“Pots are pots, not people:” material culture and ethnic identity in the Banda Area (Ghana), nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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“Pots are pots, not people:” material culture and ethnic identity in the Banda Area (Ghana), nineteenth and twentieth centuries

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Colonial literature often assumed that Africans belonged to tribes and could be organised in orderly fashion. Concepts of ethnicity and identity have replaced the colonial paradigm and propositions of ‘pots as people’ are considered fallacies. Nevertheless, analogies continue to be employed, thereby overlooking the diversity of historical experiences, the fluidity and the strategic character of ethnicity, rather than stressing similarities across time and space. This case study cautions against the validity of simple analogies used to address identity formation and its direct relationship with material culture. It focuses on ceramics produced in the Banda area of west-central Ghana during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that are characterised by their seeming lack of meaning as emblems of identity, while intangible cultural aspects play a central role. When analysed at the micro-level identical vessels used by different ethnic groups in their daily life show variability in manufacture among villages. This paper examines how contexts and choices in production can be entangled with cultural identity, taking us beyond formal aspects of ceramics as markers of identity.

Keywords: Ceramic production and consumption; historical archaeology; Ghana; critique of Africanisms

La littérature coloniale a souvent présumé que les peuples africains pouvaient être classifiés en tribus et qu’on pouvait les organiser en groupes clairement ordonnés et délimités. Cependant, des concepts comme l’ethnicité et l’identité ont remplacé le vieux paradigme colonial de tribu et aujourd’hui des prémisses qui maintiennent que des personnes et des récipients céramiques peuvent être équivalents sont considérés des fausses propositions. Malgré tout, on continue à utiliser des analogies ethnographiques pour interpréter des objets et des contextes archéologiques, en soulignant des ressemblances rencontrées à travers du temps et de l’espace au lieu de considérer la diversité des expériences historiques des peuples africains et la souplesse et le caractère stratégique de l’ethnicité. Le cas examiné dans cet article met en question la validité de telles analogies simples, employées dans des études archéologiques sur la formation d’identités et leur rapport avec la culture matérielle. L’exemple présenté ici a en vue des récipients de céramique qui étaient produits dans la région de Banda (dans le centre-ouest du Ghana) pendant le dix-neuvième jusqu’à la fin du vingtième siècles. Ces poteries sont caractérisées par l’absence de toute symbolisme d’identité, malgré que l’identité ethnique est définie par des aspects immatériels. C’est à dire, la poterie n’a aucun symbolisme ethnique – des populations appartenantes aux groupes

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ethniques différents utilisent les mêmes céramiques — quoique leur identité soit souvent définie par des éléments immatérielles qui on ne trouve jamais dans les fouilles archéologiques. Cet article examine comment la production des céramiques et les choix des artisans peuvent être compliqués par des aspects d’identité culturel au delà de la forme et de la décoration des poteries, montrant que celles-ci ne doivent pas être utilisés en archéologie pour identifier des identités ethniques.

Introduction

Material culture in general, but ceramic material culture in particular, is a bastion of archaeological research. While imported ceramics may speak about trade relations, élite consumption and long-distance relations, locally produced, domestic ceramics are understood as products of economic and socio-cultural local traits, ideal for identifying continuities and changes. Commonalities of ceramic forms and decorative grammars are often equated with cultural similarities, evidence of common experiences for groups of people, including assumptions of common ethnicities that can be observed across time and space. Often we are faced with a lack of understanding of the dynamic nature of African societies, accounting for an uncritical and selective use of colonial ethnographies in the search for visible African legacies and cultural contributions in the Diaspora. In this paper I contend that a focus on artefacts and their correlation with ethnicity is limiting and that material culture analysis is better served if it conveys ideas that distance it from the reification of ethnicity(ies). Ethnic reality is complex and historically based, and while objects should be viewed as intercultural artefacts, often participating in contexts of hybridity and operating in multicultural settings, they may not perform ethnic identity at all.

