

The Power of Clay

By Kathleen I. Kimball

We ourselves are made from it. We stand and walk upon it, grow our food and store ground water in it, eat and drink from plates and vessels made of it, and when we reach for the stars, we cover our vehicle in tiles made from it. The power of clay is with us from creation myth beginnings to libation of our cremains, when, as Yeats said, “They but thrust their buried men back in the human mind again.”¹ But in addition to correlating earth and mind, humans have seen clay pots as people, clay bricks as containing the numinous, and clay objects housing the soul, the goddess, and the power to make things happen.

No one has yet proved what many suppose, which is that the earliest hominids (200,000 bce Neanderthals) first used clay. Perhaps it was discovered as primitive fire brick when soil in a fire pit partially baked; or perhaps it is, as Cooper has suggested, “natural” to have picked it up in the areas around the rivers²; or perhaps it was used to line baskets and when they were heated or burned, the clay remained. In any case, by 20,000 bce goddess figurines widely populated Europe.³ Gimbutas interprets 9000 year old figures as the life-giving/death-wielding regenerating neolithic great goddess.⁴

These images speak of the fertility of the earth itself as a power; the earth was a goddess, and her image was produced in her own substance, i.e., clay. By 4500 bce settled Near Eastern villages with geometric compositions on the pottery appeared. The continuing goddess meanings for these symbols in the Halaf and Samarra styles has been well established.⁵ By the time of Gupta India, (500ce) the words and rituals for making & using brick for temple building were long standing. Brick was the preferred material, since it was made of earth and fire, and therefore contained the “essence of sacrifice” and the essence of the diety within itself.⁶ The bricks, like the earlier neolithic figures, contained a power from the clay. This “presence” in an object is what Armstrong argues makes art at all.⁷ What I am suggesting is that clay is inherently the primordial substance of power.

From observing the role of the earth in the power of change, (seasons, daily sunrise and set, life & death), it is easy to see why both creation myths and funeral rites often still feature the use of clay. From the well known Bible story of Adam made from clay to Mud Diver and Coyote of the North American Indians, versions of such stories about the beginning of humans abound. Nor is there a shortage of funeral rituals. From that first paleolithic burial in pre-natal position in 200,000 bce⁸ to “dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return”⁹ in contemporary burial practices, we are presented evidence of the power of clay in our history and in our present.

And what of that present? Today a common social science methodology is the use of inferences between archaeological and ethnographic information. For example, comparing excavated rouletted African pottery shards with current rouletting practices in the same geographic area. Given the origin of homo habilis in the Olduvai gorge, and the probable spread from there throughout central and northwest Africa, it is reasonable to look at this area of Africa today to ascertain what remains of the ancient power of clay. Therefore, being mindful of the analogy between potting and procreation¹⁰, we turn our attention to central and northwest Africa. (See attached Map of Africa.)

Throughout Africa pottery is largely considered to be women’s work; and for the Yoruba the goddess of potters is a goddess of fertility. There are many taboos and rituals regarding the making and using of pots, e.g., while menstruating, Manda women cannot gather clay¹¹, and Asante women cannot make

pots. When a Gurensi woman dies her eating bowl is broken at the funeral as the pot is analogous to the body as vessel, and the body is no longer functioning.¹² Even decorative styles may reflect the body, e.g., scarification patterns appear on pots with the similar result of beautifying the surface.

An 8,000 year old tradition, African pottery is the preserve of archaeoethnology and art history more than ceramics, Michael Cardew notwithstanding. A wealth of information is now in print and beautiful colored pictures abound. (See annotated bibliography.) Thanks to these it is easy to learn about the variations in pot making and culture throughout the continent. Clay reflects change, tradition, and cultural values; e.g., depending on the tribe, women may be taught as children or only later by their mother-in-laws in a new patrilocal setting.

Clay has been special pots for people, events, and substances as well as part of daily life. It is also material for musical instruments, pipes, houses, and portraits, and it shares these roles with other materials, such as wood, ivory, and metal. It provides one of the only ways women may control their own money, but in many places is being replaced in some of its functions by imported plastic and enamel wares. It seems able to hold its own in specialized functions for which clay is a must, such as housing an ancestor spirit or initiation rites.

For example, pots are considered house of the spirit in Ife terracottas; Akan portrait pots of important figures ensure their continued influence.¹³ Similarly, Mma ancestral pots ensure the deceased are satisfied and the power over fertility protected.¹⁴ The ashe effect, that presence which comes alive when objects are used, continues to work in a variety of healing and conjuring vessels.¹⁵ While there are similarities in the pots and clay work of Africa, even within a specific culture area, such as Ghana or Nigeria, there are also tremendous differences in style, shape, and meaning. The history of Africa is written in its pottery, and contact with neighbors, distant Europeans, and the earth itself, are shown in a review of the work.

