

Connections and Similarities of Ceramic Art Practices of Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundu of African Descent

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Abstract: The coincidence of similarities in the ceramic practice of Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundu has triggered this study. Emanating from literature, it is not strange how similarities could exist in the works of two different individuals from two different countries. Discoveries show that the duo had basic training of pottery/ceramics from the same institution and once upon a time, both of them were trained by the master potter, Michael Cardew. It is not certain if both ceramic artists have met before. The similarities between them is discovered not only in the area of their ceramics art but also in their career. Both have been in the academics and trained students in the area of ceramics, they rose through the ranks and became professors at different intervals. They both held vital managerial positions in the University level. Striking similarities emanating from literature show that the duo in their studios carry out traditional style of ceramics production (hand building), which is peculiar to African local technology in pottery. Both adopt the local firing technique (open air reduction firing) in finishing their art works and making it aesthetically appealing. Nevertheless, some peculiar differences were discovered and this is the point of their uniqueness. This study concludes that the duo of Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundu via the striking resemblances in their works have established a legacy of imbibing uniqueness of local tradition in terms of technology to promote indigenous art practice. Definitely, has gone a long way in encouraging upcoming ceramic artists to be indigenously unique in their practice.

Keywords: Connections and similarities, ceramic art, Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundu

1. Introduction

In Art practice, it is possible to come across similarities between one person's work and another. It is not necessary that artists with similarities in their art works have met or got inspired by each other's technique or style. It can happen by coincidence. There are recorded instances that similarities in art of people from different race, culture and tradition have been noticed by sheer coincidence. On the other hand, it is possible that similarities occur because such artists unknowingly for them, they may have ties from history. It could be as a result of attending same training institute at different times thereby are influenced by institutional art tradition or they have picked interest in the practice of the same mentor in an informal setting.

Ceramic artists have embraced the idea of multi-culturalism in their art to a greater measure than their counterparts in the other visual arts, such as painting and printmaking. This could be a result of the fact that most cultures have produced ceramic work from earliest times. Vessels have most commonly been made for a combination of functional, ceremonial and decorative purposes. They are usually used to carry food and drink, but they often serve the further purpose of commemorating certain important ceremonies [7]. While in history of art there are similarities in styles of different art forms such as paintings, sculptures and even pottery, these are viable ways of maintaining culture and traditions. No wonder in the works of the duo in this study, the styles and practice of their historic background is consciously or unconsciously been manifested in the manner of their individual pottery forms even up till date. It is not certain if Ahuwan ever met Odundu but the similarities of their practice is astounding. The continent of Africa has gotten proponents of ceramic art that have distinguished themselves and excelled in their chosen career to the point of global recognition. Among the proponents are Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundu. These two pottery/ceramic artists incidentally have been influenced at one point of their training or another by a common denominator. No wonder according to literature, they both have a connection with the Abuja pottery centre located in Nigeria for apprenticeship, which must have been the defining moment in their practices.[6] point out that the art of traditional pottery is mostly kick-started in the apprenticeship system. This apprenticeship is the teaching and learning of the pottery trade from the first principles of raw material appreciation, to the "doing" of the forms, down to the last stage which involves the firing of the products. This explains the kind of pottery skill learnt from Abuja pottery by Abbas and Odundu.[8] reveal that Odundu attended the West Surrey College of Art and Design, Farnham from 1973 to 1976; the same college Ahuwan attended from 1968 to 1972. This suggests that Ahuwan must have graduated a year before Odundu came on board as a student in the same institution. Odundu went through some training in Nigeria

traditional pottery techniques at the Abuja pottery founded by Michael Cardew. Ahuwan earlier went through similar training at the Abuja pottery in 1960s. Michael Cardew was actually instructor to both Ahuwan and Odondu at different intervals and also taught both of them at Farnham school of Art for their degrees in the same area of ceramics. The accounts of Abuja pottery and Farnham School of Art go a long way to reveal the reason behind the duo of Ahuwan and Odondu possessing similar trait of producing their ceramic pieces.

