

CHAPTER 9

A CENTURY OF CERAMIC STUDIES IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

OVER a century ago, one of the first monographs devoted to African pottery (Coart and de Haulleville 1907) announced many further developments in ceramic studies. To identify cultural facies, for instance, its authors relied on an intuitive multivariate analysis, eschewing the ‘tribal’ paradigm typical of 20th-century art history. Embracing the evolutionist theories of the time, they also viewed Congolese potters as modern equivalents of European ‘prehistoric’ ones, seeing this as an opportunity to develop a better understanding of the ancient potter’s art (Fig. 9.1). They thus paid considerable attention to tools, gestures, and recipes, looking for technical residues on finished products and even providing the mineralogical compositions of some potters’ clays.

The modernity of a publication whose overall tone and presentation are grounded in early colonial ideology should not be exaggerated, but it nevertheless heralded some major directions in African ceramic studies: close association with prevailing theories in social science; interest in large-scale comparisons; use of ethnographic analogy in archaeology; attention to technical processes. Completely missing, however, were considerations of the cultural history of those among whom pots and technical information were collected. This only started to change once western scholars acknowledged not only that African people had a past but that that past was worth attention.

This chapter summarizes the evolution of Africanist ceramic studies in ethnography and archaeology. Since they developed mainly independently in both fields, only starting to merge during the 1970s, they require separate consideration, which we structure in three chronological subdivisions. Detailed reviews of ceramic studies as a whole include Devisse (1984), Hegmon (2000), David and Kramer (2001), and Stark (2003).



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POTERIES DE LA RÉGION MARITIME.
 RAAR (art. n° 1021)

FIG. 9.1 Pottery collected from the coastal region of Congo-Kinshasa (now in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium), early 20th century. Source: Plate III of Coart and de Hauleville's *Notes analytiques sur les collections ethnographiques du Musée du Congo*, reproduced with permission from the Royal Museum for Central Africa.



DEVELOPING AN INTEREST (1900–1945)

Ethnography

Soon after Coart and de Haulleville's volume, another compilation of ethnographic data was published by the French archaeologist Franchet (1911a), who conceived of ethnography as an auxiliary to European archaeology. His evolutionist agenda compelled him to sort techniques according to their 'degree of evolution' and to look for the ancestors of some technical devices (Franchet 1911b). Unsatisfied by the quality of available data, he also devised a field enquiry form for travellers and ethnographers. Questions focused on the manufacturing process, but also considered sociological and religious aspects.

Serious work could have started at this point, but into the 1930s pottery was mainly relegated to the back sections of ethnographic monographs, even though the development of colonial museums and the intellectual impact of the German school of cultural diffusionism (*Kulturkreise*) generated increased attention for African material culture. Nevertheless, of at least thirty studies published before 1939, some stand out in regard to the details provided and/or the quality of their illustrations (e.g. Nicholson 1929; Arkell 1939). Most authors, however, lacked the experience needed to describe technical actions and especially the shaping process, severely hampering their modern use.

Dominated largely by English-speaking and Belgian scholars, most fieldwork was undertaken in relation to museum collections (Bentley and Crowfoot 1924) or in order to depict 'native customs', though the intrinsic importance of pottery making was also recognised (Macfie 1913), not least by colonial authorities concerned to improve the diversity and quality of its products and to find new openings for local crafts (Maquet-Tombu 1938). Sadly, much of the data recovered at this time remains unexplored in European museums (but see Drost 1967), and despite a few tentative suggestions (e.g. Brauholtz 1934), little was done to understand spatial patterning in ceramic techniques as the result of historical processes.

Archaeology

Archaeological pottery studies in Africa first developed among Egyptologists, most famously with Petrie's (1921) seriation of Predynastic pottery, though even this defined types according to a confusing mix of technical, ornamental, and morphological parameters (Peet 1933). Most early Africanist archaeologists were not concerned with pottery, however, focusing instead on Stone Age contexts and ignoring the history of extant African populations (Robertshaw 1990). The first classification of sub-Saharan pottery was thus that of Laidler (1929), who attempted to reconstruct the recent prehistory of southern African 'native' populations. Although infused with racist conceptions (Hall 1984), this was among the first attempts at using pottery remains for approaching African history, and at seeking connections between archaeological and ethnographical contexts.

Trained in Egyptology, Caton-Thompson (1931), who undertook systematic excavations at Great Zimbabwe and related sites in 1929, devised a classification of associated ceramics that helped prove the African origin of the complex. Her contribution was followed by those of Fouché (1937) at Mapungubwe and Wells (1939) at Mumbwa Cave. Connections between

ancient pottery styles and modern social entities played an important part in these southern African studies, and also in Uganda, where Wayland et al. (1934) related the presence of plaited roulette impression on archaeological potsherds to contemporary Baganda ceramics. Hubert et al. (1921) likewise exploited local ethnographic references in devising a decorative typology for ancient Mauritanian pottery, as did Griaule and Lebeuf in the Lake Chad area, their combination of archaeology and ethnography including a specific emphasis on techniques (Lebeuf 1937). Nevertheless, archaeological analyses remained essentially descriptive throughout the first half of the 20th century and largely isolated from contemporary studies of extant pottery traditions.

