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Sacred Ceramics: Investigating the Production and Significance of Ewe Ritual Ceramics in Ghana

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Abstract

This article outlines the beginnings of a new study of the ritual ceramics of Ewe traditional religious practices in Ghana, which play a unique role in the visual expression of indigenous Ewe worldview and cosmology. Ritual ceramics are fundamental to indigenous religious practices of Ewe and are worthy of examination yet have not received significant attention from scholars. In African-Atlantic religion, handmade pottery is being usurped by commercial ware, but the tradition remains vibrant in Ghana. The author's position as a practicing artist with experience in making pottery for African religious practitioners in the US, and 20 years studying West African and African Diaspora religions, give a unique perspective to this study.

Keywords: West African ceramics, West African traditional religion, Ewe culture, Ghanaian ceramics, pottery

An altar to the deity Mami Wata sits in the corner of a shrine in a village in the Southeastern Volta Region of Ghana. Offerings of brightly dyed cloth, morsels of food, beads, statuary, and ceramic vessels populate the altar. The pottery, carefully handled, decorated, and fired, communicates a spiritual grammar that is visual, conceptual and pleasing to the spirits. The potter shaped these pots in the image of her understanding of the spiritual world. Many very similar altars exist in Havana, Salvador de Bahia, Miami, Los Angeles, New York and New Orleans, and many commonalities exist with the religious space in Ghana. However, a major difference, from a craft-centric point of view, is that the ceramic pots used in the altar arrangements in the African Diaspora would have been industrially mass-produced whereas in the Volta Region of Ghana these pots constitute a vital living tradition.

Ritual ceramic arts are fundamental to the practice of traditional West African religions. The vessels and other accouterments are worthy of examination and classification as a unique material expression of Ewe cosmology, yet the methods and thoughts regarding production of those objects is just as essential to understanding the religion and the connection between spiritual and material-culture. The making of spiritual *and* utilitarian pottery among the Ewe in southeastern Ghana is imbued with cosmological significance (Aronson, 2007). Largely neglected by scholars, and at risk of extinction by way of mass-produced imported products, this particular pottery (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) tradition plays a crucial role in the visual expression of traditional Ewe cosmology. Women dominate the production of utilitarian and ritual pottery in the Volta, but cheaply made mass-produced pottery may eventually undermine their significant roles in upholding artistic and spiritual practices. As ceramics artist, Ewe potters and I share a basic vocabulary of material and technique. I produce ritual ceramics in collaboration with practitioners of African-Atlantic religious traditions, and to my knowledge I am perhaps the only academically trained ceramic artist in the U.S. engaged in this production and exchange, and uniquely positioned as a practicing studio potter, scholar, educator and artist.

Key research questions are: 1. What are the practical and spiritual processes of making ritual pots among the Ewe in Ghana? 2. How many distinct shrine pottery forms/types may be identified, and what is the cosmological significance of each? 3. How does gender impact Ewe pottery and women's place in traditional religion? 4. How do the ritual ceramics "live" or "speak" in shrine arrangements? 5. To what degree is this pottery tradition at risk due to competition with mass-produced, imported products? 6. How are Ewe potters and their sacred ceramics connected to related traditions of a greater West Africa regional religious complex?

Figure 1. Pottery at Kuli Village, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

In her seminal book, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power*, Suzanne Blier recognizes the important role played by ceramic vessels in the thought and practice of traditional West African Religion:

> Like gourds, pottery vessels (*zen*) are associated with a range of worldly and religious signifiers. Many such pots are linked to *vodun* because of the prominent place of terracotta vessels in temples and shrines, each deity being identified with a distinctive vessel shape or pattern (see Savary 1970; Blier forthcoming). Moreover, accounts of deity origins frequently refer to the gods as having been born in clay pots… With both gourds and pots, ideas of engendering are thus important. (Blier, 1995, p. 259)

In a telling quote one of Blier's informants, a traditional priest, expresses the significance of pottery in traditional spiritual practice thusly, "pottery does the things of *vodun*." (Blier, 1995, p. 302) Metalworking and pottery have been instrumental to the evolution of complex societies. However, ceramic industries have not received the same scholarly attention as metallurgy. Herbert argues that even though "the potter should stand on

a par with the smelter/smith as culture hero, peer of kings, and master of the bush, she does not." Men dominate metalworking; women dominate the production of pottery in sub Saharan Africa (Herbert, 1994, p. 200). Some scholars presumed that women made cruder utilitarian pottery while men produced artistic and ritualistic objects of greater finesse and beauty. To the contrary, women dominate ceramic production in much of sub-Saharan Africa and they are especially integral to the manufacture of ritual pottery. However, women do not simply form a pot and fire it. They shape the pot as they visualize and manifest the cosmos in the object (Norman, 2014).

Concerning the significance of gender in the making of religious pottery, a deeper investigation is critical. While Aronson suggests the existence of taboos regarding the making of shrine pottery being the exclusive province of women (Aronson, 2007), in a July 2016 research trip to Ghana, discussions with Ghanaian potters, both women and men who made both secular and religious work, point to less definitive designations, at least contemporaneously. It was noted that people *once thought* that making pottery was detrimental to male health and virility. This notion was found laughable by a group of male potters making utilitarian work in a rural village outside Kumasi (personal communcation, July 2016). When I asked a group of Ewe women potters who specialized in ritual work in Kuli Village in the Volta Region about this notion, they claimed that "men were not interested," but that there was no special taboo against men making these or any other pots (personal communication, July 2016). I hope to investigate this issue further.

