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An Ethnographic Study of Nupe Pottery at Badeggi: A *Chaîne Opératoire* Approach

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Abstract

This study presents an ethnographic investigation of Nupe pottery-making traditions at Badeggi in the Bida Basin, Niger State, with particular attention to the chaîne opératoire of ceramic production. Employing participant observation, oral interviews, and desktop surveys, the study presents the entire production sequence, from clay acquisition and preparation through vessel forming, decoration, firing, and post-production use. The analysis demonstrates that Nupe pottery-making embodies a sophisticated body of indigenous technical knowledge grounded in material science, artistic skill, and cultural symbolism. Findings from this study reveal that the craft is predominantly practised by women and children, with men participating marginally in clay mining and marketing. The study indicates that pottery retains multifunctional value within Nupe society, serving domestic, ritual, economic, and symbolic purposes. Despite the increasing dominance of plastic and metal substitutes, Nupe pottery endures as a resilient cultural practice, adapting to contemporary conditions through modified decorative techniques and shifts in production strategies to meet market demand. The ethnographic evidence presented further highlights the role of intergenerational knowledge transmission, communal labour organisation, and environmental adaptation in sustaining the craft. The study concludes that Nupe pottery should be regarded as a dynamic indigenous technology that continues to shape identity, sustain livelihoods, and preserve cultural heritage in the Bida Basin.

Keywords: Nupe, Pottery, Ethnography, Badeggi, Bida

Introduction

In this study, an attempt has been made to undertake an ethnographic enquiry into the understanding of the traditional Nupe pottery-making tradition in Badeggi town, with emphasis on the *Chaîne Opératoire*. Through this approach, key aspects such as clay raw material acquisition strategies, clay treatment, vessel forming, surface treatments, and the firing processes have been examined. Ethnography, as

employed in this study, is viewed as a qualitative data collection method and model for understanding and explaining extant cultural practices. Through this, relevant primary and secondary data were collected through oral interviews, participant observation, and consultation of written texts, which have been used to understand the importance of pottery objects and their technical production systems in the everyday life of the Nupe people.

This survey is conducted on an essential cultural practice that is still in use among the extant Nupe populations of the Bida Basin, in its various forms and sizes. Information on this craft abounds in several texts on the Nupe of the Bida Basin, highlighting its important role as domestic, ceremonial/ritual, luxury, and trade goods (Nadel, 1946; Jimada, 2016; Abubakar, 2016; Sheshi, 2018). To understand this, the survey decided on a sample population which was arrived at from an excerpt found in Nadel (1946, p. 296) as follows;

Pottery is widespread in Nupe, both in Bida and in the villages. Certain places are famous for their pottery, such as Jebba Island, Baro, Badeggi, and Bida. The best clay for pottery is found near the river, and this may explain the superiority of the pottery produced in these localities, which are all situated on or near the river. But there exists also a regular trade in potter's clay; women from Badeggi take the excellent clay which is found in that district to Bida and sell it there to the local potters.

A similar view was also found in Nicholson (1934, p. 71), expressed as follows: "Suitable clay is found in the swamp of the Gbako river at Badeggi, about 10 miles east of Bida. Itinerant vendors from this village bring it round for sale...."

The above views have influenced the ethnographic survey on the potters from Badeggi town, among others, as the survey sample population. The other settlements of Jebba Island, Baro, and Bida, although also located on river and stream banks, were not considered, given their current meagre production of pottery materials as against their large-scale output at Badeggi. It is a small town located on latitude 9°03'45''N - 9°02'50''N and longitude 6°08'05''E - 6°09'10''E on the bank of the Gbako river in Katcha Local Government area, Niger State (See figure 1 below for details).