This study considers the following enquiry about Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odondu as the trust to guide: what is their historical profiles? What does their ceramic forms look like? What is their style philosophy? What similarities are there in their practice? What differentiates their practice? How have they been able to inspire the next generation? To go further, it is necessary to armed with some basic information regarding the two proponents of ceramic art.

2. Abbas Magaji Ahuwan

Abbas Ahuwan is a treasure in the Zaria Art School. He was born in 1947 to Magaji Ahuwan at Sakwak Bajju, Kamrun District, Zango Kataf Local Government Kaduna State, Nigeria. His career was kick started at the Sudan Interior Mission (S.I.M) School, Madakiya in 1955. Subsequently he transferred to practising School, Kagoro, before going to the S.I.M Senior Primary (Adachip) Kagoro in 1961. Ahuwan had his Higher School Certificate at Abingdon, Berkshire, United Kingdom. After the completion of his HSC, Ahuwan was given a sponsorship by Michael O'Brien to West Surrey College of Art and Design, where he specialised in ceramics and graduated with a 2:1 honours degree in June, 1972. He also obtained a Master's degree in ceramics from the United States and was introduced to American ceramics. Ahuwan was confronted with a pallet of mixed cultures with a high degree of freedom. It became clear to Ahuwan that having been trained in two alien cultures, he needed to develop a philosophy which relates to his own cultural background in order to avoid any contradiction on the way forward and this background formed the theoretical framework of the Hunkuyi-experiment. He was the president of Ceramics Researchers Association of Nigeria from 2001-2010 and was the editor in chief of the Ashakwu journal of Ceramics.

[9] states that "the works of Ahuwan are fully constituted by indigenous content. He uses the hand-building technique (see Fig. 1) and fires his wares using the open-firing technique where cornhusk, cornstalk, cow dung, firewood or sawdust is used as fuel. Mallam Mohammed Idi, a Hunkuyi potter, taught Ahuwan how to employ these Nigerian Pottery techniques". The ceramic art works of Ahuwan reveals mastery in the use of the traditional hand built method of production and also the traditional mode of firing which he preferably adopts of majority of his works. The resultant effect of open air reduction firing in Ahuwans works reveals an interplay of varied burnt effects that ranges from very dark to brown values. See Fig. 2 – 8.

In analysing Ahuwan's works, [9] reveals thus:

The *Kim Kim* is the most fascinating ceramic art form Ahuwan had ever produced. The work is richly embellished with a variety of elements taken from traditional Nigerian pottery. The *Kim Kim* is provided with three stands as if to emphasize the point that it was meant to be on display. Some of the traditional elements adopted by Ahuwan are the several studs that form part of the decoration. The arrows on the *Kim Kim* were actually the shape of the windows which Ahuwan saw on the Abuja Pottery House. Coincidentally, however, after he had produced them, he turned his attention to producing sculptural forms, which have no utilitarian function. The *Kim Kim* therefore, are the bridge between the utilitarian ceramics and the sculptural ceramics of Ahuwan. The overall effect of all these elements is the ambiance the *Kim Kim* possesses as an antique. The sculptural-ceramic forms of Ahuwan share a few elements with the *Kim Kim*. They are created and fired under the same methods. The differences between them however, are many. They do not necessarily assume the shape of gourds or pots and they do not have utilitarian value, except aesthetical value. They take different shapes inspired by a variety of things including animals like tortoises or decorated gowns. Their surface treatment is intended to fascinate the viewer through the intricate display of textural motifs, tones and hues. The variety in Ahuwan's works, captures the essence of his creativity.

