



THE CULTURE OF POTTERY IN ZANZIBAR

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Abstract

Zanzibar is an archipelago globally recognized for its rich culture, which has emerged from the confluence of diverse communities. These communities, including Indians, Arabs, and mainland Africans, arrived in the Zanzibar islands and blended with the indigenous inhabitants. From this interaction arose generations who cultivated Zanzibari culture through various art forms, such as carving, weaving, painting, and pottery.

The pottery art of Zanzibar is a tradition that has endured and is highly cherished by many of the island's communities. Indeed, any discussion of this art form in Zanzibar necessarily centers on the village of Fumba in the West Region of Unguja Island. Fumba is celebrated from antiquity as the birthplace of pottery, historically known as the home of the famed late potter and singer, Siti binti Saadi. Her initial recognition came from selling pots in town while singing, her captivating voice drawing crowds who urged her to become a performer (Robert, 1976).

The art of pottery involves the creation of various household utensils using clay as the primary raw material. These items include cooking pots (*vyungu*), large pots (*vikaango*), water jars (*mikungu*), incense burners (*vyetezo*), small bowls (*vibia*), water storage vessels (*magudulia*), pitchers (*mitungi*), coconut graters (*mikungu ya kukunia nazi*), and various decorative objects produced on different scales.

While a superficial examination might suggest that pottery is being rendered obsolete by scientific and technological progress, a closer look reveals that, in other respects, the art form continues to develop in various ways. Pottery is being innovated and crafted in new styles, providing aesthetic pleasure to observers. Modern and veteran potters alike continue to demonstrate their evolving skills, crafting this art with a mastery that astonishes viewers through the unique character of their vessels.

Keywords: People, Zanzibar, Art, Communities, Diversity

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Zanzibar is an archipelago globally recognized for its rich culture, which has emerged from the confluence of diverse communities. The communities that have contributed to Zanzibar's culture include Indians, Arabs, and mainland Africans ("Wangazija"), who came to the Zanzibar islands and intermingled with the indigenous inhabitants. This interaction produced generations who have cultivated Zanzibar's culture through various art forms, such as carving, weaving, painting, and pottery.

Among these, the pottery art of Zanzibar is a tradition that has endured and is highly cherished by many communities on the islands. Indeed, any discussion of pottery art in Zanzibar must include the village of Fumba, located in the West of Unguja Island. Fumba village is renowned from antiquity as the origin of pottery art, for it is historically the home of the famed late potter and singer, Siti binti Saadi. Her initial recognition came from selling pots in town while singing, her voice captivating many people who then urged her to become a singer (Robert, 1976).

Discussing the art of pottery refers to the creation of various household utensils using clay as the raw material. These items include cooking pots (*vyungu*), large pots (*vikaango*), water jars (*mikungu*), incense burners (*vyetezo*), small bowls (*vibia*), water storage vessels (*magudulia*), pitchers (*mitungi*), coconut graters (*mikungu ya kukunia nazi*), and various decorative objects, which are produced in varying scales.

Upon closer examination, one might perceive that pottery art is becoming outdated due to scientific and technological progress. However, in other respects, this art form appears to be advancing developmentally in various ways. This is because pottery art has been innovated and crafted using new styles, offering aesthetic pleasure to the observer and demonstrating the evolving talents of both modern and veteran potters as time goes on. All these talents of the potters enable them to innovate this art with a craftsmanship that astonishes the viewer due to the uniqueness of the vessels. Many people assume that pottery vessels are merely cooking pots, but there are also pots for planting flowers which pottery artists create. Some pots are decorated with zebra patterns to further attract people, especially tourists. This is achieved using clay, paint, lime, and many other materials employed during the potting process.

The clay used for making these items is of a silty type, also referred to by some as potter's clay (*udongo mfinyanzi*). It has cohesive properties and can retain water for a long time, allowing it to be stored for extended periods before being used to create these items.

