

## **THE ROLE OF CERAMICS IN TRADITIONAL RITES OF PASSAGE IN AFRICAN RELIGION**

**Moses Ozidede**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,  
Delta State University  
Abraka, Nigeria  
mozidede@delsu.edu.ng

### **Abstract**

This study is integral in understanding the role that connects ceramics in the traditional rites of passage within various African cultures. Through a critical study of the varied uses and symbolic meanings of ceramics across different African societies, this paper sheds light on their contribution to the identity, continuity, and social cohesion of these African communities. Moreover, it highlights how these artifacts act as vessels of cultural transmission, carrying rich histories and teachings from one generation to the next, by weaving through the narratives and practices surrounding traditional African rites of passage. The research underlines the profound interconnection between material culture and intangible heritage, illustrating how ceramics are imbued with cultural significance far beyond their physical form. It suggests that the use of earthenware objects should go beyond mere utilitarian, but serve as significant symbols in the ceremonial practices associated with birth, puberty, marriage, and death rites.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Ceramics, Cultural Heritage, Rite of Passage, Material Culture.

### **Introduction**

Religion has profoundly impacted on cultural and societal structures across African continent and this has been the subject of extensive scholarly examination. Sanni (2016) and Beyer (2010) provide a foundational understanding of African Religion, emphasizing its communal nature and the lack of a clear distinction between the sacred and secular within African societies. African Religions are deeply entrenched in the rhythms of daily life, influencing moral values, social norms, and laws. This perspective is crucial for appreciating the holistic manner in which religion permeates African life. Muthuri (2024) offers a perspective that echoes a focus on the concept of a Supreme Being prevalent across various African religions. The works of Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agbada (2022), Hu (2022), Ushe (2017), and Mbiti (1970) highlight the polytheistic structure of embedded in African religious practices, with a supreme deity at the apex of a hierarchy of lesser gods and ancestors. This structure underscores the importance of ancestral veneration and the belief in a spiritual connection between the living and the dead. Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agbada (2022) in their critique of Western

interpretations of African Religion, argues for understanding African spirituality on its own terms. Sanni (2016) asserts that African religion should be viewed through the lens of its cultural and historical context, rather than through the imposition of foreign religious frameworks.

More recent studies, such as those by Abejirinde & Oyintonyo (2024) and Chando & Lufeyo (2023) explore the interaction between African religion and contemporary issues that include health, politics, and globalization. They discussed how traditional beliefs and practices are adapted in response to modern challenges, demonstrating the dynamic and resilient nature of African Religion. Lastly, the role of African religion in rite of passage is explored by Nwadiokwu et al. (2016), who delve into the ceremonial practices associated with birth, initiation, marriage, and death in several African societies. These rites are critical for understanding the community's social fabric and the transmission of cultural values and beliefs across generations.

### **Material Culture vs. Intangible African Heritage**

Whitaker (2024) and Scarpaci (2016) provide a foundational understanding and meaning of material culture, by defining it as the physical objects created, used, or valued by specific cultural groups. In the context of African heritage, by the researchers highlights the role of artifacts such as ceramics, textiles, and tools, which not only serve practical purposes but also carry deep cultural and historical significance. These objects often offer tangible connections to the past, allowing for a palpable understanding of the technological, artistic, and everyday experiences of African communities through time.

Conversely, McDonnell (2023), focuses on the intangible aspects of African heritage, emphasizing practices, knowledge, and expressions that, while not physical, are vital to the cultural identity and continuity of communities. McDonnell analysis sheds light on how oral traditions, performing arts, and rituals contribute to the social fabric and collective memory of African societies through cultural objects. Through this lens, intangible heritage is seen as dynamic and evolving, reflecting the lived experiences and values of people in a way that material objects alone cannot capture. The interplay between material and intangible heritage is further examined by Lenzerini (2011), who argues that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive but rather deeply intertwined. Hoeane and McGinn, (2021) presents case studies of traditional African rites of passage to illustrate how physical artifacts, are imbued with meanings that transcend their materiality, serving as vessels for intangible cultural practices and beliefs in traditional rites of passage. This perception elevates the importance of considering both material and intangible elements to gain a holistic understanding of African heritage.

In a comparative analysis, Ozidede (2024) highlights the challenges and opportunities in preserving African heritage. The research point to the vulnerability of intangible heritage to globalization and cultural

homogenization, stressing the need for innovative preservation strategies that engage communities and leverage technology (Salamzadeh et al., 2024). The authors also discuss the role of museums and cultural institutions in bridging the gap between material and intangible heritage, advocating for approaches that honor and sustain the dynamic relationship between these two facets of culture.