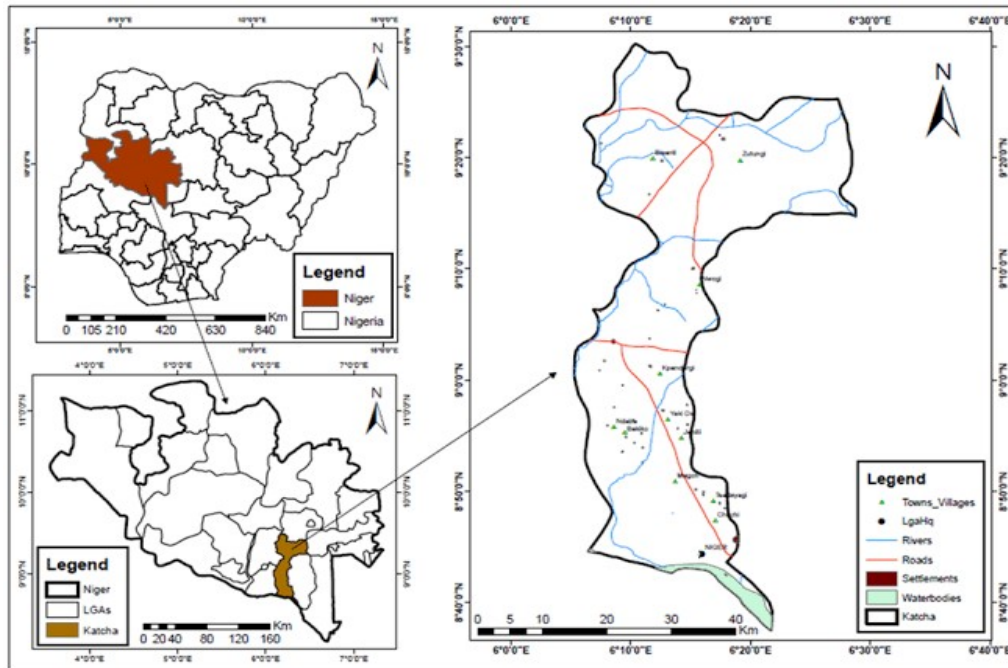


Figure 1: Inset maps of Nigeria, Niger State and Katcha Local Government Area
Source: <https://sambusgeospatial.com>

At Badeggi, contemporary pottery manufacture is practiced among almost all the households in the town by women and children (of both genders). Although young men sometimes participate in the pottery production process, it is usually to help their aged mothers, whom they had observed manufacturing pottery materials since childhood. However, having adult males engage in the art of pottery making is very uncommon among the Badeggi potters and the Nupe generally. But they are sometimes involved in the making and selling of the final pottery products at the weekly markets. Apart from the occasional digging of clay and selling of finished wares, adult males hardly engage with the craft on an intimate level, but, along with women and children, utilise pottery materials for the day-to-day activities.

Data Collection Strategy

Interview questions were administered to the chosen sample population at both the individual and focus group levels – women, children, and men inclusive. The questionnaire format was mixed, including both structured and unstructured questions, to which the respondent provided answers in the Nupe language. Given

that all of the respondents, except four, could not read and write, the most appropriate mode of administering the interview questions was orally in the Nupe language. Responses were then collected through an audio and video recorder, which was later transcribed into English. This was possible as the researcher's mother's tongue is also Nupe, thereby eliminating the encumbrances of the language barrier and aiding an understanding of the often-unspoken cultural nuances.

Nineteen female respondents were interviewed altogether, divided into two categories of full-time potters: (i) those who had inherited the craft from their parents or grandparents and had been practising since childhood, and (ii) those that have learnt the craft through apprenticeship. Two additional female respondents who were not potters but housewives who utilise pottery wares for domestic activities also form part of the sample population. Also, two male respondents from pottery-producing families were interviewed to examine their involvement in the production process and perception of the craft. This provided useful information on the use/function, and marketing of the pottery wares. All the interview sessions were held while the potters were engaged in the production process, with the researcher often participating in some of the tasks involved, such as clay sourcing and mixing. Through this, it was possible to observe and experience first-hand the art of pottery production from the perspective of the practitioners – a key goal of the ethnographic method.

Employing three data collection methods, including archival research, participant observation, and interviews, the survey was able to deduce the crucial role of pottery technology in the everyday life of the Badeggi people. As a qualitative research method, the interviews were conducted in the morning between 9:00 am and 2:00 pm at the courtyards of the potters' homes, which in most cases serve as the potting workshop. The reason behind this timing was to allow the potters to carry out their morning chores without disturbance and conclude the day's interview before 2:00 p.m. to make time for the preparation of the afternoon meal.

Both structured and unstructured interview questions were then administered after informing the respondent about the purpose of the exercise, which is academic. The sessions then would commence with the potter(s) arranging their materials for demonstration. A voice recorder was then put in a safe place away from the direct view of the respondent, and questions were asked in a discussion (semi-formal) manner, giving room for the respondent to feel relaxed in providing answers while

working. Accordingly, notes and photographs of the different production processes were taken while the interviews were ongoing so as not to miss out on any of the details. In furtherance, video recordings were also made of the production stages to record a broader view of the potters and their working environments.