Despite the long-standing presence of pottery art on the Zanzibar islands, there is now a risk of its disappearance for future generations. Research indicates that many elders in rural areas are more engaged in the craft than the youth. In terms of usage, it is primarily adults, who are already aware of the benefits of using these vessels, who purchase and utilize them. It is for this reason that the researcher decided to conduct this study, in order to understand the details in depth and address this gap.



PHOTOGRAPH OF THE LATE SITI BINTI SAADI, THE RENOWNED POTTER FROM FUMBA VILLAGE, ZANZIBAR.

RESEARCH PROBLEM STATEMENT

Pottery art has existed in Zanzibar for a long time, an art form that has been practiced daily and has grown very rapidly. However, alongside this growth, there is a significant problem for the younger generations: a lack of knowledge or a failure to appreciate the importance of this pottery art in its overall cultural context. It is due to this gap that the researcher decided, with sincerity, to conduct this study in order to address it.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.3.1 General Objective

To examine the significance of the culture of pottery art in Zanzibar.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

- a) To identify the meaning, types, and history of pottery art in Zanzibar.
- b) To investigate the reasons that have led to the neglect of pottery art among the younger generation.
- c) To assess the cultural impact of pottery art on Zanzibari society.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- a) Explain the meaning and history of pottery in Zanzibar.
- b) What are the factors that have led to the neglect of pottery art among the younger generation?
- c) What is the cultural impact of pottery art on Zanzibari society?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

The benefits of this research are as follows: First, to enable many students to understand the meaning and history of art in general. Second, to gain a deep understanding of the pottery art present in Zanzibari society. Third, to make this research a reference for other students who may wish to conduct their own research in the field of art, both in Libya and Zanzibar in general.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH**

The scope of this research will focus solely on pottery art. Other art forms mentioned in this research will only be used for explanatory purposes and are not part of the researcher's objectives.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Literature on Art

Various experts have presented their thoughts on art in general, as follows:

Mvungi and Omari (1980) explain that Art is skilled work; it is work that requires expertise or craftsmanship.

However, upon close examination, one will realize that this definition is weak because the craftsmanship or skill in a work of art is derived from the viewer's or art lover's perception. This is to say that the beauty or ugliness of art lies in the mind of the observer of the art in question.

The difficulty in finding a precise definition of art stems primarily from the notion that anything we find visually pleasing is a work of art. It must be understood that skill or craftsmanship in any work does not necessarily constitute art. Perhaps a precise meaning of Art can be found if we understand the activities associated with artistic works: these are the foundations of artistic works!

Nkwera (1979) elaborates in detail on the foundations of art as being the foundations of any artistic work. Among the fundamental characteristics of these arts are:

- Pattern or ornamentation

Typically, all works of Art have a specific design which the artist visualizes or creates. This design can be manifested through lines, colors, shapes of objects, and their arrangement. Pattern or ornamentation prevents the viewer's eye from tiring of looking at the work of Art and makes the work more attractive or even gives that type of art a distinct characteristic. For example, in the art of henna painting, there must be well-patterned flowers filled with henna of a brown color, as is commonly seen.

The Relationship Between Depicted Objects

This relationship can be established through pattern or ornamentation. These patterns are placed by the artist according to their vision; however, they must consider the principle of not distorting the fundamental form of that art as it is perceived or as is customary.

Relationship Between Shapes and Their Composition

Ornamentation should not distort the shapes of artistic works. There must be proportion and a strong cohesion that can make the artistic work appealing. Furthermore, these foundational principles of art described above are also evident in the art of pottery. In terms of pattern and ornamentation, there have been significant changes from the utensils that were traditionally made to those of the present day.

Historical utensils had few patterns; for example, ancient pots lacked handles for lifting, whereas today's pots are made with handles. This condition aids the user in handling them with ease. Similarly, incense burners (*vyetezo*) originally had a single, natural cup-like form. However, today there are incense burners with tall, slender shapes resembling electrical insulators.

