

# **Decline of Traditional Pottery Practice among the Afizere of Naton-Doss in Plateau State of Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

Described in this paper is how certain changes have affected the practice of traditional pottery of the Afizere cultural group in the village settlement of Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State. It gives a brief background history of the existence of the Afizere cultural community and, how intergroup relationship between the community and other cultural groups around them has influenced Afizere culture. Also considered are variables such as: the numerical strength of the Afizere community in relation to that of the other cultural groups around them; the impact of Islam and Christianity; the impact of Western system of education and the influx of modern facilities in the area as the prevailing problems militating against the practice of traditional pottery technique among the Afizere community. Thus, suggestions are made, that may encourage the younger generation of this particular cultural community to develop appreciable interest in their traditional pottery heritage and, avail themselves of the cottage or self-employment, and tourism potentials with which pottery production is known.

## **Introduction**

Culture is what most people are proud of because it is what gives one a sense of belonging. It is often referred to as the totality of a people's ways of life. Culture therefore, is what people learn within their environment to keep life going. It is what is done in conformity with the established rules and customs of a given society. Culture covers such aspects of life as agriculture, architecture, transport, family life, social life, language, religion, technology and art and crafts of a people. All these put together make culture to be dynamic. Culture is therefore not static as a result of man's interaction with his environment and his fellow men. As a result of this, there is hardly any culture in the whole world that is superior and has not been influenced by one thing or the other. However; the levels of influence vary from one cultural trait to the

other, depending on the strength of the prevailing forces.

The Afizere cultural group, like any other on the Jos Plateau, would want to preserve a good number of the artistic aspects of its cultural identity as a heritage; so they have maintained their unique style of flute dance steps called *Asharuwa*, for example. However, this is not the case with traditional pottery among the Afizere. Their traditional pottery practice, design and technique have been corrupted because of the influence of certain variables such as neighbourhood communities; modern education; the influx of modern facilities into the area; current economic activities; and their acceptance and practice of new religions such as Islam and Christianity.

## **The People and their Location**

Plateau state is a land of agriculture and scenic beauty. It is occupied by more than

two hundred ethnic and cultural groups as virtually all the different cultural groups in Nigeria can be found residing on the Jos Plateau. Some of these groups are large while some are small. Tracing the formation of various cultural groups on the Jos Plateau, Mangvwat (1984) identified four phases; **the first** being the prehistoric period between 200BC and 1000AD. **The second phase** was between 1000- 1700AD which was caused by the developments in the Kanem Borno region, particularly following the establishment of the second Kanuri empire which occasioned the emigration of groups of people who refused to be incorporated into the new Kanem policy to the Jos Plateau area. **The third phase** was between 1600- 1800AD which was known as the Jukun Kwararafa activities. This resulted in the massive emigration of people from different origins to the Jos Plateau. **The fourth phase** was between 1800-1907 AD. This was related to the coming of the Fulani herders and Hausa traders which culminated in the Sokoto Jihad. Ajiji (2009) opined that the entire Afizere cultural communities settled together at Shere hills when they first came to the Jos plateau. He is of the view that the Afizere clan that settled at Naton-Doss must have left Shere hills via Federe some 180 to 200 years ago in search of farm land, and this took them to their present location at Naton-Doss, where they settled with the Pyem; the Rumada and the Berom cultural groups.

Each of these groups that found themselves on the Jos Plateau in one way or the other within the years of intergroup relationship have exerted some level of influence on the original culture and lifestyle of the other groups. Naton Doss is a small village of the Afizere (Jarawa) cultural group whose population stood at 422 during the 1991 National census. Out of this figure, 223 were reported to be female. From the record of the brief history above it shows that before the inception of colonial rule in

Nigeria the Afizere community at Naton-Doss had settled in their present environment which is very close to a fast growing commercial town of Kadunu.

