

Repositioning Pottery Practice as a Viable Tool for Poverty Alleviation in the South-South Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

The South-South region is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria where the people have been in the business of pottery practice for a very long time as other zones of the country. The region has gone through a series of challenges as a result of oil exploration and exploitation activities by various multinational oil companies in the region since the 1950s. One of these problems is environmental degradation as a result of oil spillage, gas flaring and fire disasters which have destroyed the people's means of livelihood as farmers, fishermen and traders. The region has been neglected and marginalised which has deprived them of economic power thus making the region very poor and undeveloped. The people have become slaves in their land and every attempt to make their voice heard has always been met with confrontation by joint government forces. The region is not free from the general economic recession which has made the government place emphasis on self-reliance, entrepreneurial studies, youth and women empowerment, and the establishment of the Bank of Industry and Micro Finance Scheme to mention but a few. All these are geared towards poverty alleviation in the region in particular and the nation at large. This paper, therefore, aims at repositioning pottery practice as a viable tool for poverty alleviation in the South-South region of Nigeria. It is believed that with the abundant clay and other pottery materials in the region and the high demand for pottery wares, the indigenes will acquire the necessary skills, source for funds and take to pottery practice to economically empower themselves and the region.

Keywords: *Pottery, Degradation, Marginalised, Alleviation and Entrepreneurial*

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Background to the Study

The South-South region is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. It is made up of six states which include Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo and Rivers States. This zone falls into the Niger Delta and the oil-producing regions of Nigeria. The region like other regions of the country has practised pottery for several years before the arrival of the Europeans to Nigeria. As a riverine area, the occupation of people of the region in addition to pottery practice is fishing. They are also farmers and traders. Over the years the region has gone through severe challenges and changes as a result of one problem or the other. The basic thing is that people, society, nations and the entire world are going through challenges and changes and the region cannot afford to be static.

The rapid population growth has resulted in unemployment and the activities of the multinational oil companies in the exploration and exploitation of oil in the area since 1956 have brought more pain than the gain to the region. According to Edewor (2016) “the Niger Delta environment has continued to be in one news much for adverse social vices due to petroleum oil exploration, exploitation and maladministration of oil wealth within the local and national circles.” Many statements have been generated to express the immediate and long-term socio-economic and political effects of oil exploitation assault on host communities. The South-South region has experienced very devastating environmental degradation where the air, water and land have been destroyed by oil spillage, gas flaring and fire disasters. This has polluted and destroyed the people's means of livelihood as fishermen, farmers and traders. The indigenes of the area have been rendered jobless and poverty has taken over the area. This has brought about youths' restiveness, aggression, agitation, drug abuse, violent crimes, get-rich-quick syndrome and other vices. At this point, empowering the indigenes economically becomes an effective way to alleviate poverty.

To achieve the issue of self-reliance, there has been a new development in educational curriculum to include entrepreneurial studies geared towards making the people, employers of labour rather than job seekers. The Government at all levels, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Churches, et cetera have established skills acquisition centres to train indigenes in different trades including pottery. According to Ojie (2000), “the trending issues are technological advancement, poverty alleviations, income generation, women empowerment, women development matters as well as Micro Credit Schemes”. The truth remains that these programmes are not adequately implemented to yield the much-expected result of empowering people out of poverty.

Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to reposition pottery practice as a viable tool for poverty alleviation in the South-south region of Nigeria. The objectives are to assess the development of pottery practice in the region, to assess the availability of clay and the potential of pottery in the region, to identify the reasons for the lack of growth, and to explore the possibility of engaging the youths and women of the region in pottery practice to alleviate poverty.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted Anthony Bertram's design theory propounded in 1938 which according to Fiell, and Fiell (2003), posited that “good design is not a matter of wealth, much less of the chic, the latest thing. It is not a matter of novelty for novelty's sake, but of the production of cities, houses and goods which will best satisfy the needs of the people: their needs for practical, honest, cheap, lasting and beautiful things to see and use in their everyday lives. Bertram was an art critic and a passionate advocate of modernism whose design theory provided core principles for good design. According to Efe, (2015), “the critical core principles of design as firmitas, utilitas and venutas.” These of course are firmness, utility and aesthetics which make up the functions of art. This theory is suitable for this paper because it entails building on existing form to produce firm wares which will perform the aesthetic and utilitarian functions of art. It is only then will they meet the people's need for practical, honest, cheap, durable and beautiful things to see and use in their daily lives.

