

## **Deconstruction and consumption of traditionally designed pottery vessels in contemporary Zimbabwe, with Special Reference to Apostolic Christian Church Sects**

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### **Abstract**

*This qualitative study interrogates the consumption of traditional pottery vessels within the Apostolic Christian church sects in Zimbabwe. The study argues that with the sudden increase in African-initiated churches, especially the Vapostori (Apostolic) sects a noticeable increase in the distribution and consumption of pottery products as worshipping accessories has been observed. It also posits that while there has not been a major change in the form and shapes of the vessels, there has been a significant shift in the end use of the vessels to include tourist souvenirs and symbolic prayer accessories. It is thus observed that to a larger extent, the symbolic function has been found to have motivated the continued existence of pottery-making in Zimbabwe. We argue that traditional pottery-making has become a major source of symbolic substance with the capacity to be used as prayer accessories with economic potential.*

**Keywords:** Pottery vessels, material culture, continuity and change, symbolic, commodification

### **1.0 Introduction**

One of the most known abundant raw materials that is used to produce utility objects since ancient times is clay. (Ellert, 1992; Arthur, 2013, Lindahl & Matenga, 1995, Flower, 2008). Pottery has provided archaeological evidence of cultures and the technological development of life in the past. In Zimbabwe, the use of clay to create pottery vessels is still prevalent although acculturation has significantly revolutionized its use and consumption. Compounded by the impact of globalization the use of traditional clay vessels in Zimbabwean and similarly in most parts of sub-Saharan

Africa has shifted to industrial goods (Arthur, 2013) which are durable and compatible with modern energy sources. Despite societal transformations, the resilience of the practice in Africa is worth investigating. There should be serious research to account for the continued existence of pottery-making practices in societies where this art still exists. Notably, several studies in the sub-Saharan region focus on technological aspects as they link archaeological findings with current research practices and this is evidenced by studies done in western and eastern Africa including some parts of southern Africa (Gosselain, 2000; Gossealin, 1992; Gosselain, 1999; Weyessa, 2010; Arthur 2013). Regardless of the pottery vessel's cultural significance, African sculptural forms tend to receive more attention as art where documentation reveals this artistic genre as the most authentic source of African identity (Fowowe, 1984). In line with this argument, the writers take cognisance of the fact that pottery-making practices are denigrated to craft status despite being endowed with cultural tradition that defines the past of many societies through pot design, surface decorations, and symbolism associated with production and function. Notwithstanding the situation recent ethnographic studies reveal that pottery-making is endowed with symbolism which enables the artifacts to communicate through generations, (Nangendo, 1984). Pottery vessels carry material culture qualities and therefore act as social agents; the ability of the artefact to interact with humanity. Reip (2019) states that while ceramic vessels serve utility functions within social boundaries, they also act as agents for social interaction especially where they define individual and group cultural preferences. In a study of the use of artifacts for religious purposes among the Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi, Musoni, Machingura and Mamvuto, (2020) observe that African traditional clay pots have assumed a new role in their religious beliefs. The clay pots now serve as agencies for prayer in fulfilling spiritual needs. The use of pottery vessels as accessories for prayer illustrates the critical symbolic function inculcated in African traditional material culture. While this study focuses on the use of traditional artifacts in indigenous religious practices in general the study however does very little to reveal the meaning embedded in graphic symbols inscribed inside pottery-artefacts used by some apostolic faith sects. This paper in essence deconstructs the symbolic function of selected pottery vessels being used as prayer accessories by apostolic faith churches in Zimbabwe with particular attention to the graphic signs inscribed inside some pottery artefacts. The study also focuses on the woman potter as a designer and creator of the symbolic signs inscribed inside pottery vessels. The

interpretation of meaning contained in the graphic signs inscribed inside the clay vessels was done through interviews with sect leaders. This study brings to light the shift in symbolic function and significance of pottery vessels to the woman potter. Through the study of pottery vessels produced in Shumba village in Chinamhora district in Mashonaland East Province, the study interrogates the construct of continuity and change of pottery-making traditions by analysing the symbolic function of the clay pottery vessels. Observed too are lived experiences of women potters in this contemporary cultural environment that is influenced by Western education, technology, social change, and rapid economic development. In revealing the role of the potter and that of the members of the apostolic sects the study investigated the symbolic significance of the pottery vessels in understanding continuity and change. The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore factors that contribute to continuity and change in traditional pottery practices in Shumba village Chinamhora, Zimbabwe;
2. To establish the role of women potters in pottery production; and
3. To deconstruct indigenous pottery forms, patterns, and symbolism entrenched within the consumption of traditional pottery.