### **Historical Background of Africa Ceramic**

In the context of African culture, ceramics refer to objects made from clay that are permanently hardened by heat (Ojie-Ogwu & Ozidede, 2022). These objects include pottery, vessels, figurines, and various artifacts used in daily life as well as in special ceremonies and rituals. African ceramics are not only utilitarian but also hold significant cultural, spiritual, and symbolic meanings. They are often intricately decorated and can represent various aspects of African life, including fertility, spirituality, status, and community identity (Roberts, 2013). In traditional rites of passage, ceramics play a crucial role. They may be used in the rituals themselves, serve as gifts, or act as symbols of the transition being celebrated. The designs, shapes, and use of these ceramic pieces are deeply rooted in the history, beliefs, and traditions of African societies, making them an integral part of African cultural heritage.

In African folklore, ceramics hold a significant position in traditional rites of passage. These artifacts that are skillfully shaped from earth and rendered in fire carries with them deep symbolic meanings from the various elements that shape them (Okafor, 2020). Each piece, with its unique shape, designs and patterns, represents a prayer for the individual's journey through these pivotal moments or as a vessel of storage for the afterlife. Thus, ceramics serve as a tangible link between the physical and spiritual worlds, playing a crucial role in these cultural practices and the preservation of African heritage

Ceramic practices in Africa have an iconic history that dates back to thousands of years. The earliest evidence of ceramic use in Africa can be traced to around 10,000 BCE in the Sahara region, where communities used ceramics for utilitarian purposes such as storing water, cooking, and serving food (Ozidede, 2024; Donker et al., 2024; Haour et al., 2010). This period marks the beginning of a long tradition of ceramic craftsmanship on the continent. As African societies began evolving, so did their ceramic-making techniques and styles. By around 5000 BCE, the Nubian civilization, located in what is now Sudan, began producing finely crafted pottery that displayed a high level of skill and artistic expression (Adams, 2016). These ceramics were often decorated with intricate patterns and symbols that held cultural and sometimes spiritual significance (Onibere & Ottuh, 2024).

Nok culture of modern-day Nigeria in West Africa emerged around 1500 B.C.E and is renowned for its terracotta sculptures, which are among the earliest examples of figurative art in Africa. These sculptures, often

representing human and animal figures, were likely used in ritual contexts and demonstrate the cultural significance of ceramics beyond their practical uses (Franke, 2024; Gijanto, 2014). The spread of Bantu-speaking peoples across sub-Saharan Africa from around 1000 BCE also played a crucial role in the dissemination of ceramic production techniques and styles. These communities settled in various parts of the continent, they adapted their ceramic practices to local materials and traditions, leading to a rich diversity of pottery across Africa (Bostoen, 2018).

Africa is a continent famous for its diverse cultures and rich artistic traditions. One of the most intriguing aspects of African art is pottery. The craft of pottery has been an integral part of African culture for centuries, with each region showcasing its unique styles and techniques (Paulski, 2024). In North Africa, the Berber populations of the Maghreb region have been making pottery for millennia, with styles and techniques varying significantly from one region to another. These ceramics objects often feature geometric designs signifying their use in both everyday life and ceremonial contexts (Bratu, 2019). The introduction of the potter's wheel from the Middle East around the first millennium BCE marked a significant technological advancement in African ceramic-making (Thér & Mangel, 2024; Cutillas-Victoria et al., 2021). However, many African potters have continued to use traditional hand-building techniques, such as coiling and pinching, to this day, reflecting a deep respect for ancestral methods.

### **The Rites of Passage: An Overview**

Human life undeniably progresses through distinct developmental stages (Nyeseh & Mohangi, 2024), which play a crucial role in bridging our past and establishing a strong sense of belonging within diverse. Human existence is a journey marked by a series of changes from birth to death, which are the two most significant events in a person's life. Birth marks the start of a new life and is a significant, unique event that occurs within a specific cultural and social context (Wojtkowiak, 2020; Nwadiokwu et al., 2016). In other words, childbirth transcends being merely a biological event; it is also influenced by social and cultural constructs. These elements are expressed through symbols and rituals that reflect the social identities and cultural values of a particular society (Van Beek, 2002).

Rites of passage in African societies are culturally and socially significant, marking the transition of individuals between different stages of life. These ceremonies are deeply rooted in the communities' traditions and beliefs. They serve not only as a formal transition into new roles but also as a way to transmit cultural values, knowledge, and history from one generation to the next (Nyeseh & Mohangi, 2024; Nwadiokwu et al., 2016). This transmission embodies the collective identity of the society, reinforcing bonds within communities and with the ancestors. These rites can include ceremonies related to birth, adulthood, marriage, and death, each imbued with specific

rituals, symbols, and teachings designed to prepare the individual for their new status and responsibilities.