Historical ritual ceramics such as a Yoruba vessel or a Fon medicine-statuary object (*bocio*) abound in museums and collections. Yet little attention has been paid to contemporaneous vessels and other religious items utilized in the current traditional West African religion. Writing for *African Arts*, art historian Lisa Aronson emphasized the importance of ceramic sculptural pots to Ewe tradition "(A) more comprehensive survey of Vodun pottery production and use throughout the Ewe and Fon areas would not only fill in the gaps, but also help trace the history of this tradition and better understand its role and related means of production within the complex world of Vodun." (Aronson, 2007, p. 85) Aronson notes the regional trade in ritual pottery across borders in Benin, Nigeria, and Togo as well. By undertaking comprehensive documentation and categorization of Ewe ritual pottery, this project will by extension lead to a broader survey of the ritual pottery of an expanded area of West Africa and the African-Atlantic Diaspora.

Figure 2. Pottery at Dzodze market, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

Modern travel and the Internet have facilitated exchange between practitioners of traditional religion in West Africa and those in the Diaspora (Bay & Kristin, 2001; Canizares-Esguerra, Childs, & Sidbury, 2013). An excellent illustration of this exchange was the recent program "Osun-Osogbo," a segment of the PBS documentary series *Sacred Journeys*, which featured American scholars/practitioners of West African tradition as they traveled to a major religious festival in West Africa (PBS, 2013). Another film, "Black Atlantic: On the Orixas Route," documented a touching exchange between traditional practitioners in Brazil and Benin (Filmmaker's Library, 2001). My project will introduce ceramics into this contemporary dialogue.

My work as a studio potter, scholar and artist is intimately bound to religious traditions of West Africa and the African Diaspora. I have worked extensively with practitioners of West African and African Diaspora religious traditions from Cuba, Brazil, Benin, and Nigeria to make pottery vessels for religious practice. Ceramic pots house the sacred icons and ritual substances associated with the divinities. This specialized pottery

represents a significant and unique facet of the material culture complex associated with West African traditional religion. Within the African Diaspora, mass-produced, low quality, imported pottery has mostly replaced handmade pots for religious practice (Brown, 2003). Cheaply made and impersonal imports are presently threatening the handmade, regionally produced pottery for religious shrines in West African traditions as well, making my study time sensitive.

I am first and foremost a ceramics artist, but I have found that I cannot limit my personal designation as "artist," "academic researcher," "participant-observer," "contemporary gallery artist," "religious artisan," etc., but rather, have to fluidly move from one role to another or inhabit multiple positions concurrently. I have extensively studied West African religious traditions in order to make pottery for ritual use with a keen mind to cultural sensitivity. The necessity of becoming a student of tradition is an important and significant aspect of my work in Ghana, in order to become versed in the cosmology necessary to understand the pottery. Though I have engaged in research related to West African tradition for many years, I will prioritize learning first hand from scholars, religious artists, and religious specialists in Ghana.

Figure 3. Pottery at Dzodze market, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

My first goal is to document as many different Ewe religious pots as possible, examples of which are depicted in Figures 1-4. I will document the making of these pots in order to illustrate the unique techniques and materials utilized by Ghanaian Ewe potters. I will prioritize investigating how Ewe potters visualize the spiritual world as they form the pots for ritual use.

Figure 4. Pottery at Dzodze market, Volta Region, photographed by Adam Posnak, 2016

A second goal of the research and documentation will be photographing the use and placement of ritual pottery in contextualized settings, such as public and private shrine arrangements. This aspect is of particular significance to understand and document the "life" lead by these singular pots. To further an understanding of the role and meaning of pottery within West African traditional practice, I will consult religious and ritual specialists regarding aspects of traditional religion generally and the role of pottery specifically.

There have been few studies of the work of Ewe ritual potters in Ghana, and little attention paid to this tradition by either the anthropological community or the contemporary world ceramics community. Studies of traditional practices exist, however, the majority of these have focused on communities further east, primarily in Benin and Nigeria. By researching and documenting the contemporary tradition of Ewe ritual pottery in southeastern Ghana, and by the publication of articles, the exhibition of artwork, future panel discussions and conference presentations, I hope to draw attention to this dynamic Ceramics tradition, the contemporary potters who are making the work, and especially the pottery unique functions within the religious complex. In this way, art, and ceramics specifically, would become a unique facet of the lively cross-continental exchange within the African-Atlantic cultural and religious landscape.

