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Samuel Nortey, Naako Wamuaja & Frederick Ebenezer Okai

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Teaching artists work on unraveling complexities in the designs of indigenous youth potters in the Nanumba South District of Ghana and expanding the frontiers of pottery production in the interests of social sustainability.

## Expanding the Frontiers of Pottery in the Nanumba South District of Ghana for Social Sustainability: An Experiment with the Youth



Samuel Nortey



Naako Wamuaja



Frederick Ebenezer Okai

Correspondence regarding this article should go to:

**Samuel Nortey**  
Kwame Nkrumah University of  
Science and Technology  
Department of Industrial Art  
College of Art and Social  
Science  
University Post Office  
Kumasi, Ghana  
[sammynort@gmail.com](mailto:sammynort@gmail.com)

### Introduction

Ghana as a nation is endowed with abundance clay, the principal raw material used in pottery production. The availability of the raw material in almost every region of Ghana has made pottery production a source of employment for many indigenes of the various regions. Nanumba South District of Ghana has developed a considerable history of pottery production almost ever family home produces pottery. The art of pottery making has been a profession that has been passed on from generation to generation, and it is closely joined to the life of the people of Nanumba and Ghana at large. Products of this craft are of paramount importance in homes, in workplaces, and during festivals and important traditional occasions.

Pottery like any other art plays an important educational role, bringing artistic skills, values, and practices into the public eye, which provides a form of expression and gives validation to the experiences, history, and cultural heritage of societies where the majority of the population may have been historically marginalized (Marschall). The essence of traditional pottery practices contributes significantly to the archaeological method of transmission of knowledge within communities (Childs; Walde, David, and MacEachern).

Despite the significant role of pottery in preserving cultural identity and providing a source of livelihood to the people of Nanumba, their artistic development of pot production has been stagnant. This has resulted in low patronage of their products, which is further accentuated by the influx of the plastics industry on the market. This in turn has led to low social sustainability of pottery production. As a society, there is the need to promote education, creativity, and the development of human potential for the whole population; preserve our cultural and biological heritage;

and strengthen our sense of connectedness to our cultural history and environment (Osberg). However, according to the Ghana Tourist Board, the northern part of Ghana receives a significant number of tourists (both foreign and local) who are mostly interested in artworks as souvenirs. It is becoming a common spectacle or fashion for Nanumba potters to migrate southward in search of nonexistent jobs in the cities.

The question is, how do we prevent this pottery activity from becoming extinct in Nanumba? How do we develop the region's pottery to meet the expectations of tourists and art lovers in order to promote its social sustainability? The project discussed in this article looks at Nanumba pottery with the primary objective of unraveling its design complexities and expanding the frontiers of pottery production to meet contemporary expectations.

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## **Ethnographic Account of the Nanumba South District and Their Pottery**

The Nanumba South District of Ghana was carved from the then-Nanumba District with Wulensi as its district capital, situated about 211 km southeast of the regional capital Tamale. The district also spans 145 km of the western border with the East

Gonja District and the Oti River. The district is well known for its striking and distinctive architecture and for the various extensions of houses that reflect extended family heritage. Indigenously, men are the heads of the household, which includes the wife, children, nieces and nephews, and younger brothers. To Perani and Smith, it confirms the respect they hold in the community. This is an agricultural district with the cultivation of yam as its major crop along with cassava, maize, groundnut, and rice.

The Nanumba South District also has a multiplicity of ethnic groups and cultural practices. Besides its farming activities, it is well noted for its distinctive pottery and other handicrafts such as wood carving and weaving. These crafts, though not practiced on a large scale, are found in many communities including Kajesu and Opidjua, which are both a few minutes' drive from Wulensi, the district capital. However, Kajesu is well noted for the production of "signa" or "nkin" (water cooler pot). Opidjua, on the other hand, produces a mixture of wares such as "lisanbiboln" ("fufu" bowl), "kisanbibik" (soup bowl), "lidabuul" (pito pot; "pito" is a local beer prepared from corn or maize), and "kisapeik" (bathing bowl). The potters take pride in their work and in the economic sustainability they derive from it. Potters in the district work individually in their respective homes applying skills passed on from generation to generation in producing their pots.

## **Understanding Nanumba Pottery Before Expansion**

Clay for pottery production in Opidjua and Kajesu, both in the Nanumba South District, is obtained mainly from the bank of the Oti River. It is very plastic and fires red due to high iron content in the material. Clay is also obtained from other parts of the area, especially in the rainy seasons when it becomes difficult to access the riverbank. Head pans and wheelbarrows are used in transporting the clay to the work site.