Prior to the inception of the British system of administration, each of these cultural groups though proximate to one another, ruled their subjects separately and according to their different cultural practices and beliefs Ames (1934). With the establishment of British colonial rule in Nigeria in the early 1900, these separate cultural groups were brought together under one paramount village chief with headquarters at a place called Langai. Langai is one of the four Pyem settlements located at the northern end of Gindiri, which is now one of the administrative districts of Mangu Local Government Area. Under this new development, the different groups within this long period of mutual existence and relationship have in various ways influenced the culture of one another; most especially in the fields of religion, language, commerce, social life style and art.

### **Numerical strength of the Afizere cultural group**

It is a common fact that any society that does not have the numerical strength of people who will continue to keep its cultural norms and values going on within a particular environment, is bound to face some level of cultural assimilation. This may lead to a total cultural extinction because, that culture will be submerged into that of the dominating group.

The national population exercise of 1991 showed that among all the surrounding cultural groups in the environment where Naton-Doss is located, the Afizere cultural group is among the least. Samirga village had 495; Kadunu had 1,770; Angwan Garba had 672; Patiko had 771; while Naton-Doss an Afizere cultural group settlement had only 422. This is an indication that the Afizere group at Naton-Doss are likely

prone to lose some aspects of its culture to those of the dominating surrounding cultures. It is no wonder therefore that, at the expense of pottery practice, there are presently more Afizere women practising the art of mat weaving, hitherto very popular among the Pyem women folks - the Afizere women pottery craft now apparently subsumed under the Pyem cultural influence.

### Clay Sourcing for Pottery

In the past the Afizere women learnt the art of traditional pottery from their mothers, and as part of the culture, a clan must have a clay pit from where every potter in the clan must source pottery clay. As a result, a village may have one or two big clay pits where all the women source clay during the pottery session. (Pottery clay in this village is not sold in the local market; it is sourced and dug freely). The Pottery session starts after all food crops have been harvested and stored. The day to go out for the digging of pottery clay is usually announced by a woman regarded in the clan as the chief potter. Women will then get ready to go out to source enough clay that will last them some weeks or months. The digging is also usually done collectively since the women will all dig from just one pit. By so doing, the younger and stronger women folks are involved in the digging exercise while the middle aged and the older and weaker women do the selection of what they consider as the good plastic clay into heaps. When enough of the good clay has been gathered into heaps, they are loaded into each woman's container and carried home for use. At home, every woman prepares her clay and builds her pots according to the culturally accepted size, shape and decoration, usually under the shade of a tree used as a common workshop.

Various shapes and sizes of pots that serve the cultural functions of the people are

made. Some are purely to serve as cooking pots; some as water coolers; some for use by the elderly; some are to serve as storage pots; some serve as water or eating bowls; some are for the fermentation of locally brewed beer; some are meant as standard (production) measures; and some are to be used as special granary covers while some are used to placate the elders in ritual places and at festivals. (Each of these pots has its special local name which usually specifies its function).