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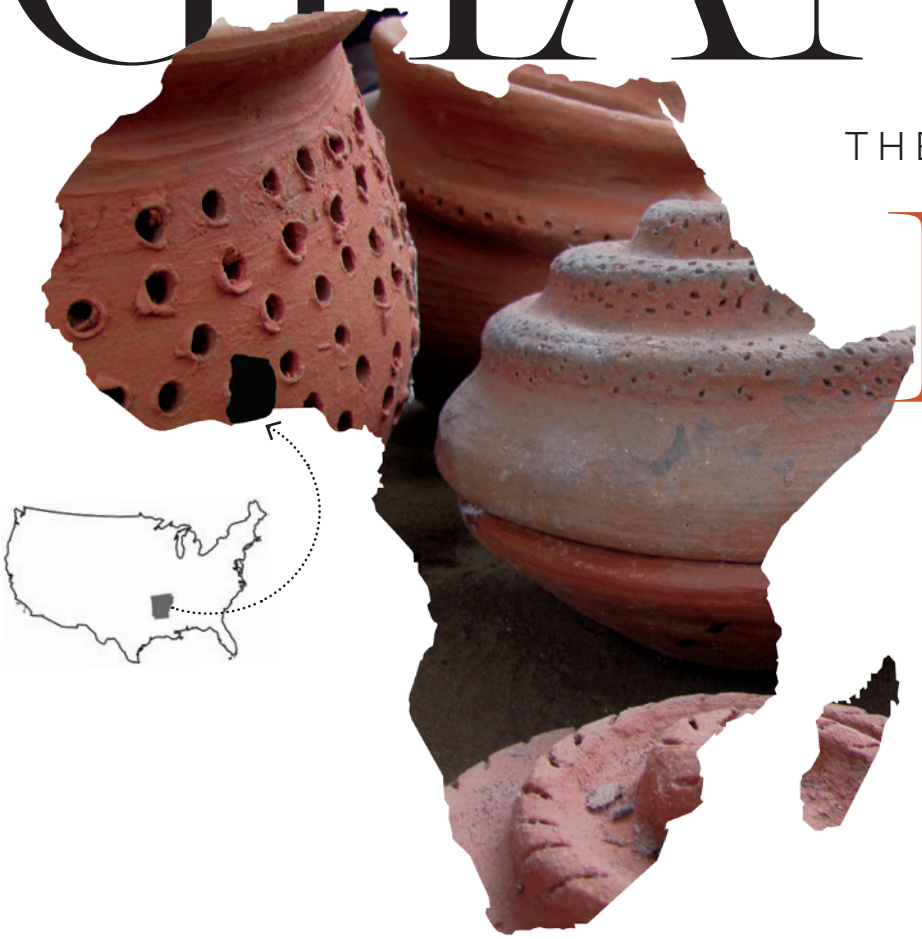
About the author

I arrived in Ghana in late August 2018, intent on spending a year researching Ewe ritual ceramics and the traditions in which they function. I was afforded this opportunity because my wife Jeannie Hulen, also a ceramics artist and educator is serving as a Fulbright Scholar in Ceramics at KNUST in Kumasi, during the 2018-19 academic year. With our two children, we relocated to Ghana for a year, excited to participate in the vital academic, contemporary and traditional art communities. I am convinced that the pottery made for ritual use in Ewe traditional practice has not received deserved attention from art historians, anthropologists, or the art world at large, and I look forward to beginning a deep investigation of the tradition.

FROM ARKANSAS TO

GHANA, THE CLAY IS STILL Red



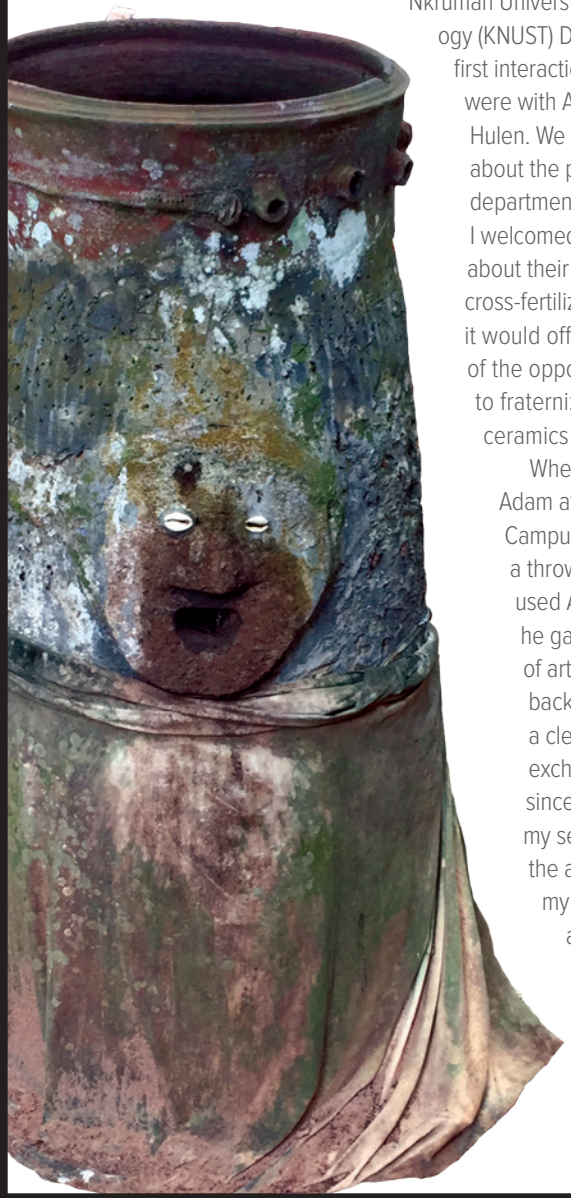
BY | *Dr. Samuel Nortey*
Adam Posnak

The following article is a collaborative effort, reflecting the authors' shared experience of international exchange. In the text that follows, Dr. Nortey's contributions are represented in grey sans serif, and Mr. Posnak's are in black serif.

◂ *Vodu ritual pots, Kuli Village, Volta Region, Ghana. All photographs by Adam Posnak, 2016.*

ARTIST NARRATIVE

▼ *Central shrine pot, Kuli Village, Volta Region, Ghana.*



DR. NORTEY: Many of the studio potters in Ghana have been trained through informal apprenticeship programs or by skills passed on from their parents, who considered pottery a family profession. An emphasis on formal education has, however, made many young people shun the profession: they seek white-collar jobs instead. I am a ceramicist trained by and now teaching in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) Department of Ceramics. My first interactions with foreign ceramicists were with Adam Posnak and Jeannie Hulen. We had communicated for a year about the possibility of their visiting my department for teaching and research. I welcomed the idea and was enthused about their coming first because of the cross-fertilization of skills and ideas it would offer, and second, because of the opportunity it would offer me to fraternize with Americans in the ceramics field.