BROADENING THE SCOPE (1945–1970)

Ethnography

Although things initially remained much the same after the Second World War, new areas benefited from scholarly interest, especially in West Africa, paralleling a shift in the geographical origin of researchers, who included not only more French but also Spanish (Panyella and Sabater 1955) and Portuguese (Dias 1960) scholars, as well as the Malian Boubou Niakaté (1946), whose note on Soninke pottery was probably the first publication by an African scholar on such a topic; other contributions from African colleagues only appeared after independence (Nizurugero 1966; Eyo 1968). Field research was also increasingly professionalized. In France, Leroi-Gourhan's (1943, 1945) classification of techniques and the subsequent creation of the Department of Comparative Technology at the Musée de l'Homme had an evident impact on technological studies. Professionalism was also increased by a generalization of enquiry forms used in museums, anthropology departments, or Christian missions. A 1947 exemplar held at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Belgium) shows that information on rituals, taboos, social organization of the craft, location and characteristics of the workshop, names of tools and materials, and trading modalities were now supposedly recorded, together with a description of the manufacturing sequence (but see Trowell and Wachsmann 1953 for an example of lesser professional standards).

The postwar period also witnessed the development of large-scale surveys. In some cases, such as the collection made by S. Leith-Ross at the request of the Federal Department of Antiquities in Nigeria, this resulted in the development of pottery galleries at museums (Jos), as well as comprehensive regional catalogues (Leith-Ross 1970). In others, it involved compilation of earlier ethnographic accounts. Drost (1967), for example, sought to identify distribution areas, the size and positioning of which would provide information on the origin of specific technical traits (Fig. 9.2), though in this case an anaemic theoretical and methodological toolkit resulted in largely uninspiring interpretations. Lawton's (1967) study of 'Bantu pottery in southern Africa' also focused largely on description, but nevertheless made some interesting observations regarding how the shaping techniques used could be broken down into a 'basic' method and several technical 'developments', the distribution of which could help to subdivide or regroup ethnolinguistic groupings. Regrettably, the opportunity to discuss why the spatial distribution of formal and ornamental attributes did not match that of other—technical—aspects remained unseized.

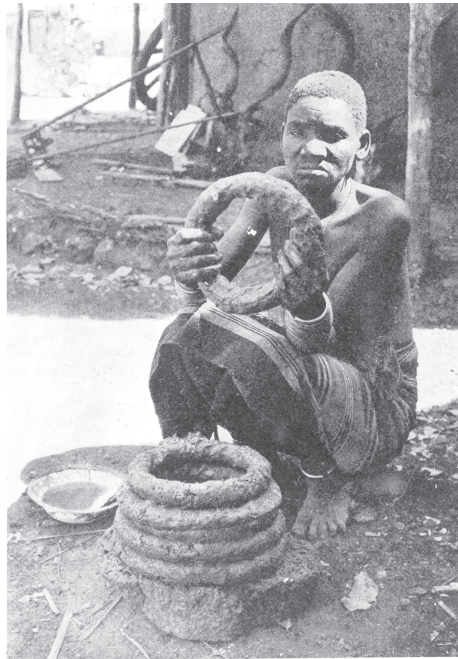


FIG. 9.2 Image of an Ila (Zambia) potter employing the coil-building technique, early 20th century, used by Drost (1967) in his book on African pottery to illustrate this technique. This copy of a photograph taken from Edwin W. Smith and Andrew M. Dale, *The Ila-Speaking People of Northern Rhodesia* (London: Macmillan, 1920, p. 192) was found in the archives of the section of prehistory at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium. Pencil marks outlining the potter and her work confirm Drost's use of the photograph.

ARCHAEOLOGY

The postwar period saw a surge of archaeological discoveries and a shift in research focus, with Africa's post-Stone Age history becoming increasingly fashionable. This placed pottery analysis in a better position, but again without drastically changing the way it was carried out.

West Africa stands out in regard to methodological developments. Although the region saw the first publication of pottery remains made by an African scholar (Nunoo 1948), there was for a long time only a remote interest in ceramic analysis (Devisse 1984). Most archaeologists considered pottery in combination with a large body of data, including written and oral sources. While this helped avoid fragmented views of the past, it also weakened historical reconstructions that were too often built on ad hoc typologies. Things started to change during the 1960s, with the publication of regional classifications such as that devised by Camps-Fabrer (1966) for North African and Saharan ceramics, which used both archaeological and experimental materials. With these works, pottery started to be used as a relative dating tool, even for rock art (Bailloud 1969).