Production Processes and Systems

Pottery production as observed in the Bida basin today could be said to be of a long-standing tradition. This is attributable to its presence at all the investigated archaeological sites in the area, occurring in abundance on site surfaces and extending to the deepest stratigraphic levels (Aiyedun & Shaw, 1989). It is one of the most important forms of traditional crafts through which societies in the Nigerian area have expressed high levels of technological and artistic ingenuity. This traditional craft, although currently in decline in most parts of West Africa as a result of the introduction of plastic, steel, and aluminium vessels, is still widely practised among the Nupe.

In most Nupe towns and villages, women and children are the direct practitioners of ceramic art, producing vessels of different shapes and sizes for both the local and faraway markets. This is observable at Badeggi and other settlements, where it is a common sight to find in the majority of the households, groups of women and their children busy during the day manufacturing pottery objects (especially water containers and hearths). This group engages in the production of these objects all year round, with manufacturing only slowing down during the rainy season, when it is usually time for every member of the family to join hands in the cultivation of the land for the farming season. Also, the arrival of the rains disrupts the production of pottery materials because the clay mines, which are located on the floodplains, are usually flooded during this time of the year. The potters are therefore left with clay stored in their homes from the previous year to work with.

a. Clay Extraction and Mining Process

The art of pottery production among the Nupe, like other West African peoples, begins with the mining or sometimes the purchase of clay raw material (see plates I and II). This is evident in the case of the potters at Badeggi, who have strategically situated their settlement on the floodplains of the river Gbako, possibly for proximity to the clay resource, which they continue to mine. On average, the distance between the clay fields and the potter's workshops is less than a kilometre, which corresponds with the view of Giade (2016) that most African potters collect their clay from close to where they live and practice the craft.

Women and sometimes children (boys and girls) mine the clay from shallow pits on the riverbanks (See plate I and II below for details) with mattocks (*Dugba gbari*), which, according to them, are best for the extraction. Occasionally, however, adult men could also be seen extracting clay to be sold to women who cannot dig for themselves. When the clay is dug, huge plastic containers and baskets are used to convey the mined clay back to the potters' homes and workshops. Due to the excellent nature of the clay and its abundance at Badeggi, the raw material is traded to other parts of the area where less malleable clay is available.



Plate I: A Woman mining clay on the bank of the river Gbako at Badeggi



Plate II: Mined clay raw material

Two forms of clay are extracted from the riverbanks by the potters, depending on the time of the year. For instance, at the end of the rainy season, when the water levels are receding, potters collect wet clays from puddles on the floodplains, while at the peak of the dry season, dry clays are mined from shallow pits reaching depths of about 2 metres. Several pits are mined concurrently by the potters themselves, who collect clays from different points through years of practical experience. The women potters of Badeggi, having learned to exploit the riverbank for clay resources from previous generations, could easily identify sections of the floodplains with the right type of clay suitable for pottery production, and that which is only useful for building construction.

b. Clay Preparation

When the mined clay arrives at the potter's home or workshop, depending on its moisture level, the potters spread it out to dry. The clay is thereafter sorted to remove impurities, such as roots and shells, present in the clay. Sorted clays are then soaked in large pots overnight or even for longer periods. However, because of the fine texture of the floodplain clays at Badeggi, the potters sometimes use wet clay directly from the pits without sorting and air drying to manufacture ceramic vessels. The wet clay is mixed with grog (*Zungba*) to serve as a temper, which is pounded in a wooden mortar into coarse grains that are added to the clay to increase its elasticity (See plates III & IV below for details). Two varieties of materials are used as grog among the Badeggi potters, obtained mostly from pounded-fired clay lumps and potsherds. Organic materials are not used or included as in clays as tempers among the potters who claim to have never heard of it or seen it done before.



Plate III: Lumps of fired clay with the pounded grog in a mortar

To produce a vessel, ash (*Nanbu*) collected from the firing exercise is sprinkled either on a sack or old cloth spread on the floor, and the wet clay is scooped onto it. This is to prevent the clay from sticking to the kneading surface. The pounded and sieved grog is then gradually sprinkled on the clay with the potter persistently carrying on with the kneading until the lump has attained the required level of workability.