The case study of ceramic production in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Banda (west-central Ghana) discussed in this paper emphasises historical changes that occurred over a short time period. Whereas they influenced the production and consumption of material culture, particularly ceramics, as well as producers’ choice and agency, technological and decorative styles do not necessarily reflect identity construction or population movements. Banda ceramics are characterised by their seeming lack of meaning as emblems of ethnic identity, which is instead defined by intangible cultural aspects. Ceramic vessels, identical in form and decoration, are used by different groups in their daily life. When analysed at a micro-level, their manufacture varies only slightly from village to village, but never from ethnic group to ethnic group, while being a craft specialist is not bound to ethnic identity. Documented precolonial and colonial historic events are known to have brought immense change in group identity to the region and cannot be ignored. As such, my goal is to convey a cautionary tale against the use of simple analogies, particularly in the search for Africanisms in the African Diaspora.

Material culture, Africanisms and simple analogy

While archaeologists working on the post-Columbian African Diaspora, particularly those working on plantation archaeology, have moved beyond functionalism into more nuanced topics to understand, for example, historic roots of colonialism and racism, there has been a somewhat uncritical generalisation into the Americas of African ethnic and religious traits. Critiques of the use of Africanisms and the
development of more complex analyses for understanding continuities and changes in the material construction of identity have taken us beyond easy generalisations and the mapping onto the past of recent ethnographic observations (Thomas 1995, 2002; DeCorse 2001b; Fennell 2003; Hauser and DeCorse 2003; Kelly 2004; Seeman 2010; Gijanto 2011). However, many are still tempted to take leaps of faith and see, for example, BaKongo cosmological influences on African American sites (Heath and Bennett 2000, 43) or Igbo ethnic identities in the sub-floor pits associated with Virginia’s slave archaeological contexts (Samford 2007). Little attention has been paid to source criticism, especially when using ethnographic documents written before the post-modern turn in anthropology that reflect colonial assumptions about indigenous populations and group identity (see Northrup 2000 for a critique).

Although acknowledging the visibility of African legacies that made their way into the Americas and influenced African American world views and cultural traits (e.g. Gundaker and McWillie 2005), we have to consider changes that occurred on the African continent itself that may greatly limit the use of simple analogies between Africa and the Americas. We should, for example, consider ethnic constructions that resulted from colonial encounters, changes in African world views that happened after the ending of the Atlantic slave trade and changes in material culture following access to new and imported materials, as well as a wide array of other conditions.