### Taxonomy of Afizere pots

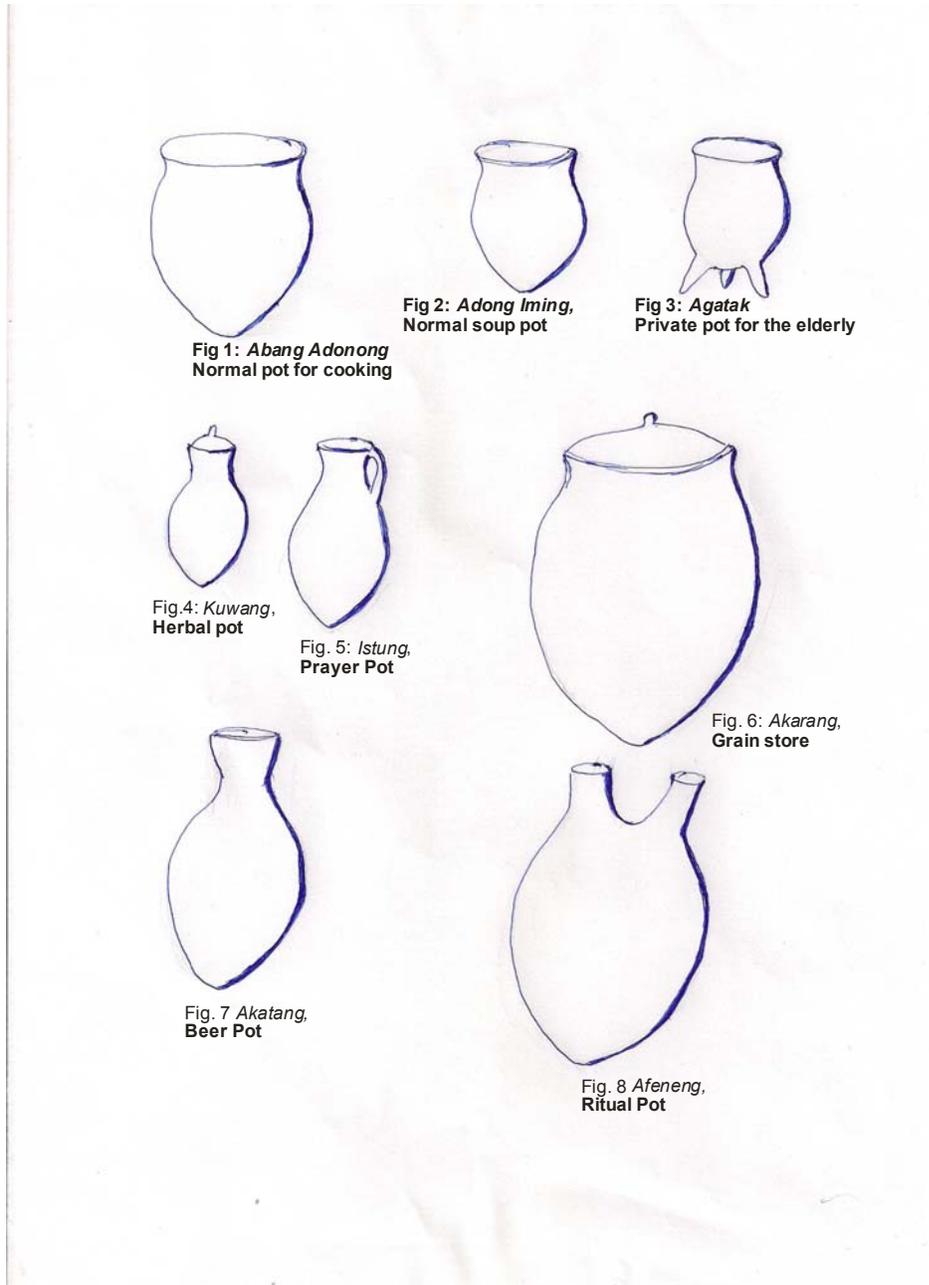
According to my respondents, Ishaku Bawa Atang and Yakubu Pada the pot meant for cooking of food is called **Abang Adonong**, the small pot specially used by elders for cooking of some special delicacies or soup is called **Agatak**. It is designed with three legs to enable it stand on its own even where there are no tri-pot stones to support. The usual soup pot used by women in the kitchen is called **Adonong Iming**; a small but oblong shaped pot that is used for the boiling of herbs is called **Kuwan** while the smaller one of its type, which is designed for the aged to boil water for washing of the face in the early hours of the morning is called **Istung**. The large storage pot which is as high as the height of a grown up person, is the type of pot used by all house wives to store their harvested food stuff, from where they would feed the entire family until the middle of the wet season when food stuff would scarce enough to make demands from the husbands' granaries. This type of pot is referred to as **Akarang**. The water pitcher with narrow but long neck used for fetching water from the stream and also for preparing leaf oil, as well as, for the fermentation of locally brewed beer is called **Afeneng**. **Akatang** which is used for the storage of beer meant to placate the ancestors and the gods has the same shape with **Afeneng** which is used for social and everyday use. The

difference being that Afeneng has two separate rims.

