria, generational gaps are informally classified under ‘new school’ and ‘old school’. While the new school exercises experimental and explorative zeal, the old school advises on caution and moderated lifestyle based on the philosophy of look-before-you-leap. These two viewpoints often clash and fracture social relationships with far-reaching consequences. In the course of pottery apprenticeship, an arena is created where these generational gaps are moderated and, perhaps, ‘closed’ at various points in the course of pottery skill instructions. The master-potters teach and counsel their apprentices about the virtues of patience, tolerance and the benefits of moderation.

In Nigeria, for example, where ethnic inter-marriages are always engaged in on a continuous basis, prompt violent reprisals are resorted to by the “new school”, (mostly impatient and hot-headed youth population), to punish the offending group for maltreating or beating up “our daughter” married across the ethnic line. Usually, the tool of midnight or early morning arson is used for this purpose. On the contrary, the “old school”, (experience-led parents and grandparents), will prefer sitting at meetings after meetings to devise strategies of discussion with the emissaries from the offending community due to arrive in eight market days. This clash of strategies is one of the areas where the apprenticeship system intervenes to resolve by narrowing the generational gap.

4. Establishing and Maintaining Friendship

The establishment and the maintenance of the bond of friendship is the hub around which social peace revolves. Sometimes, this bond of friendship is established but become short-lived. But for pottery learning, it is different. Because each session of pottery apprentices keeps meeting and interacting under one master-potter leadership, it becomes clear that the friendship bond established are also maintained in long-enough contact time for it to be permanent. The traffic of friendship is usually between the master-potter and the apprentices (as a group), on one side, and that which is established among the individual apprentices. They become friends by common association. The above falls in line with Lave and Wenger (1991) in their *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* in which they talked about a mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity.

The angle of friendship, which is also of immense importance, but not obvious, is the one which is established between the master-potter, (at the wheel centre, see Figure 2 below), and each of the individual apprentices surrounding her. At the core is the master-potter surrounded by five apprentices. The outside perimeter arrows move in one direction while the inner perimeter ones move in the opposite direction. They represent the friendship flow between one apprentice and the other and back. This may be referred to as the inter-apprentice friendship flow. There are also five two-directional arrows which may be described as wheel spokes from the wheel core towards each of the five apprentices.

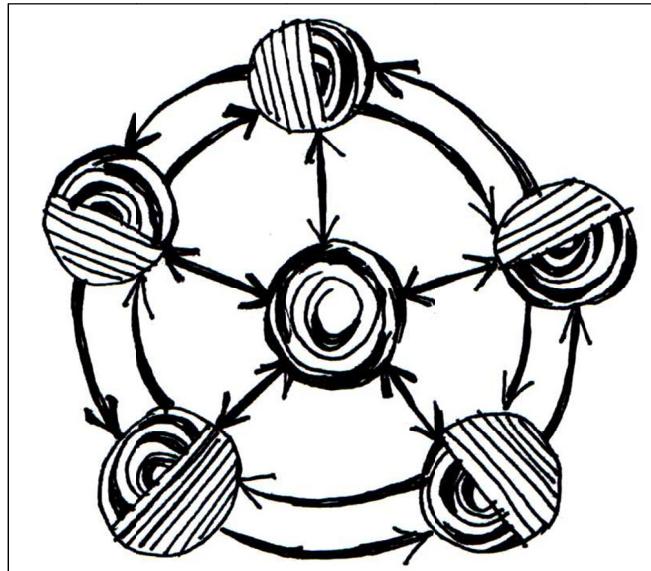


Figure 2. A graphic illustration of wheel showing the traffic of friendship in pottery apprenticeship

The above levels of friendship traffic become the basis for a sustainable and continuous friendship structure that multiplies itself for the benefit of the larger society. At the end of their training, each 'graduate' carries this patience-based friendship to her home where it continues to be put to work.

5. Oiling the Wheel of Conflict Resolution

Conflict is the opposite of peace and peace is the desired result of conflict resolution. Ughammadu (2009), defines peace as "freedom from disquieting or aggressive thoughts or notions...a harmonious state of personal relations". It is this harmony in mutual relations that the pottery apprenticeship provides the culture for. Rummel, in the above author, gives his own definition of peace as "state of mind, an attitude towards humanity and a spirit of love, compassion and forgiveness".