An additional complexity that needs to be taken into account is the fact that identities, including black identities in the New World, are ongoing processes that include forced and non-forced travel, exchanges across the Atlantic (both African and European) and individual and/or collective strategic choices embedded in national and political cultures. The complex history of the African Diasporas is specifically transnational (Gilroy 1993) and equating ethnic groups with material culture, especially ceramics, music, beads or other cultural traits (e.g. Thompson 1983, 1990; Stine et al. 1996; Wilkie 1999; Heath and Bennett 2000) results in a very limiting focus on the analysis not only of the African Diaspora, but of African peoples as well. It is not a novel observation that identity formation is fluid, nuanced and multi-layered, and archaeologists must be careful in establishing direct continuities from African groups, even when limiting their analyses to restricted and relevant regions. To draw identity inferences from material culture, i.e. to equate ceramics with people or people’s identities, is a dangerous task, especially when using ethnographic analogies. To assume that symbolic meanings are always associated with African material goods (e.g. cowries, beads, ceramics) is a simplistic assumption. In my research, I encountered a number of situations in which people talked about decoration of pots that was used “only as decoration” or to make them more “appealing” (Cruz 2003, 2006). Additionally, and foremost, it is puerile to talk about ‘Africa’ and ‘African influences’ as an homogeneous origin, considering the chronological and spatial diversity of a continent with a rich history of empires, states, long-distance trade and slavery. The use of a Pan-African identity in the New World (Orser 1991, 116) may partially solve the problems arising from a lack of data about specific ethnic identities and identity construction in the past, as well as those raised by the fact that slaves were drawn from across the continent from Senegambia to Central Africa, as well as from Eastern Africa. However, this again stresses African influences without also considering the effects of hybridisation with Native American and European cultures.
As an example of syncretism of Afro-European-Indigenous elements in a religious celebration we can briefly consider the festival of Santa Filomena portrayed in the documentary *Quilombo Country* (2006), which addresses the lives of Brazilian *quilombolas* (i.e. the residents of *quilombos*, villages that housed runaway slaves). During the celebration a tree trunk brought to the village enters each house and receives gifts of fruit, money and *cachaça* (rum) in exchange for blessings. The fusion of traditions in this single celebration illustrates the seamless blend of elements into a unique religious tradition. While I can argue that the use of a tree trunk and the libations with *cachaça* over the trunk may represent African legacies (see Cruz in press for a discussion of trees as ancestors), going from house to house to receive gifts of fruit and money can recall the Easter ceremonies that still take place in my Portuguese village, where the priest and the carriers of an adorned crucifix enter each house to bless the residents while collecting gifts of money and oranges. While I cannot deny the presence of Africanisms, it would be simplistic to view Santa Filomena’s celebration only as a survival of African traditions rather than a case of hybridisation in which a former slave culture drew influences from a variety of geographical and cultural sources and made them its own. Similar to this *quilombo* celebration other aspects of Black American culture (*sensu lato*) have their own individuality and stand on their own, despite a variety of other influences. It is in this sense that I consider that looking mostly for Africanisms as signs of identity and attempting to assign them to a specific regional influence is limiting as the new identities created during and after the Atlantic crossing, in the plantations, but also in the lives of *quilombolas*, black homesteaders in the American Midwest, etc. were made of syncretic influences.

African influences are certainly apparent, but an exclusive (or near exclusive) stress on the predominance of ‘African survivals’ as correlates of African identity or African symbolisms forgets the fact that some of these correlates could have a much broader significance or origin. Blue beads were not used only in Africa and, in reality, have a long history tied to issues of technology (the use of copper or cobalt in their manufacture) and taste (for example, in the seventeenth century blue beads were the most common in European contexts as well; Rodrigues 2003, 210), whereas African archaeological contexts have yielded sets of beads that are diverse in colour, shape, material and symbolism (Caton 1995, 1997; Kelly 2004, 229). If we consider colonoware, its distinctiveness lays in the simplicity of its technology: handmade, simple forms, fired in open fires with different levels of oxidation, that appear in African contexts, but also in Native American or European (even in later periods when the wheel was not used all the time; Martins 1999; Heite 2002; Dyer 2010).

In the discussion or use of Africanisms to interpret African American contexts the absence of African archaeological data or a discussion of a rich Africanist archaeological research record is readily apparent. Based on a specific case study that clearly illustrates the fast pace of cultural change, the aim of this paper is thus to caution against the validity of broad generalisations and simple analogies that use African ethnographic data in discussing identity formation among diasporic populations outside Africa. The misuse of ethnographic data has been under attack (Stahl 1991, 1993, 2001; Thomas 1995, 2002; Singleton 2001; Cruz 2003, 2006; Kelly 2004) and Africanists have often called attention to the disruptive processes that took place over the last 500 years as a result of the Atlantic slave trade (DeCorse 1999, 2001a, 2001b; Kelly 2004; Gijanto 2011), colonialism (Stahl 2001; Cruz 2003, 2006),
as well as to other processes that were already in place before the institution of direct
Africa-European relations and contributed to the rise and decline of African states
and dramatic changes in economic relations, social organisation and cultural
practices (DeCorse 1999, 2001a, 2001b; Kelly 2004; Monroe 2010; Gijanto 2011).
The demise of some groups, the creation of new cultural entities and the absorption
of some groups into others are processes more difficult to document in light of their
lack of material bases. However, some case studies do clearly illustrate that such
processes are obstacles to the use of essentialist notions of continuities in cultural
identity across the Atlantic (Atkinson 1989; Lentz 2000; Lentz and Nugent 2000;
MacEachern 2001). Moreover, Africanist research has documented that mobility,
multiple-group membership and kinship-based communities were perhaps the most
Colonial literature and ideology assumed that Africans belonged to tribes and
that populations living in a territory were linked through common descent, sharing a
common language and culture (Lentz 2000), including material culture. For early
researchers the main task was therefore one of deciding where to draw the lines of
demarcation to organise such groups in an orderly fashion. Stress was placed on the
natural basis of political communities, separated from their neighbours by language
and cultural tradition (Lentz 1995, 2000). Colonial maps reified the idea that African
rural populations were organised in historically rooted ‘tribes’ and brought a visual
quality to such concepts, creating an image of clearly distinct groups that were
bounded and spatially located (e.g. George Murdock’s *Tribal Map of Africa*
[Murdock 1959, Map 17]; *Tribes of Ghana from the 1960 Population Census of
Ghana. Special Report E* [in Lentz 2000, 119]). In recent decades, concepts of
ethnicity and identity have come to replace the colonial terminology, becoming
powerful idioms in the construction of communities (cf. Lentz and Nugent 2000, 4).