Repositioning Pottery Practice in South-South Region

Beyond the general poverty level in the country, the people of the South-South region have been highly impoverished as a result of environmental degradation caused by pollution, the neglect and marginalisation of the area by the Government which appears, a calculated attempt to keep the people in abject poverty to rule them easily. This can be seen from the lip service made by the Government on every poverty alleviation programme in the region.

It is based on this that this paper is raised to reposition pottery practice as a viable tool for sustainable poverty alleviation in the region. Corbett (2009), defines poverty as “a state of being poor and not having enough money to take care of basic needs of life such as food, clothing, housing and healthcare. Poverty is a condition of having insufficient resources or income. In its most extreme form, it is a lack of basic human needs such as adequate nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water and healthcare services. To alleviate poverty, therefore, is to economically empower the people to reduce the effect of poverty and this can be done by encouraging the indigenes to be self-sufficient by taking pottery as a profession. Pottery or ceramics has from its birth been in the business of producing wares to solve human problems in the home, building industry, fashion industry, health sector and engineering sector to mention but a few. The demand for pottery wares is so high and difficult to meet and therefore requires many indigenes of the area to take to the practice to better their lives.

In an attempt to reposition pottery practice as a viable tool for pottery alleviation, it is pertinent to take a critical look at the factors that make the profession almost stagnant, extinct and uninteresting, especially to the present-day youths. Such things as the requirements for establishing a small-scale centre, materials, techniques, training, form and function, production hazards and patronage or support. It is believed that in looking at the factors listed above and more and providing remedies to them, the profession will be given a new life to serve as a very viable tool for a lasting poverty alleviation condition for the people of the area in particular and the nation at large.

Ceramics or pottery is the art and science of baked clay. It can be seen as the use of clay with or without other materials and rendered permanent by heat treatment. Cardew (1977), said that “no work of clay, no matter how beautiful, has value except it has been fired. Firing therefore is the application of thermal or heat energy to convert clay to ceramic which has produced a variety of wares to solve human problems. Agberia (1997), added that “ceramics products in Nigeria can be safely classified into decorative ceramics, table wares, sanitary wares, as well as industrial refractories and insulators. Rada (1989), said that “ceramics comprises such diverse products as bricks, porcelain dining sets, abrasive wheels, ceramics semiconductor and materials used in nuclear power plants and for the heat protection of space shuttles.

Repositioning pottery practice as a viable tool for poverty alleviation in the South-South region of Nigeria is to say that the industry has not been doing well despite the fact that indigenes of the area have been practising pottery before the discovery of crude oil in the Oloibiri community in present-day Bayelsa State in the 1950s and later in other states within the region and the attendant products of crude oil such as kerosene, diesel, engine oil and natural gas which aids the generation of electricity. The industry has been very slow in development. This stands true when compared to other industries such as plastic and enamel wares industries. These industries have turned out beautiful and affordable wares in addition to the beautifully finished imported porcelain wares which are preferred to the local heavy, dull and unattractive pottery wares. Ojie (2000), said that “the plastic, melamine and metal industries have exhibited great advancement as shown in the quality, quantity and diversification of functional products today. She added that “these industries have created employment opportunities for Nigerians because they have made conscious and remarkable efforts to remain marketable by improving the quality, quantity and expanding the functionality of their products.

Pottery from its discovery was producing wares to meet the needs of the people who were just peasant farmers, hunters and fishermen. These were people who just embraced a new settled lifestyle and needed containers in addition to Calabash and animal skin for storage. Traditional pots were then produced for fetching and storing water and wine, preservation of seeds, drying of meat and fish, bowls for eating, drinking and washing and larger pots for cooking food, processing and brewing.