Every woman is free to produce any kind of pot she likes, depending on the amount of clay she has. However, pots meant for ritual purposes are made by the older and very experienced women. Should

a potter finish her clay while her colleagues still have, she can go back to the pit to get some more or, be helped with some by a friend. If she prefers to go for more she may go alone or request someone or her daughter to go along with her.

### Types of Afizere Traditional Pots



### **Beliefs surrounding traditional firing of pots among the Afizere People.**

The Afizere tradition of firing pots was linked to some beliefs in the African traditional religion. It was a common belief among the traditional potters that prior to the day of firing, all the potters are supposed to be in sober mood, and to withdraw themselves from sexual urge. As a result of this, no Afizere woman potter is expected to spend the night prior to firing on the same bed with her husband. Also, a woman on menstruation should not go near the firing spot either because she is regarded as impure. And any woman who violates the former belief and has sexual intercourse with her husband the night before firing will have to stay away from the firing premises on the day the pots are being fired. It is believed that if these rules are not observed all the pots will develop cracks during firing or, shatter into pieces altogether because the god of fire will not be pleased.

Again, Afizere tradition demands that the women respect their husband's desires; as such, any woman who, in meeting her husband's desire, slept with him on the night prior to the firing day is expected to stay distances away from the firing premises. She may only request the other women to help include her pots among those to be fired; or, if she has grown up girls, in the alternative, she could engage them in the firing on her behalf.

### **Drying pots for Firing**

The women dry their pots slowly under the shade. They keep a daily check on the pots to ensure that the pots have not developed major cracks. If however, some cracks have developed they try to mend and avoid deterioration into major cracks. Cracks that appear after mending are usually tiny and are left unattended to until the real time for firing is ready.

According to the dictates of Afizere tradition no woman fires her pots by herself alone; she must do it with the support of other women or together with some other women potters. This rule was a kind of precaution against any fire outbreak in the process of firing the pots. As a result, firing of pots was usually a collective activity of all the women potters within a large compound settlement. On the day of firing it is usually the responsibility of every woman potter to gather her dried pots near the firing spot for pre heating under the sunshine in the early hours of the day. They inspect and mend all the tiny cracks which might have developed in the process of drying. It has been an old practice among the women potters in this area to fire pots in the evening prior to the local market day.

At the firing spot, the larger pots are always the first to be brought and placed near the firing pit because the big pots are normally first arranged inside the pit.

### **Pre heating and firing**

In the early hours of the day when the rising sun is hot enough precisely at around eight o'clock on the day of firing, the pots are taken outside and placed under the sunshine until about four o'clock pm to properly finish the drying process. Sometimes, large pots are again placed upside down on a tripod over a hot burning charcoal to further help remove the moisture in the body of the pots. The potters have learnt over the years of experience that pots still contain some moisture even when they visually look dry, and that such pots are liable to burst when they are caught by the sudden heat of the open fire. This treatment is done to all the big pots in turns, after which they are taken to the firing spot which is just an open field some few metres west of the compound. The selection of the firing position is scientific. The potters are always conscious of the direction of the blowing

wind at that period of the day. They have learnt through years of experience that during pottery season, the wind blows from North East to South West, as such firing their pots at the western end of their compounds will not cause any fire hazard to their houses.

The fuel used in firing pots is usually made up of small branches of dry wood, about three to four head pans of millet or guinea corn chaff, and eight bundles of some locally available grass specially used for firing purposes. Once the pots have been arranged, and the fuel is properly stoked, a more experienced woman among the potters is chosen to set the clamp on fire. She sets the pots on fire at several spots and withdraws to where her fellow potters are waiting; she 'reports' by lying flat on the ground before them with her face down, as a kind of prayer and request to the god of fire, for safety of the pots from any form of disaster.

Since all the materials used to fire the pots are inflammables, the fire burns fiercely and within a short period the entire stock is completely burnt. An inspection is quickly administered by the older and more

experienced potter(s) to see areas that will need more stoking; after which some more bundles of the dry grass are quickly added to the clamp. After about two or three more stoking, the firing is all over in less than one hour, but the ember is left to naturally cool over night.

