

# CLAY AND SPIRIT: ANIMIST VALUES IN TANGIBLE POTTERY ARTWORKS OF BENIN CITY

**Kennedy J. Eweka, PhD**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, Benin City

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the animist values embodied in pottery artworks of Benin City, Nigeria. Pottery, as both a functional and symbolic art form, has historically mediated spiritual beliefs, ritual practices, and communal identity in Benin. Drawing from ethnographic field observations, oral accounts, and secondary literature, this study examines the relationship between clay as material and spirit as meaning. This paper portrays that beyond utility, pottery vessels retain animist qualities expressed in their ritual uses, symbolic forms, and cultural narratives. However, the continuity of these traditions is increasingly challenged by modernization, industrial substitutes, and declining apprenticeship systems. The paper concludes by emphasizing pottery's role as both a tangible craft and intangible cultural heritage, calling for renewed academic and policy attention to its preservation.

## **Introduction**

Pottery has been an integral part of the Benin's cultural expression, shaping the spiritual, social, and economic lives of its people. Beyond its utilitarian role in cooking, storage, and domestic functions, pottery embodies animist values that align with traditional cosmologies of the Edo people. Clay is regarded not only as a material resource but also as a medium of spiritual agency, believed to hold transformative powers when shaped by the potter's hand and consecrated in ritual practice.

In Benin City, pottery traditions can be traced back to pre-colonial times, when vessels played a significant role in religious ceremonies, ancestral veneration, and symbolic communication. Despite rapid urbanisation and the influence of industrial materials, pottery continues to function as a vessel of cultural memory and spiritual symbolism (Ebohon, 2021). This paper examines how animist beliefs influence the tangible forms of pottery in Benin and how these traditions are being reinterpreted in response to modern pressures. See figures 1, 2 and 3.



Fig 1: This is Madam Dora Onaiwu (1944 – 2024) a potters at Oka-bere village, Benin City. Photographed by: Kennedy J. Eweka 09 July 2015, 09:31:46



Fig 2: Mrs Patience Iziegbe is a practicing traditional potter in Benin City and the daughter of Late Mrs Madam Dora Onaiwu above Photographed by: Kennedy J. Eweka 06 July 2015, 07:41:38



Fig 3: Mrs Patience Iziegbe keeping the pottery traditions going in Benin City. A craft she inherited from her late mother, Mrs Madam Dora Onaiwu (1944 – 2024) Photographed by: Kennedy J. Eweka 12 July, 2024 1:28

## **Literature Review**

Studies reveals that continuity and loss in pottery traditions in recent scholarship highlights both resilience and decline in West African pottery. A 2025 study on Benin shows that while modern vessels gradually replace traditional ceramics, cultural connections persist in ritual and symbolic contexts (*African Archaeological Review*, 2025). This pattern resonates in Benin City, where pottery retains ritual and symbolic roles despite reduced everyday usage.

It is heart-warming that educational and cultural revival in pottery workshops and exhibitions underscore its continuing cultural relevance. For instance, the 2024 National Museum of Unity (Ibadan) workshop trained students in pottery making, highlighting pottery's role in cultural transmission and heritage awareness (Tribune Online, 2024; Western Mirror, 2024). Networks such as Visions in Clay Artists Network (VICAN, 2024) also demonstrate pottery's evolving significance in contemporary Nigerian art.

In a comparative African insights research in Ijaye (Southwest Nigeria) reveals pottery's religious, aesthetic, and economic relevance (Ogunfolabi, 2021). Similarly, studies of Yoruba pottery traditions note that foreign influences reshape cultural practice but do not erase pottery's socio-cultural and spiritual significance (Adewale, 2024). These insights mirror the Edo experience, where animist values embedded in clay persist amidst modernisation.

Art and Symbolism in Benin Kingdom, in a Scholarly explorations of Benin Kingdom traditions emphasise symbolic meanings encoded in art practices, including pottery (Ebohon, 2021). Pottery is not merely a craft but a cultural text through which cosmological, environmental, and ancestral ideas are communicated. See figures 4, 5 and 6.



Fig 4: Sacrificial pots placed by various individuals as an appeasement to the spirits of the deities at a roundabout at Ekiadolor Community.

Photographed by: Kennedy J. Eweka 09 September, 2025. 8:05



Fig 5: Showing sacrificial pots used for the appeasement to the spirits of the deities at a roundabout at Ekiadolor Community.  
Photographed by: Kennedy J. Eweka 09 September, 2025. 8:05



Fig 6: Showing Sacrificial pot on Benin Lagos Road, by Ovbiogie, Benin City.  
Photographed by Kennedy. Eweka 09 September, 2025. 7:51

### **Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach. Field observations were conducted in selected pottery communities; Eguaioba at Uselu and Okabere Village within Benin City, with attention to production sites, ritual contexts, and markets. Oral interviews were held with local potters, ritual specialists, and elders, focusing on their perceptions of clay as both material and spirit. Secondary data were drawn from recent journal articles, reports, and museum initiatives (Adewale, 2024; Ebohon, 2021; Ogunfolabi, 2021; African Archaeological Review, 2025). The data were thematically analysed to identify continuities, transformations, and symbolic meanings.

### **Findings**

The study reveals that clay is widely perceived by potters in Benin City as a spiritual medium with inherent potency. Before its extraction, rituals such as libation are sometimes performed to appease earth deities, underscoring the sacred relationship between the material and the spiritual. Pottery vessels also play an indispensable role in ritual practice, particularly in ancestral rites, libations, and shrine activities, where specific forms such as water pots and offering bowls are consecrated for religious purposes. See figures 7 and 8.