With the current level of technological advancement which has led to the discovery of crude oil in the area and its attendant products, modern materials, equipment, tools and techniques have also been introduced into the industry. To reposition the practice, therefore, is to marry tradition with modernity. According to Igwilo (1996), and Agberia (2007), this was the reason the Government brought the English Potter, Michael Cardew to the Abuja Pottery Centre in 1956. It is believed that the traditional potters in the area who had been used to the traditional crude methods of production will embrace the modern equipment, materials, tools and techniques to produce wares that are suitable for modern homes and functions.

In order to reposition the pottery industry for poverty alleviation in the region, the performance of the industry has to be enhanced and this can only be done by addressing the

problems militating against the industry. Some of these problems include starting capital, availability and quality of materials, training and skills acquisition, production hazards and risk, forms and functions of wares, patronage and support.

Starting Capital

Establishing a pottery centre requires starting capital just as every other business. Onuoha, and Amah, (2011), opined that “entrepreneurs are seen to be visionaries in nature, having dreams and visions which they often translate into action. They establish enterprises and endeavour to produce and establish goods and or services needed by members of the society. Due to the level of poverty in the region, it has become very difficult for an indigene to raise the needed money capital to establish a pottery centre. However, establishing a pottery cottage industry or centre can be done with a few basic pieces of equipment. The most important equipment needed in a pottery centre is the kiln which does not necessarily need to be a sophisticated one. A single chamber kiln, updraft or downdraft, preferably, the downdraft kiln can be locally fabricated with discarded metals and other locally sourced materials.

The Government and the private sector can assist through soft loans from the Bank of Industry, microfinance schemes and grants from the oil companies operating in the area. Non-Governmental Organizations and wealthy individuals can also assist through concrete arrangements. Other government agencies such as the National Directorate of Employment and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) et cetera, should financially support cooperative societies and individuals to establish and become self-employed and employers of labour. The already existing centres should also source for loans and grants to invest and improve upon the quality and quantity of their wares.

Availability and Quality of Material

Nearness to raw materials is one of the most important factors in citing an industry. In pottery, clay remains the basic material while other materials serve as modifiers to the clay. The good thing is that any type of clay is useful in pottery either plastic clay or non-plastic clay. While secondary or plastic clay is good for modelling, primary or non-plastic clay is useful in a lot of other things in the centre. However, the entrepreneur must, first of all, carry out adequate feasibility studies to know the quality and quantity of clay at the depot.

When the clay samples are brought into the centre, the necessary slake test must be conducted to confirm if the samples are the clay. Other tests for plasticity, shrinkage, porosity, firing colour, green strength, vitrification range, calcium carbonate and so on must be conducted before the preparation and formulation of the desired clay body. It is worthy of note that many centres have been producing poor quality wares and even losing a lot of wares during firing because they failed to carry out the necessary tests before using the clay for production.

Apart from clay which is found in abundance in the region, other materials such as red iron oxide, feldspar, calcium and so on are also available in good quantity and quality in the area. This makes it possible for an entrepreneur to source materials and compose his glaze and engobe by reasoning which allows the centre to continue producing even when there are no already formulated and imported body recipes in the shops.

Training and Skills Acquisition

It is disastrous for an individual to venture into an area or profession without acquiring the necessary training and skills. Many indigenes of the region, especially the youths who were involved in the destruction of oil facilities in the area but later laid down their arms had been sponsored to acquire skills in special areas including pottery. Many other youths have studied ceramics and have graduated from tertiary institutions across the nation and are ready to set up small-scale pottery industries in the region as young entrepreneurs and employers of labour.

