

## **LIVING THROUGH TWO POTTERY TRADITIONS AND THE STORY OF AN ICON: LADI KWALI**

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### **Abstract**

*The history of the development of ceramic art practice in Nigeria will always have a pride of place for Ladi Kwali for her immense role. The efforts of this iconic personality are very remarkable, especially given her rather inconsequential background. This paper very briefly examines who this personality was, her humble beginning and rise to international stardom: in effect her transition from her traditional cultural domain as a traditional potter to modernity where she was introduced to the use of western technology. It very briefly considers her works in both domains and examines the impact of the transition on her ceramic art practice. It highlights the honours she received and wished there could emerge more 'Ladi Kwalis' from our pottery communities through the length and breadth of Nigeria, as that would impact very positively other Nigerian pottery cultures.*

### **Introduction**

The story of the development and practice of modern ceramics in Nigeria cannot be told without according a pride of place to Ladi Kwali. She was part of the pioneering effort and indeed carved a niche for herself through her efforts in the whole process. She lived through two distinct domains in her art practice: the traditional, cultural environment where she was discovered, and the modern, she transited to. And so for her it was a transition from tradition to modernity.

Ladi Kwali started from a small village of Kwali in the present Kwali Area Council of the Federal Capital Territory. She was born in 1920<sup>1</sup> to the family of late Mallam Shago Kyelese<sup>2</sup> in Kwali Village. She grew up in a family in which the women folk made pots for a living<sup>3</sup>. It was therefore not surprising that Ladi learnt to make pots, in which she also excelled, very remarkably. Her excellence in pottery making during her lifetime at the traditional cultural domain is summarized in some glowing testament: "even in the early years of pottery making, Ladi Kwali excelled in the crafts and her wares were often sold even before they were taken to the markets"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Ladi Kwali's Traditional Pottery**

And so was it with Ladi Kwali in the traditional, cultural domain in which she produced pots, traditionally Gbagyi, including the *randa* (Fig 1). The Kwali community of the Gbagyi area have for some decades produced pottery that are easily identifiable with the community. Their forms are therefore characteristic of their community; the community in which Ladi Kwali lived and also produced pottery. It is therefore understandable that she produced pottery that were characteristically Gbagyi, but accentuated with idioms that were characteristically personal. The traditional cultural environment she lived in, and also worked for, became therefore a strong factor in her forms and styles. The nature of her basic material, clay, came in strongly too as a factor that dictated her approach, echoed by the deep mathematical sense that Ladi brought to bear in her works. This engendered the symmetry she displayed in every piece.

Traditional pottery everywhere shares all the advantages and limitations of traditional pottery anywhere; advantages and limitations that mark them out for what they are. Ladi's traditional pottery were therefore no exception. For example, "their technical character remain unchanged: they are made without the throwing or potter's wheel; they are always open-fired; they are never glazed, although some of them are given the surface finish that would be mistaken for a true glaze"<sup>5</sup>.

Differentiating traditional pottery from glazed ware is the greatest practical advantage of the former that enables its being used over an open wood fire for cooking or for boiling water, without any fear of breaking them. This practical advantage of traditional pottery in this tolerance of thermal shock makes traditional pottery to be considered "superior to ordinary glazed pottery, and its only rivals are the flameproof porcelains and glassware of modern industry."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps one very strong feature that marks out Ladi Kwali, was the surface embellishing of her traditional pottery. Her pots were characterized by their incised decoration of animal forms. She preferred, for her figural motifs, scorpions, lizards, crocodiles, snakes, chameleons, birds and fish, although she produced pots she also decorated with geometric, linear patterns.<sup>7</sup>

### **Transits to Modernity**

The establishment of the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja (now Suleija) in 1951 by the renowned British potter, Michael Cardew<sup>8</sup>, constituted an important event in the life of Ladi Kwali. Three years on, 1954, saw Ladi Kwali join the Pottery Training Center as a worker, thus transiting from tradition to modernity. That move sign-posted a turning point in the life and ceramic art practice of Ladi Kwali, while on the other hand, the year marked an important interface between the two domains in the art historical experience of this iconic personality. Ladi Kwali now saw herself in entirely new domain. And so, what was it like for her? What were the implications for her?

The transition from tradition to modernity meant so much for Ladi Kwali as she not only had to begin to master her new environment but also had to abandon some of her traditional production practices and techniques for a new western technology. In a situation that contrasted sharply with what it was in the traditional cultural domain, Ladi had to work and produce pottery on the potter's wheel. For her it was the first ever feel of western technology in the process of pottery production. For her, the firing of pottery was no more to be open air but instead in a device made for the purpose by western technology; a device known as the Kiln. With the introduction of the Kiln, Ladi would no more produce biscuit wares or terra cotta but would

rather have her works glazed. For Ladi Kwali there was therefore a very strong contrast between the traditional and the modern, two distinct domains she inevitably had to experience, having transited from one to the other.