3. Magdalene Odundo

The following is the biographical overview of Magdalene Odundo by [3], [7] and [11]:

Magdalene Odundo's career and life trajectories contain several seemingly paradoxical elements that she has been able to integrate skillfully and transform into strengths. These elements include her Kenyan heritage, art education in ceramics within the context of British studio pottery, and international exhibition history in both fine art and design. Magdalene Odundo was born in Kenya. As a child she lived for a brief spell in India before going back to Kenya. On her return she went to school locally, attending institutions and growing up in the bigger cities of Kenya, such as Nairobi and Mombassa. Thus, she lived an urban life style in Kenya and studied

at schools which were based on the British model. She first trained as a graphic artist in Kenya. In 1971, however, with the help of a sponsorship, she moved to England to continue her education in art. Odundo initially enrolled in a vocational course centred on graphic design at the Cambridge College of Art. The focus of the programme did not satisfy her, however, and she felt a strong need to pursue her innate affinity for clay. In 1973 she enrolled at the West Surrey College of Art and Design at Farnham, where she resolved to concentrate on ceramics and more specifically, on hand building and vessel-making. While still a student at the West Surrey College, Odundo enjoyed the enriching opportunity of visiting the Abuja centre in Nigeria. This was a potter's training school established in the city of Abuja by the traditionalist English potter, Michael Cardew, who aspired to expose African ceramists to more advanced techniques, while at the same time nurturing their own ceramic abilities and styles. At the Abuja centre, Odundo was taught hand building by influential ceramists such as Ladi Kwali, who is discussed later in more detail. Ironically, it was there, too, in Africa, that she learned to throw clay on a wheel. In 1975 Odundo returned to Kenya to research her thesis entitled "A complete study of woman's pottery techniques and the use of ceremonial vessels in rites of passage". She completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1976, after which she chose to travel. During her journey she had the opportunity to observe such important ceramists as Maria Martinez (1887-1980), who was one of the most influential native-American potters ever known. She then returned to England to do a masters degree at the Royal College of Art in London, which she successfully completed in 1982. Odundo lives in Farnham, England, where she works independently from her studio at home, producing hand built vessels mostly for direct sale to galleries and private collectors. She has had many solo exhibitions all over the world and has an international name. [11] affirm that "Odundo's ceramics are in the collections of leading art institutions, including the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they are interpreted in various contexts".

Regarding the manner of Odundo's works, [4] opine that "indeed, her art generates intensive discussion about the object, first as exquisite vessels, then in relation to other objects and global contexts of contemporary art practice, and to their presentation". [5] reveal that Odundo uses primarily coil built using a blend of red Etrurian marl and yellow brick clays, her pieces are burnished when leather hard, covered with slip, burnished again, then fired in a gas kiln. This method of production was part of the skill Odundo learnt from Ladi Kwali while she visited the Abuja pottery centre for apprenticeship. [12] describe Odundo clay forms as "evolution of the artist's distinctive formal language, in particular the swollen bellies and extended lips". Her attitude and approach to producing pottery that have a lot of traditional bearing has stood her out and made her internationally recognised. Due to success recorded in practice and in academics, Odundo became a professor of ceramics in 2001 at the University of the Creative Arts, Farnham and was also awarded the Order of the British Empire for Services to the Arts in 2008. More recently, she became professor emerita in the same institution she had been teaching. As a result of her dedication and achievements, she was appointed chancellor also. No wonder [4] aver that "by 2015 Odundo was as well a pathfinder, herein "pathmaker," a globally recognized ceramic artist and professional leader in art education".

Ceramics pieces of Odundo like that of Ahuwan are usually finished with traditional mode of decoration that took multiple times of burnishing and firing to achieve. Her forms are predominantly bore out of interest in the shapes of vases, but taken to a different level of stylisation. See fig. 10 - 15 of her works.