### **1.1 African pottery making**

While archaeologists tend to regard pottery making as means to trace life in the past in ancient civilization through material culture, ethno-archaeologists on the other hand have contributed significantly to providing much-needed literature on factors contributing to the continued existence of pottery vessels in sub-Saharan Africa through the woman potter. Pottery-making has been observed to be a significant craft and an active practice in studies on several sub-Saharan African regions including among others Zulu potters in South Africa, (Olalere, 2019; Flower, 2010), the Yoruba in South western Nigeria ( Busari & Odetoyinbo, 2021; Shado, Kashim & Fatuysi, 2020) the Manaledi potters of Botswana (Thebe, 2016), Ethiopia (Wayessa, 2020) including Ghana ( Abaka-Attah, Asante-Kyei & Addae, 2019; Nortey & Asiamoaso, 2019). This somewhat confirms its relevance within the corpus of tangible and intangible heritage assets. In the word of Olalere (2019), pottery-making is regarded as a tangible asset and therefore requires continued preservation although a decline has been noted in some communities (Wayessa, 2020) and endangered as well

notably in Ethiopia and Uganda (Kayamba & Kwesiga, 2016). Despite notable strides to document through research the current developments within pottery-making communities in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, very few research activities have been noted in Zimbabwe. For example, in South Africa studies on Zulu traditional pottery in KwaZulu-Natal fundamentally identify the preservation of pottery-making through cultural traditions such as beer brewing, rituals, and ceremonies (Fowler 2008, Fowler 2011, Flower 2006; Armstrong 2010). Elsewhere Weyessa (2010) and Arthur (2013) found out that among the Jimma and Gamo respectively in Ethiopia pottery-making persists as a result of utilitarian and non-utilitarian values. These examples reveal the significance of pottery-making particularly the role of women in the preservation of pottery traditions as an indigenous technology.

Besides that, globalization factors such as Western education, cultures, etc., have influenced the propagation of the continued existence and use of pottery, and the economic benefits realized through pottery-making practices are now a prerogative of most studies. Fowler (2010) gives a repertoire of Zulu pottery which narrates how Msinga women benefit from the continued demand for pottery vessels. According to Gombe (2002) among the Gisu in Uganda, pottery-making is regarded as a worthwhile activity sustaining livelihoods in rural communities. Studies in pottery-making tend to agree that within various social boundaries, pot design, and decorations are ascribed to symbolic meaning and function depending also on gender roles. In sub-Saharan Africa, the pot is a valuable asset as it is used in the preparation of traditional meals and beer and to a large extent rituals, for example, the Zulu pottery. This dimension situates pottery-making as endowed with abundant belief systems where taboos are meant to preserve this ancient tradition and assure its continued existence. Quoting Gosselain, 'from a technical point of view breaching a taboo may affect the three stages of the manufacturing process' (1999: 209). This statement points towards the preservation of pottery-making practices from clay extraction to production processes. The aspects of prohibitions provide an essential spiritual presence that guides the entire process of pottery-making that makes pots sacred.

While elsewhere studies have established the factors proliferating the continued existence of pottery vessels (Thebe, 2016; Busari & Odetonyibo, 2021; Wayessa, 2020)) very little has been observed on the continued existence emanating from changes in symbolism and an approach that situates this practice to be more

commercialized in approach. The phenomenon prevailing in Chinamhora district in Zimbabwe illustrates that the demand has the potential to foster the preservation of pottery-making and offer livelihood to the women potters.