Further south, archaeologists' interest in the Bantu 'problem' (de Maret, Ch. 43 below) had a strong impact. At first, the aim was to characterize pottery shapes and decorations in order to fill the gap of the 'protohistoric period' (Leakey et al. 1948; Schofield 1948; Hiernaux and Maquet 1957). Following major developments in the classification of Bantu languages (Guthrie 1948), some also started to view the simultaneous appearance of pottery and iron production as indicating the arrival of a new population. At the end of the 1950s, several authors made an explicit connection with the Bantu expansion, opening a research avenue that still survives. Some references were made to extant pottery traditions or oral history (Nenquin 1963: 272), but these topics never benefited from serious enquiries. With pottery analyses restricted to typological descriptions, archaeologists lacked a methodological framework for exploring relationships between archaeological remains and language expansion. As data accumulated, many felt a need to improve their understanding of pottery artefacts, and thought that they could achieve that in turning toward anthropology. This explains the plea for ethnographic enquiries made at the 1965 Burg-Wartenstein Conference (Clark et al. 1966: 117).

Some theoretical advances were, however, made during the period. Posnansky (1961), for instance, proposed to access past socioeconomic contexts through combining the analysis of the context of discovery with that of pottery stylistic and functional diversity. Adams in a key paper (1968) rejected the 'invasion' paradigm in explanations of culture change, and later pleaded for a more careful handling of archaeological data in the reconstruction of history (Adams 1979).

All in all, Africanist archaeologists' *Zeitgeist* at the end of the 1960s was dominated by methodological and theoretical concerns, with an increasing demand for revising former tools and developing new ones, among them regional typologies and terminologies. As a consequence of the Burg-Wartenstein meeting, further discussion on the classification of African pottery took place at the Second Conference of West African Archaeologists in Ibadan (Willet 1967). Compared to other parts of the world, however, Africanists' methods and theories remained undeveloped.

BUILDING A FIELD (SINCE 1970)

Ethnography

Major changes in African pottery studies were connected to the development of ethnoarchaeology. Not only did pottery benefit from professional enquiries, but data also reached a broader audience. At least two independent factors explain such development. First, western archaeologists saw the African continent as a good laboratory for testing new theories. Second, postcolonial politics led many western governments (including the United States) to invest in Africanist studies. This attracted scholars with new research interests and theoretical backgrounds.

Although the roots of ethnoarchaeological approaches run back earlier, 1970 was a pivotal date in regard to African pottery studies, as it saw Swiss archaeologist Gallay (1970) publish a detailed study of pottery production in two Sarakolé localities in Mali, slightly before David and Hennig (1972) did the same for a Fulani village in Cameroon. Both studies proved extraordinarily inspirational for a generation of archaeologists. For the first time, minute descrip-

tions of pottery making were provided, from production to consumption and discard, and new research topics considered (e.g. distribution networks, household inventories, lifespan of vessels). What differentiated the authors had less to do with theoretical positions than with research interests and training. In step with the burgeoning field of technical studies in France, Gallay offered a meticulous description of the manufacturing process. David and Hennig were more superficial in that regard, but made a detailed exploration of the consumption and use of vessels. Such differences were not purely coincidental. They illustrated diverging traditions in French and British approaches to material culture which developed from the 1970s onward, irrespective of the archaeological agenda (Coupaye and Douny 2009).

In the following years, archaeologists who had so far frequented potters during their leisure time paid them more attention. Pottery studies gradually expanded. An early and enduring example of ethnoarchaeology is the 'direct historical approach', in which modern pottery traditions are used for interpreting historically related archaeological remains. This developed initially in connection with existing archaeological projects and major archaeological departments. English-speaking Africa was especially well represented during the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g. Huffman 1972; Blackburn 1973; Crossland and Posnansky 1978). Perhaps the 'first truly ethnoarchaeological study by a non-Westerner' (David and Kramer 2001: 21) was made in Ghana by Effah-Gyamfi (1980), and there, as in Nigeria, an increasing number of African scholars found in the direct historical approach a way of exploring the past that was both scientifically sound and capable of including elements of living traditions. French-speaking Africa followed in the next decade (e.g. Bedaux and Lange 1983; Gallay et al. 1990). The geography of these contributions illustrates the changing fortune of post-independence archaeology research centres and teaching programmes, yet some poles emerged and strengthened through the years, among them the University of Ouagadougou and the National Museums of Kenya, where J.-B. Kiethega and S. Wandibba respectively initiated and directed dozens of pottery studies.