4. Contrasting between the Practice of Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundo

Considering the practices between the works of the Ahuwan and Odundo, there are similar factors that have brought the works of the duo closely related and likewise there are factors that have differentiated their mode of practice. Their mode of working in the studio suggests the traditional African mode of pottery production. See fig. 1 - 8 of Ahuwan and Odundo at different instances in their studio. Furthermore, in the area of gender, age difference and nationality, Ahuwan is a male and he is three years older than Magdalene Odundo. He is from Nigeria and based in the country. Odundo is a female. She is from Kenya but based in the United Kingdom. In the area of Academic career, Ahuwan became an academician and rose through the ranks to becoming a Professor of Ceramics in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. He retired from active service in 2017. Odundo on the other hand also became a Professor of Ceramics and the Chancellor of University of Creative Art, Farnham in 2018. In terms of their ceramics training, Ahuwan specialised in ceramics from the West Surrey College of Art and Design and graduated with a 2:1 honours 1972. He was trained in the Abuja pottery in 1960s. Odundo graduated with a first class honours in ceramics 1976 from the same University as Ahuwan. She was also trained in Abuja Pottery Centre and also in Kenyan pottery styles. In mode of production of their works, basically, Ahuwan adopts the hand built method of production in forming his art works. See figure 1. This method of production encompasses coiling, slabbing and pinching. Odundo also uses hand building in forming her ceramics shapes. Interchangeably and for convenience, she uses the different types of hand building where applicable. But it seems she favours the coiling method more compare to the other hand building methods. See

figure 8. In the area of body decoration, Ahuwan believes so much in textural surfaces that are dramatic and very conspicuous. These could be seen on fig. 2 - 7. This adds to the characteristic finish of his works. In addition, the effect of open air reduction firing which results in different shades of brown- black adds to the aesthetic appeal of Ahuwan's works. Odundo on the other hand is comfortable with the very smooth-shiny finish in which her works are generally made. The repeated burnishing and smoothing of her works gives them a perfect finish of excellent standard. Just like Ahuwan, she adopts multiple reduction firing to achieve her finished works. By contrast, Odundo's works possess more shiny effect compare to that of Ahuwan. Coincidentally, the duo do not apply glazes on their works but rely on the ingenuity of traditional firing. In the area of subject of exploration, Ahuwan's earlier explorations tilted towards musical instrument he termed kim-kim. Later on, Ahuwan's clay forms got inspired by zoomorphic forms as could be noticed in his works. See fig. 2 - 7. While Odundo earlier explored traditional clay containers such as water pots and so on, she later became influenced by feminine inclination towards flowers, probably, and this could be the reason her products majorly take the shape of vases in stylized manner. In terms of Firing, Ahuwan subjected his wares to initial biscuit firing in the kiln. To create the antique effect, he burnishes the same wares in an open air reduction firing. Odundo does likewise in the firing of her wares, subjecting them to multiple heat temperature for a desired finished effect to be achieved.

In terms of exhibition, available literature shows that Ahuwan has carried out few solo shows within and out of Nigeria when compared to Odundo's. He has also participated in group exhibitions. Odundo has carried out lots of solo shows and numerous group exhibitions both at home and internationally. No doubt, Odundo has gotten better visibility in terms of exhibitions. This could have been influenced by environmental factors and location of practice. This translates to the level of impact made. Ahuwa made international impact especially through his musical clay pots he termed kim-kim. But Odundo has made more international impact through her works. This is evident in her exhibitions at strategic museums in the western world and the volume of publications she has attracted for herself online.

5. Findings

There exists astonishing resemblance and likewise differences between Abbas Ahuwan's ceramics practice and that of Magdalene Odundo. From the manner of their production, firing and finishing they seem to be "twins" working together. There are also differences as discovered, in the area of body decorations and inspiration to their forms. While Ahuwan's forms look zoomorphic, Odundo forms takes from vases.

This study has revealed that even though it is not certain if Abbas Ahuwan and Odundo have ever met, they have quit a number scenario and engagement that have linked the manner of their practice in ceramics. More importantly is the fact that both of them studied and also carried out apprentice training in the same institutions though at different times interval but at the instruction of the same instructor – Michael Cardew.