Plate IV: Clay kneading process

c. Forming Technique

Two styles of vessel-forming techniques were observed among the potters – they are the moulding and coiling techniques. The potters form their vessels using a

combination of both techniques. Forming of the vessels starts with the fetching of a lump from the kneaded clay, which is then beaten in a downward motion with an oval-shaped fired clay hammer (*Bamba*) into a flat piece. Ash from the pottery firing place called Nanbu is then sprinkled on the surface of the pot mould to prevent sticking of the clay to the upturned mould. The flattened clay piece is thereafter placed on the upturned pot and beaten into shape to form the lower half of the pot. This moulded lower half is then set aside by the potter to harden a bit before the coils are added to form the upper part. At this stage, the potters use a wet pebble or calabash to polish the inside and outside of the partially formed vessel – and also to fill up visible cracks. Consequently, the upper part of the vessel is formed using coils that have been rolled horizontally. These coils are joined to the moulded lower half, and the vessel is built into the desired shape. The vessel-forming process is then concluded with the making of the rim and lip (See plates V & VI below for details).



Plate V: Stretching of the flattened clay on a convex mould with the *Bamba*



Plate VI: Completing a vessel with rolled clay coils

To form the rim and base of a vessel, a tiny coil is rolled depending on the desired size, which is attached at the leather-hard stage by pressing it with the thumb along the circumference of the rim or base, which is then wiped with a folded wet cloth to smooth and bring out its shape. A similar process is used to form the vessel lip with a folded wet cloth held firmly between the fingers, and the cloth is then wiped along the edge of the vessel orifice to form the lip (See plate VII below for details).



Plate VII: Forming a vessel base

d. Decoration and Tools

Among the potters interviewed, there seems to be a line of division as to the point at which the decoration of a vessel starts. Most of the Badeggi potters view

decorations commencing with the use of a broken piece of calabash dipped in water to smooth both the exterior and interior parts of the vessel. Some of them disagreed, insisting instead that the act of smoothening and burnishing is part of the finishing process. For this group, the art of decorating a vessel begins with the application of decorative markings at the leather-hard stage. Even though the potters disagree on whether burnishing should be considered as part of the decoration process or not, they all engage in the art of vessel burnishing, which they claim fills up minor cracks and prevents water leakage. This technical procedure, as observed from the field observations, serves non-aesthetic functions among most of the potters studied and thus cannot be considered as burnishing, given its practical purpose. When burnishing is done, and the vessel is allowed to dry for some time, usually in the shade, the potters apply various decorative markings such as grooves, incisions, roulettes, perforations, appliques, red slipping, painting, and so on. Using objects such as combs, knives, broken calabashes, sticks, sponges, and toothbrushes, the potters decorate vessels to enhance their aesthetic and economic value (See plate VIII below for details).



Plate VIII: Vessel decorating tools

However, the potters claim that these days the technical efforts invested into producing intricately designed vessels with multiple decorations (common among the Nupe and Gbagyi potters) are no longer appreciated by the buyers who purchase the objects based on their functional attributes only. According to the potters, modern users of pottery vessels attach little or no significance to ornamental decorations, as was the case in the past. This has led the potters to produce vessels

that are scantily decorated with mostly horizontal and oblique incisions and grooves. However, the potters have also adopted the use of red slipping (with red clay paste) and painting as means of decoration, which to them is much easier and less time-consuming when compared with the use of roulettes, appliques, and so on.

Sadly, the decline in the production of intricately decorated vessels according to the potters could be attributed to the high demand for the wares, in which case the ability to meet up with an overwhelming market pressure often supersedes aesthetic traditions. This situation, according to them, was not the case in the past, when a potter could produce one or two vessels in a month, often for personal use and had ample time to express their artistic talents. Although most of the traditional decorative motifs (with the exception of incisions and grooves) have largely disappeared among the Badeggi potters, they claim not to have forgotten the techniques and symbolisms of the 'old' styles. Interestingly, most of the potters interviewed indicated a willingness to reproduce such decorative styles upon request or when commissioned to do so by interested buyers. To assert the claim, two potters were made to demonstrate the 'old' styles of decorations on a pot and pot stand which was impressively produced (See plate IX below for details).