Perhaps no statement could be more succinct in differentiating between these two domains, traditional and modern, experienced by this toast of a potter than that by the African Voices Journal when it notes: “the whirl of mechanized wheels filled the air as potters adopted the most modern of techniques into the ancient art of pot making”<sup>9</sup>. In effect, Ladi’s transition from tradition to modernity brought her face to face with a technology she was experiencing for the first time in her life. There were the potter’s wheel, and the kiln for firing pottery. There were the glazes for the adornment of the surfaces of her pots. She also had to contend with higher temperature firing and other experiences in the tradition of the European studio pottery which she needed to master.

Remarkably, in bracing up to the new challenges posed for her by the introduction of Western technology to the art of pottery making, “Ladi Kwali proved to have a natural ability to throw”<sup>10</sup> on the potter’s wheel. Her mastery of the potter’s wheel and consequently her perfection of the art of throwing informed her introduction of forms she never had produced before: Tankards (Fig 6), coffee cups, casseroles and many more other forms. For her, it was a most exciting experience as echoed by the zeal and dexterity she displayed in her works.

Ladi’s attainment of excellence in the use of the new technology did not diminish Michael Cardew’s strong interest to ensure the preservation of the traditional Gbagyi pottery Ladi had excelled in making before joining the centre. At the Pottery Training Centre, Cardew therefore designated a room to enable Ladi continue to produce these Gbagyi traditional pots. He named this separate room *Darkin-Gwari*<sup>11</sup>. It was a most rewarding experiment as these traditional Gbagyi pots were formed by traditional production methods and production completed through subjecting them to the vagaries of Western technology for firing and glazing.

With the establishment of the Darkin-Gwari at the Pottery Training Center therefore, Ladi relived her traditional production techniques alongside throwing. The water pots constituted the bulk of her modeled forms at the Pottery Training Center. And their new domain brought tremendous changes to the pots too, in physical structure, prices and even in usage by buyers. Of the traditional Gbagyi pots now produced by Ladi Kwali at the Pottery Training Centre, the African Voices Journal remarks:

*Ladi modified the design to suite the customers – collectors and tourists - who would use her kiln – made water pots for decorative rather than utilitarian purposes. Although exceptional as works of art, Ladi’s glazed water pots were unsuitable for local use, for the glazes made them heavy as transport containers and prohibited the evaporative cooling process for effective use as water coolers in the villages.*<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the physical structure of the pots, Ladi made their base flat, as against roundish, so that they could be stable, therefore requiring no support. The glazing of these traditional pots caused their prices to change. They became more expensive to produce than their original forms. But while it was so, the positive developments came in other ways: “these traditional pots produced by modern technology became much less breakable than the ones produced by local techniques, and they became collector’s treasures, now worth huge sums at auction, which neither Cardew nor Ladi herself could ever have envisaged.”<sup>13</sup>

Several other throw-ups followed from Ladi's transition to modernity from her traditional cultural domain and were felt very strongly in the area of surface ornamentation. She had over the course of time advanced her skill, and some of her works very much illuminate the sophistication she had brought into her production (Fig 2). The rather mathematical bellying and symmetry that she had perfected in her works were further enhanced with patterns she covered the surface of her pots with; a very remarkable advancement from where she once was. Ladi did not give up on the use of her premier and popular motifs which included the lizards, birds, scorpions, crocodiles and fish (Fig 3) but rather integrated them into her new collections. Her thrown works, at the Pottery Training Centre, were ordinary table wares as had been noted, which comprised different sizes and forms of jugs, tankards, casseroles and platters. Her tea and coffee pots which she seemed to have adapted from the traditional Gbagyi forms especially the *Tulu* (Fig 5), are globular in shape, with long necks and non-flaring rims. The jugs are topped with lids to which are attached knobs for lifting. To these tea or coffee pots are attached handles and spouts.