Foreign materials such as roots, stones, and so on, are picked out of the clay by

hand, and then the clay is soaked in a pot or a pit to break up lumps to ensure homogeneity and allow it to age. The aged clay is later taken and kneaded to expel trapped air and improve its consistency.

## Forming the Wares

In Kajesu and Opidjua, pots are formed from the bottom to the top using old broken pots as molds to support the base. A lump of clay is first parted and put on a piece of leaf or light wooden board. Clay is added in the form of balls and coils as it's worked. The potter first presses the right hand into the middle of the lump of clay until the hand touches the bottom of the clay. The potter makes a circular movement around the lump of clay and with the corncob in the right-hand inside the lump, pushes the clay from the inside. The potter then draws the corncob gently from bottom to the top while making the circular movement. This continues until the belly of the pot is created. The potter wets a rag and in addition to a corncob smooths and shapes the form. There is continual application of the wet rag and the corncob until a half finished pot results. A number of such half finished pots would normally be made by the potter in a day. Once satisfied with the work the potter goes to the farm and generally upon his or her return, the pot is ready for the second forming.

## The Second Forming

The potters sometimes sit on a low stool with the pots on their lap. The potter scrapes off as much clay as possible from the piece to define the shape. The piece is turned upside down on the rim, and the half base of the piece is also scraped to define its shape. When the base is completely formed, a corncob is used to smooth the pot again. The thickness of the pot is checked by hand. The pot is then left to dry in the sun. The potters produce some relatively large pots generally used for the storage of cereals, water, and the brewing of pito.



Image 1: A woman potter producing a pot.

## Decoration and Firing

Pottery decoration in the Nanumba South District is basically the incision of simple zigzag, curved and straight lines on the pot (signa). A brownish color prepared from the bark of a special tree called "nyam" is used for the decoration. The tree bark is boiled in water and made thicker by rubbing another special brown stone called "lisa" in it continuously until the desired paste is achieved. It is then applied on the incised lines with a feather or a millet stalk.

Potters in the Nanumba South District use the open pit firing method in which firewood is arranged in a shallow pit and the wares are packed on the firewood. The potters utilize the availability of grass as fuel for firing. The pots are carefully arranged in layers covered with dry grasses, and the firewood is kindled to begin the firing. Immediately the fire subsides, and it is rekindled by the addition of more grasses and firewood until the wares reach the correct maturing temperature. The maturing temperature is normally determined by eye or experience. This is usually when the wares fire red. Preheating is done in their traditional kitchen where the heat keeps the pot very dry before the main firing at the pit. Normally, this is done at night, and

by morning the pots are well fired. The only finishing technique adopted by these potters is the blackening of the wares. This is done by adding dry cow dung into the fire, which does not burn with flame after the wares have reached their maturing temperature.

## Expanding the Frontiers of Nanumba Pottery

### Identification of a Priority Population

A study of this nature calls for thorough understanding between the learner and the teaching artist. It was therefore expedient that both parties come to a consensus about whether the frontiers of pottery making in the district need to be developed. The teaching artists spent eight weeks in the district in order to understand the level of pottery making as just described and to establish a welcoming rapport between the local potters and the teaching artists. Brewer argues that if a study of a community is to capture true meaning, then the researcher must participate directly in the setting in order to understand and validate the first-hand information gathered from the activities of the people. Also, Erickson clarifies that in order to develop art to the fullest, one must create meaning and invest interest in maintaining it through shared experiences. In this sense it was paramount that we appreciate the skill level of the potters in order to understand which frontier of pottery to develop.

Our analysis and critical review of the potters' art revealed that they needed to unravel the complexities of design and effect a total transformation of building pots to create wares that are traditional but also work to engage the contemporary public eye. Nortey, Okai, and Bodjawah argue that breaking conservatism and spurring innovations in form requires in-depth exploration and design development. To achieve this, forty-two potters and nonpotters participated in the workshop,

working in smaller groups to ensure full participation and attention.

### Ethical Considerations

Because action research is carried out in real-world circumstances, and involves close and open communication among the people involved (Winter), the teaching artists paid close attention to ethics in the conduct of their work. The teaching artists consulted the chiefs and elders of the district, the social organizations, the local potters, and the principles that would guide the expansion of the frontiers of pottery in the district were explained and accepted by all. The participants were assured of equal access to the artistic creation processes, and an initial design team was created to facilitate a process that would maximize the opportunities for the involvement of all participants. Allport's second principle of equal status, which states that all participants must be treated equally by contact facilitators and that participants must perceive themselves as being treated equally and fairly, informed the work of the teaching artists.

