research note

Ewe Ceramics as the Visualization of Vodun

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All photos taken by author

On February 12, 2005, members of a Yeve Vodun shrine in the Ewe village of Anlo-Afiadenyigba in southeastern Ghana paid their due respect to Mami Wata as part of their month-long ceremony in honor of Heviesso, the powerful and omnipresent thunder god. On the final day of the event, the Mami spirit entered a woman’s body in the form of a snake. Lured by the spraying of toilet water and white powder and the rhythms of the drums, the snake slithered ever so slowly to her shrine, where she encountered desirable items, including food sacrificed in her honor, richly patterned cloth, and—the focus of this essay—a range of ceramic vessels featuring creatures familiar to her world (fig. 1).

1 Mami Wata altar in the village of Anlo-Afiadenyigba decorated in preparation for the following day’s sacrificial ceremony in mami’s honor. Anlo-Afiadenyigba, February 12, 2005.

2 A Vodushi from the village of Klikor wears beads and other form of body decoration to identify the various Vodun (Mami, Dete, Avia, Afa, and Heviesso) she honors. Dzodze market, January 24, 2005.
Ceramic sculptural pots are an important component of the visual culture of Anlo-Ewe Vodun (meaning “gods” or “spirits”), yet they have received surprisingly little attention in the literature (Herskovits 1938; Hubner 1995; Savary 1970), most of it focused on the names of the pots and their ritual associations rather than production and marketing. I first became aware of Vodun pottery while doing a pilot study of Anlo-Ewe Vodun body arts, including tattooing, body painting, beadwork, a prescribed set of dress codes, dance movements, and spirit possession (FIG. 2). This study was not without its obstacles because of the highly personalized nature of the topic and the reluctance on the part of the Anlo-Ewe Vodun practitioners to reveal information about their religion to outsiders. To help overcome such barriers, I turned my attention to Ewe Vodun pottery, which I found to be a useful venue for learning the identities and relationships of the various gods and for understanding the role that visual culture plays in Vodun worship. The mutual trust this investigation engendered led to a more open dialogue with the potters and ample opportunity to participate in their Vodun ceremonies.

My research suggests that Ewe ceramics, like body arts, provide a visual language intended for the Vodun gaze. The potters shape their pots the way they visualize their spiritual world and then use them in ways that make that spiritual world more attractive to the Vodun. Moreover, this visualization is reflected not only in the forms themselves but in the unusual means the potters use to construct them. Employing what is best described as the “punch” method, the potter pushes out the flat area of a clay disc to give rounded, spherical form to the vessel—creating a shape that mimics their spiritual world—on top of which images of different Vodun are attached.

The potters with whom I worked come from the Vodun-centered village of Dzodzefime, where pottery production is a major occupation for the majority of its women (FIG. 3). While they are not the only potters in this region, the women from Dzodzefime seem to be the most prolific within the Dzodze area. The pots they make for Vodun, like the religion itself, have roots further east among Ewe relatives in Togo and the related Fon of the Republic of Benin. When the ancestors of the Dzodzefime potters migrated from Togo more than 100 years ago, they settled where they now live precisely because of its abundance of clay deposits, suggesting that knowledge of pottery production was something they brought with them.

While Vodun pottery production now thrives in this region, Ghanaian Ewe devotees will occasionally cross the border into Togo or even travel to the Republic of Benin for their pots. Such was the case with the pots featured in the above-mentioned Anlo-Afiadenyigba altar to Mami. When asked why the artists constructing the altar went to Benin for their pots when local ones were available, the Afá diviner, a leading figure in this particular shrine, explained, “For the same reason that you go to Japan for electronics.” Such an acknowledgement, phrased in terms he thought I would appreciate, affirms the often-expressed belief that Vodun in Benin is more powerful and effective. But, as the Dzodzefime potters informed me, people from Benin or Togo also come to southeastern Ghana to acquire pots. This apparent ebb and flow calls for a more thorough examination of the production and patronage of ceramics within this broad Vodun-specific area of West Africa.
Similar to their Fon ancestors, the Ewe potters from Dzodze-fime make a wide range of ceramic pots for both domestic and ritual use (fig. 4). Their repertoire includes pots with holes for use as sieves (zenongwe), small pots with covers (zevi agbauw), wide-mouthed soup pots (detti ze), flat bowls for toasting pulverized corn kernels (sowu), and small bowls with a textured interior surface suitable for grating peppers (tadi tugbavi). Certain pot types serve both domestic and ritual functions, suggesting that the dividing line between these two categories is not always clearly defined. For example, a small water pot to which a deep red slip has been added (zedzi, ‘red pot’) can be used both for daily food preparation and for making offerings to the dead. Other ritual pots include those honoring twins (venavize)—distinguished by the ring at the bottom that prevents the pot from touching ground—and miniature versions (gozi) of larger pots used as metaphorical offerings on shrines.