When I met Jeannie and Adam at their hotel on the KNUST Campus, Adam gave me a gift of a thrown mug with a design that used African concepts. The cup he gave me confirms the ability of art to transcend borders and backgrounds. It says that there is a clear opening for dialogue and exchange of ideas. That mug has since been the unique piece on my serving tray and has received the attention of many visitors to my small studio. The question always is "Which African artist made that mug?" From the foregoing discussions, your answer is as good as mine.

ADAM POSNAK: I've always been drawn to both geographical and conceptual places where cultures overlap and mix. Growing up in the Deep South, in particular, the cities of New Orleans and Miami, I gained an appreciation early on for things of mixed ancestry, whether they be music, food, religion, or art. Though *creole* is defined in various, if not downright contradictory ways, I use the term to describe anything of mixed cultural origins, particularly African, European, and North and South American origins. Deep mixes—whether the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans, tamales of the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta, or the music of Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence—are hybrid fires that warm me. Given the recent changes in the government and social currents of the United States, I am even more committed to *open* borders supported by art and action.

I have been a student of African-Atlantic culture for as long as I can remember. For the past decade, I have been making pottery for use in African and African diaspora religions. In comparison with other crafts, such as beading, woodcarving, and altar construction, ceramics is not a prominent tradition of the diaspora. But I've worked with members of various African diaspora religions, including Lucumi ("Santeria") and Vodu ("Voodoo"), making pottery for ritual use. I wanted to do more research on pottery made for religious use, which meant studying in West Africa, where it is a living tradition.

My wife, Jeannie Hulen, also had an interest in studying ceramics in Africa, and in particular, in exploring the possibility of starting an exchange program with a West African university. The University of Arkansas's ceramics program benefits greatly from her instituting an annual graduate student exchange with the Tainan National Institute of the Arts in Taiwan. The ceramics program has prioritized the building of similar exchanges with other institutions. Together, Jeannie and I began to make inquiries and plan our visit.

Our first priority upon arriving in Kumasi, Ghana, was to visit Dr. Samuel Nortey and the Ceramics Department of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). We were immediately impressed by the vitality of the faculty and students and the overall energy in the studio. Some aspects of studio life, mostly related to materials and hardware, were clearly different from what we had come from. We quickly became hyper-aware of the extent to which we, as ceramicists in the United States, are spoiled in comparison to our West African counterparts. Dr. Nortey and his colleagues explained that a ceramics supply industry, such as we are used to in the States, is nonexistent in Ghana or in West Africa generally. For all the differences, though, I found it reassuring that the clay was just as red in Ghana as in Arkansas.

Initially I was very reluctant to take Adam and Jeannie through the studio and show them the working area. This was simply because I had in mind that they had come into contact with more established studios than mine. I was working on developing a glaze coating for the local pottery industry. I took Jeannie and Adam around to view my materials. In Ghana, most of the ceramic materials are collected *in situ* (from the places where they were formed or deposited). Clay is found most everywhere, but the other materials can only be found in specific regions. The feldspar we use is mined from Moree and Akurabaze, in the central region of Ghana. The kaolin is from Teleku Bokasso, in the western region, and so is the sand, which

serves as my silica. I use shells from the Volta region as a flux to introduce calcium oxide, as well as granite from Buoho, in the Ashanti region. The works are mostly made by hand, less by machinery. One of the primary finishing materials is manganese, either painted on directly or used in glazes. Manganese is a waste material from the mining industry and gives the works an aged, antique look.

Ceramicists in Ghana produce works by prospecting material from their source of formation, and process them towards product development. In America, ceramicists receive processed materials from suppliers. This difference facilitated a very meaningful dialogue. In mining materials and processing them, one may gain a better understanding of their properties. According to Adam and Jeannie, in the U.S., all you need to do is to make a call to the suppliers with your specifications, and what you need is delivered to your studio.

In addition to touring the KNUST ceramics and art department facilities, Jeannie and I were invited to present lectures on our personal work for the KNUST faculty and students. Rather than deliver a standard, chronological talk focused only on my work, I wanted to emphasize my personal reasons for coming to Ghana to study traditional pottery, and the deep debt of gratitude that I owe African-Atlantic cultures. In my lecture, I addressed the work I have done making pottery for use in African-Diaspora traditions, including those of Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. When I finished, silence rang out in the packed conference room. I sensed that the lecture had affected the audience, but I had doubts about whether the impression had been positive. I realized that crossing cultural borders was an unpredictable venture. Illumination came from Dr. Nortey. "We feel two ways about this," he explained. "We are uncomfortable with the fact that a white foreigner is appreciating these aspects of African tradition that we have not valued, though we should. However, these things are also fearful."

This did not come as a complete surprise. I had gone to Ghana with the understanding that traditional African religions were mostly frowned upon by the vast majority of Ghanaians, who are devoutly Christian. From the moment I arrived in the country, the prevalence of Christianity was evident in radio station broadcasts, billboard advertisements, and the loud, distorted amplification of the words of street preachers. The traditions and beliefs of indigenous Ghanaian culture seem to occupy an ambiguous position. On the one hand, traditional music, dance, and crafts are embraced. On the other, expressly traditional religious practices are considered backward and incompatible with a modern, Christian worldview.