According to Adeboye (2021), some of the essential skills an entrepreneur must acquire and develop include communication, listening, negotiation, conflict management, problem-solving, risk management, marketing, interpersonal, time management, technical, managerial and organizing skills". it is worthy of mention here that the government, non-governmental organizations and churches have been involved in the training of indigenes to acquire and develop these skills. It is therefore time for the government, wealthy individuals, companies especially those operating in the region, non-governmental organizations and the church to assist these indigenes with free interest loans and grants to set up pottery cottage industries.

Production Hazards and Risks

Every profession has its hazards and venturing into any business is risk-taking. According to Antoncic and Hisrich (2003), "risk-taking is the Hallmark of an entrepreneur as it defines the ability to venture into uncertainty and create a positive outcome in the form of a new process on business if successful". Risk-taking involves going into a venture whose outcome can result in failure or loss. Venturing into a business relates to actively taking risky actions quickly and developing resources for new business opportunities with the probability of incurring a loss. When we consider production hazards and risks involved in pottery practice, the next idea is an innovation which according to De Jong and Wennekers (2008), "is the creation and implementation of useful ideas for new products, services, and production methods or techniques and management practices".

An entrepreneur who ventures into pottery must know that clay is a very fragile material and subjecting beautifully finished green wares to the action of thermal or heat energy in the kiln for conversation makes it riskier. For this reason, a ceramist must be very patient from the choice and preparation of the materials, the production and handling of the wares to the final step of committing his wares to the kiln chamber for an uncertain result. The potter must understand the effect of thermal shock on the wares. To avoid unnecessary loss of wares and other risky occurrences, he must understand plasticity, shrinkage, porosity, vitrification range, thermal expansivity, thermal efficiency, thermal shock, coefficient of expansion, placing of wares for bisque and glaze firing, how to light, fine-tune and insert the burner, how to preheat, control the kiln, when to close the vent and spyhole, when to give full blast, when to soak, when to crack and open the kiln, when to offload the wares and how to handle and move the fired wares.

It is also good to mention that apart from the risk of losing wares, the potter stands the risk of inhaling dust, soot and carbon monoxide during firing especially if he is using a solid fuel kiln. He may sustain an injury in the course of production such as looking into the spyhole immediately after it is opened and opening the hot kiln immediately after firing. If the cylinder is not full, then care must be taken to put off the burners immediately after the gas is finished.

This will stop the empty cylinder from sucking heat from the kiln chamber which will result in an explosion which affects the kiln, wares, entire centre, the potter and the environment. The workers should make use of their safety kits such as nose masks, gloves, booths, goggles, helmets and coveralls while working. In addition, other safety precautions must be observed such as acquiring a functional first aid box, fire extinguishers and buckets of sand, especially around the kilns. Finally, workers must be given proper medical care, especially those working around the kiln due to radiation.

Forms and Functions of Wares

It is worrisome that ceramics or pottery wares from the centres are not up to the expected standard that can compete favourably with the beautifully decorated imported ones. The centres continue to adopt the same crude techniques and equipment to produce substandard products even when they are no longer appealing to twenty-first-century homes in forms and functions. Cardew (1969), observed that “the Nigerian traditional potters have great artistic potentials which could be harnessed by exposing them to well-attested technical and artistic apprenticeship which incorporates modern tools, equipment, materials and techniques such as clay testing, kiln design, construction and firing”.

At this point, innovation becomes the keyword. Knight (1977), defines innovation as "the pursuit of creative or novel solutions to challenges confronting the firm including the development or improvement of goods and services as well as new administrative methods and technologies for carrying out organizational functions" Through innovation, new products and services are introduced to the market which strengthens the competitiveness of a company. The potter must be able to identify a problem and generate ideas or solutions. It is expected that a potter as a businessman should be proactive. According to Schmitz and Scheuerle (2012), “this entails the centre seeking out new business, opportunities, monitoring his environment for important changes and continuously being innovative and coming up with new ideas which are regularly implemented”. To this end, the centres must creatively break out from the traditional crude methods and forms to embrace modern designs, forms, glaze and glazing, engobe, body stains and general finishing since the entrepreneurs are qualified potters.

