

Bakor Women in Pottery Production in Colonial Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper x-rays the performance of Bakor traditional pottery industry in colonial Southeastern Nigeria. It reveals that, contrary to popular textbook generalizations, the industry demonstrated considerable resilience and not only survived, but actually expanded in spite of or even because of colonial presence. The industry survived the harsh colonial economic environment as a result of a number of factors. One of such factors was that clay, the essential raw material, did not make the list of export items to Europe. This meant that producers were not starved of raw materials. Another factor was that there were no perfect imported substitutes for clay pots. For utilitarian and cultural reasons people preferred clay pots to imported varieties. Also significant was the fact that, as elsewhere in Nigeria, the pottery industry was the exclusive preserve of the women folk who were exempted from direct taxation. This meant that, unlike their male counterparts, they were not forced to abandon traditional economic pursuits in search of wage labour or production for export in order to earn the needed cash with which to pay tax. The paper also shows that colonialism actually expanded the market for Bakor pot manufacturers by breaking down traditional trade barriers along the Cross River. In this way their wares found their way into markets as far South as Itu and Calabar. The paper concludes by cautioning against sweeping generalizations in the assessment of the impact of colonialism on African societies.

Key Words: Bakor women, colonial Southeastern Nigeria

Introduction

The most pervasive perception of the influence of European colonialism in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, is that in performing its historic role of incorporating colonized economies into the western-dominated capitalist system, the colonial state stifled indigenous manufactures through the importation of cheaper alternatives to domestic products (Rodney, 1972: 190). This notion may perhaps explain Tangban's (2008: Chapter 6) omission of traditional crafts and industry in his discussion of Ejagham economy under colonial rule. Again, and of particular interest to us in this paper is the view that because British colonialism came with the Victorian concept of male-oriented leadership, ideology and structure, women were the most oppressed and marginalized segment of the population during the period of colonial rule in Nigeria. According to this view,

The advent of Christianity and the imposition of British judicial, social and moral attitudes, deprived women from (sic) their traditional social, religious and moral-control functions and completely ignored the collective participatory role of autonomous women's organizations in the communal set-up. The women's economic independence as small-scale agricultural producers, palm produce processors and market-traders were affected by the insensitive economic policies of the colonial government (Ekpo, 1992:1).

While the above views may be valid to very large extent, there is need to exercise some caution in accepting such sweeping generalizations. A few case studies have shown how, during colonial times, indigenous crafts demonstrated considerable resilience and not only survived but actually expanded in spite of or even because of colonial presence. A particular instance was the textile industry at Iseyin, Western Nigeria (Hopkins, 1973:250).

Bakor pot-makers in Old Ogoja Province of Southeastern Nigeria, the subject of this paper, provide an eloquent testimony to the resilience and resourcefulness of Nigerian women under colonial rule. A number of factors worked in favour of the Bakor pot industry and enabled it to survive and expand production despite the harsh colonial economic policies. But before analyzing these factors it is necessary

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to identify our area of study and comment briefly on the techniques, typology and marketing of Bakor clay products.

Bakor is a sub-group of the Ejagham ethnic group in the Cross River region. It consists of eight clans stretching from modern Ikom town to Ogoja which was the headquarters of Old Ogoja Province in Southeastern Nigeria. Because the Ejagham are a matrilineal people, women played a much more significant role in the economic and social life of the society than is generally acknowledged. Economically, women were independent of their husbands. Each spouse in the polygamous household owned his/her farm. The chief source of labour was the entire family but there was gender-based division of labour, though this was not watertight. The man who was the head of the family and other grown up males in the family ploughed the mounds on which yam seedlings were planted and staked the vines when the yams sprouted. The female members of the family were responsible for weeding the farms. Apart from agriculture women dominated petty trading business in Bakor society, as indeed elsewhere in Nigeria. Pottery is one of the most ancient of the traditions of the Bakor, and still exists. They are sited in Ogoja and Ishibori in Nkim clan as well as Agburumbede and Ikandangda in Nkum clan. In all the communities mentioned above, as indeed elsewhere in Nigeria, the industry was the exclusive preserve of the women folk (Tangban, 2008:105). This, as we shall illustrate shortly, was one reason why the industry was least affected by colonialism.

