African pottery - why archaeologists don’t get it

AARD
Southampton

3-4th November 2012

Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation
The present in the past

- Why do people do ethnoarchaeology? Presumably because present practice is supposed to illuminate the past.
- But the problem is that the past is used to set the agenda, not the present.
- So, not to exaggerate much, you find a lot of uninteresting pots in an excavation and go and ask potters uninteresting questions about them in the present.
- A cloud of hi-tech language gives the whole thing an aura of science, which it isn’t.
- But the pottery (and other material culture) we find in the present has to have evolved in the past.
- And therefore we need to somehow invert this procedure and work back from the present to the past.
The present in the past

Present practice [largely unknown, currently highly threatened]

Questions driven by hypotheses

Present practice known more fully through open-ended examination of ethnographic specimens and museum collections]

Models of present practice compared with known evolutions

Past practice [largely unknowable, marred by interpretative errors]

Excavations mediated through sociological hypotheses

Past practice slightly less, unknowable] illuminated by hypotheses from the present

Hypotheses about past practice informed by both excavation and ethnographic modelling

Hypotheses about past practice informed by both excavation and ethnographic modelling

Models of present practice compared with known evolutions

Questions driven by hypotheses

Present practice known more fully through open-ended examination of ethnographic specimens and museum collections]

Past practice [largely unknown, currently highly threatened]

Excavations mediated through sociological hypotheses

Hypotheses about past practice informed by both excavation and ethnographic modelling

Models of present practice compared with known evolutions

Present practice known more fully through open-ended examination of ethnographic specimens and museum collections]
Between Central Nigeria and the Grassfields of Cameroun, ceramics/terracotta are a key medium for the creation of elaborate figurative pottery which is a central focus for a wide variety of ritual activities.

These traditions are stylistically extremely diverse, encompassing both the type of figurines characteristic of Nok, the anthropomorphic vessels in NE Nigeria and elaborate polychrome creations in the Grassfields.

Apart from Nok, almost none of these have been excavated in context. The paper describes the geographical distribution of these forms of ceramic expression, with particular attention to the Grassfields.

It suggests that stylistic diversity must be linked to extreme ethnolinguistic diversity and is thus an indicator for the antiquity of these traditions.
It presents some examples of what is known of the ritual uses of anthropomorphic pots, especially in NE Nigeria. It contrasts these striking traditions with the flat, two-dimensional functionalist presentation of the social context of pottery which so often emerges from archaeological monographs.

This is the basis for a proposal to develop a more nuanced understanding of ethnographic pottery in order to build more convincing images of the significance of pottery in past societies.
The major zone of figurative pottery
Rattling spoons: Cameroun Grassfields
Libation spoons: Cameroun Grassfields
Ancestor figures: Mambila
Examples from the Cameroun Grassfields
Modernising the polychrome tradition
Offering pot: Cameroun Grassfields
Terracotta drum from the Cameroun Grassfields
Making pots in the Grassfields

- The particular interest of the Cameroun Grassfields (and the Cross River) is that the traditional is still alive and the makers can be interviewed, the rituals and belief system understood.
Nok terracotta
Sao terracottas
Nigeria: Longuda and Jukun ancestor figures
Examples from the Cameroun Grassfields
The wider African picture

- Apart from this region, anthropomorphic terracottas are found, largely in archaeological contexts
- The Segou/Niger Delta terracottas (much stoeln, much forged)
- Bura terracottas of the Niger Valley
- The Koma sculptures in Northern Ghana
- The Mangbetu head pots in eastern CAR
- Scattered anthropomorphic terracottas across DRC and Tanzania
- Falasha terracotta heads (? Link with Axum)
The bigger picture in Africa
Koma terracottas: Northern Ghana
Segou figures
Mangbetu vessels
Anthropomorphic pots are fairly rare globally.

They only occur in one part of Melanesia, ethnographically.

And, exceptionally the Maitum ‘portrait’ pots in the Philippines.

They are important from Mexico to Peru in the archaeological tradition.

And in early Japan.

Which is why the African story is fairly important even in telling a global story.
The global picture: New Guinea
Chambri Lakes face pottery
The global picture: Maitum funerary pots
The global picture: Nazca, Peru
The global picture: Japan
In the figurative pottery zone identified here, ceramics/terracotta are used as a central expressive tool for marking identity, ethnic boundaries and created for a central position in ceremonies.

Oh yes, and people use pots for cooking as well.

For expressive creations, different materials are more or less important in different regions; bronze and iron can be used, wood is crucial.

These reflect cost, ecology and artistic choice.

It is clear that the living traditions of anthropomorphic pottery are much less common than the archaeological ones.

This may be because materials such as iron have become cheaper and therefore are drawn into the expressive repertoire.

Which points to the importance of documenting the creative process while it is still alive.
Thinking about this historically

- Figurative pottery in Africa has scattered occurrences across much of the continent, but typically associated with settled communities and subhumid zones.
- It is strongly cross-correlated with figurative art in other media, especially wood.
- It is dying or has died in many places, but it has a creative heartland, which is the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland.
- Where it is still alive and indeed apparently adapting to a modern commercial climate.
Thinking about this methodologically

- Looking at a wider range of pottery in the present can surely help us better identify what is found in excavations.
- However, more than that, we need to try and draw up models that credibly derive the present from the past.
- For example, there is a region of complex figurative polychrome pottery in the Cameroun Grassfields; what are the pigments? Is this a recent development or an old tradition?
- Stylistic mapping (using synchronic pottery, museum collections, archaeological finds)
And here’s the big issue

- Too much work has gone into technical stuff, *chaine opératoire*, clays, firing procedures
- And when potters are interviewed, the questions typically focus on these questions
- But this is to miss the point in a big way. The question we are (I hope) trying to answer is what are ceramics (and by extension other types of material culture) doing in society?
- Cooking pots are for cooking, fine
- But people who make these complex and elaborate ceramics do it for multiple reasons and within stylistic paradigms
- We have a just a few chances to find out what these are
A moral issue

- A problem arises, which is that so much of the most striking material, especially terracotta, is out of context.
- Collectors favour figurative ceramics
- They are being illegally excavated, or were even legally removed from the country in an earlier era.
- In the case of Nok, they have been restored in significantly wrong ways
- And there are increasing numbers of fakes around
- We can deplore it, and pass resolutions against labs which do the dating, but in the end it is evidence, sometimes striking, for past traditions.
- A moral GPS as well as an artistic/technical one
THANKS

Thanks to Nicole Rupp for images of the Nok terracottas.

To the Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for supporting the fieldwork.