When conflicts of one sort or the other arise among friends, resolution promises to be easier than when they arise among enemies, strangers or casual acquaintances. 'Graduates' of the pottery apprenticeship classes usually disperse back to their different communities or families to establish their own pottery practice. Having been tutored on peace and friendship and their maintenance, it becomes easier to pursue them back at home. With this 'oil of peace', they are equipped to 'anoint' rusty and creaky wheels of potential conflict areas, resolving them for the benefit of a larger society. Their new language of peaceful resolution of conflicts douses and moderates the zeal of youthful aggression. Disagreements related to land disputes, farming rights or boundary issues are all positively affected by this new move. One may argue that women are not directly involved in village disputes, especially as they affect land. It should however, be noted that peaceful lifestyles, by whosoever have the capacity to influence the environmental temperament in favour of peace, irrespective of age or gender. For example, when wives are peace-driven, they have the capacity to disengage war-prone minds of their husbands. However, there are exceptions.

6. Family Life and Marriage

The atomistic version of the society or community is the nuclear family. The neighbourhood sorority emphasizes to the apprentice young girls the responsibilities and relationships of wives to their husbands and their children. They informally learn from their 'masters' that "Everything must be done to keep the family stress level low", Babamemimo (2009). The training meetings provide the sorority 'a close-door environment' to discuss various 'matters of the moment' outside the earshot of their male counterparts. In such an environment as this, the master-potter is able to discuss deep gender issues, including marriage education, sexual issues, explaining them in clear terms. Because these lectures are held 'behind closed doors', the apprentices are able to ask questions and receive answers. They are exposed to the stark realities and expectations of married life.

The calm and experienced potter does not shrink from discussing some of the ugly realities in the home relationships. Issues of possible excesses of the male folk in terms of wife- battering, polygamy and relationships outside the home are highlighted. The delicate matter of mothers-in-law/daughters-in-law remains

recurrent in issues of marriage counseling. Over and above these, the ‘students’ are encouraged to remain good wives when the time comes.

7. Child-rearing Through Parental Presence

This writer likens child-rearing and up-bringing to the preparation of clay for effective pot-making. Just as clay cannot be prepared in the absence of the potter, effective child up-bringing is not possible in the absence of the parents, especially the mother. Clay preparation is hard work. Cosentino (2002), notes that the body textures of clays vary enormously in their natural states. It is the diligence of reconciling these various textures of clay that makes clay preparation a stressful exercise. The commitment and diligence that accompany this clay preparation and pot-making can be placed side by side with that which is demanded by the child-rearing project and more. In other words, the handle-with-care posture demanded in pottery for successful production goes to approximate that needed in child up-bringing and training. As pots can break and be lost, so can children also ‘break’ and be ‘lost’, one loss too many. Nwazor (2006), commenting on proper child up-bringing says that, “Children generally want to be assured by their parents’ availability to listen to what they want to talk about. Never dismiss their shared concern with the wave of the hand”.

There is a thermal survival test which all pottery must pass if they must render proper service to humanity in terms of utility. The physical presence of the potter is needed all along the production line to guarantee the survival of this fire test. The earlier childhood training begins, the more chances the child has for successful adult life. Early training for child up-bringing is the equivalent of initial and diligent body preparation for pottery. As such pots survive the fire test during firing, so do children subjected to early training also pass the ‘fire test’ of adult life.

8. Economic Empowerment and Self-Reliance

The versatile feminine social outreach instructs that women need to custody knowledge as the banker and the dispenser. Even then, there are areas men cannot dare in spite of the training. Ijere (1991), has this to say about women.

In the society, women are the cleaners of rural roads, the regular visitor to the weekly market, the impartial arbitrator in family and or clan disputes or disagreements, the preservers of age-old customs of yam festivals, childbirth, marriage feasts, and water collection. They pound the food that nourishes the family, make the dainty appetizing meals, process the palm oil and make the ‘akamu’ and attend to the numerous community chores that break the men’s backs. Thus, from the dawn of the day till the dusk, it is a restless and all-consuming event for the women. It follows, therefore, that any programme of rural transformation that ignores the women does so at its own risk.

The ubiquitous nature of women’s social participation endorses their relevance in all-round social engineering. The master-potters, usually grandmothers or great grandmothers, exploit the above gender versatility to encourage their apprentices to also empower themselves socio-economically through pottery-making skills. This becomes, for them, a signature of value addition which positions them as highly ‘marketable’ candidates for marriage. For such and for those already in marriage, there is an automatic up-grading of self-image, and for the family, an enlarged economic coast as a result of the income from pottery. As people are naturally attracted to any added economic source, husbands get attracted to their potter-wives thereby establishing a strong love-base for family stability.