Beliefs and cultural practices are usually expressed through rituals, and it is seen as a fundamental platform to the African belief system. Among the most common rituals in indigenous African societies are rites of initiation or passage. These rites help maintain a sense of continuity and connection with the past, as they are often passed down through generations, preserving the community's heritage and identity (Ossai, 2024; Ohana & Anyim, 2021). In essence, rites of passage in African societies are fundamental to understanding the social fabric and cultural identity of these communities. They are a vivid expression of African philosophy, spirituality, and worldview, reflecting the deep interconnectedness of life, community, and the ancestral realm (Ehimuan, 2021). Rites of passage serve multiple functions, including marking the transition from one life stage to another, integrating individuals into the social and spiritual fabric of the community, and transmitting cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next.

### **Phases in the Rites of Passage**

The concept of rites of passage is a term coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 work "Les rites de passage," referring to ceremonies that mark important transitional periods in the life of an individual. Van Gennep identified that these rites typically follow a three-phase structure, differentiating stage in the process of transition from one status to another (O'Loughlin, 2023; Zhang, 2018).

- i. **Separation (Pre-liminal Phase):** This initial stage involves the symbolic removal of the individual from their current status or position in society. It's a form of detachment process where the individual is separated from their previous role or identity (Mahali, 2016). In traditional societies, this could mean physical separation from the community or the symbolic shedding of one's previous identity through specific rituals. For example, in initiation rites, this might involve the initiate being taken away from the community or their family, signifying the end of childhood.
- ii. **Liminality (Liminal Phase):** This phase is a period of transition, where the individual is no longer in their previous state but has not yet been incorporated into their new role or status (Le Hunte, 2022). It is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. During this phase, individuals often undergo trials, receive teachings, and experience transformations that prepare them for their new role in society. This stage is crucial as it's where the actual transformation occurs. The person is considered to be "betwixt and between" their old life and new life.
- iii. **Incorporation (Post-liminal Phase):** In the final phase, the individual is formally reintroduced to society in their new role or status. This phase

marks the completion of the transition (O'Loughlin, 2023). The individual, having gone through the trials and teachings of the liminal phase, is now accepted into their new position within the community with full rights and responsibilities. Ceremonies and celebrations often accompany this phase, publicly recognizing and reinforcing the individual's new status. For instance, in marriage rites, the public ceremony and celebration signal the couple's new status as a married unit within their community.

## **Case Studies**

When examining the role of ceramics in traditional passages of African religion and culture, several case studies emerge as particularly significant for their cultural importance and the depth of information they provide. These case studies illustrate the diversity and complexity of the role that ceramics play in traditional rites of passage across different African cultures. Through these examples, one can gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic and functional importance of ceramics in marking significant life transitions and reinforcing cultural identity.

### **Ceramics in Pregnancy, Childbirth and Naming Ceremony**

The most critical periods in women's health are pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum phase (WHO, 2015). While childbirth is a biological process, the experiences of pregnancy and labor are largely influenced by cultural perceptions (Kaphle et al., 2013). As birth represents a significant transition, cultural beliefs often lead women to adhere to specific traditions, starting from the desire to become pregnant (Kultur, 2008). Traditional beliefs, which are accepted as true without the need for proof, vary across cultures and are passed down through generations (Haileyesus et al., 2018). These cultural beliefs and practices play a key role in shaping the unique characteristics of people's ways of life (Isidienu & Chiejina, 2022).

Ceramics play an important role in childbirth and naming ceremonies across various African cultural traditions. These objects are skillfully crafted with precision and care, showcasing artistic talent while also holding cultural and spiritual significance that goes beyond their physical beauty (Hennessey, 2021). During birth and naming rituals, ceramics serve multiple purposes, reflecting the community's beliefs, values, and wishes for the newborn. Firstly, ceramics are often used as containers for offerings to ancestors or deities, seeking their blessings for the child's well-being and protection. These offerings may include food, libations, or other symbolic items, and the choice of ceramic vessels can reflect the specific traditions and aesthetic preferences of the community they represent.