#### **Arrangement of pots in the firing pit**

Before pots are arranged in the fire place, a layer of about 4cm or 1½ in. of millet chaff will be sprayed on the floor. The millet chaff serves as a cushion to the pots and also helps to retain some heat that will help fire the pots to the needed temperature. The pots will be arranged according to their sizes until all are carefully arranged on top of one another in a big heap. Large pots are usually stoked with some dry grass before they are arranged in the pit. The pots are carefully arranged in the pit in such a way that the rim of the next pot is placed facing the base of the pot placed underneath. In doing this care is taken to ensure that a small gap of about 2cm is maintained between one pot and the other. The gap is then filled up with more millet chaff, from bottom through to the top.



**Plate I: Pots being fired. (Photographed, 2010, by Author)**

### Unpacking the Fired Pot

Since the pots are left to fire over night, unpacking is done early in the morning of the next day, at about 6.30am when the day is already bright enough to see the fired pots, the women potters gather at the firing spot to unpack their already fired pots. It is the responsibility of the lady who sets the pots on fire the previous day to ensure that all the potters whose pots were included in the firing are around during the unpacking exercise. For the fact that the pots are still hot, she uses a strong long bamboo stick to lift out the pots. To ensure that all the pots are given careful treatment, she puts one end of the long bamboo stick into the pot she intends to remove out of the fire place and removes it. In a situation where a pot is so big that she can not lift it out alone, she is given some helping hands by the other potters.

As the lady in charge of the firing brings out the hot pots from the firing spot she places them around the fire place where the other women potters quickly use the fresh leaves in their hands to clean the ashes that must have come along with the pots. Immediately after the cleaning, an improvised brush, made from some *Acha* straws, is soaked into already prepared locust bean pods soaked in water and boiled for about an hour the previous day and quickly sprinkled randomly on the hot pots to provide some improvised brush marks. This pigment serves as a colouring agent and at the same time gives the pots a kind some reddish brown polish which looks like glaze on contemporary modern pots. The pigment also helps in covering up some of the pores in the pots. In addition the pigment serves as a kind of decoration on the pots as it provides a shiny finish on the affected spots.



**Plate II: Some fired pots. (Photographed, 2004, by Author)**

It is important at this point to take note of the following: The pointed base of the large pots for brewing local beer; the spots of the locus bean juice on some of the pots; as well as, the change in the (hitherto pointed) base of the smaller pot (top left hand corner of Plate II) are all as a result of outside cultural influence.

In order to understand why traditional pottery in this area is not being practised by the younger generation, the impact of Islamic religion, Western system of education, and modernization were examined.

## **Impact of Islam, Western Education and Modernization on the Life and Culture of Afizere**

### ***Impact of Islam***

Before the inception of British colonial rule in Nigeria all the cultural groups living within the area of study were worshipers and believers in the popular African Traditional Religion. The proximity of Naton-Doss to Bauchi and Bauchi's growing commercial activities as well as her emirate status (bequeathed by the Dan-Fodio Jihad) influenced Naton-Doss in one way or another. Similarly, a good number of the Pyem and the Rumada cultural groups embraced Islam as their new religion. According to Ajiji (2009), although the Afizere cultural group opposed Islam they were not opposed to associating with Muslims, for economy and 'prestige' reasons, as those who embraced Islam were treated as higher citizens among their fellow cultural folk. In the course of time, a reasonable number of them learnt the Hausa language while some embraced Islam and its practices. This led to their preference to communicate with people in Hausa instead of their mother tongue. This single act also affected some of their traditional arts which include various handcrafts such as iron/metal works, basketry, mat weaving, carving, and pottery, the most popular art of the Afizere women folks then.