Both of them found themselves practicing in the academic arena. They have made huge impacts by training students at all levels in the University system over the years. They both rose to the pick of their academic career as professors. While Ahuwan was appointed Dean of Faculty in Ahmadu Bello University as some point, Odundo became the Chancellor of University for the Creative Arts, Farnham at another time. Ahuwan retired in the year 2017 from active service, while Odundo has gone ahead to becoming Professor Emeriti in 2016 and still in active service.

6. Conclusion

The enterprise of studying the duo of Abbas Ahuwan and Magdalene Odundo, among the proponents of ceramic art from the African descent, reveals the relevance of maintaining unique traditions and culture in Africa local technologies. This goes to point out that no matter the extent of foreign education one has acquired, it only pays sustainably to develop along one's indigenous ideals to get to the world. This is the legacy Ahuwan and Odundo has established via achievements in their ceramics practices for the upcoming ceramic artist to emulate.



Figure 1: Abbas Ahuwan at work in his local studio at Hunkuyi Village, Zaria
Source: The Researcher

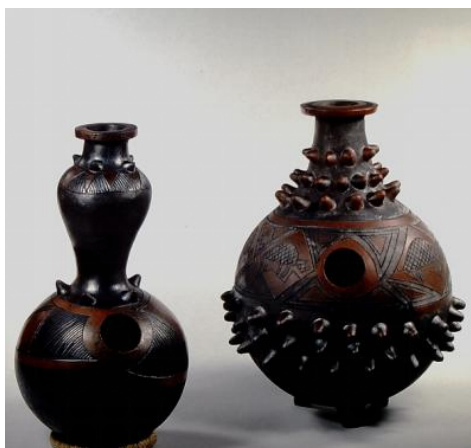


Figure 2: Abbas Ahuwan "Kimkim" (1989)
Source: Met Museum



Figure 3: Abbas Ahuwan, *Gown*, 1998, Terracotta,
39cm high



Figure 4: Abbas Ahuwan, *NM2*, 1999, Terracotta,
33cm high



Figure 5: Abbas Ahuwan, *Sculptural-Ceramic Form VIII*, 1998, Terracotta, 28cm high



Figure 6: Abbas Ahuwan, *Sculptural-Ceramic Form IX*, 1999, Terracotta, 18cm high



Figure 7: Abbas Ahuwan, *Sculptural-Ceramic Form XI*, c.1998, Terracotta, 12cm high



Figure 8: Magdalene Odondo at work in her Studio
Source: veniceclayartists.com



Figure 9: Magdalene Odondo, *Pot (2)*,
Source: British Museum



Figure 10: Magdalene Odondo, *Untitled*, 2000, a handbuilt, burnished ceramic, asymmetrical black ceramic vessel, Source: Celestine R Henderson / Bridgeman Images



Figure 11: Magdalene Odondo, *Untitled*, 1997, red clay, 50.2 x 33cm,
Source: Metropolitan museum

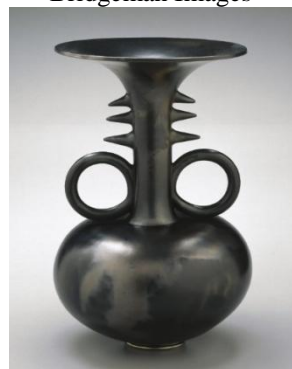


Figure 12: Magdalene Odondo, *Symmetrical Reduced Black Narrow-Necked Tall Piece*, 1990, terracotta, 40.6 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm, 16 x 10 x 10 in.,
Source: Brooklyn Museum



Figure 13: Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 1994, terracotta, height: 50.5 cm, Source: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions



Figure 14: Magdalene Odundo, *Vase*, 1982, hand-built (coiled) earthenware in an asymmetrical bag-shaped form with lustrous metallic surface, h. 28.5 cm, Source: British Museum

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