Despite being conscious of the complexities and multilayered meanings of
objects, archaeologists have often used material culture to identify groups, move-
ments of groups, invasions, expansions, contacts and continuities. Propositions of
‘pots as people’ are considered fallacies, in line with the multiple, historical and
situational meanings of ethnicity, identity and material culture. Yet we continue to
find studies in which the diversity of historical experiences, the fluidity and the
strategic character of ethnicity(ies) are overlooked, giving place to analogies and to
considerations of similarities across time and space that embed colonial construc-
tions into precolonial models of identity (Lentz 2000, 109) to provide a deep history
to ethnic groups imagined in the recent past. Notwithstanding acceptance of the idea
that ethnic identities are creations and regionally specific processes, Americanist
scholars continue to cherish groups such as the BaKongo and the Igbo in their search
for trans-continental identity connections (Thompson 1983, 1990; Ferguson 1991,
1992, 1999; Wilkie 1999; Fennell 2003; Samford 2007). Only rarely does such work
consider colonial motivations and interests in politically centralised ‘tribes’ and the
possibility that continuity in the name does not necessarily correspond to continuity
in the community itself or in its cultural traditions. Seldom, too, do scholars who
seek cultural connections through material culture consider the African archae-
ological material coeval of the trans-Atlantic slave trade period, preferring instead to
highlight ethnographic or ethnohistoric data based on literature of colonial
inspiration (DeCorse 2001b; Kelly 2004). But this is not only an African Americanist
problem. In southern Africa, as well, material culture continues to be used as a
diagnostic for group identity, based on analogies with colonial ethnographic data (e.g. Huffman 2007). Whether or not commonalities, continuities and change in material culture, namely ceramics, are accidental, we need to move away from simple analogies that correlate types of material culture with expressions of identity and address the socio-economic processes and cultural practices that shape community and communities’ relations, including the intentions of both producers and consumers (Gijanto 2011, 24), beyond ethnic affiliation. Banda ceramics illustrate that material culture may not be imbued with symbolism and that decorative designs may just be a form of embellishment.

Geographic, historic, cultural and economic contexts

The Banda Traditional Area is located between the forest and the savanna, in the extreme northwest of the Brong-Ahafo region of Ghana, immediately south of the Black Volta River. The area is dominated by a range of high hills, the Banda Hills, that rise from a rolling landscape of savanna woodland, conferring a degree of topographic diversity on the region (Figure 1). This paper centres on three potting villages – Dorbour, Adadiem and Bondakile – located to the west of the Banda Hills, with sporadic references to the archaeological site of Makala Kataa, located at the Tombe Gap.