Patronage and Support

An entrepreneur is a businessman who invests to make a profit, therefore adequate feasibility studies must be carried out to know what to produce and who he is producing for, when to sell, how to sell, where to sell and which wares to sell. Apostolos-Cappadona (1984), said that “potters are practical people with their conversations focusing on clay bodies, glaze recipes, recalcitrant kiln problems, new techniques, new materials and yet let us be frank, sales”. This

means that the economic aspect is also a live wire of sustenance to the pottery industry. An entrepreneur who fills his warehouse with wares that are not demanded, cannot make sales, profit and progress. Poverty is alleviated when a centre supplies what is demanded or introduces new products and services that stimulate demand and the market.

The existing pottery centres seem to focus more on production than sales and this limits them from attracting patronage and support. The centres must be restructured to have sales or marketing units whose responsibility is to reach out and create channels for marketing their wares from wholesales, and retailers to consumers or users. It is from the feedback from these middlemen that the industry will know the taste of the users and how to meet that taste. Ojie (2000), said that “to get involved in such large markets would require advertisements by such means as radio, television, billboards, posters, handbills, stickers et cetera”. Currently, the social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Website, Facebook, Telegram et cetera create the electronic market (e-market) places for wider and faster coverage which would attract responses, patronage and support from all over the world.

It is worth stating here that a young entrepreneur may venture into areas that do not need a glaze. Such wares as unglazed or stained flower vases and planters, wall tiles, (wall or surface stones) and art pieces. He can also produce complementary wares or gift items for hotels, institutions, political parties, Churches and the building industry. Other products may include birthday, marriage, funeral and chieftaincy coronation ceremonies and anniversaries. These wares need perfect glazing with heat transfer of photographs, images and texts and each commissioned work will attract good profit.

Conclusion

The South-South region of Nigeria has gone through a lot of problems, the major of which is the devastating effect of oil exploration and exploitation activities. The high degree of environmental degradation as a result of oil spillage, gas flaring and fire disasters has destroyed people's means of livelihood as farmers, fishermen and traders. These and other issues in the country have rendered the people of the area very poor. The resultant effects of this poverty level are agitations, restiveness, protests, drug abuse, illegal refining of petroleum products, destruction of oil installations and other forms of criminality.

There has been a call for self-reliance, economic empowerment, youths and women empowerment and so on. The government has tried to implement different programmes to empower indigenes beginning with the introduction of entrepreneurial studies into the tertiary education curriculum, and the establishment of the Nigeria Delta Development Commission and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs. Despite these and other programmes, there is still more pain than gain in the region, hence this paper.

It is the position of this paper therefore that pottery which has been practised in the region before the discovery of oil can be repositioned or enhanced as a viable tool for lasting poverty alleviation. It is the position of the writer that since pottery wares are in high demand in homes, the building industry, engineering and medical sectors, many indigenes of the area

should be encouraged to take up pottery practice as a profession. This will economically empower many indigenes out of poverty and make them employers of labour.

The paper has taken a critical look at the factors that have contributed to the slow pace of the existing centres in the region and has made reasonable contributions if success is to be achieved in alleviating poverty in the area. The writer has gone further to suggest that the government through its agencies such as the National Directorate for Employment (NDE), Bank of Industry, Niger Delta Development Commission and the Ministry for Niger Delta Affairs, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), oil-producing companies in the area, wealthy individuals and churches should do more than lip service to give trained and willing indigenes free interest loans and grants and the necessary patronage and support to set up pottery cottage industries to create employment opportunities for others. This will position the industry to compete favourably with its enamel and plastic counterparts and imported pottery wares.

It is therefore the position of this paper that with the abundant clay and other pottery materials in the region, available firing fuels, a kiln, good designs and well unglazed and glazed forms that meet the taste of the twenty-first-century homes, the building industry and so on in aesthetics and utilitarian functions, pottery is enhanced and repositioned as a viable tool for lasting poverty alleviation in South-South region in particular and the entire nation in general.

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