Two research projects using the direct historical approach stand out in terms of their geographical and historical importance and their theoretical sophistication. The first developed in the Banda area of Ghana (Stahl 2001), the second in the Inner Niger Delta in Mali (Mayor 2010). Both were long-term projects that involved painstaking and eclectic data collection, and maintained separation from the models produced by more theoretically oriented ethnoarchaeological research.

The later are typically associated with research into material culture patterning. As critical discussions are available elsewhere (David and Kramer 2001; Lane 2006), we do not go into details here. A fashionable issue at the end of the 1970s, 'style' was the focus of early ethnoarchaeological explorations. It was subsequently considered as a visible channel through which information about identity was deliberately communicated to foreign groups (Hodder 1979, 1982), a reification of worldviews aimed primarily at those who made and used the vessels (David et al. 1988; Sterner 1989), a materialization of social interaction networks developing at various scales (Herbich 1987), and a repertoire of technical, formal, and ornamental elements reflecting various facets of social identity (Dietler and Herbich 1989; Gosselain 1992; Gallay et al. 1998). Discussions about style faded out at the end of the 1990s as interests shifted to symbolic dimensions (Barley 1994) and broader considerations of social interactions (Dietler and Herbich 1998). Neither of these contributions led to the big 'law-like' models archaeologists had in mind when engaging in ethnographic research. Yet ethnoarchaeological studies have considerably increased our knowledge of the potter's world in Africa, and contributed to the building of invaluable

reference collections that currently allow for better reconstruction of ancient tools and techniques (Haour et al. 2010). Another legacy is a series of contemporary studies that explore how African potters actively shape their social world through manipulating techniques and materials (Fowler 2008; Gosselain 2008; Lyons and Freeman 2009; Mayor 2010).

The last decades have also witnessed increasing involvement by art historians. Crucial contributions from this field are culture-historical approaches that treat elements of pottery traditions as historical documents, comparing them at local or regional levels (Berns 1989; Schildkrout et al. 1989; Frank 2007). These studies join a growing body of history-oriented works in various parts of the continent (Pinçon and Ngoie-Ngalla 1990; Gallay 1994; Sall 1996). Although largely avoiding theoretical fashions, and choosing to publish mainly in German, German researchers have maintained a tradition of ‘thick description’ that confers a particularly high value on their publications (e.g. Hahn 1991; Platte and Steigerwald 1999). Increasing collaboration and exchange would benefit those interested in pottery making and material culture in general.

Archaeology

On the archaeological side, an explosion of research and theoretical discussion has also been witnessed since the 1970s. Pottery assemblages have become the backbone of long-term sequences and large-scale syntheses. Regions previously ignored, such as West Africa (Shinnie and Kense 1989; McIntosh 1994), the Sahel (Jesse 2010), and Congo (de Maret 1985; Wotzka 1995), have entered the picture. Sub-continental syntheses have also appeared, largely built on stylistic variations in pottery (e.g. Phillipson 1977). Analytical systems and tools vary considerably, but are usually detailed in publications, contrary to previous practice. A more recent body of regional studies focused on specific aspects of pottery (decorations, form–function relationships) is allowing for new historical interpretations (Desmedt 1991; Livingstone Smith 2007; Ashley 2010).

Strikingly, all these contributions have emerged nearly independently of one another. The only manifestation of an interest in broader theoretical debates comes from South Africa (Hall 1983; Huffman 1983) and an isolated criticism of the growing distance between theory and practice in archaeological classifications (Adams 1988). A recent field manual for identifying and classifying African pottery roulette may be indicative of a shift, as it results from the joint effort of a dozen scholars from various horizons (Haour et al. 2010); while the idea that classification methods have shaped archaeologists’ perception of identities (Huffman 1980; cf. Lane 2006) is also of interest.

The second major advance concerns pottery technology. Two independent traditions are attested in Africa. The first follows the American school of pottery ecology, as in Nordström’s (1972) study of Sudanese pottery, while the second is directly or indirectly connected to the French school of technological studies. So far, the latter’s impact has been more pronounced, with contributions devoted especially to ornamental techniques (Bedaux and Lange 1983; Caneva 1987) and shaping techniques (Huysecom 1996; van Doosselaere 2005; Livingstone Smith and Vysserias 2010). As regards decoration, technical analyses have also been combined with a reconstruction of ornamental ‘grammars’ or ‘structures’ (Assoko Ndong 2002; Gallin 2002).

Finally, a major issue such as the Bantu expansion remains mainly unresolved. Pottery analyses have played their part (see de Maret, Ch. 43 below), but still have to be fully integrated in historical reconstructions. What we need, more than ever, is to improve our under-

standing of the relationships between language, societies, and material culture. As pottery is one the few media allowing for an interface between the past and the present, and between archaeology, history, anthropology, and linguistics, the future may be bright. But this means becoming even more scrupulous and innovative in our daily handling of data, analytical methods, and theories.

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