## **2.0 Theoretical Framework**

The concept of continuity and change could be well understood in the field of anthropology in the study of material culture. Although used together in diverse fields it is important to unpack the terms separately to understand their application in explaining the social dynamics, and artifacts from the past to the present world of material culture. Continuity refers to staying the same comparatively for a long period. An artefact may remain the same technologically in form and style from generation to generation. Continuity is existing in the same form while maintaining the same value (Bill, 2014) and further argues that continuity may also resides in the mind rather than in materials per se. This statement holds continuity in the form and nature of the objects remain the same including their symbolism. However, according to Smith et al, (1982), continuity is the process of uniting the past, present, and future. Therefore, where continuity is concerned traditions recur from one generation to the other over time. However, the form of nature and the symbolic function of objects may change as human adapts to diverse cultural environments. Ndiiri (1997), is of the view that continuity in coastal pottery in Kenya is an example of cultural continuity. Although there are elements of continuity in pottery making it is faced with its problems, emanating especially from radical changes propagated by technological advancement. Change in this sense refers to the failure of traditional objects to adapt to changes in new cultural environments brought about by modern technological advancement. Change in this sense are transformations including alterations that occur while being driven by factors including among others, technology, social interactions, and economic development and can impact society negatively or positively. Culture has been observed to be dynamic as it responds to and absorbs new ideas (Sibani, 2018) into society as the old is replaced with new ways of life. As part of material culture pottery-making traditions are susceptible to change. Material change has been observed to be positive or negative and is believed to be perceived from different perspectives by some scholars (Sanchez, 2018). Where it is positive it

may carry with it the continuity of some traditions while negatively it may result in the demise of traditional practices. This phenomenon is prevalent in some parts of Africa where pottery-making practices are declining and some extent ceasing completely. However, for this study pottery vessels have aspects resisting change while existing in an environment faced with radical technological and societal transformations. These resisting aspects have fostered continuity in which the past, present, and future of pottery-making practices and consumption can be traced. Pottery-making in Domboshava Shumba Ward 3 homesteads is a clear demonstration of cultural continuity adapting to environmental changes brought about by influences of globalization.

### **3.0 The study sites**

The study was situated in Shumba Villages' Ward 3 homesteads in Chinamhora District in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe. While the study results focus on the functions of pottery vessels the study's initial stage was to begin at the source in Shumba village Banga and Marimo homesteads. The study area was chosen for the widespread number of women potters in the communities with an established processing rate of pottery vessels averaging 10-20 pieces per day. The study area was identified through a pottery trader frequenting Chinhoyi urban for markets. These communities are commonly identified with market gardening despite also engaging in growing seasonal crops. However, the major focus of this study is pottery making. Other than subsistent farming interviewed women in these villages stated that they are preoccupied with pottery-making an activity that has become more full-time due to demand. Since the study sought to establish the symbolism enshrined in the inscribed symbols inside pottery vessels the study also engaged members of the apostolic faith churches in Chinhoyi urban located 115 kilometres from north-west of Harare who are consumers of these clay vessels.

### **4.0 Methodology**

The research employed a qualitative study approach using open-ended interview questions which allowed the principal researcher to engage the women potters in Banga and Marimo village homesteads in explaining their experiences, beliefs, and behaviours in their cultural context. Understanding the phenomenon from the

participants' perspective and their settings is grounded in qualitative studies where it is possible to use a small number of individuals. No wonder it is from these settings that phenomenological methods which inherently "seek the opinions and subjective accounts and interpretation of participants" (Gray 2009, p. 28), were put to use in this study. Qualitative methods were used to further our understanding of the symbolic nature of pottery vessels and how they are manufactured and distributed. The participants consisted of potters who included widowed and married women belonging to diverse age groups. Purposive sampling of (14) participants was done following case study research approaches where participants are chosen according to the quality of information they carry, (Denscombe, 2010; Williman, 2006; Gravetter & Forzano, 2009). To add variety and diversity to practicing potters, snowballing procedures were also employed as a sampling strategy. A lead informant assisted the principal researcher to identify the homesteads of participants. In total several visits were done to conduct interviews and focus group discussions (FDGs).