The climax of Ladi's production at the Pottery Training Centre was the application of glazes on her pots. Her works were glazed either with the chun or the temmoku, both high temperature glazes. Except for the application of glazes on her pots at the Pottery Training Center, the level of surface embellishment of her works differ from the modeled to the thrown forms. While the thrown forms are sparsely decorated with spiky leaf motifs, the modeled forms are more richly decorated with different animal motifs and geometric patterns. However a notable exception of her thrown form is the platter (Fig 4) which she elaborately embellished with one of her favourite motifs: the fish. In effect, in spite of the fact that she produced wheel-thrown forms, Ladi's specialty at the centre was "coil-built traditional style pots particularly the water pot, a broad-rimmed vessel with flaring walls that in village domestic use serves to transport and store water in Gwari homes."<sup>11</sup>

### **Honours and International Exploits**

Perhaps the most exciting and dramatic fall-outs of Ladi Kwali's transition from tradition to modernity was her international show-casing which was facilitated by Michael Cardew. Barely four years after she joined the Abuja Pottery Training Centre, Ladi had become well prepared for the international exposition which came first in 1958 and followed closely by another in 1959 through the exhibition of the works of the Center at the Berkeley Gallery in London.<sup>15</sup> The tremendous success that this exposition recorded accentuated Cardew's fame while Ladi Kwali was becoming a household name. The success she had begun to make of her ceramic art practice opened the door to other women potters although none of these was a match to Ladi Kwali.

In 1962 Ladi was again away in England for three weeks, during which she was demonstrating Gbagyi pot-building techniques. She attended yet another exhibition of the Pottery Training Centre's works at Berkeley Gallery.<sup>16</sup> But the hostile disposition that was beginning to build up in her fellow staffers at the Pottery Training Centre against her could not stop Ladi. She was again away from Nigeria in 1972, visiting many institutions and galleries in the United States of America. She demonstrated at the Howard University, Washington D.C., for students, staff and administrators, including Ola Oloidi, a student, but now a Professor of Art History.<sup>17</sup>

The international fame which Ladi had won through her ceramic art activity attracted for her several honours. She has been honoured in many ways, perhaps much more than anyone else with a comparative pedigree: the MBE (Member of the British Empire) in 1962 by the British

Government; the honorary doctorate degree in 1970 by the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, an honour described as “unprecedented academic distinction for a woman potter without formal education”<sup>18</sup>; the Pottery Training Centre renamed after her; the conference center of the luxurious Abuja Sheraton Hotels and Towers named after her; and in 2007 the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria printed her image on the new twenty Naira Currency notes, showing her throwing forms on the potter’s wheel (Fig 5).

## Conclusion

The name Ladi Kwali is one that has become unmistakable in the historical development of Nigeria and more particularly when the history of ceramic art practice is told. Ladi began from a humble background as a traditional potter. But her transition to modernity from the traditional cultural domain she began from marked for her a turning point, which ripples nobody, not the least herself, had envisaged.

Ladi pioneered the fusion of the traditional with the modern when she took a bit of the traditional to the Pottery Training Center as a worker. While she kept alive her traditional coiling techniques by which she continued to produce traditional Gbagyi pots at the center, the works were fired to a high temperature in the kiln. This practice contrasted sharply with her traditional pottery practice – the open-air firing. She therefore bridged the techno-cultural gap between the traditional and modern practice; a gap between the village and the town, between the traditional female potter and the sophisticated male ceramist in the tradition of the European studio pottery. Ladi worked to strike a balance between traditional design and modern techniques of production and so created for the urban folks what would have remained consigned for the traditional (village) folks. And with time, she internationalized the Nigerian pottery.

Ladi Kwali was readily acknowledged by Michael Cardew for the rare qualities she was endowed with. He remarks:

*We had four women potters arrive here in 1994... They all came from districts near Abuja because women from distant places can't dig themselves up and leave their families. They are doing well, Ladi is still prima inter pares.*<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that she won for herself numerous honours during her life time, and has continued to be honoured, even post humously. Ladi has left a legacy that will continue to stay with Nigerians. By her hard work she has left a permanent print of identity of what has become ‘Abuja Pottery’ in the modern Nigeria art scene; an art scene in which the name, Ladi Kwali, today looms large, albeit, from a rather inconsequential background. Perhaps the story would today have been different if ceramic art practice in Nigeria had had the fortune of many more ‘Ladi Kwalis’ emerging from the pottery communities scattered through the length and breadth of this country. The place of Ladi Kwali in the history and development of ceramic art practice in Nigeria remains unmistakable.