I was somewhat perplexed as to how to respond to the mixed emotions of my audience. Then a young man stood up and said: "Throughout my artistic career, as a student and independent artist, I've always wanted to incorporate aspects of traditional African religious culture. I was always discouraged by teachers and peers, but seeing you—a white foreigner—embracing these things has given me the conviction to do it, too, regardless of what people say."

In the moment to a degree, and certainly in retrospect, I was struck by the complexity of this exchange between me and the audience. Though it was not a comfortable situation, it was the sort of thing that I find most inspiring and valuable about a cross-cultural dialogue. Here I was, a white American, coming to Africa to study a traditional religious culture that has been largely replaced—even demonized—by Christianity, a religion propagated and sometimes enforced by colonialism. The fact that I and the audience were able to acknowledge the discomfort broke down a barrier. I had received a warm welcome, and the atmosphere became only more welcoming after my lecture. Many students wanted to talk more about my work and interest in West African tradition, and the faculty seemed more engaged as well. It was as if we had to get over the "hump" of tension that my interests elicited; once it was aired, we could move on to a more honest and meaningful discussion.

Vodu priest pouring libations, Kuli Village, Volta Region, Ghana.

Adam presented two separate but related bodies work, each intimately bound to the material culture and religious traditions of West Africa, and the African diaspora of the Americas and the Caribbean. His works showcased extensively the influence of these traditions on pottery vessels. I was particularly astounded that an American could display skill in traditional pottery-making and offer meaningful explanations for the works. The work vividly displayed the African intent and I was curious as to how he could develop such skills, taking into consideration his cultural background. This brought to the fore that art is a bridge that brings cultures together, a way of telling stories from outside one's cultural background.

Vodu ritual pot in market, Dzodze, Volta Region, Ghana.

In a Ghanaian context, however, Adam's work would be considered sacred and reserved for religious purposes. The lesson of the presentation was clear: We are throwing away our cultural heritage in favor of Western canons of aesthetics and form. My students were interested in Adam's works not because he is an American, but rather because he is influenced by African vernacular pottery and forms used by the religious sects.

When our time in Kumasi came to an end (all too soon), Jeannie and I traveled to the Volta Region in southeastern Ghana. This area bordering Togo is home to the Ewe people, whose pottery is my primary research interest. Through the Aya Centre in Accra, an organization devoted to assisting and coordinating academic research in Ghana, we had a the name of a contact in the Volta Region who had been briefed on our interest in shrine pottery. The director of the Aya Centre told us to call a cell phone number when we arrived at the Sogakope Bridge, which spans the Volta River, and our guide would appear. This was more or less how things transpired for the rest of our journey.

We traveled by way of taxi for miles on washed-out dirt roads to the extreme east, near the Ghana/Togo border, to the village of Kuli. This is a district recognized as both a stronghold for traditionalist Vodu practice, as well as for secular pottery. Entering the village, we were greeted by a crowd of residents and ushered into an inner yard surrounded by stucco houses. A group of three women sat on chairs in the center of the yard, prepared to hold court. These were the senior potters, clearly persons of particular distinction in the village.

The first thing we were shown was a battered copy of *Traditional West African Pottery: Kuli Village*, written by Terry deBardelaben, which documented and described the pottery-making techniques of this village. The book was presented to us as a badge of authenticity, illustrating in no uncertain terms the status of this group of potters. Clearly we were not the first outsiders to take an interest in the Kuli Village pottery tradition.

Yet we did seem to be the first visitors with a specific interest in the pots made for Vodu. We were shown the area where ritual pots are stored separately from the secular pottery made in the village. They brought out a large selection of lidded vessels for us to view. A definitive characteristic of these pots is that they are fashioned with sculptural animals or figurative elements symbolic of specific deity or spirit. Each deity has a distinctive symbol set, taboos, and likes and dislikes; the pots reflect this complex cosmology. For example, snakes represent "Da," the arch-deity of wisdom; mermaids symbolize Mami Wata (Mother of Waters); and the chameleon is the earthy representative of the creator god Mawu.

The most significant cultural challenge came when I expressed interest in visiting the village's Vodu shrine, a temple enclosure located in a sacred grove on the outskirts of the village. Jeannie, though interested in other aspects of Ghanaian ceramics and culture, chose not to enter the shrine. For me this opportunity was a priority. This was apparently an unusual request from an outsider like me. I communicated that my interest was rooted in the highest respect for the tradition, and of both a personal and an

academic nature. After complex negotiations involving both the village chief and the primary priest of the shrine, I paid a small fee (used to purchase schnapps and gin, to be poured as offerings on entering the sacred space) and, in the company of the priest of the shrine and a group of congregants, walked the small distance to the shrine.

Because the space is religiously "charged" and separate from the secular world, certain ritual gestures must be performed before entering. Male participants, myself included, removed shirts and covered any remaining secular clothing with traditional cloth. The priest offered prayers and poured libations at the walled entrance to the shrine. We entered the space in single file walking backward, humbly approaching the resident deities. Solemnity pervaded but almost immediately dissipated after we crossed the threshold. From then on, I was eagerly escorted from one point of interest to another and encouraged to photograph everything. In particular, my attention was directed to painted wall murals depicting the primary spirits of the shrine.