### The Workshops

#### Brainstorming

The various participants were grouped based on their knowledge of the pottery profession. Very simple questions were asked about the characteristics of the clay and the techniques of production and design. The level of answers and the dexterity of the participant in pottery making provided the grouping criteria. The participants brainstormed topics connected to pottery production and discussed their views on how pottery within their communities can be expanded in order to provide greater social and economic sustainability. One key point we focused on was that the potters would be able to expand their frontiers through practice and effort. We left these ideas registered in their minds as a catalyst for expanding the frontiers of their production.



Image 2: A teaching artist explaining pottery to participants during the workshop.

attract both tourists and local indigenes to purchase their products. We expanded this premise by introducing the potters to the idea of building pots that would serve a utilitarian purpose as both decorative and functional pieces.

## The Dialogue

The workshop started with a dialogue between the teaching artists and the participants as they tried to dig into their understanding of clay as a material and its usefulness in their community. The dialogue continued with the teaching artists introducing the participants to state-of-the-

art production and expanding notions of what they are capable of doing with the main material (clay), including producing their own clay bricks to build their houses. Although the dialogue was in the English language, one of the teaching artists is a native of the district and therefore could interpret to ensure a thorough understanding.

## Demonstration

Having educated the participants to the potential of the industry, the teaching artists went on to demonstrate practical uses of

## Activities

After the brainstorming it was time for practical workshops. The first thing was to introduce the potters to improved ways of building pots. We all came to understand that there was the need to produce both functional and decorative pieces that would

some tools and equipment such as the binding wheel, production processes, and design techniques and also showcased some decorative, glazed pieces (see Images 15 and 21). Interestingly, the embracing of the process by the participants and their willingness to pursue further knowledge was wonderful, such that they were ready to



Image 3: One of the teaching artists explaining some key points in pottery.



Image 4: The researcher showing and demonstrating to the people the use of the binding wheel.



Image 5: The researcher taking a potter and some participants through some design techniques.

absorb whatever was taught and develop the new techniques and ideas to their maximum potential. As part of advancing knowledge of potters in the Nanumba South District, various studio practice techniques were introduced to the participants, especially in relation to form and other basic finishing. Some studio practice methods were used to produce simple artifacts to illustrate the use of the various techniques.

The potter's wheel and binder's wheel were the two machines used in the demonstration together with some simple throwing tools. However, the demonstrations carried out included the alteration of thrown forms, work with slabs, and combination of both techniques. The idea of these studio techniques was to add techniques other than the already common coiling method of production by potters of Nanumba.

### Throwing on the Potter's Wheel

Throwing on the potter's wheel is fun for practicing artists and magical to first time observers. Potters of Nanumba were introduced in batches to throwing using a mechanical potter's wheel during the demonstrations. The potters were introduced to the procedural stages of throwing and subjecting thrown pieces to alterations to enhance artistic nobility. A ball of clay was wedged to eliminate debris and kneaded to expel trapped air.



Image 6: Demonstrating the kneading process.

The kneaded clay was then placed almost center of the potter's wheel. The machine was switched on and water sprinkled on the ball of clay to allow free movement of clay in between one's palms. The centering process was the first stage introduced to the potters while opening the ball of clay as shown in Images 7 and 8. The two stages received much attention, as potters found the process exhilarating.

The participants watched the two stages of the technique of throwing with curiosity and started asking interesting questions. The first remark was, "Is there any special set of medicines that one has to take before acquiring this beautiful skill?" followed by "Can anybody make this work?" Another



Image 7: Centering a ball of clay.



Image 8: Opening up the centered clay.





Image 9: Teaching a youth participant the skill of pulling on the potter's wheel.

potter asked if it is "suitable for a teenager to try practicing on the wheel." Surprisingly, all questions were asked with smiles and a sense of anxiousness to quickly try the technique.

The teaching artist explained that working on the wheel demands no "pills" other than one's enthusiasm and willingness to learn and a commitment to practice. The skill demands extra attention beyond rote work; working on the wheel as a kind of hobby will yield comfort in production and will encourage one to try out outstanding forms. Last, we made the potters understand that it *is* a skill, and even an infant can acquire and master it. This inspired a trickle of laughter from the participants. After addressing the concerns of the gathered crowd, the

teaching artist went on with the technique of pulling the clay on the potter's wheel. It was explained that one hand stays on the inner wall of the clay while the other hand remains outside but directly opposite to the inside hand. The tip of the fingers push toward one another, pulling up clay to achieve a taller object.