Additionally, ceramics can be gifted to the family of the newborn, symbolizing various wishes such as prosperity, health, and strength. The motifs and

designs on these ceramics are carefully chosen to convey specific messages and blessings. For example, a pot adorned with symbols of fertility and growth might be given to wish the child a fruitful life. In some cultures, specific ceramic objects are associated with the naming ceremony itself. These items might be used in the ritual proceedings, such as pouring water or other sacred liquids over the child's head from a specially made ceramic bowl (Okafor, 2020). Such practices underscore the importance of material culture in connecting the physical and spiritual worlds. Furthermore, ceramics used in these ceremonies are often considered heirlooms, passed down through generations as tangible links to the family's ancestors and heritage. This continuity reinforces the child's place within the long lineage of the community and its traditions.

Specific objects made from ceramics that are commonly used in birth ceremonies include pots which are often used to carry water or herbal mixtures that are integral to the purification rituals associated with birth. Bowls are typically used for serving food and drinks during the ceremony, symbolizing hospitality and the sharing of resources. In some cultures Kanu, (2019) referenced that special bowl might be used to collect the umbilical cord and placenta as a symbol of the child's first connection to the physical world, which is then buried as a rite of passage, signifying the child's integration into the community, (Okafor, 2020). Also, Ceramic figurines often represent ancestors or deities and are used to invoke blessings for the newborn and their family. These figures serve as a link between the spiritual and physical worlds, ensuring the child is protected and guided throughout their life (Bogaert et al., 2008).

### **Cultural and Religious Symbolism of Objects Representing New Life Context**

These specific objects which are often crafted with great care and intention carry deep symbolic meanings, especially in representing new life. Their interpretation and significant role are as follows:

- i. **Vessel of Life:** Ceramics in the form of vessels or pots are commonly used to symbolize the womb. Just as a vessel contains and nurtures its contents, the womb protects and nourishes the developing baby. This symbolism highlights the protective and nurturing role of the mother as well as the safe environment the womb provides for new life to grow.
- ii. **Circle of Continuity:** Circular ceramic objects, such as plates or open bowls, can represent the cycle of life and the continuity of generations. The circle, with no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth. In the context of childbirth, it underscores the arrival of a new generation that continues the family lineage and the broader human story (Siwila, 2015).
- iii. **Figurines of Fertility:** Ceramic figurines often depict deities or symbols associated with fertility, childbirth, and motherhood. These may include

representations of mother goddesses, animals known for their fertility, or symbols of abundance such as overflowing baskets. These figurines serve as prayers or wishes for a successful birth and a fertile life for the newborn.

- iv. **The Protective Guardian:** Some ceramics are crafted to represent animals or mythical creatures believed to offer protection and guidance. Placed near the newborn or in the birthing area, these objects are thought to ward off evil spirits and safeguard the health and well-being of both the mother and child. They symbolize the community's wish for the child's protected and healthy start in life.
- v. **Seeds of Potential:** Ceramics that incorporate motifs of seeds, plants, or growth patterns symbolize the potential and promise of new life. Just as a seed holds the promise of a plant, a newborn represents the potential of a new human life. These objects celebrate the inherent possibilities and dreams that each new life brings into the world.

### **Ceramics in Adulthood Initiation**

In traditional African societies, ceramics play a significant role in initiation rites, acting not just as containers or decorative objects, but as integral components of the spiritual and cultural practices associated with these rites of passage (Uche, 2024). These ceremonies, which mark the transition from childhood to adulthood or from one status to another within the community, often employ ceramics in various forms and for different purposes (Mahmud, 2022). Specific objects made from ceramics that are commonly used in the adulthood initiation rites include:

- i. **Figurines and Statuettes:** These are often symbolic, representing ancestors, spirits, or deities. They may be used to invoke protection, blessings, or guidance for the initiates. In some cultures, these figurines are thought to house spiritual entities and are treated with great reverence.
- ii. **Pottery Vessels:** These vessels can be used for practical purposes, such as containing food, water, or medicinal brews during the ceremonies. However, they often also have a symbolic meaning, such as representing fertility, abundance, or the womb of the earth. The designs and decorations on these pots can have specific meanings related to the initiation rite.
- iii. **Masks:** Masks serve a dual function, they disguise the wearer, allowing them to embody ancestral spirits or deities, and they also represent the transformation of the initiate undergoing. The material, shape, and design of the mask can all convey specific messages and teachings.
- iv. **Ritual Altar Pieces:** Ceramics are used to create altars or sacred spaces within the context of the initiation rite. These may include bowls, plates, and other items that hold offerings to the ancestors or spirits being invoked. The arrangement and types of ceramics used can follow strict traditional guidelines.



- v. Beads and Jewelry: Some cultures utilize ceramic beads in their initiation rites. These can be worn by the initiates as symbols of their transition, protection, and the new responsibilities they are taking on.