The region’s economic basis is subsistence farming (yams, groundnuts, manioc, tomatoes and maize), supplemented by some cash crops, especially tobacco. In Dorbour, potting is still a significant economic activity for women, both as potters and traders. In the past, Banda’s transitional location between the forest and the savanna contributed to its inclusion in trans-Saharan trade routes. Begho (Crossland and Posnansky 1978; Wilks 1982; Posnansky 1987; Crossland 1989), Bonduku and Kintampo (Stahl 1991, 251, 1999, 2001, 83) were all paramount markets in the supra-regional traded networks in place until the end of the nineteenth century (Arhin 1979, 29) and the strategic position of Banda at the crossroads leading to some of these markets undoubtedly contributed to its considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity, as well as to its tumultuous history (Stahl 1991, 255, 2001; Cruz 2003). Today, as in the past, Banda is connected to networks of roads that link villages to market centres (e.g. Wenchi, Sampa, Techiman and, ultimately, Kumase) where people can obtain goods, such as cloth, clothing and household equipment, not available at local markets (Stahl and Cruz 1998, 208; Cruz 2003). Banda-Ahenkro is the larger village and the seat of the Banda Paramount Chieftaincy (Stahl 2001, 41, 72–76), which is composed of a number of villages. The politically dominant Nafana trace the institution of chieftaincy to Kakala, but its organisation mirrors that of Akan structures, reinforced by the British policy of indirect rule (Stahl 1991, 255, 2001) and their imagination of small states’ political organisation. The paramount chieftaincy and individual villages have parallel political hierarchies, both headed by a chief, following Asante’s military structure (e.g. having a Nifahene, Krontihene and Gyasehene; Terray 1976; Arhin 1980; Stahl 2001, 71–72).

The ethnoarchaeological research that I undertook included villages belonging to the Sampa Traditional Area (Adadiem and Bondakile) where ceramic production was, until recently, a major economic activity. Adadiem’s population is drawn from both Nafana and Mo groups, with two chiefs as a result, one for the Nafana population and the other for the Mo, while Bondakile is predominantly Mo. Some
Figure 1. Map of the Banda Traditional Area and neighbouring villages.
villages within the Banda chieftaincy and neighbouring areas result from recent migrations from Ivory Coast. As recently as 1923, Nafana immigrants built villages west of the Banda Hills, while others settled in villages already established (Kofi 1922; Wilkinson 1923a [31/10/1923], 1923b [3/12/1923]). This population instability and these movements confirm that precolonial community membership was likely to be context-dependent (Lentz 2000, 107), certainly not resembling the European colonial imagination of well-bounded and homogeneous communities. Neither Banda’s regional diversity is reflected in archaeological nor ethnographic ceramics, which share stylistic and technological norms that can go back several centuries, but are not emblems of ethnic identity. This contravenes the use of ethnographic analogy in correlating material culture patterning with ethnic and linguistic identities and artefact similarities with space and time continuities.

**Ethnicity in Banda**

The Banda Area is characterised by considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity (Stahl 1991, 255, 2001; Cruz 1996, 2003). It is dominated by five different ethnic groups (Nafana, Kuulo, Ligby, Mo [Degha] and Ewe) who arrived in the region at different times (Terray 1995; Stahl 2001; Cruz 2003), but share villages, intermarry and mostly undertake the same economic activities. The numerically and politically dominant Nafana speak Nafaanra; the Kuulo, also known as Dumps, speak Kuulo, which during the colonial period was replaced by the use of Nafaanra (Dolphyne and Dakubu 1988; Stahl 1991, 252–254); the Ewe are recent immigrants to the area (around the 1930s), and are largely confined to riverside fishing villages; and small groups of Ligby-speaking peoples living in separate villages or occupying separate quarters represent remnants of the Mande trade diaspora involved in the trans-Saharan trade network. In addition to Nafana migrations, Tauxier (1921, 400–402) and Binger (1892) refer to several migrations of Mo people, while Delafosse mentions that after the destruction of villages by Samori’s troops in the late nineteenth century the Mo dispersed, some being absorbed by the Nafana of “Lôrha or Boué and of Banda” (my translation, Delafosse 1904, 223; also Tauxier 1921, 402). More recently (1914–1918), migrations of Mo populations from Ivory Coast to the then Gold Coast seem to have been related to forced recruitment and increase of taxation in the French colony during World War I, and the Provincial Record Book (1923–1931, 192) refers to Mo migrations into Banda as late as 1923.