But by far the most Vodun-specific pots in the Anlo-Ewe repertoire are those decorated with sculptural forms (fig. 5). Most have as their base two small bowls, one inverted over the other, that together create a divided sphere, with the bottom half for the placement of offerings and the top as the lid, where the sculpture is usually placed. Referred to generically as nyagblorze, meaning ‘pots with messages’, these figured pots, like images painted on the walls of shrines or the tattooed designs applied to human skin, give visual form to the various gods. Attesting to the diversity of the Vodun religion that Blier has so thoroughly documented among the closely related Fon (Blier 1995), nyagblorze are numerous in type, some with some humanized forms, others drawn from the animal world, and yet others from nature.

In my brief survey, I documented pots of more than a dozen Vodun. A common form is one made in honor of the male sky and creator god Lisa. The Ewe, like their Fon relatives, depict Lisa in the form of a chameleon, a fitting metaphor for his powers of spiritual transformation (fig. 5). Together with his consort Mawu, Lisa is viewed as a great and powerful creator god responsible for producing the many spiritual offspring that have come to make up the Ewe Vodun pantheon. It is no wonder, given his omnipresence, that he appears so frequently on Ewe altars.

Adzakpa, yet another popular Vodun, appears in the form of a crocodile carrying a small pot on his back. The pot is said to contain a fiber bag filled with magical substances, and it reminds us of the ritual role that pots as containment can play in the context of Vodun. Adzakpa is to be distinguished from another crocodile Vodun, Tomekossou, who looks exactly like Adzakpa except that his back has no pot. A Vodun pot with encircling coils of indenations surrounding the pot refers to the earth-related Vodun Anyidoho (fig. 5), and one with cowries evokes Avia, a powerful Vodun from Togo associated with medicinal healing.

The Anlo-Ewe Vodun pantheon includes a long and complex list of snake-related Vodun that are articulated more through

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4 Display of mainly “domestic” pots combined with two ritual ones, the miniature pots (gozi) in the lower left and the pot with the base and lid for twins (venavize) in the far right. Dzodze market, February 12, 2005.
their pottery than through beadwork. Whereas only one, or at best two, types of beads are associated with the snake (Da) spirit, there are at least five Da-related pots, each manifesting him in a different way. The Ewe make pots for Dangwe (represented by both male and female figures, each wearing the Da beads); Vome-Da (snake from the sea); Dakpui (short snake; fig. 6); and Tomegble (poisonous water snake), always represented as a long snake that wraps itself around the entire pot. There are also snake-laden pots for the water spirit, Mami Wata. One example that was identified as mid-twentieth century (fig. 7) features a relief of several miniature pots along with snakes whose heads point towards the pot’s opening, as though the snakes are moving in pursuit of nourishment contained within. Another and possibly more recent type of Mami Wata pot shows the snakes traveling in the direction of a seated human figure with hands outstretched as though giving offerings (fig. 5). An in-depth art historical study of Anlo-Ewe pot iconography, particularly in comparison with Mami pots from Togo and Benin, might help to determine the beginnings of this particular figurative type.

Many of the Vodun pots I documented, including the figurative Mami pots, require both a male and a female version, suggesting pairing by gender to be a defining aspect of Ewe Vodun. Pots made in honor of Lisa frequently feature two chameleons, one, as it was explained, for the creator god himself and the other for his female counterpart (fig. 5). The Lisa pot in Figure 5 (center back) shows the creator god on top and, as one potter explained, his consort at the two sides. Whatever the gender of the latter, they are reaching toward either the sky realm that Lisa embodies or the offerings of food that the pot contains. In the case of a pair of unfired pots made in honor of the Vodun Tomekossou, the crocodile image on the male version was slightly larger than that on the female pot.

Apart from needing to be paired, “pots with messages” are effective only once they have been properly anointed with a white, chalky substance. White chalk is commonly used at all Vodun ceremonies and thus is readily available in any Anlo-Ewe market. Both the Ewe and Fon associate the color white with what Hubner describes as “purity, the world of the deceased,

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5 Grouping of nyagblorze, including two figurative ones for Mami Wata, the left female and the right male, two with a chameleon for the creator god Lisa, and two more for the earth god, Anyidoho. Dzodze market, January 27, 2005.


and supernatural power” (Hubner 1996:118), qualities that make them more attractive to the Vodun for whom they are made. In the case of the Mami altar at Anlo-Afiadenyigba, white powder was applied to the surface of some of the pots, while red and blue painted spots were applied to others to reveal the opposing or complementary domains of Mami’s world. The heavily powdered space, with snakes painted in the background, is considered the altar’s most sacred area. Anlo-Afiadenyigba, February 12, 2005.

Located to the right of the decorated pots and cloth, this raised space, with snakes painted in the background, is considered the altar’s most sacred area. Anlo-Afiadenyigba, February 12, 2005.