Production Techniques

The techniques were the same in all producing communities. The women went to the bush where the mines were located to scoop out clay, the essential raw material for the industry. As a result of repeated excavation, some mines could be several metres deep, thus making the mining of hard clay from them very tedious and even risky. The clay was then carried home where it was ground until a very fine texture was obtained. To avoid the pots cracking during firing, fine sand was added to the clay in appropriate proportions. Water was poured on the clay which was then worked with legs to produce a dough. An old pot was used as a mould for the base of the new pot. The method of pot building from base to rim described in detail by Simmonds (1993:147-8) was applied by Bakor potters, until the required pot was obtained.

An old sack made from local fibre was then wrapped round the partially dry pot and softly pressed to give it a special design. A few other designs were then added at the rim using the grooving method. This gave Bakor pots their distinctive character. Pots were made specially for utility/practical purposes, not as items for aesthetic appreciation, to be sold in craft shops. This probably explains the absence of elaborate designs on Ogoja pots generally (Decohorst, 1931:49). The pots were then kept in the sun to dry and later fired using the open burnfire method.

The dry season was the peak period of pot production for obvious reasons (Effah-Gyamfi, 1980:108). First, frequent flooding of clay mines which occurred during the rainy season was unknown during the long dry months of the year. Second, considering the fact that pot-making was only an adjunct, though an important one, to agriculture, the dry season when there was little or no work in the farms, provided the best opportunity to concentrate on the industry. Third, all operations took place in the open air, under tree shades. This meant that during dry weather, work would not suffer any disruptions occasioned by rainfall. Fourth, the intense sunshine associated with the dry season was the most ideal for drying clay pots. Finally, firewood, the main fuel for firing the pots, was easily available during the dry season, unlike in the rainy season.

Typology

Pots were made in a variety of shapes and sizes, depending on the intended use. The most popular of the pots were *etu*, *mkpangeny*, *ekpeke* and *ekpingrongho*.

Etu was a type of pot used for fetching water from the stream, and for storing water and palm wine. Pots meant for storing water, for example, were the largest in size and could hold up to fifty or sixty litres of water. This type of pot was kept inside the house and was rarely moved about except for occasional cleaning. Pots for fetching water were, for obvious reasons, smaller than those for storing it. Such pots could hold up to twenty litres of water, if they were to be used by adults. Pots used by younger persons were smaller in sizes, and ranged in capacity between five and ten litres. This category of pots generally had narrow rims, just wide enough for a calabash-cup to pass through. *Mkpangeny* were cooking pots that ranged in size from small soup pots to large ones for boiling yam, brewing corn beer and so on. A buyer chose the size that suited the number of household members to be served meals. This

type of pot had wider rims than the water pots. *Ekpeke* were bowls for various uses. The size of each *ekpeke* depended on the intended use. Those for bathing, for example, were bigger than those for washing hands before and after meals. Bowls for sharing palm wine were even smaller. They had wider rims than the cooking pots. *Ekpingirongho* were similar to *ekpeke* but thicker and heavier because of the purpose they served. They were meant for grinding pepper and other soup condiments. They were also used to serve food in liquid or semi-liquid form, such as soups or palm oil to be eaten with boiled or roasted yam. This category of pots had much wider rims than *ekpeke*. It should be added that the various types of pots were used in a variety of rituals depending on the nature of the particular ritual. From the fore-going brief, it is clear that clay pots were indispensable in every household or community.