### Notes and References

1. Ladi Kwali's date of birth was given by Salamatu Yusuf in the funeral oration she prepared and signed on behalf of the Senior Pottery Officer at the Pottery Training Centre.
2. Alhaji Muhammed on the early life of Ladi Kwali. Alhaji Muhammed is the senior Pottery Officer at the Pottery Training Center.
3. Mallam Mekaniki Kyebese, who is Ladi Kwali's younger brother, discusses through one of his grandsons, Danlami, in company of his friend Rilwanu, in an interaction with the author in 2008.
4. African Voices, (2004) "Ladi Kwali, An African Potter" [www.Rit.edu/-africa/Ladi/Kwali/ladipgl.shtml](http://www.Rit.edu/-africa/Ladi/Kwali/ladipgl.shtml).
5. Cardew Michael, (1970) "Pottery Technique in Nigeria" (in S. Leith Ross) *Nigeria Pottery*, Lagos, Department of Antiquities, p.9.
6. Cardew, Michael, 'pottery Technique .....' p.9
7. Moloney, Liz, (2001) "Michael Cardew 1901 - 1980" *Nigerian Field*, Vol. 66 pt.2, October, p.4.
8. Moloney, Liz, 'Michael Cardew 1901-1980' p.5.
9. African Voices, 'Ladi Kwali...' The Journal makes comment on the Abuja Pottery Training Center, a new development in the history of ceramic development in Nigeria. The establishment of the center in 1951 by Michael Cardew saw the introduction of Western Technology into Pottery Production in Nigeria.
10. Pottery Studio Journal makes comment about the exceptional ability displayed by Ladi Kwali in the production of pottery at the Pottery Training Centre using the new western technology.
11. Agberia John, (1996) "Content, Form and Function in Ladi Kwali's Pottery: The Abuja experience" *USO: Nigerian Journal of Art*, Lagos National Gallery of Art, Vol. 1 No. 2, p. 5.
12. African Voices, (2004) 'Ladi Kwali, An African Potter'
13. Moloney, Liz (2001) 'Michael Cardew .....' p.4
14. African Voices, (2004) 'Ladi Kwali, An African Potter'

15. African Voices (2004) 'Ladi Kwali ....'
16. African Voices (2004) 'Ladi Kwali ....'
17. Ola Oloidi tells of his experience of Ladi Kwali during one of her visits to the United States of America, during which she demonstrated her traditional pottery making techniques in his institution, Howard University, Washington DC He was a student at the time. He is now a Professor of Art History.
18. Moloney, Liz (2001) 'Michael Cardew ....'
19. Agberia, John (1996) 'Content, Form and Function ....' P.6



*Fig. 2: Ladi Kwali's traditional Gbagyi pot, which she produced at the Pottery Training Centre, showing a tremendous advancement of her skill in surface ornamentation.*



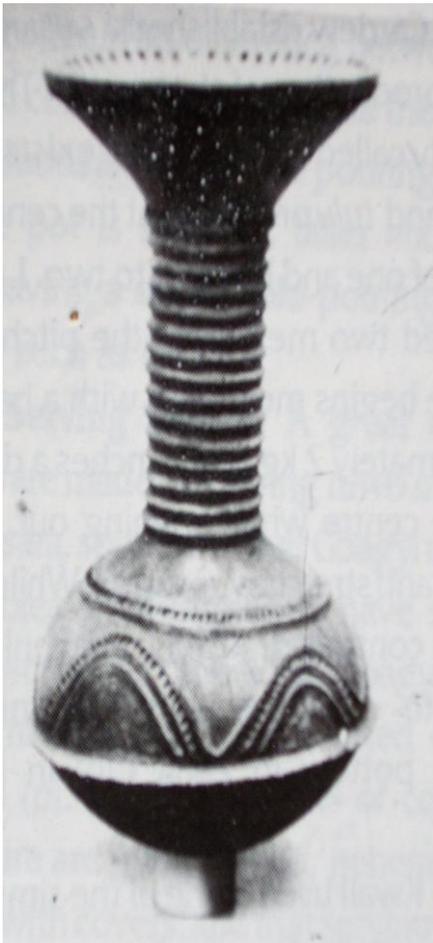
*Fig. 1: The Randa; decorated by incision and rubbing of guinea corn flour to emphasize the ornamentation.*



*Fig. 3: Ladi Kwali's pot: the wide flatish shoulders of the traditional pots had become replaced with rounded shoulders and much more rotund belly.pot (fig. 17).*



*Fig. 4: Ladi Kwali's platter, decorated with the fish motif and glazed with the celadon stoneware temperature glaze.*



*Fig. 5: The Tulu; elaborately ornamented with embossed patterns. The whole length of the slim neck is so painstakingly covered with embossed rings*



*Fig. 6: Ladi Kwali's tankard I, glazed with the chun glaze and fired in high temperature; decorated with spiky leaf pattern.*

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Sources:

John Agberia; African Voices; Picture Gallery for Abuja Pottery; Vintage 1960s.