At the base of the largest tree in the center of the shrine compound was a very large pot, decorated with a cement face with cowrie shell eyes and filled with liquid. Especially significant to my research, the pot was of imposing scale, though the complete size was unclear, as the bottom section of the pot was buried in the ground. My previous research during my visits to other Vodu shrines had not revealed an example of a similar pot elsewhere in Ghana, nor had the scarce literature on the subject. The shrine community said that this was the epicenter of the shrine and that visitors came from far afield to be bathed in the healing water of Vodu.

This pot holds a special place in my mind and has become something of a symbol for my endeavor of examining the role of pottery in African-Atlantic religious practice. Wherever found, whether in Haiti, Cuba, Trinidad, Venezuela, Brazil, Benin, Togo, or Ghana, these are traditions of healing in the broadest sense, addressing not only concerns of the body but also of the mind and spirit. Though the names vary, water deities are often related to healing. Pottery is relevant in both concept and physicality in that clay vessels serve as containers for spirits' sacred waters. Pottery results from the collaborative intersection of earth, fire, and water—earth and fire also having important constituent deities. In her outstanding book *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, Power*, Suzanne Blier quotes a priest from Benin: "Pottery does the things of vodun."

Since returning, Jeannie and I have devoted time to securing funding and support for a lengthier return trip. Working closely with Dr. Nortey, we hope to continue forging a bond with the ceramics program at KNUST that facilitates an exchange of students and faculty. Our primary goal is to create avenues whereby Ghanaian ceramic artists, both academic and traditional, can visit the United States and interact with our ceramics community. This essay represents the mere beginning of our efforts to bridge the gap of artistic processes and production between the U.S. and Africa. We strive to build lasting bonds between traditional and academic practices among artists, educators, and institutions.

Retrospectively, our interactions as ceramicists reveal a series of border crossings, in terms of material processing, techniques, skills, and form development from the most accessible to the most rarefied.

Our contact was initiated through academia, the most broadly sanctioned and public face of the arts community. Interactions with groups of wayside potters with improvised wheels and machineries teach us that challenges should not be a stop sign to our creativity. Potteries using indigenous techniques are in constant production to meet the demands of society. The potters of Kuli Village that Adam and Jeannie visited are held in high esteem by their community and outsider connoisseurs alike. Of these women elders' work, the pots made for use in Vodu practices were the most esoteric, even to the extent that they were stored separately from secular pottery.

When Adam and Jeannie left Ghana, they were sad to leave new friends, and knew that they had barely scratched the surface of so many aspects of our ceramic culture. I was reassured that our shared experience was substantive and mutual by the authentic and mutual bonds it formed with both the academic community and amongst traditional potters and Vodu practitioners.

DR. SAMUEL NORTEY is a practicing ceramicist and senior lecturer at the department of Industrial Art, KNUST, Ghana. He holds a PhD in African Art and Culture, has trained indigenous potters, and has published quite extensively on expanding the frontiers of pottery and ceramics production in Ghana and sub-Saharan Africa.

ADAM POSNAK grew up in Macon, Georgia. His great-grandfathers were blacksmiths, his grandfather a woodworker, and his mother a studio potter. Posnak holds a MFA from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, and a BA from Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota. Adam teaches ceramics and foundation courses at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

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To Serve the Divine:

MAKING POTTERY FOR AFRICAN-ATLANTIC RELIGIONS

by Adam Posnak

Adam Posnak grew up in Macon, Georgia. He currently resides in the White River Valley of the Boston Mountains in Arkansas, with his wife, Jeannie Hulen and their two remarkable kids.

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OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Pot for Yoruba Egungun, *primary ancestral spirits, 2012. Earthenware, 15 x 13 x 13 in.*
OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW: Pot for Yoruba Abiku, *a potentially dangerous class of ancestral spirit, 2012. Earthenware, 15 x 13 x 13 in. Photographs by Lydia Clark*
OVERLEAF: Wall painting, *Abiku shrine, Benin, West Africa. Photograph by Awo Fáladé Òsúntólá*

African and African-Pan-American religious-cultural systems make use of an array of ceramic vessels and objects. Within these cultures, special pots are understood to literally house divinity and are receptacles for detailed and painstaking spiritual offerings. In some cases the pots reside in lavish altar cabinets, surrounded by fine fabrics, statuary, wood carvings, and beaded items. In other contexts, they lie in repose on earthen floors, bathed in rum-mist, cigar smoke, candlelight, and shadow. They are sung to, drummed to, beseeched and prayed to.

It has been the greatest challenge and most humbling experience of my artistic career to participate in the making of these pots. In hopes of paying tribute to the cultures and individuals who have allowed me to make pieces for them, schooled me in the faiths, and provided so much inspiration for my personal work, I offer this article. Additionally, I hope it presents a broadened vision of the potential roles for functional pots.

Growing up in the southeastern United States, I became aware at a young age of the African-American practices of folk-healing and -harming, variously known as hoodoo, conjure, and rootwork. I frequented a hoodoo store masquerading as a joke shop, with a few sorry card tricks and whoopee cushions gathering dust in the display cases. As a young "whiteboy" I received some strange looks, but it didn't take a detective to discern that there was something secret and compelling happening behind the beaded curtain, from which the smells of incense and candle wax emitted. This was my introduction to African spiritual practices that had been transported to the New World as a result of the cataclysmic trauma of transatlantic slavery. My curiosity sparked, I have spent more than half of my life investigating, researching, and eventually participating in various manifestations of African religion as they reemerged in the Americas. It is only more recently that I have made pottery for use within these faiths.