Marketing : Arising from their numerous uses, it should occasion no surprise that clay pots enjoyed near insatiable demand both locally and from more distant places. The Mbube, Boki, Yala, Ekajuk, Ukelle, Izzi and other neighbouring communities were among the major consumers of Bakor pots (Murphy, 1992). Women traders played a central role in the distribution of the wares. These women took advantage of existing periodic markets in the general area to peddle the wares from one locally to another. They were highly mobile because, as Hopkins (1993:560) has observed, “the most effective way of connecting buyers and sellers was by bringing them together in periodic, rotating markets”

The communities of Old Ogoja Province had a five-day week and each clan had one major market which held on a particular day of the week. Neighbouring clans did not hold their markets on the same day of the week. Communities specialized in the production of items for which they were endowed with resources. Thus, Okpoma in Yala specialized in salt production because they had the resources; Boki, a forest community produced calmwood; while Nkim and Nkum, our study area, produced clay pots. The market women played the all-important role of going round the markets of producing communities to purchase products for resale to consuming communities. It was in this way that Bakor pots were distributed to the nooks and crannies of Old Ogoja Province.

Bakor pot-makers also developed far-flung trade connections covering the entire Cross River basin. Nkum and Nkim, the pot producing communities in Bakor, are situated on the bank of Aya river which joins the Cross River at Ofun-Nta, near Ikom. The Aya river was navigable by large canoes about nine months in a year and for steam boats up to Bansara at the peak of the rainy season. This meant that Bakor potters were effectively linked with the commercial network of the Cross River basin. Agwagune and Okuni traders travelled to Nkim and Nkum in large canoes some of which carried as many as 200 large pots each. The wares were transported down stream to as far as Itu and Calabar (Majuk, 1995:133),

The potters demonstrated perfect understanding of the laws of supply and demand. Accordingly, they tried to avoid overproduction with its attendant slump in prices. This was achieved by ensuring that each group of producers marketed their wares on alternate market days. Thus, for example, Ogboja and Ishibori in Nkim clan, who shared a common market, had an arrangement by which they marketed their wares in alternate weeks. The Agburumbede and Ikandagha producers in Nkum clan who also shared one market had a similar arrangement. In this way a slump in prices which sometimes resulted from over supply was as much as possible avoided (Connell, 1935:37).

The Industry Under Colonial Rule

European colonization of Africa, by creating export-dependent economies in the colonies, dealt a devastating blow on many indigenous manufacturing industries. However, as we stated earlier in the introductory part of this paper, we have to be cautious in making sweeping generalizations. As a result of a number of factors, and contrary to textbook generalizations, the Bakor pottery industry, like a few others elsewhere, survived the harsh colonial economic environment and even exhibited considerable growth.

One of the factors that worked in favour of the industry was that clay, the major raw material, did not make the list of export items to Europe. One reason why some indigenous industries like textile and leather work suffered severely under colonialism was that local manufacturers were starved of essential raw materials which were rather exported to feed the industries in the colonial metropole. In such cases, policies were formulated that denied local manufacturers the opportunity to buy raw materials. In the case of textile, for instance, the British Cotton Growing Association whose headquarters was at Zaria was directly in charge of cotton export. And cotton could only be bought through licensed buying agents. The process of obtaining such licenses for buying cotton for local use was deliberately made all but impossible. It was reported that in the 1940s, 80% of the cotton crop in Chafe District, a

major cotton producing centre, went to the export market. This was despite the fact that local cotton producers offered to pay nine pence per pound weight as against six pence per pound weight paid by exporters (Majuk, 1988:118). It was similarly reported that the famous leather industry in Sokoto was dying out as a result increased exportation of skins (NAK 1992:2). In contrast to textile and leather works, pot makers still had uninterrupted access to clay and this partly explains why production was not hampered.

Also significant was the fact that there was no perfect imported substitutes for clay pots. One of the ways that colonial economic policies smothered local industries was the flooding of Nigerian markets with imported, usually, but not always, higher quality alternatives. Indigenous textile and leather industries in Northern Nigeria were destroyed partly as a result of this (Majuk, 1988:118). No doubt, aluminium and iron pots as well as enamel basins were imported into Nigeria during this period. However, locally made clay pots had an edge over the imported varieties in some respects. Take the storage of water as an example. Clay pots store water far cooler than metal pots, especially over a long period of time. In fact, the longer the period of storage the cooler the water becomes. In contrast, water stored in aluminium or iron pots become warm after a few hours; the longer the period of storage the warmer it becomes. Considering the fact that virtually all of the population of Old Ogoja Province had no access to any form of cooling devices, it needs not be stressed that the clay pot remained the preferred means of storing water. This is especially in the tropics to which Ogoja belongs.