Nasra (2013) discusses art within various academic fields such as history, philosophy, and religion, stating in his article:

Art and History: An artwork can be valued for its ability to express history or ancient matters. For example, historians inform us that in Zanzibar, there are doors adorned with patterns of

Indian origin, which have existed since the era of the sultans. These doors are located in the 'House of Wonders' (*nyumba ya ajabu*) at Forodhani in Zanzibar town, having been there for many past years.

Art and the Philosophy of Life:

Art typically reflects the philosophy of life of the concerned society. For instance, the coastal people (*Watu wa Mwambao*)—those living in the areas of Tanga, Bagamoyo, Dar es Salaam, Lindi, Mtwara, and Kilwa—engage extensively in mat weaving and pottery. Why do they engage more in this art? Why not in carving statues? Essentially, coastal people have been greatly influenced by Arab culture, the foundation of which is the Islamic religion, which prohibits artistic works depicting the creation performed by God. It is not surprising for a coastal person, upon seeing you carve an effigy resembling a person or human, to tell you, "You will be accountable for their souls to God Almighty."

Thus, we observe that alongside pottery, the coastal people also engage in arts such as weaving and decorating mats (*mikeka*), *majamvi*, *makawa*, and *miswala*. This indicates that art has the power to show how a society views the world. Every society engages in a certain type of art that reflects its philosophy of life. For example, it is difficult to find carved statues among the Maasai society, not because there is a lack of wood or stone for carving, but because carved statues are more prevalent in sedentary societies. These are societies engaged in agriculture. The art forms commonly seen among pastoralists involve decorating items that have significant and essential roles in their lives, such as gourds for milk and water, shields, clothing, and various weapons.

Although the artist's environment plays a role in determining the type of artwork, we must not forget that the artist's worldview (philosophy) is not different from that of the society in which they live. Even though an artist may deviate and decide to adopt and revere the philosophy of a foreign society in their work. This is why, for Zanzibari society, despite many modern (Western) influences, there are still communities of people who prefer to use traditional pots in their lives, especially for cooking. Many Zanzibari communities enjoy cooking fish in clay pots despite having many contemporary utensils.

Madumulla (2009) explains that there are two main types of art: Natural Art and Human Art. Natural art originates from God, while human art is created by humans themselves. Human arts include:

Visual Arts (*Sanaa za Maonyesho*): These are arts whose beauty manifests in a permanent form—a form that can be preserved and its beauty displayed at any time. Examples include

sculpture, painting, and pottery. These arts produce items like pictures, statues, embroidered cloth, and pottery.

Performing Arts (*Sanaa za Vitendo*):** The beauty of these arts lies in the form of performance. To appreciate this beauty, one must observe the actions being performed. This form necessitates the presence of an artist/performer, an audience/spectator, a stage/platform, the act/performance itself (to be done or enacted), or the concept/event being performed, along with time. Of course, one will note that performing arts also fall within the realm of literature, which is the core of our course.

Mlama (1980) explains that Art is beauty manifested in a crafted form—a form a person uses to express feelings that touch them by providing an illustration or illustrations with a specific concept. It is absolutely true that every art is created with its specific concepts; for example, the art of pottery uses tools such as silty clay (*udongo wa kiinamo*) or potter's clay (*mfinyanzi*), kneading, modeling sticks (*vibanzi*), shells for polishing (*kombe za pwani*), cloths, water, grinding stones (*towe*), firewood, and fuel for firing these items.

Auditory Arts (*Sanaa za Ghibu*):** These are arts whose beauty is not manifested in a visible or tangible form but in a form that touches the senses. Examples are poetry, singing, or playing music. The beauty of these arts lies in hearing or reading them. Undoubtedly, one will note that this category of art represents literary works.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

3.1 Research Design

This research was conducted using a descriptive design. Data collection, investigation, and presentation of research findings were based on various written documents related to art and literature in general. Additionally, field data were obtained through observation and interviews, which fulfilled the needs of this research. Diverse data were collected, verified, analyzed, and finally interpreted in-depth and with great care.