In this regard, Vodun pottery, with its appropriate shapes and embellishments, functions like beads, whose colors, textures, combinations, and adornment communicate a specific divine identity. When I asked people why they wore beads of a particular color or shape, they frequently responded that it was because the gods wore similar bead configurations, making their own visual language one that the gods would easily recognize and thus be drawn to. Vodushi (practitioners of Vodun) even add white powder to their beads to make them all the more attractive to them and their body, a factor which may then lead to spirit possession (see fig. 2).

Besides serving as bait, pots for Vodun may help to define their pecking order within the Vodun pantheon. I observed this on three separate altars dedicated to the thunder god Hievesso, who is generally regarded as the most powerful and omnipresent deity, under whom all other Vodun serve. In all three occasions, the sculpture in wood of Hievesso and his female consort Wleketi, dressed with billowing, multilayered skirts (achaka) that evoke their thunderous power, were placed at the back of the shrine, and thus beyond the physical reach of the congre- gants. The other gods represented at the shrine, i.e. Lisa and several snake deities, were placed at the front of the altar, suggesting both greater accessibility and lower rank within the hierarchy of the Vodun world. Moreover, the latter were depicted through nyagblorze, i.e. in terracotta, whereas the figures of Hievesso and his consort were done in wood. Neither do we see terracotta renderings made in honor of Hievesso in Benin and Togo (Hubner 1992), suggesting a pattern of representation, or nonrepresentation, that deserves further exploration.

Whoever is represented on a Vodun ceramic pot, its basic, foundational shape also gives tangible form to the Vodun world. Vodushi define their cosmos by way of a circular configuration that is divided into four quadrants, with the most spiritual point being at the center. For example, a shrine in the Ewe village of Klikor devoted to the Vodun Avia, a powerful god of healing, features several circular designs mapped out in the cement floor with cowries, Avia’s sacred beads (fig. 9).

The circular nature of the Vodun world is also evident in containers the Vodushi use to give offerings to and gain the attention of their Vodun. One of the more traditional and pervasive vessels used for making offerings is the dried calabash or gourd. Blier notes that the neighboring Fon associate gourds, as well as pots, with “life, regeneration, and supernatural empowerment” (Blier 1995:259). Similarly, the Ewe see and use gourds and pots as symbols of nurturing in their Vodun ceremonies, making calabash containers an essential commodity in any Anlo-Ewe market. It is worth noting that Vodun pots, like gourds, have as their basic form a divided sphere. Indeed, the gourd may well be the prototype of the ceramic vessel, both in its shape and its associative meaning.

Could it be that this conceptualization of the cosmos in ceramic spherical form helps to explain the unusual way Ewe potters build their pots (fig. 10)? Regardless of the type of pot, whether domestic or figurative and ritual, the potter shapes the basic form by punching out its bottom. She begins the process by forming the clay into a flat, thick, circular disc with a 2” (5cm) rim rising from its outer edge. The circumference of the disc...
naturally varies in size depending on the type of pot she is making. After the disc has dried over a twenty-four-hour period, the potter proceeds to scrape away the dry outer surface to expose the more wet and malleable clay. With the disc resting sideways on her lap, she proceeds to punch out the flat area to give the pot a spherical shape. Such a method is unusually arduous, particularly for the larger pots, which require that she push the clay out as much as 15” (38cm) before patching any holes, shaping the overall pot, and scraping the walls to achieve a uniform thinness. It is no wonder that it is only the older women, who are stronger and more skilled, can make these pots.

Its level of difficulty notwithstanding, this method of forming the vessel is quite unusual compared with techniques used elsewhere in Africa, which combine variations on the direct pull method, coiling, and molding, and making a new pot on the upturned base of an old one (Roy 1975, 2003). While there is no easy explanation for how this unusual technique was developed, it is clear that the Anlo-Ewe potters view it as the most appropriate way to make pots. The question is why? One possible explanation is that they are giving three-dimensional shape to their spiritual world, particularly with respect to the nyagblorze, to which they then add the sculptural image of the Vodun. The potter draws a line that serves as the center point, with the image then spread in an outward direction. When making an image of the crocodile, for example, the potter begins with the body as the center point, from which the four legs radiate outward in four directions. Images of cowries, bumps, or snakes in radiating form are begun in a similar fashion, from the center working outwards (fig. 6). I suggest that the way the potters punch out the spherical form as described above and the way they construct images of the Vodun on these pots might be their way of drawing out the cosmological map with the Vodun’s image situated at the center.

The questions this essay raises call for further research on Vodun pottery production. Thus far, existing data on the subject draw from the outermost boundaries where Vodun is practiced in West Africa, specifically the Aje area of Benin to the east and now the Anlo-Ewe area of southeastern Ghana to the west. 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.

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