Pulling as a technique requires imagination and sense of craftsmanship; the two hands must move at the same pace going up in a parallel motion with specific space intervals. It was explained to the potters that pulling should be done in repeated folds until the thickness of wall required is achieved; pulling once to achieve very slim wall results in a torn clay wall. In order to ensure that the participants



Image 10: Thrown bowl.

understood what was being said, they tried their hands on the wheel several times to consolidate their learning process. After issues were addressed about the pulling stage, the next procedure—shaping—was undertaken.

Shaping was explained to the participants as creating the form that they have conceptualized. It happens by pushing either outward or inward or sometimes both to achieve a drawn form in the technique of throwing. This however, raises a direct concern with the height of the pulled clay because the form demands a correlation between the height of pulling and the size of clay needed for throwing a particular piece. These issues were not unfamiliar to the participants since they were already creating pot forms with their original method of production.

The kidney (a tool) was used to shape the inner contour of the thrown bowl, and a modelling tool was used to remove excess clay from the base of the thrown object. A cutting pin was used to take out excess clay from the edge of the bowl with the right finger placed on the edge to maintain level and round the mouth edge of the bowl.



Image 11: Altering thrown form.

## Altering Thrown Forms

Altering forms, unlike accidentals, demands careful gesture from the artist and the intentional subjecting of thrown form to pushing, cutting, or the addition of sections to wheel-thrown forms. In our quest to introduce potters to different ways of creating intuitive forms, the wheel-thrown

object was altered to create a nuisance in the potters' minds. The teaching artist gently pushed the thrown bowl with both hands towards the inside of the bowl, altering the form.

At first, the potters considered that the object had been destroyed; the shape they had admired had been tampered with.

As the teaching artist

discussed the results of the "tampering" and divergent uses of the newly created object, the potters began to see from the perspective of the teaching artist and began to suggest other ways of altering thrown bowls for artistic purposes. The altered object was allowed to become leather hard and was turned on the wheel. It was then incised on the sides as part of enhancing its

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***The pots are carefully arranged in layers covered with dry grasses, and the firewood is kindled to begin the firing. Immediately the fire subsides, and it is rekindled by the addition of more grasses and firewood until the wares reach the correct maturing temperature.***

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Image 12: Altered pieces produced by combined efforts of teaching artists and participants.



Image 13: Bisque fired piece.



Image 14: Showcase of altered piece at green state and gloss fired at 1180 °C.



Image 15: Samples of altered pieces made by some potters of Nanumba.

aesthetic appeal. They were painted in an engobe and allowed to dry. The participants tried their hands on many of these forms, as shown in Image 12.

## Firing

Nanumba potters produce bisque pieces using traditional open-pit firing method. The dried greenwares were first fired using the aforementioned firing method. They the potters aligned the dried wares on the combustible foundation and gradually packed pieces of wood in between the wares. Dried leaves were put on top in addition to dry sawdust to cover the entire ware before the preheating firing. Bits of firewood are added gradually to maintain and increase firing temperature. On the third day after cooling, wares were taken out of the pit and taken to the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Industrial Art Department) for gloss finishing. Manganese and Glaze were applied artistically and fired to a temperature of 1180°C. After cooling, additional materials such as raffia and metal were added as additions to enhance the altered thrown pieces. Images 14 and 15 shows samples of bisque and glazed wares.

## Slab-Building Demonstration

### Idea Development

The use of slabs by potters for the production of artifacts for domestic and

public use is an ancient technique. Slab building leads to distinct shapes since it enables potters to achieve forms that are not circularly restricted, although circular forms are feasible.

In improving the knowledge of pottery for potters of Nanumba district by introducing them to different approaches to construction and finishing, the use of the slab-building technique was a particularly effective means of expanding the frontiers of technique and design. The approach to design development was the first lesson introduced to the participants who were encouraged to allow nature to dictate our rite of perception and to use nature as a resource for ideas. It was evident that most potters, though they had produced countless number of pieces, had no idea of drawing technique and had previously been inspired by natural forms. Simple geometric forms were used as means of introducing the potters to drawing while the teaching artists improved on forms of their own by incorporating natural forms into the final design for the exercise. Capitalizing on the idea of moving from the known to the unknown, circles and squares were used as starting point of the drawing lesson. It was observed that although drawing was new and alien-like to the potters, their participation and eagerness to show what they had put on paper was a sign that they were interested in the idea development class.

### Slab Preparation and Pot Building

Balls of clay were kneaded and shaped into rectangular blocks. Each shaped ball



Image 16: Slab-making demonstration. As the groups worked of their assigned projects, the Nanumba Community Center was used as one of the venues to teach potters in the region.



Image 17: A section of participants using slab production.



Image 18: Teaching artist helps participants to try their hands at the technique of slab building.