*Fig 7: Benin Olokun ritual pot  
Photographed by Kennedy J. Eweka*



Fig 8: An Altar to the Olokun deity in Benin City owned by an Olokun Priestess Madam Rose Ebose  
Photographed by Kennedy J. Eweka 30 November 2015, 15:20:44

The symbolic dimension of pottery is equally significant. The shapes and surface treatments of vessels often carry meanings linked to fertility, protection, or communication with ancestors (Ebohon, 2021). Nevertheless, the everyday use of pottery has sharply declined as industrial containers—such as plastic and metal—have replaced clay vessels in many domestic contexts (*African Archaeological Review*, 2025). This decline has reduced the visibility of pottery to ritual, artistic, and cultural spaces. Despite these challenges, pottery continues to serve as a vital element of cultural transmission. While traditional apprenticeship systems are weakening, new initiatives by museums, networks, and cultural organisations are reviving interest in pottery among younger generations (Tribune Online, 2024; VICAN, 2024; Western Mirror, 2024). This ensures that the craft retains its relevance as both a cultural and spiritual heritage.

### Discussion

The findings affirm that pottery in Benin City embodies animist values that transcend its utilitarian role. Clay is not merely considered a raw material but is regarded as a sacred medium that connects the physical and spiritual realms. Through ritualised acts of extraction and production, clay is imbued with symbolic power, and the vessels shaped from it are understood as carriers of meaning within Edo cosmology. Pottery thus functions as both an aesthetic expression and a spiritual instrument, bridging human communities with ancestral forces and deities (Ebohon, 2021).

However, the practice faces significant challenges in the context of modernisation. The introduction of plastic, metal, and glass containers has displaced pottery from its central role in domestic life, leading to a symbolic dislocation in which industrial materials gradually

replace spiritually significant clay vessels (*African Archaeological Review*, 2025). This transformation illustrates a broader cultural shift, where economic convenience increasingly overshadows ritual value. Yet, it is important to note that pottery's decline in everyday use has not erased its cultural relevance. Rather, the art form survives most visibly within ritual practices, where it continues to hold irreplaceable symbolic significance (Ogunfolabi, 2021). At the same time, contemporary revivalist efforts indicate resilience within the tradition. Museums, cultural institutions, and networks of ceramic artists are not only preserving pottery knowledge but also reimagining it in ways that speak to younger generations (Tribune Online, 2024; VICAN, 2024; Western Mirror, 2024). These initiatives ensure that pottery is understood not simply as a relic of the past, but as a living practice that adapts to new cultural contexts while retaining its animist core.

The Edo case aligns with broader African experiences where pottery endures as both tangible craft and intangible heritage. Across different regions, clay objects are simultaneously valued for their functional utility and for the spiritual beliefs they embody (Adewale, 2024; Ogunfolabi, 2021). By situating Benin pottery within this wider discourse, it becomes clear that preservation requires more than conservation of objects. It involves nurturing the symbolic, ritual, and educational systems that sustain the worldview in which pottery is meaningful. In this sense, pottery remains a crucial site where material and spirit are continually negotiated, ensuring its enduring place in the cultural imagination of Benin City.

### **Conclusion**

Pottery in Benin City demonstrates that clay is far more than a material resource; it is a vessel of spirit that embodies animist values central to Edo cultural identity. The study has shown that the processes of extraction, shaping, and consecration are deeply embedded in ritual practices that affirm the sacredness of clay and the vessels it produces. Even as industrial substitutes increasingly dominate domestic life, the symbolic and spiritual functions of pottery remain resilient in contexts such as ancestral veneration, shrine rituals, and communal ceremonies. This persistence underscores the dual nature of pottery as both tangible craft and intangible heritage. While the decline of traditional apprenticeship systems has weakened the direct transmission of skills, emerging initiatives in museums, cultural networks, and contemporary art spaces are reinvigorating pottery traditions and ensuring their relevance for future generations.

In this sense, pottery continues to act as a bridge between past and present, embodying continuity amid change. Ultimately, the significance of pottery in Benin lies not only in its aesthetic or functional qualities but in its ability to sustain a worldview where material and spiritual realities are inseparable. Recognising and supporting this dual significance is essential for safeguarding pottery traditions in Benin City, ensuring that they remain living expressions of cultural memory, ritual practice, and spiritual imagination.

### **REFERENCES**

- Adewale, T. (2024). Yorùbá pottery tradition amid foreign influence. *ResearchGate*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387517855\\_YORUBA\\_POTTERY\\_TRADITION\\_AMID\\_FOREIGN\\_INFLUENCE](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387517855_YORUBA_POTTERY_TRADITION_AMID_FOREIGN_INFLUENCE)
- African Archaeological Review*. (2025). Disappearing traditions in a globalised society? Possible mechanisms of continuity and loss of pottery traditions in Bénin. *African Archaeological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-025-09619-7>

- Ebohon, O. (2021). Benin Kingdom's art traditions and culture. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 22(1), 93–110. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JUCR/article/view/255934>
- Ogunfolabi, T. (2021). Home grown; home inspired: The resilience of traditional hand built pottery production in Ìjàyè, Abéòkúta, Southwest Nigeria. *African Identities*, 19(3), 255–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1940839>
- Tribune Online. (2024, March 22). National Museum of Unity, IFRA-Nigeria engage students on pottery. *Tribune Online*. <https://tribuneonlineng.com/national-museum-of-unity-ibadan-ifra-nigeria-engage-students-on-pottery-preneur/>
- Visions in Clay Artists Network (VICAN). (2024). *About us*. <https://visionsinclay.org.ng/>
- Western Mirror. (2024, March 24). National Museum of Unity, IFRA-Nigeria trains students on pottery making. *Western Mirror*. <https://westernmirror.com.ng/national-museum-of-unity-ifra-nigeria-trains-students-on-pottery-making/>