According to oral history, the origin of the Banda state was connected to the migration of the Nafana into the region in the seventeenth century and the creation of the Bonduku, Sampa and Tempi chieftdoms (Owusuh 1976; Stahl and Anane 1989; Terray 1995, 310–312; Stahl 2001, 151, 155–158). Long distance trade and military campaigns led to movements of populations (e.g. of the Mande; Goody 1964; Terray 1995, 46–85), which greatly contributed to the ethnic complexity of this ‘internal frontier’ region (Kopytoff 1987). Within an ethnically heterogeneous area, the Nafana took over political power, dominating the groups already in place, as well as those arriving afterwards. Complex political structures together with economic factors resulted in state expansion and shaped political alliances between the Banda chieftaincy and neighbouring states and its participation in local and regional conflicts. The long-term alliance between Banda and Asante deeply affected the local life of the populations: in addition to political control and payment of tribute, Banda
supported the Asante confederacy in its wars against rebellious states and the British colonial power. But the influence of Asante was also felt beyond the realm of political organisation, leading to changes in local ethnic style (Royce 1982; Stahl 1991). Furthermore, from the early twentieth century, the British direct colonial administration brought additional changes in local political structures and in daily life, including new regulations on settlement patterns, mortuary practices and marketing practices and access to new products.

The Banda Traditional Area displays a mutable and complex ethnic identity and its ethnic style (Royce 1982; Stahl 1991, 2001) is the result of historic processes and power strategies, providing a good example of the dynamic and diachronic construction of ethnic identities (for a detailed study see Stahl 1991, 2001). Historic and cultural aspects speak to the complexity of ethnic relations and history, in which material culture does not reflect the region’s ethnic diversity. Ethnic and cultural identity is actively constructed and shaped by power struggles and external influences (e.g. the Asante and the British). The projection of contemporary cultural characteristics onto the past of Banda would be a simplistic upstreaming exercise (Stahl 2001, 22, 151–153) of mapping the present onto the past, without taking into account changes and the flexibility demonstrated by Banda populations. The dominant Nafana have absorbed large numbers of ‘foreigners’ into the “fabric” (Stahl 1991, 266) of their society, and the impact of foreign elements on Nafana culture is significant. But above all contemporary Nafana identity is defined by a variety of intangible cultural practices and performances.

Among the most important – if not the most important – Nafana cultural identity practices are female puberty and marriage rites. To be a ‘proper Nafana’ is to be born of a Nafana woman, one who underwent Nafana nubility (mana ndiom) and marriage (bijam or sanwaa) rites. Manaa ndiom involves female circumcision and a series of rituals and restrictions on initiates (Stahl 1991, 2001b, 55–57; Cruz 2003, 132–133). Girls undergoing manaa ndiom are recognised by wearing locally woven traditional cloth and by the summe, a special double string of white beads with a cowrie and four larger beads (Cruz 2003, 133). Nafana social organisation is dictated by matrilineal principles: people are organised into katooos, literally meaning ‘houses’ (sing. katoo), but referring to both matrilineal units and dwellings. Membership in the katoo is defined by maternal links and a woman’s identity as a Nafana is crucial to membership in the ethnic group (Stahl 1991, 2001, 54–58). Although matrilineages are known as ‘houses,’ these are not necessarily co-residential units. Each katoo is headed by a male and a female head of the family, usually individuals regarded as knowledgeable, wise and respected by all of the katoo’s the members.