In order to gain an understanding of this use of pottery, it is necessary to point out some of the basic characteristics shared by the various cultural practices concerned. Throughout the Americas, wherever African culture took root (which is almost everywhere), certain neo-African or African-Atlantic religions came into being. The majority of the Africans forcibly brought across the Atlantic were citizens of west and west-central Africa, and many of the people in the enslaving cultures, especially those in the Caribbean and Latin America, were Catholic. A hybridized form of religion and cultural practice was created, particularly in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, but also in a few North American locations such as southern Louisiana and the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. In most instances a core of west and central African cosmology was augmented and embellished by, if not merged with, Catholicism. The resulting religious forms were many and distinct, including Vodou in Haiti; Lucumi (often known as Santeria) in Cuba; Shango-Baptist in Trinidad; Candomble, Umbanda, and Quimbanda in Brazil; Obeah in Jamaica and Trinidad; and Palo Mayombe in Cuba. It is extremely important to note that each of these religions represents a unique and complete cultural system, and that they resemble one another only in general terms. These various religions could be compared to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which are all "traditions of The Book" but are quite distinct from one another.

The common cosmology of the African religions in the Americas includes a singular but remote God, served by a contingent of spirits or lesser deities, who function as intermediaries with human beings. It is these spiritual beings (known as *Lwa* in Vodou, *Orisha* in Lucumi and Candomble, and *Mpungo* in Palo Mayombe) with whom human beings deal on a daily basis, God being far too remote and busy to be concerned with the everyday lives of individuals. These lesser divinities are often identified with a specific aspect of nature (for instance the *Orisha Yemaya*, who is associated with the oceans, and *Siete Rayos*, the *Mpungo* of fire and lightning). It is quite apparent how believers of this conception of the universe, with a Creator God served by a bevy of lesser divine beings, have drawn parallels with the Catholic cosmology, namely God and the saints.

In addition to this basic understanding of the cosmos, most of these religions share practices, including drumming, singing, prayer, and dance, as essential modes of devotion, as well as a belief in spiritual possession (universally understood to be beneficent and desirable). All these religions have their own distinct, complex, and specialized understanding of such concepts as the human soul, guidance through divination, the afterlife, and initiation.

It should be reiterated in no uncertain terms that these religions are distinct and independent from one another, and any shared characteristics must be understood to be general in nature. However, in all these faiths crafted objects play an indispensable role, as important as song, rhythm, and dance. Key material components include intricately beaded necklaces and bead-encrusted sculptural objects, wooden statuary and vessels, drums and other instruments, various cloth objects (including in some cases very ornate initiatory garb), drawn sigils (invocational designs), and pottery.

Vessels in general, and clay pots specifically, are utilized in a way that can be confusing to a cultural outsider. Upon initial viewing, one might be tempted to conclude that the vessels and pots (and their contents, which I will address below) are themselves objects of worship. This interpretation led early cultural-studies scholars to apply the concept of the fetish, whereby (allegedly) an inanimate object is elevated to divine status. This is a fundamental misinterpretation. In fact, the vessels used in African and African-American sacred practice are provided as temporary seats or housing for the divine essence; in other words the pot is not itself sacred, but rather it contains the spiritual force.

Kept within an open or lidded clay pot, metal cauldron, or wooden jar are sacred materials: plant, animal, and statuary considered to be appealing to, emblematic of, and nourishing


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for a specific divine entity. The vessel is a temporary abode for a spirit, or more accurately, for a small facet of an unfathomably vast spiritual essence. The style, size, and material of these vessels vary widely, ranging from a colossal Palo Mayombe iron cauldron, filled with material including dirt, iron objects, sticks, rocks, and bones and weighing hundreds of pounds, to a minute halved and dried gourd holding a few stones, to a plain terra-cotta pot or a baroque porcelain soup tureen. Typically, an initiate may own one vessel dedicated to a single spiritual force, while a senior priest may possess many of these sacred pots representing a complete pantheon.

Though I have made pots for practitioners of African Ifa-Orisha and Brazilian Candomble and have a Haitian Voodoo project currently under consideration, the majority of my work for these practices has been commissioned by practitioners of the two primary African-Cuban religions, the west African Yoruba-derived Lucumi and the central African-derived Palo Mayombe, or simply Palo.

Lucumi and Palo Mayombe have distinct aesthetic currents, the former being lavish, elaborate, and refined, and the latter being earthy, rugged, and visceral. Long ago the sacred items of Lucumi's Orisha were kept in hollow gourds, and later plain clay pots were the chosen vessels. Eventually it became the accepted norm for imported mass-produced porcelain, primarily soup tureens known as *soperas* and lidded jars called *tinajas*, to be used as Orisha vessels, and this is the nearly universal choice in contemporary practice. This usage represents a sort of aesthetic resistance, in which the proponents of a much-maligned and underground culture usurp the accoutrements that are the very signifiers of value and status among their cultural oppressors.

The Palo Mayombe faith makes use of all sizes of metal cauldrons and cooking pots, as well as plain or decorated clay pots. For the most part, the vessels of Palo are unadorned or simply decorated with sacred linear symbols known as *firmas*. In many cases a multitude of vessels may be arranged within a shrine-building, accompanied by all manner of statuary, painted images or cloth hangings on the walls, animal products, and beaded objects.

There is a general appreciation of crafted objects, and this inspires some practitioners to seek out handmade work, whether beadwork, woodwork, or ceramics. One of the greatest pleasures of doing this work has been the chance to make series of ritual vessels for a number of individuals. One of my most comprehensive projects to date was to make a set of pots for the personal pantheon of priest Awo Fáladé Òsúntólá, who has received initiations in both Haiti and Benin. Over the course of producing a number of significant pieces, I was able to have a lengthy exchange with him, and he explained to me in detail the significance of the deity for whom each piece was intended, as well as providing me with personal photographs of both traditional pots and ritual practices in Benin.