The observations, interviews, and FDGs sought to explore forms and designs on pottery, identify factors contributing to its continued existence and explain the insights of women potters in Banga and Marimo homesteads on designs they inscribe inside clay vessels. The first stage of the research was done through interviews to get the demographic information of the potters. The second stage involved the use of open-ended questions to establish potter experiences and their understanding of pottery vessel production, uses, and symbolism and was conducted at potters' homesteads. The third stage involved two FDGs as a strategy to triangulate data collected through individual interviews and these were conducted at the headman's homestead. The women were also observed creating vessels and inscribing symbols inside the vessels. The fourth stage of the research shifted from Chinamhora district to Chinhoyi urban in Mashonaland West where the marketing and consumption of the artefacts was observed. The meanings of decorations on pots were established through purposively selected six participants who claimed to be spiritual healers and members from the *Mapositori* (Apostolic sects) through the use of open-ended questions. The data was analyzed alongside the dictates of thematic analysis of data collected from interview sessions while semiotic analysis was used as a lens to reveal the structure and design of pottery vessels. The connotations of the signifiers (pottery vessels) and the symbols inscribed inside them assist in establishing their meaning within the

apostolic sect religious practices. The semiotic lens also assisted in establishing the denotative value of the clay vessels being the basic meaning of the symbols inscribed inside the vessels, for example, the cross, representing Christianity.

## **5.0 Results and discussion**

Drawing from the interviews, focus group discussions, and observations this study observed that there has been an increase in pottery making in Chinamhora where it has become a full-time activity. The demographic information was collected to understand the appropriateness of the respondents in participating in the research. The fourteen respondents interviewed indicated their commitment to the practice. The women potters reported that traditional uses of vessels are still prevalent. The demand has been encouraged by the sudden surge for traditional vessels being used as religious accessories by the members of the apostolic sects. Revealed is the mass production of these vessels pushed by high demand for the products. From the focus group discussions, participants revealed that they are not spiritually connected to the clay vessels while creating and inscribing symbols inside these vessels. However, they admitted that they work under instruction through directives from the traders who supply customers in towns such as Chinhoyi Urban. The research exposed significant changes in design from traditional chevron patterns to a sign system with religious connotations. These signs are inscribed inside the vessels rather than outside surfaces signifying uniqueness in aesthetic terms. Potters have also mastered the skills of inscribing the symbols inside the vessels showing an individualistic style.



### 5.1 Demographic data of participants

Table 1: Key attributes of the participants

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Pottery-making experience (years)</b>	<b>Full/Part-time</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>
R01	F	40-44	8	PT	Christianity-Apostolic faith	Secondary
R02	F	35-39	12	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R03	F	25-29	3	PT	Christianity-Apostolic faith	Primary
R04	F	25-29	3	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R05	F	40-44	4	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R06	F	60+	15	PT	Christianity	Secondary
R07	F	55-59	11	FT	Christianity	Primary
R08	F	55-59	18	FT	Christianity	Standard 2
R09	F	30-34	11	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R10	F	30-34	4	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R11	F	20-24	3	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R12	F	20-24	8	FT	Christianity	Secondary
R13	F	50-54	21	FT	Christianity	Primary
R14	F	25-29	7	FT	Christianity	Secondary

Table 1 illustrates through these age groups that the practice is no longer a preserve for the elderly as culturally and previously believed (Wayessa, 2020). The adage that potting skills are passed on from generation to generation can be safely dismissed in this regard. This is evidenced by the data in Table. 1 showing various age ranges of interviewed respondents. As a result, it is no longer a preserve for the elderly but a

survival skill for everyone, among them the young who in some instances have trained older women. Young women falling in the 20-24 age group are full-time experienced potters. The number of years of experience indicated in column two shows the diversity in the period potters have been engaged in the activity. This is an indicator that the recruitment of potters is ongoing illustrating continuity. The level of education too is very high since most of the participants have at least attended up to Ordinary Level. The potters are all Christians although not from the apostolic sects.