At no point does this oneness of mind come alive more than at the onset of the rainy season which heralds the beginning of the farming season and land-clearing as well as cultivation and planting. The return of the rains, to a large extent, also marks the cessation of pottery season. The stoppage of pottery activities is prompted by a number of reasons:

- (1) The rains flood the clay deposits making the digging of the material impossible. The potters expend their clay bank and wind up for the season.
- (2) During the rains, not enough sessions of sunshine are there to ensure drying of wares according to clay’s technical allowances.
- (3) Firing of pottery becomes a guess work as weather changes quickly without warning, from dry to rainy sessions.
- (4) Good wives usually team up with their husbands to ensure timely and expansive farming because community economies revolve around subsistence farming in most African communities.

(5) This farming union between wife and husband forges closer family ties, thereby bonding the family ever more tightly. Family break-up frequencies are cut down in such an environment.

Pottery and farming alternate their seasons with mutual promptness forming an economic anchor for social survival. Self-reliance connotes economic dependence on oneself instead of on another. The ‘students’ are encouraged to believe in themselves for personal provision. This position has several benefits-discourages prostitution and waywardness directly and indirectly, thereby minimizing the dreaded HIV/AIDS pandemic as well as providing gainful employment. Nnadozie (2012), cites this as a major strategy for MDG’s objective for social sustainability. While providing a busy schedule, too busy and attractive to allow people engage in human trafficking or to become an agent with all the risks, role models are also created as examples to emulate by up-and-coming generations.

9. Conclusion

The surface investigation which hitherto seemed deep has placed the traditional pottery of Nigeria on a lonely track of skill acquisition. The best such postures have done was to talk of pot’s formal qualities, design sources, technical mastery and comparative studies of various locations. With this paper now on the shelf, previous researches seem incomplete having left out the other dimensions of social benefits which perch tenaciously to the pottery apprenticeship programmes. The social implications and the enormity of these other dimensions have, hitherto, been fenced out.

It has become evident that the skill acquisition factor of pottery represents an infinitesimal dimension of what pottery holds. Beyond that lie the psychological aspects of the human person. From this write-up, other areas which cannot be discounted, include capacity building, social engineering through conflict resolution, self-reliance and patriotic citizenship. An educational system has also been located which does not seek to create and colonize its learning time and physical space just for its use, but humbly shares same with skill training. This is a masterful arrangement. The broad arrows, (Figure 3 below), represent the various sub-heads of social engineering utilizing the same platform originally designed for pottery skill acquisition only.

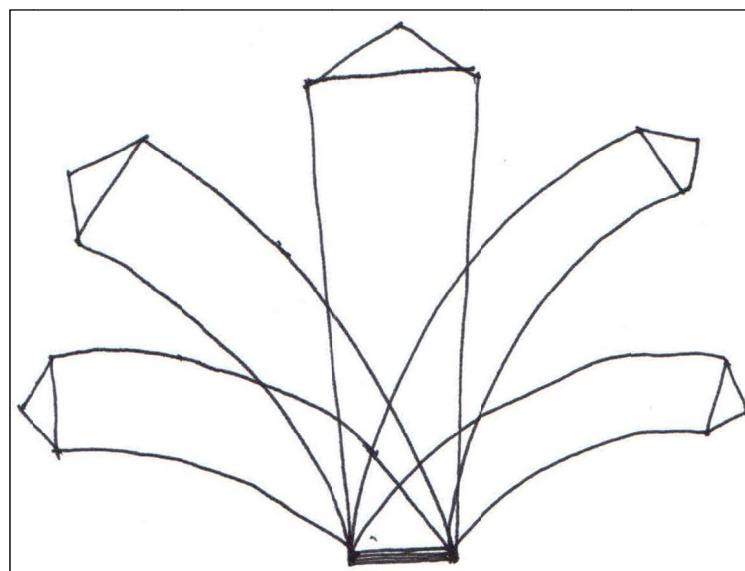


Figure 3. Pottery apprenticeship and social engineering using a common platform of time and venue

Serious-minded potters in pot-making areas remain patient and calm under pressure and tension. For what tension can be more than that which they have routinely been subjected to over the years each time their pots ‘entered’ fire for firing. Such potters neither ‘smoulder’ nor ‘catch fire’ anymore because they have been fired and ‘inoculated’ against such in training and practice. Only their products now continue to be fired to ensure social service delivery in the round.

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