I became interested in these traditions well before I was involved in pottery. For a long while, this interest was kept completely separate from my pottery pursuits, and I did not make any attempt to introduce one to the other, even while being encouraged in graduate school to immerse myself in meaningful source material. Since I began making pottery in undergraduate school in the early nineties, my aesthetic was more-or-less Mingei, by way of Minnesota and Georgia. When I finally decided in 2009 to try my hand at making pots for African-Atlantic traditions, I was not immediately comfortable with certain stylistic and aesthetic conventions. For instance, mermaids are emblematic of the arch-Orisha Yemaya, and I did not fancy myself a potter who would under any circumstances put mermaids on pots! There continues to exist


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ABOVE: Pot for Yoruba/Lucumi Sakpata or Babalu Aye, deity of smallpox and pestilence, *2012. White indentations recall small pox scars; hole in lid allows the insertion of the ritual "broom" with which Sakpata sweeps his power across the earth. Earthenware, 14 x 16 x 16 in. Photograph by Lydia Clark*
PREVIOUS PAGES LEFT TOP: Ibeji pot, Yoruba/Lucumi sacred twins, *2013. Unglazed earthenware, statuary, earth, outer bowl 18 in. Lidded jars 5 x 5 x 5 in. by Adam Posnak, statuary and other clay vessels from West Africa. Photograph by Awo Fáladé Òsúntólá*
LEFT CENTER: Osun pot offering arrangement, Yoruba/Lucumi deity of fresh water, *2013. Lidded pot 12 in. partially covered in center of frame, glazed earthenware, fruit, vegetables, drink, beadwork, statuary, floral arrangement, red parrot feathers. Photograph by Awo Fáladé Òsúntólá*
LEFT BOTTOM: Osumare pot(s), Yoruba serpent deity, *2013. Unglazed earthenware, beads, shells, iron work, earth, bowl 15 in. Photograph by Awo Fáladé Òsúntólá*
RIGHT: St. Barbara plate, *2013. Earthenware, 14 in. Photograph by* Lydia Clark

a degree of push and pull in making pots for religious use; sometimes I am resistant to certain cultural tastes, and at other times I try to introduce stylistic or formal ideas that are not well received. Ultimately I have decided that any resulting frustration is insignificant compared to the value of the experience.

In addressing my personal position in relation to these practitioners and communities, it is important to state that there is a fairly wide range of involvement possible in any of the faiths concerned. It is certainly permissible to be a casual participant; however, access to certain symbolic and ritual knowledge and experience is closely guarded, and there comes a point at which one is either "in" or "out." Full participation is only granted when an individual makes the personal commitment, is given permission, and accepts the responsibility conferred by ritual initiation. During the course of my time making pottery for ritual use, my status has evolved from interested outsider to semi-participant to full initiate. I found it important from the perspectives of both potter and traditional participant to follow this gradual course. On the one hand, though clearly a cultural outsider in terms of my upbringing, I came to the traditions with at least a minimal skill to offer. On the other hand, I'm hopeful that this unique experience allows me to bring something back to the contemporary pottery community: an expanded vision of the potential of functional pots and the inspiration gained from vibrant, though largely unknown, cultures.

Along the way, two individuals have been particularly instrumental in my development as a maker of religious vessels, one a folklorist and priest of Palo Mayombe and the other both an art historian and Lucumi initiate. Possessing the dual perspectives of academic and priest, each of them has been an indispensable gateway into his religious community.

Though I continue to consider the making of sacred pottery separate from my personal work, the two types of work have certainly influenced one another. I have received tremendous inspiration from the visual culture related to African and African-Caribbean practice. From the painted walls of a Haitian Humfor (Vodou temple), to the sacred sigils of Cuban Palo Mayombe, to the work of contemporary Cuban-American artist extraordinaire Jose Bedia (a Palo initiate), I have found a wealth of inspiring symbolic and visual information. I have had the great fortune to be allowed to visit various shrines and temples of different traditions, including Vodou temples in Little Haiti, Miami; Lucumi *Iles* (religious houses) in Texas and Louisiana; Palo houses in Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania; and the Oyotunji Village in South Carolina, where a traditional Yoruba society has been completely reconstructed.

Making pottery for use in a dynamic and living spiritual context has given me a new perspective on the concept of function. These pots are considered to be housing for deity, and as such are focal points for devotion and receptacles for spiritual offerings. In the Lucumi religion, rich, complex, lush displays are constructed from the finest fabric, draped layer upon layer in the corner of a room, and the sacred vessels are seated in their midst. The pots are adorned with heavy and ornate multistrand hand-beaded necklaces. In the Palo Mayombe tradition, the vessels are often kept in small buildings of their own, where they are sat with and sung to for hours on end, the generated spiritual heat being tempered by cooling drafts of cigar smoke and mouth-blown mists of rum and dry white wine. This is hardly the life usually associated with functional pottery, but the experience of participating in these traditions has profoundly influenced the pottery I make for everyday use. I've been very fortunate to learn about and be allowed to participate in these traditions, due to the kindness and indulgence of the priests and practitioners that I have been privileged to know. It has been an intense and humbling experience to make these pots, and I hope they can stand as a tribute to both the people and the spiritual forces for which they are made. Relatively speaking, this is a new endeavor, but one that I hope continues and evolves throughout my pottery-making life.