Beyond its ongoing and changing uses in Africa, there are many other contemporary testimonies to the persistent presence and power of clay. These would include the sublime and the ordinary, as in the conjuring vessels of African-American artist, Williams Harris II, earthworks as art¹⁶, bridal registries of China patterns, and kiln goddesses so familiar to many American potters. In the end, we are still of, with and returned to the clay of our ancestors, and the power of clay itself. If the architect Soleri is right that “mass energy is in the process of etherealizing itself into spirit”¹⁷, then how better to facilitate our evolution than by working with and through the power of clay?

NOTES

“Under Ben Bulben,” in *Collected Poem of William Butler Yeats*, MacMillan, London, 1952, p 398.
Cooper, Emmanuel, *A History of World Pottery*, rev. ed., Chilton, 1981, pp 12-3.

Campbell, Joseph, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, V I, *The Way of the Animal Powers*, P1, *Mythologies of the Primitive Hunters and Gatherers*, Harper, NY, 1988, p 25. Elsewhere, Campbell wrote “...no one familiar with the mythologies of the goddess of the primitive, ancient, and oriental worlds can turn to the Bible without recognizing counterparts on every page, transformed, however, to render an argument contrary to the older faiths.” Joseph Campbell *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Penguin, NY, 1964, p 9. But here the concern is with the earth’s early and inherent powers as the womb of fertility, the tomb of rebirth, the “power to make things happen.”

Gimbutas, Marija, *The Language of the Goddess*, Harper, SF, 1991. We should at least mention that a

hundred years before, Bachofen argued that myth and legend suggested the initial stages of society were matriarchal. See Bachofen, J.J., *Myth, Religion, & Mother Right*, Princeton UP, NJ, 1967.

Campbell, Joseph, *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, Penguin, NY, 1970, p 37.

Kramrisch, Stella, *The Hindu Temple*, V I, Motilal, Delhi, 1976, pp 100-08. Here again the old union of tomb and womb is found.

Armstrong, Robert Plant, *The Powers of Presence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1981. One is led to wide ranging speculations from these initial thoughts. For example, given the characteristic of clay to imitate other properties, (it can be made to look like metal, leather, etc.) could this very flexibility be part of what originally led to the mimetic thinking that objects made of clay carried power forward to other things? The contemporary Yoruba practice of curing elephantiasis involves preparing a medicine which is drunk from a vessel showing elephantiasis as the surface texture. What about the next step? Did the ability to imitate other substances in some way contribute to the decline of clay? If it were only an imitation of other materials, were the original materials superior and the clay then just a cheap substitute? In the process, was the power inherent in the clay forgotten? Is today's widespread disregard for and exploitation of the earth mirrored in the low status with which clay art is often held? Hmmm. Is it more than historic coincidence that the value of handmade pots seems to disappear with the agrarian societies that produced them?

Campbell, Joseph, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Penguin, NY, 1969, pp 66-67. Genesis III: 19 "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." And in the Book of Common Prayer we find the Prayer for the Burial of the Dead, read at the graveside, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life."

Barley, Nigel, *Smashing Pots*, Smithsonian, p.85.

Frank, Barbara, "More than wives and mothers; the artistry of Mande potters," in *Africa Arts*, Autumn 1994, p.28.

Smith, Fred T., "Earth, Vessels, and Harmony among the Gurensi," in *African Arts*, February, 1989, p.61.

Preston, George, "People Making Portraits" in *Africa Arts*, July 1990, p.71.

Soppelsa, Robert T., "A Mma in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," in *African Arts*, July 1990, p.78. Tucker, Yvonne E., "The Ashe Effect", in *International Review of African American Art*, VII, #2, pp. 61-66.

The first clay figures earlier described actually combine two concerns of contemporary earthworks artists: the human figure and the landscape. Rather than representing it, in the 1970's and 80's some artists, such as Anna Mendieta, chose to work in it. "... people's relationship to the landscape is one of the most significant expressions of culture, in many respects equal in importance to the relationship to the sacred." John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond*, Abbeville, NY, 1984, p. 2.

Soleri, Paolo, *The Bridge Between Matter and Spirit*, Anchor, NY, 1973, p. 250.

Map of Africa



Legend of Information

(Note: A name in the brackets refers to entry in annotated bibliography.)