## **5.2 Pottery-making practice and the mitigation of poverty**

The study found out that traditional pottery has become a supplement in generating income in place of subsistence farming which used to be the only source of livelihood. This outcome vindicates Burke (1992, p.199), who states that 'goods produced in pre-capitalist society are transformed into commodities' and where he further observes that 'the nature of their exchange, their usage, and their aesthetics are transformed as a result.' This account provides important information on commoditization as villagers produce many pots for a ready market. This reveals that the commodification of pottery making is a phenomenon currently prevailing in Shumba village. Cited as the major driver is the prevalence of poverty in this area as among all the 14 interviewees it was identified as a key motivator for taking up pottery making. Thus, potters are bent on exploiting an emerging demand from the apostolic sects who use clay pots for prayers known as (*masowe*). This was noted in FGD 1 where participants agree that the advent of apostolic sects in post-colonial Zimbabwe has increased the demand for pots which enticed many to take up pottery making. It was noted that as a result of this demand pots production has become a complete full-time activity as shown in Figure 1 as out of the 14 interviewees three indicated that they work on a part-time basis. Thus, this development can be viewed as a significant phenomenon contributing to the alleviation of poverty thus improving the livelihoods of villagers (Thebe, 2016; Mbonile & Huale, 2020).

This research also observed that despite an increase in potters and the competition amongst each other, one of the interviewed potters reported that "I am excited by the orders that I get, especially the big orders as I had never anticipated this when I was introduced to pottery." This statement further illustrates that they supply to traders who

then resell these consumers. However, potters bemoan this approach to doing their business as it deprives them of the prospects to maximize their income. Although there are unfair trade imbalances pottery making is becoming a significant income generation source not only for potters but traders as well.

### **5.3 Pottery making and societal cohesion**

Also significant is the fact that cooperation among potters has drastically increased as these potters network lessening the burden of marketing, sourcing raw materials, and to some extent cooperating during production. However, very few women admitted to working together during this process. Such development on its own is a clear indication of how traditional pottery-making is contributing to social cohesion. This is also explained by how the experienced potters are willing to impart pottery skills freely to anyone willing to earn a living out of this trade, as some of the respondents conceded that traditional pottery-making is for everyone to exploit. It was noted that among the respondents there is a tendency of contributing towards the mobilization of funds to hire vehicles to ferry products to the market since individually this is expensive. This is however not the only situation potters get to work together but in several other demanding challenges such as clay quarrying and the collection of firewood.

### **5.4 Pot adornment and symbolism**

Another significant observation being presented by this study is the shift in symbolism in pot usage. Familiar usage of pots includes domestic and traditional rituals, as some elderly respondents indicated that they use pots for cooking special meals. They all agreed that pots are now being produced to act as agencies for *minamoto*, the vernacular term for (prayers). This has prompted potters to concentrate on particular pot designs and shapes. Commonly produced pots are *mbiya* (small bowl), *mazambara* (larger version of *mbiya* bowl), and *gate* (similar to the beer pot). Generally, the design of these types of pots is similar to the traditional forms. *Mbiya* is the smallest bowl which has sizes that vary slightly in depth and diameter depending on the preferences of individual potters. *Mazambara* is another type of bowl popular with potters which is relatively grander in size than *mbiya* although its shape and form

are quite (similar to the beer pot). The *gate* is also a common vessel. These three types of pots are not used for anything else other than *minamoto* (prayers). Potters are thriving on exploiting their demand hence they have increased the production of clay pots through the traditional way.

Interestingly besides form and design, these pots are decorated in a very unusual fashion where the inside center of the pot is adorned while the outside is left undecorated. The decorations are signs done according to client specifications usually as prescribed by the religious leader as an accessory for prayer deliverance. All the participants agreed that they design pots on the inside with shapes in the form of *nyenyedzi* (star), *mwedzi* (moon), *mazino* (teeth), *muchinjikwa* (cross), *dare* (court), *chanja* (palm), and *tsoka* (foot). The different symbols illustrate the nature of prayer sought by a client. All the respondents could not reveal the meaning of these symbols despite being master craftspersons of these pots.