Plate IX: A pot with multiple decorative motifs

e. Drying and Post-Drying Treatments

Having decorated the vessels at the leather-hard stage, the potters set them aside to dry for some time, often under the shade or the morning sun. This is done to technically guard against the risk of cracking during the firing process. From years

of practice and experience, the potters allow the vessels to dry for different durations depending on their thickness and prevailing weather conditions. After the vessels are dried, they are red-slipped with either a paste of red clay (*Eegun dzuru*) or red laterite (*Taakun dzuru*) mixed with water and sponge to give them a brown and red colour after firing. The mixture is rubbed onto the vessel using a sponge that is dipped into the solution. When this is done, a toothbrush is used to apply a white kaolin paste to the objects. This gives the wares a bright, colourful look that concludes the post-drying treatment process (See plates X-XII below for details).



Plate X: Wares at the leather-hard stage set outside to dry



Plate XI: Red clay paste – slip



Plate XII: A cross-section of slipped wares ready for firing

f. Firing

The firing process is done communally every Thursday of the week. The choice of Thursday for firing the earthenware objects is to allow the potters to sell their products the following day at the Badeggi Friday market. Firing is done at two specified areas behind the town where potters take their wares to be fired. The preferred fuel for firing is rice straw, wood, and other grasses that grow on the river banks. To fire the wares, the potters arrange sticks on the ground and then place the objects on them according to size. The large vessels are placed first on the woods, followed by other smaller vessels. Rice straws and other grasses are then carefully piled on the vessels to cover them completely.

Fire is then lit to the arranged pile with the potters constantly monitoring the temperature around the wares for maximum oxidation. When and where necessary, the potters use long sticks to turn the vessels in the fire to prevent darkened spots on the wares, which could result from poor firing (reduction atmosphere). Water is also used to douse the fire in an attempt to control the temperature and forestall cracking due to uncontrolled temperatures. In some instances, more and more fuel is added to the pile to achieve the desired temperature (See plate XIII below for details).



Plate XIII: Pile of fired wares

Usually, within the pile or close to it, the potters also fire the dry clay used as grog in the clay preparation process (See plate XIV below for details). The fired grogs are thereafter transported to the workshop, where they are pounded in mortars for use as inorganic tempers.



Plate XIV: Fired clay to be used as grog

g. Vessel Types and Function

Despite the dominance of plastic and metal vessels as household objects, there appears to be a thriving demand for pottery wares. This demand has aided the survival of the pottery-making industry, servicing both local and regional markets with wares of varying types and functions. As observed, vessel types are defined by the functions they serve, which may range from their use as mostly water

containers, as cooking utensils, ritual and religious objects, and ceremonial regalia. Aside from these uses, the function a vessel is put to could also depend on the choice of its owner, who determines other ways the objects can be used.

Some of the vessel types observed in use include *Egbaa*, a large storage pot with a wide orifice used in storing water or cereals. These large pots are often permanently fixed in front of their owner's rooms within the compounds. Other vessels include jugs (*Mange*) for ablution and as bridal gifts for royal maidens; steaming bowls (*Kasko*), and water pots (*Dukun nuwan*). There are also perforated bowls that are used for roasting meat, nuts, and special kinds of medicines. Although pottery vessels are no longer used in the cooking of foods, they still serve as medicine pots in traditional healing practices. Another kind of vessel that still plays an important role is the frying pan (*Tanda*), which is used in the preparation of a starchy snack called *Bambaraa* (See plate XV below for details).



Plate XV: Fired wares ready for the market

Among the Nupe generally, pottery wares hardly cease to be of use as they are either recycled as grog in the pottery production process or put to other uses (such as floor pavements) when they are broken. These broken vessels sometimes also serve as feeding troughs for domesticated birds such as chickens, ducks, and pigeons. However, one crucial household purpose of broken vessels is their use by housewives for obtaining ash and hot coal from neighbours to make a fire. Women commonly do this when they have run out of matchsticks, and when they intend to

burn incense. Ash from the fireplaces is also mostly collected in these broken vessels to be leached for potash.

Pottery wares also play important roles in Muslim burials, where newly produced vessels are carefully broken to be used in covering the corpse in the grave before covering it with earth. As seen among the sample population, broken pottery objects also serve as grave markers and sometimes complete bowls with water in them are placed beside graves for birds and other small animals to drink from as charity (*Sadaqa*). Similarly, pottery objects feature prominently during childbirth, where heated sherds are placed in old clothes and consistently placed on the umbilical cord to hasten its drying and healing.