### **Ceramics in Dowry and Marriage Ceremonies**

In traditional African religions, ceramics play a pivotal role in marriage ceremonies, serving both functional and symbolic purposes. The creation and use of specific ceramic objects reflect the cultural beliefs and practices surrounding this significant rite of passage. The creation process itself is often ritualistic, with specific prayers and chants recited to imbue the objects with positive energy and blessings (Uche, 2024). Through these ceramics, traditional African religions facilitate the transition of individuals into new social statuses, weaving the spiritual and the material into the fabric of communal life.

### **Ceramics in Death and Ancestral Rites**

The significance of ceramics in death and ancestral rites within the context of African religious practices is profound and multifaceted. Ceramics, often in the form of pottery, play a crucial role in these rites, serving both practical and symbolic purposes. From a practical standpoint, ceramics are used to create vessels that hold food, water, and sometimes alcoholic beverages (Okafor, 2020; Nwadiokwu, 2016), which are offered to the ancestors during various rituals. These offerings are a sign of respect and reverence, aimed at appeasing the ancestors, ensuring their favor, or seeking their guidance. The use of ceramics in these offerings is crucial, as these materials are derived from the earth, symbolizing a connection to the land and the ancestral realm (Donkor, 2024).

Symbolically, ceramics embody purity and transformation. The process of creating pottery—shaping the clay, firing it in a kiln, and sometimes glazing it for finishing—mirrors the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (Okafor, 2020). The Dakakari people, who reside near Zuru in Sokoto State, are well known for their funerary sculptures. Various stylized human and animal figures have been found on skillfully crafted clay graves. These graves are typically enclosed by small clay walls for families and stone walls for prominent individuals (Uche, 2024). This transformation from raw clay to a finished piece symbolizes the journey of the soul from the physical world to the ancestral realm. In some African cultures, the patterns and designs inscribed on these ceramic pieces hold specific meanings and messages intended for the ancestors, further enhancing their symbolic significance.

Ceramics can also serve as markers or memorials for the deceased. In burial practices, ceramic vessels may be included in graves as part of the goods meant to accompany the deceased into the afterlife, ensuring they are well provided for. Similarly, in some traditions, special ceramic sculptures or

figures are created to represent the ancestors, serving as physical embodiments of their presence within the community (Adjel et al., 2024). These figures are often venerated and cared for, receiving offerings and playing a central role in rituals intended to honor and communicate with the ancestors. Moreover, the durability and longevity of ceramics make them an ideal medium for maintaining the connection between the living and the deceased over generations. As these objects can last for many years, they become lasting symbols of the ancestral lineage and the ongoing relationship between the ancestors and their descendants.

For instance, pots and bowls are frequently utilized in rites to offer food and drink to the ancestors, acting as a bridge between the living and the dead. This is predicated on the belief that the ancestors require sustenance and care from their living descendants to ensure their well-being in the afterlife and, in return, offer protection and blessings (Uche, 2024). Figurines made of ceramics might be used to represent ancestors or spirits. These are often placed on altars or in sacred spaces within the home as a form of respect and remembrance. They serve as tangible connections to the spiritual world, embodying the presence of those who have passed and facilitating communication with them.

Urns are commonly used for the storage of ashes or remains, signifying respect for the departed and the importance of keeping them close. The design and decoration of these urns can vary significantly across different cultures, with specific symbols and motifs that hold cultural and religious significance. The use of these ceramic objects in death rites underscores the deeply held beliefs in the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, and the interconnectedness of the living and the spiritual world in African traditions (Ohana & Anyim, 2021). Each object, through its creation, use, and the context in which it is placed, becomes imbued with cultural significance and plays a crucial role in guiding the deceased through the transition to the afterlife, while also supporting the living in their process of mourning and remembrance.

## **Conclusion**

Ceramics have played several momentous roles in traditional rites of passage within African religious practices and in cultural context, serving both functional and symbolic purposes. As societies evolve, the tradition of ceramics within these contexts faces both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the increasing influence of globalization and modernization threatens the survival of these traditions, as younger generations may drift away from traditional practices. On the other hand, there is a growing recognition of the cultural and spiritual value of these practices, which could lead to resurgence in interest and participation, which also influences continuity and authenticity of these practices.

The global art and academic communities growing appreciation of traditional African ceramics offers a potential pathway for the preservation and revitalization of these cultural practices and artistic heritage. By documenting, studying, and promoting traditional African ceramics, we hope to ensure that this complex heritage continues to play a vibrant role in the rites of passage and broader religious practices of African communities. The prospects for the tradition of ceramics in African religious practices, therefore, hinge upon the collective efforts to value, preserve and improve these practices for future generations.

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