3.2 Research Area

This research was primarily library-based but also included fieldwork (areas where the researcher went to interview various artists involved in making, selling, and purchasing). It was conducted on Unguja Island at the library of the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA) and in the Kiembe Samaki neighborhood, which is the historical origin of pottery from time immemorial.

3.3 Target Population

In this section, the researcher will outline the entire research population, where the target groups will consist of two categories. First is the overall study population, and second is the sample to be engaged.

3.3.1 Study Population:

The study population will include the community of potters expected to be reached, specifically in the Mji Mpya, Kiembe Samaki area of Zanzibar, in the West District of Unguja. This is where potters producing various items such as water jars (*mikungu*), incense burners (*vyetezo*), and cooking pots (*vyungu*) are found.

3.3.2 Study Sample:

The research sample will consist of two groups. First, various works of pottery art of different types, which will enable the researcher to analyze the visible artistic element. Second, a group of different people who are art professionals and practitioners in the visual arts, along with those who produce clay items within the art field.

3.4 Data Collection

This section explains the various methods and tools that will be used for data collection, along with the entire data collection process.

3.4.1 Data Collection Methods and Tools:

The main methods to be used for collecting research data are document analysis, interviews, observation, and focus group discussions. The tools to be used include: document analysis guide, interview guide, observation guide, focus group discussion guide, notebooks, pens, still cameras, video recording cameras, and audio recorders.

3.4.2 Data Collection Process:

Data analysis and presentation of results will also be done descriptively. The analysis of research data will align with the pillars of the realism theory. Data obtained from the field through interviews and focus group discussions will be triangulated (correlated) with those obtained from document analysis in the library, then measured and evaluated. Following this analysis, the results will be presented descriptively, which will be used to a large extent.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings and analysis of this research, presenting the results obtained after a meticulous analysis of the data. These reasons are divided into two main groups: those who believe that the art of pottery has been neglected, and those who believe that it is still evolving with the times.

4.1 Factors Leading to the Neglect of Pottery Art in Zanzibar

There are several factors that have led to the neglect of pottery art in the Zanzibar archipelago, as outlined below:

First, a large segment of the youth lack sufficient education about the use of these clay utensils. This is because children today prefer to use modern household items such as dishes, plastic or metal bowls, aluminum pots, electric ovens, and electric incense burners. They perceive these as easier to use and more durable for long-term use.

Second, there is the issue of the fragility of these items. For example, in many households in Zanzibar, parents are hesitant to buy clay pots (*vyungu*) and large cooking pots (*vikaango*) for stews, rice, and beans due to the frequent breakage caused by their children at home.

Third, there is a perception among some young people, particularly girls, that using pottery utensils is outdated. They view it as uncivilized or rustic because using these clay items is time-consuming. For instance, cooking rice or stew in clay pots takes a long time to become ready. However, using an electric rice cooker is easier and saves time.

Fourth, there are economic reasons, namely the desire to reduce expenditure. This situation arises because people often spend money repeatedly on these items after they break, which creates a disincentive for many to buy them as was traditionally customary.

Fifth, the high cost of these items is another reason that has led to the neglect of pottery art. Sellers, meaning those who buy the clay items from the potters themselves, also sell them at high prices compared to items made from materials like sheet metal, such as water jars (*mikungu*), bowls, water storage containers (*magudulia*), or plastic jerrycans.

Sixth, the lack of variety and quality in the items themselves, such as flower pots, cooking stoves, sugar containers, or clay dishes, makes people reluctant to use the same few samples every day. Furthermore, in discussions, some said that if this craft of pottery items were improved, they would be ready to use them, for example, as seen in metal stoves with a clay lining in the middle.