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of clay was put between two guide sticks and spread using a rolling pin. It was explained to the potters that the guide sticks determine the thickness of the slab and hence that of the wall; therefore, using sticks of equal is essential. Both sides of the rectangular-shaped clay were rolled to ascertain a good working slab free from cracks and air pockets.

The techniques of throwing and slab building were used in tandem. The participants were directed to throw a circular base using the potter's wheel, and when this was leather hard, slabs were added in bits to help the pot build up in width and in height. The thickness of the thrown base had direct



Image 19: Pots with thrown necks, slip painted in white.



Image 20: Sample of a floor vase built during the demonstration at Nanumba South District.

influence on the thickness of the slabs used since even wall thickness was essential in the production. The handling of slabs at the leather hard state and the effectiveness in the joining of one to the other was shown in the demonstration for the participants to witness how smooth the production is.

In the exercise, it was shown to participants that to effectively join two slabs, the surfaces to be joined had to first be scoured using a metal fork, in this instance, with slip applied on the two surfaces before joining. After joining, the meeting point



Image 21: Samples of finished pieces produced by participants.



Image 22: Sample of works of Nanumba pottery produced by some youth.

of the slabs were scoured on both sides (inside and outside of the pot), and coils were used to seal the meeting points. This provides effective joining and helps to ascertain a good, secured piece. Series of slabs were added on while the demonstrator concentrated on the design before him to accomplish the task of construction. While building, the demonstrator introduced some of the Nanumba potters to the process to enable them have the confidence into the application of the technique for production.

Upon reaching the apex of the shoulders of the floor vase, the demonstrator again used the potter's wheel to throw a neck for the developed floor vase. A hacksaw blade that is commonly available in the district was used to clean excess slab off the surface of the pot and used to level the surface through scraping. A milk tin was cut open, and the bottom part of the tin was punched with a three-inch nail to create spaces within the circular metal. The tool was used to siphon the surface of the pot to provide rough and

appealing textures on the pot surface before incising the surface with locally developed patterns.

Image 22 shows photos of some products produced by Nanumba potters after going through series of education in coiling, slab, and throwing techniques of production.

## Discussion and Conclusion

One key thing that enabled a successful development of the local potters' pottery was that as teaching artists we did not see failure; rather, we saw opportunity. When potters made a mistake either in the design process, throwing, or hand building, we portrayed it in a way that made them understand that it is a learning experience, a way for them to see how incorrect results are achieved. As teaching artists, we allowed them to try again and gently showed them how to do it correctly. The workshop used the phrase "Don't say 'wrong,' say 'close' or 'good try.'"

The workshop also created an opportunity for creative interpretations of pottery productions. We allowed the participants to pose questions and did not deter them from following their own routes. We allowed the potters to guide their own learning in order to keep them interested in their chosen profession. We also encouraged innovations by allowing them to create new things.

The potters were given assignments with a specific goal of making a pot, but it was left up to them to use their own methods to reach that goal. This allowed the participants to design a learning method best suited to their style and interests, and this in turn kept them invested in the craft and encouraged success.

As long as there are classes (the lower, middle, and upper classes) in the lives and ways of life of people in Ghana, pottery will never die. There will always be people who will use pottery products no matter what. Hence, all agencies, advocates, and stakeholders responsible must work to give pottery a good brand, and packaging, to make the industry and product attractive and important in the area and beyond, for the use of both local customers and tourists alike. Further development of this industry will go a long way toward addressing the prevailing burden of unemployment, especially among the youth and, if handled with all seriousness and much attention, will improve the lives and economy of the people.

This project has developed the pottery production of a profession that has been passed on from generation to generation to meet the needs of contemporary indigenes and tourists. This change will support future generations and will foster and strengthen a healthy community and lead to a more sustainable society.

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**Samuel Nortey** is a practicing ceramicist and a teaching artist in the Department of Industrial Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. He holds a degree in Ceramics and a PhD in African Art and Culture from the university where he works. Dr. Nortey is an advocate for development of artistic skills of young ceramic artist and currently the coordinator for the Master of Fine Art program in his department.

**Naako Wamuaja** is a trained teacher at the Presbyterian M/A Junior High School in Twifo Praso. He specialized in Ceramics during his undergraduate studies at the Department of Industrial Art, KNUST, Ghana. Naako is very much interested in hand-building techniques and the development of interesting glazes for ceramic designs.

**Frederick Ebenezer Okai** is an emerging ceramic artist who is standing recognized for his works in multisectional ceramic pieces. His expressions on surface decoration make his works compelling and unique. The surfaces of his pots explore contemporary translations of traditionally used techniques by Ghanaian potters and ceramicists. He holds a Master of Fine Art in Ceramics.