1 Gurensi people (Smith)
potters & blacksmiths
earth has life force

2 Mongoro people (Lightbody)
only women touch clay
no touch clay w/in 40 days of death in extended family

3 Akan people (Gilbert)/terracotta heads and clan pots
Akan (Preston)/elites in terracotta

3a Anyi people (Soppelson)
elite terracottas called Mma

4 Yungur people (Berns & Berns)
ancestral spirit pots, pots to contact spirit world

5 Mangbetu people (Schildkrout)
anthropomorphic pots to show high status
pot ornament mirrors body scarification

6 Edo people of Benin City, Nigeria (Blackmun)
Oba (leaders) relief portraits

6a Ife
seat of soul in head and eyes, both larger than normal;
scarification of pots, especially heads, to match people

7 Nok – (900-400 bce) historic creators and users of terracotta figures

Abbreviated Annotated Bibliography

Adams, Monni, "Women's art as gender strategy among the We of Canton Boo," in *African Arts*, October 1993, pp 32-43.

Cultural anthropology on the Ivory coast; pots as feminist culture on pp 36-7.

Barbour, Jane and Simiyu Wandibba, *Kenyan Pots and Potters*, Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1989.

Nine useful historical and ethnographic essays on Kenyan pot creation, use and distribution. Geographically organized; b&w photos and line illustrations; bibliography attached..

Barley, Nigel, *Smashing Pots: Works of Clay from Africa*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994.

Fabulous pictures complement well written text; archaeological and historic ethnographic information combines with current practices and the cultural role of pots throughout Africa; good bibliography.

Berns, Marla C., "Pots as People: Yungur Ancestral Portraits," in *African Arts*, July 1990, pp 50-60 + 102.

Nigerian portrait pots as vessels of deceased male leader's spirit.

"Ceramic Arts in Africa," in *African Arts*, February 1989, pp 32-6 + 101.

Introductory article for *African Arts* issue focusing on African pottery, summarizes each contribution and issues, e.g., looting and illicit antiquities..

"Ceramic Clues: Art History in the Gongola Valley," in *African Arts*,

February 1989, pp 48-59 +102.

Culture contact, different meanings for similar pots in neighboring groups, argue for care in drawing conclusions from studies of style.

Blackmun, Barbara Winston, "Obas' portraits in Benin," in *African Arts*, July 1990, pp 61-9 + 102-4.

Explores the multiple interpretations of Nigerian iconography in palace portraits in Benin.

Bourgeois, Arthur, P., "Purpose and Perfection (Pottery as a Woman's Art in Central Africa), in *African Arts*, July, 1993, v. 25, #3, p 92.

Describes second new permanent exhibit in the National Museum of African Art in Washington DC.

Eyo Ekpo, *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art*, Federal Department of Antiquities, Nigeria, 1977.

Good history of Nigerian art with fair attention paid to the role of clay, from Nok to the present. Good pictures.

Frank, Barbara, E., "More than wives and mothers; the artistry of Mande potters," *African Arts*, Autumn 1994, pp26-37 + 93-4.

Good overview article touching issues of: power of clay; special status, marriage patterns and relationships between female potters and male blacksmiths. Bibliography.

Gilbert, Michelle, "Akan Terracotta Heads: Gods or Ancestors?" in *African Arts*, August 1989, pp 34-43.

Author suggests terracotta heads have more than one meaning and location (roadside, shrine, etc.) in Ghana.

Jegede, Dele, "African Art: Traditional and Contemporary Pottery," in *Studio Potter*, June 1988, pp 7-9.

Good overview article with bibliography.

Lightbody, Maya, "Mongoro Women Potters," in *Ceramics Monthly*, May 1987, pp 18-21.

Story of renowned women potters of the Ivory Coast; some good pictures.

Roberts, Jane, "To be a potter in Africa," in *Studio Potter*, June 1984, pp 67-73.

First in a series on anonymous potters of the world, describes Gambian potter's experiences (West Africa).

Preston, George Nelson, "People making portraits making people: living icons of the Akan," in *African Arts*, July 1990, pp 70-7 + 104.

Memorial portraits of the elite in Ghana are related to other cultural values and practices.

Schildkrout, Enid, Jill Hellman & Curtis Keim, "Mangbetu Pottery: tradition and innovation in Northeast Zaire," in *African Arts*, February 1989, pp 38-47 + 102.

Secular Mangbetu portrait pottery in Zaire corresponds to Belgian presence but builds on local and neighboring traditions.

Smith, Fred T., "Earth, Vessels, and Harmony among the Gurensi," in *African Arts*, February 1989. pp 60-5 + 103.

The Gurensi of Ghana make pottery and wall motifs using 4 meaningful motifs.

Soppelsa, Robert T., "A Mma in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," in *African Arts*, July 1990, pp 77-78 + 104.

Formal analysis of mma, portrait effigy statuettes made 18th-20th century.

Spindel, Carol, "Potters of the Ivory Coast," in *Studio Potter*, September 1990, pp 54-61.

Describes process of pot making by African village women; good color pictures.

"Kpeenbele Senufo Potters," in *African Arts*, July 1990, pp 66-73 + 103.

The age class system of the culture is reflected in how and when women are taught the technology of working with clay.