### ***Impact of Western System of Education***

Prior to the introduction of western system of education to the Afizere community, the people had a traditional system of educating their younger ones and every member of the society had to go through it, as an integral part of their lifestyle. The system involved storytelling, festivals, observance of societal norms and lifestyles. However, this system was interrupted with the inception of the

Christian religion which started in Gindiri when the first Christian missionaries settled there. The Christian missionaries, according to Mbahi (2000), introduced a kind of education for the purpose of saving the soul. This system of education was aimed at teaching people how to read the Bible and also how to communicate their feelings in written form. Gindiri where this new method of education was introduced happened to be the British modern administrative district headquarters of the area to which Naton-Doss, the area of study is located.

The new Christian method of education soon spread to all the surrounding villages. In these schools the pupils were subjected to seat in a class room and be taught the principles and practice of Christian religion alongside other secular subjects such as reading, writing, arithmetic, art subjects such as carpentry, needle work, domestic science, weaving, and sewing, and variety of new games. But the art of pottery was not practically taught by the missionaries in the class room. The pupils were however, allowed to learn the art of pottery freely from their mothers and peer groups at home. This was the very beginning of the neglect of the Afizere traditional system.

In these way the missionaries through the Western system of schooling, the girls were taught other crafts such as needle work, sewing, cookery, weaving and crocheting. The girls found these new crafts very interesting and less cumbersome than traditional pottery. This made the younger girls to give up any interest in learning the art of traditional pottery, since it does not bring in much income in the contemporary setting.

### ***Impact of Modernization***

As development increases people all over the world want to change their lifestyle to go in line with their status and social standard. The traditional lifestyle of the Afizere

community at Naton-Doss has changed due to the impact of civilization and modernization. Many forms of art works which in the past used to be of paramount importance are no more regarded as such. They have lost their traditional importance as better and/ or more durable substitutes have come to replace them.

For example, in the traditional Afizere culture; clay pots were made of different designs and sizes to be used in every home for cooking, as storage containers, as water coolers, for boiling of water, as plates for serving food and beverages while some were made to serve some specific socio-religious functions in public or in secret places to placate the gods. With the inception of new religions (Islam and Christianity), together with the impact of modernization, some of these utensils are not being made again because of the dictate of the new religions, or because they have lost their traditional functions and aesthetic values to iron, aluminium, wood or glass utensils. This has negatively affected the traditional Afizere potters. To many, the art of pottery has no economic value when compared to the labour involved in the process. The consuming society has turned to iron or aluminium pots because they are more durable and lighter. On a visit to Naton-Doss in 1988, the researcher met four traditional potters: Kaka Anap, Kaka Abus, Kaka Akutsang and Kaka Agyer, and was informed that the Jos museum resident traditional potter (Kaka Binta Bako) also came from this village. But 23 years later, in April 2011, when the visit to Naton Doss was repeated, not even one Afizere traditional potter was found still practising. Only one of the potters the researcher met in 1988 was alive but now blind and too old to practise.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study has shown that the number of traditional potters in the area of study has very much decreased because of the prevailing contemporary economic, social, political; educational and religious factors that have contributed to the reluctance of the younger generation to develop interest in traditional pottery. Although these changes are inevitable because of the dynamism of culture, there is the need to preserve some aspects of our culture for educational purposes. Therefore, the following recommendations are proffered, to rekindle traditional pottery practice among Afizere group and, her counterpart cultural groups across Nigeria:

## **Recommendations**

The art of traditional pottery should be encouraged by parents at home and the skill should be taught at all levels of our education system.

The Afizere community should be encouraged to develop their tourism sites and activities that are of interest to tourists and artists, who would naturally buy the attractive and meaningful traditional pots.

As more and more of the traditional pots are made and sold, the young Afizere potters should themselves be encouraged to organize into cooperative societies for the sale of Afizere traditional pottery wares.

There is also the urgent need for the entire Afizere community to set up a museum of their cultural artefacts, so as to preserve some of these traditional pottery items that are no more in contemporary demand.

The state and federal governments should support setting up of community museums as a means of encouraging tourism.

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