Accordingly, a broad scheme of vessel types identified during the ethnographic survey has been generated (See figure 2 below for details). The scheme is based on the functional attributes of vessel types among the potters. Except for the pot stand, the manufacture of all the other vessel types is still in practice. The pot stand is rarely manufactured these days, but a few of them could still be found in the custody of elderly women as mementoes from the past. In contrast, the portable clay stove is the most ubiquitous, given the heavy reliance of the populace on charcoal for cooking. This is followed by the presence of small, medium, and large pots used largely for all sorts of domestic activities.

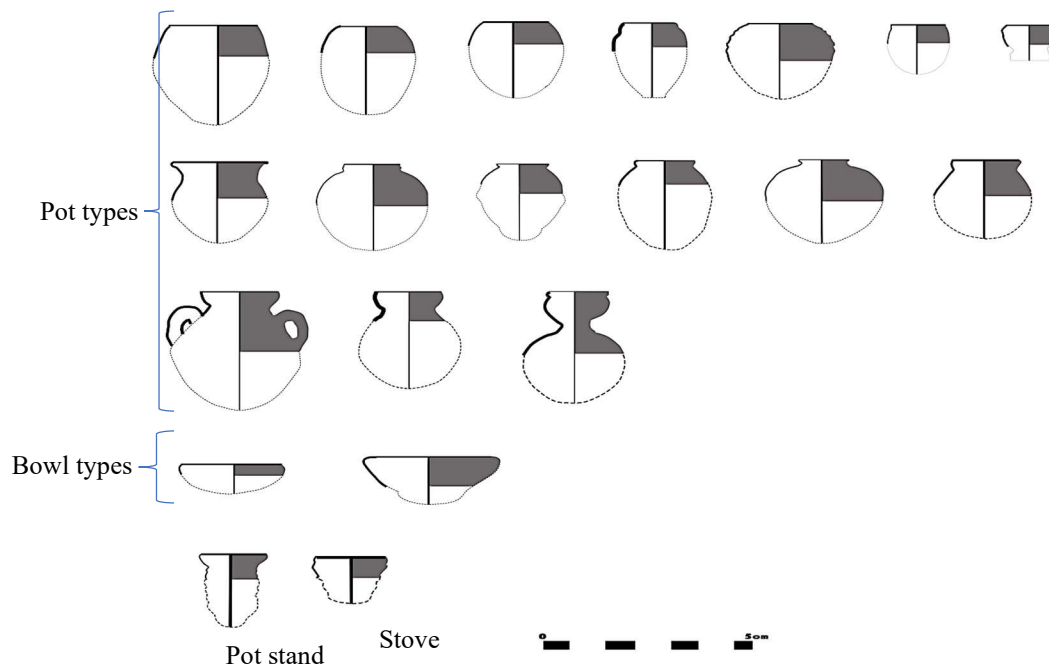


Figure 2: Some Nupe vessel types observed from the ethnographic survey

Source: Fieldwork (2023)

Conclusion

This ethnographic enquiry into Nupe pottery-making at Badeggi has demonstrated that the craft embodies a complex technological and cultural system that extends beyond the production of utilitarian objects. By analysing the *chaîne opératoire* of pottery—from clay acquisition through preparation, forming, decoration, firing, and distribution—the study establishes that Nupe pottery constitutes a resilient indigenous technology sustained through intergenerational knowledge transmission and adaptive strategies in response to environmental and economic pressures.

The findings underscore that pottery-making, though predominantly undertaken by women and children, remains a central feature of Nupe cultural life, retaining its relevance in domestic, ritual, and economic domains despite the proliferation of modern industrial substitutes such as plastics and metals. The study further

highlights the dynamic nature of tradition, as seen in the simplification of decorative styles to meet market demands, thereby challenging perceptions of indigenous crafts as static or obsolete. This research contributes to the broader discourse on African material culture by situating Nupe pottery within ongoing debates on cultural resilience, identity, and heritage preservation. In conclusion, Nupe pottery should be recognised not merely as a vestige of the past but as a living heritage that embodies both technological ingenuity and cultural identity. By way of recommendation, future research should be pursued and designed to further elucidate the significance of different pottery traditions and their capacity to adapt within rapidly transforming socio-economic contexts.

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