4.2 Reasons Why Some People Still Believe Pottery Art is Not Culturally Outdated and Remains Highly Important for Society

First, the art of pottery has economically empowered many people, who have made significant developmental strides in lifting themselves out of poverty through substantial business ventures here. For example, there are small-scale traders who started by selling pots (*vyungu*), water jars (*mikungu*), and incense burners (*vyetezo*) and have now become very large-scale businesspeople in Zanzibar.

Second, items produced through the art of clay pottery prevent harm to human health. This is because when cooking in clay pots, especially foods with acidic or sharp properties like lemons, limes, and tamarind, the clay pots do not rust due to the mineral nature of the clay. In contrast, cooking in aluminum or metal pans can. Due to this, many people in the past did not have diseases as prevalent today, thanks to the proper use of clay pots and water pitchers (*mitungi*) for drinking water. Furthermore, food is spared significant harm as it does not become bitter from leaching metals, compared to cooking in metal pots. Concurrently, food cooked this way is very flavorful with a good taste. Also, drinking water stored in a clay pitcher is sweet, quenches thirst effectively, and has no harmful effects on the throat or the entire human body. Third, the art of pottery helps preserve the cultural heritage and practices of the various communities of Zanzibar and the world at large. This cultural heritage is maintained by people upholding their customs and traditions through various art forms, including pottery, weaving, and embroidery.

Fourth, another importance of pottery is its role in identifying the art and culture of a particular or relevant society. Although pottery is an art that uses clay, each community has its specific craftsmanship or, in other words, a uniqueness that identifies those items produced. For example, in Zanzibar, there are water jars (*mikungu*) from Pemba which are different from those from Unguja and even from Dar es Salaam.

Fifth, pottery art preserves the environment and can be seen as a form of high-quality aesthetics. This is because environmentalists use special clay pots (*magudulia*) and pitchers (*mtungi*) for planting flowers as garden decorations. In many children's playgrounds, in large public gardens, and in government and private offices, various types of pottery items are used for planting flowers and beautifying the environment with the highest level of skill. These items are crafted in styles resembling beehives, antelopes, lions, and giraffes, making the scenery there more attractive.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss in general all that has been covered in this research. It will evaluate the extent to which the objectives set for this research have been achieved, along with a review of the research literature. It will also present challenges and general recommendations for future studies.

5.1 Evaluation of the Research Objectives

This research had a total of three objectives: to identify the meaning, types, and history of pottery art in Zanzibar; to investigate the reasons that have led to the neglect of pottery art among the younger generation; and to assess the cultural impact of pottery art on Zanzibari society (i.e., whether it is outdated or still holds value in society).

Regarding the first objective, it was achieved to some extent, as there are still few references specifically concerning pottery art in Zanzibar. Therefore, we relied more on general descriptions of art found in oral literature.

The second objective was met satisfactorily, as throughout the research process, we successfully interviewed various individuals, including the potters themselves, and obtained diverse data explaining why people might not favor this pottery art or choose not to use the various items derived from it.

The third objective was definitively achieved, one hundred percent, as many interviewees provided in-depth explanations that pottery art still holds great value in our society. They were able to give several reasons to show their preference for using pottery utensils in their various activities.

5.2 Challenges Faced by the Researcher

As is common, a major problem encountered in this research was the scarcity of references concerning the art of pottery. This issue caused the researcher some difficulty, as they wished to read various documents to obtain information, given that this research is both library-based and fieldwork-oriented.

Third, it was difficult to understand some of the terminology used in the art of pottery. However, because the researcher was determined to study pottery following a visit to Kiembe Samaki, they did not lose hope and were able to collaborate with various people to accomplish this.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the researcher's effort to study the culture of pottery art in Zanzibar, there are still many topics within the field of pottery that have not been researched. For example, the types of pots being made, as there were pots of many varieties like *vikaango* and *vyungu*, which require further explanation. Also, some other utensils warrant study; it is up to other researchers to write about the differences and uses of these items.

There is also a need for various research studies concerning other art fields such as carving, weaving, and others.

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