The star is usually designed to show radians numbering 3, 5, 7, 6, 9, and 12. The moon is shown as a quarter; the teeth are usually put on the rim of the pot, and the cross is an addition (plus) sign. These designs are symbolically represented without strict adherence to realism. Processes of pottery making have not changed much as potters use the same traditional pinch and coil methods and techniques to produce pottery. However, a fascinating difference concerning decoration is the ability of the potters to produce an individualistic representation of pots despite similarities in shape and form. This is made possible by the process of molding designs during the forming stages of the pot rather than after pot construction as the scratching of chevrons. The design consequently becomes an integral and inseparable element of the pots. One interesting design noted is the palm and foot which are traced from a hand and foot of a child in the case of *mbiya* and for *mazambara* is that they work from a template of their own feet and hands.

The use of clay pots is guided by a strong spiritual engagement which is supported by fasting usually for seven days. A person seeking deliverance is asked to bring a clay pot with a symbol describing the nature of prayers that will save them.

The *mbiya* and *mazambara* vessels emerged to be the most widely used vessels since they are used to contain a variety of symbols. The outline of the meanings of pottery

vessels with different symbols as given by the interviewed spiritual healers supporting women potters' interpretations is as follows,

The palm inside a vessel represents requests offered to receive prayers to increase fortune and luck.

The *muchinjikwa* (cross) represents those converted to believing, prayers are done to stabilize the souls of the newly converts, and they are asked to bring a clay pot with a cross inside.

The *mwedzi* (moon) symbolises the time when evil spirits manifest in humans therefore an attack is cleansed by prayers represented in a *mbiya* (small bowl) with a quarter moon inside the pot.

The *nyeredzi* (star) is light. It's a guiding light. There is usually a miss understanding as some have 5, 6, 9, and 12 spikes on a star, as highlighted by the prophet. The star symbols are being abused by unscrupulous spiritual healers. *Dare* (court) represent leaders in spirits in the spirit world such as Samson for power, Joshua for Holy Spirit, and Moses for leader. If one seeks power they are requested to bring a bowl with this symbol of a court.

A *gate* (traditional beer pot) is used for prayers to cleanse those who are mentally ill. It is not decorated at all. An affected person is cleansed with water from this pot with three stones inside representing power, and Holy Spirit. The pot is usually kept at the *kirawa* (a sacred place designed for prayers)

**Fig 1: Pot designs with symbolic decorations**



a) Palm



b) Cross



e) Moon



d) Star



e) Star



f) Star



g) Star



h) Dare



i) Gate

## 6.0 Conclusions

This study established that although there was a decline in pottery consumption during the colonial era, a sudden demand for the artefact surfaced as a result of emerging churches that use the pot as prayer accessories. This has increased the number of

potters who in turn have improved their livelihoods through trading in these pottery wares. Besides the potters, traders in marketplaces where these pots are sold also benefit. The research demonstrates the aspect of continuity and change in pottery-making practices in Zimbabwe as revealed from the pottery vessels being produced by Banga and Marimo homesteads in Shumba village in Domboshava. Continuity is within the technological processes while change is in the symbolic use of the clay vessels. The study found that the potters are operating in an organized commercial way hence the clay pot as a traditional artefact has been successfully commodified. This is supported by a participant who admitted, "If this trend continues, it means pottery making will hopefully sustain us for quite a while." This development is quite significant as it has resuscitated a traditional technology that was once threatened with collapse. However, noted through this study is a shift in the symbolism of pottery vessels that indicates an important function during healing prayer sessions. The decorations bear symbolic information never used during traditional rituals representing a significant change in traditional pottery-making. The study established unique ways of decorating traditional pots, through the use of contemporary religious practices where surface design appears inside the vessels. However, the use of symbols as decoration and their functionality has increased the aesthetic value of the clay vessels demonstrating the continuity of the traditional practice. This entails that the traditional practice adapted to cultural changes emanating from global influences. Sadly, the study noted that prohibitions and taboos associated with pottery-making clay have been abandoned as a result of subjugating the authenticity of traditional pottery-making.

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