For fetching water from the stream, clay pots also had an edge over the imported ones. Clay pots meant for this purpose, as stated earlier, had narrow rims. This minimized the spilling of water while being carried on human head. Imported pots and basins, on the other hand, had very wide rims, and this made it easy for water or any liquid at all carried in them to spill over and drench the carrier. It should be noted that streams, rivers and ponds were the main sources of water for domestic consumption since there was no pipe-borne water. This meant that clay pots remained indispensable for fetching water.

Another advantage which clay pots had over imported metal ones was in food storage. Cooked food that was not consumed immediately preserved longer in clay vessels. Such food remained warm for several hours. On the other hand, food stored in enamel dishes got cold and unpalatable after a very short time. For this reason, people preferred to keep food in clay pots and bowls.

Another reason why Bakor pottery industry was least affected by colonialism was that women who were the sole producers were exempted from direct income tax. One of the ways through which colonialism disrupted traditional economic activities was the imposition of direct taxation. This forced the people to abandon traditional economic pursuits in search of wage labour or production for export in order to earn the needed cash with which to pay tax (Sharwood – Smith, 1948:40). Since women were not required to pay tax, their economic activities did not suffer undue disruptions.

Cultural factors also contributed to the resilience of the pottery industry during the colonial period. The people of Old Ogoja Province, like their Igbo neighbours, celebrated many cultural events during which it was mandatory for food and drinks to be served in traditional utensils (Ibeanu 1993:163). Each lineage, age grade, society/club or council of village elders had to be served palm wine in clay pots which the host had to fill as many times as each ceremony demanded. Even if the wine was brought in an imported container, it had to be poured into the clay pot meant for the occasion. The pot was usually conspicuously displayed at the centre of the venue of the celebration. In the same way, traditional meals such as pounded yam and soup had to be served in clay bowls. Apart from their use during ceremonies and festivals, clay bowls and pots were indispensable in the numerous religious rituals for which the people were known. For these reasons, clay products have retained their relevance to this day. It should also be noted that earthen wares were very fragile and broke rather easily and therefore needed frequent replacement.

Conclusion

It is indeed, interesting that rather than retard the pottery industry, colonialism indirectly contributed to promoting it through the expansion of markets for its products. Our findings corroborate Hopkins' claim that colonialism actually expanded the market for many indigenous manufacturers by breaking down traditional trade barriers (1973:121). In the case of the Cross River basin, it was British colonial power that broke trade monopoly erected by ethnic groups that occupied the banks of the Cross River down to the coast. Before this time, with the possible exception of the Aro who capitalized on the influence of their oracle to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries for the purpose of trade, long distance

trade along the river was highly restricted (Majuk 1995:137). E. A. Ayandele (1966:111) captured the true picture of pre-colonial trade in the region when he stated that:

Starting from Old Calabar the ethnic groups of Efiks, Enyong, Umon and Akunakuna were monopolists in their commercial activities. One tribe along the river would not allow the other to pass through its territory for the purpose of trade. The tradition was that the Akunamuna must sell to the Umon, the Umon to the Enyong and the latter to the Efiks.

The British were anxious to break these trade barriers along the Cross River in order to open up the interior to international trade. Consequently, many of their military campaigns conducted in the interior of the Cross River area were designed to ensure the free flow of trade (Majuk, 1995:206). Bakor pot manufacturers in Old Ogoja Province benefited from the opening up the Cross to free trade in that the market for their products was thereby expanded to as far south as Itu and Calabar. This certainly encouraged more production and higher incomes for the producers.

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