The integration of the Banda chieftaincy into the Asante confederation shaped some characteristics of ethnic style, particularly the use of Akan (Twi) as a lingua franca and certain political practices: access to the paramount stool is restricted to the Nafana (Stahl 1991, 255), but procedures for selecting and installing the paramount chief, as well as the regalia used, parallel Akan performances (Bravmann 1972, 1973; Stahl 1991, 262–267). The adoption of Akan ethnic style was equally witnessed in the use of Akan terms to designate positions and functions within the chieftaincy, day names, and possibly the adoption of festivals with state apparatus (Bravmann 1972, 1973; Stahl 1991, 263). The distribution of Akan regalia by Asante was an attempt to “melt together” (Bravmann 1972, 153; also Fraser 1972) diverse cultures and secure political hegemony. But while prestigious goods reify political
alliances and reflect political élite ethnic styles, locally produced ceramics did not participate in the material construction of identities and do not reflect historically well-documented migration movements. Rather, the examination of ceramic production and consumption speaks to the fast mutability of economic activities and labour relations, while Banda ethnic identities are based on intangible cultural practices that would not leave imprints in the archaeological record.

**Quotidian material culture: beyond ethnic styles**

Ceramic manufacture is a specialised activity, resulting in vessels with considerable homogeneity in size, form and decorative treatment. Potting is confined to three villages: Dorbour, Adadiem and Bondakile. Two villages reveal a complementary pattern of production: potters in Adadiem primarily make (or made in the past) large water storage vessels and big cooking pots, while potters in Dorbour mainly make small cooking pots and small water storage pots. Although the population in Dorbour is almost exclusively Nafana, the population in Adadiem is both Nafana and Mo, and that of Bondakile is almost exclusively Mo (Berns 2007), ceramics decorative styles are the same and techniques of manufacture differ only very slightly from one village to the other, but never along ethnic lines. Potting is carried out only by women, who produce a variety of vessel forms and sell them in local markets throughout the area. Abandoned clay pits and a greater variety of vessel forms and decorative grammars in archaeological contexts confirm changes in production during the nineteenth century (Cruz 1996, 2003; Stahl and Cruz 1998; Stahl 2001; Stahl et al. 2008). In Dorbour, most women are, or were, involved in potting; more recently, trading of pots has become another source of income and, although the volume of production has decreased, the number of potters has increased. Women not engaged in manufacture buy unfired pots and fire and sell them in markets and villages. In Dorbour, potters collect their own clay, while in Adadiem women are not allowed in the clay pit. In the past, clay was dug exclusively by older men, but as they started migrating to cocoa farming areas, women started digging the clay and it is generally believed that this was the reason why the clay disappeared from the old clay pit, forcing potters to open a new one that yields clay of inferior quality.

In all the potting centres, pots are made by individual women, who may be helped by a younger daughter who is learning the craft. Ceramic production takes place in the courtyard of the compound, not in workshops or specialised activity areas, and a potter works on groups of six to eight pots at once, taking three days to complete a group of vessels (Figure 2). Each potter can make a wide variety of pot types; however, she only works on one type at a time, contributing to a high degree of homogeneity in size and decoration. The pots are made by drawing the clay, using a rounded piece of calabash or an old metal lid as a turntable. On the first day the potter makes the rim and body of the pot, except for the base; on the second day, after the rim and body are fairly dry, the pot is turned upside down and the base is built by adding clay and shaping it, sometimes using a wooden paddle; on the third day, after the base is dry, the interior is scraped to achieve very thin walls, the body is decorated using a corn cob and the rim and shoulders are burnished with a pebble.
Unlike the making of the vessels, firing is a collective activity, with several women helping each other. Each potter has her own firing pile and pots belonging to different women are not mixed. The complete process takes about an hour to an hour and a half, in a rapid succession of activities. The firing itself takes only about 30–40 minutes, the remaining time being used to blacken the pots with dry groundnut shells or grass and to dip them in a solution of pounded bark and water.

The vessels produced can be classified within three main functional categories: 1) those used to store water; 2) those used to cook and serve food; and 3) those used in rituals. Each of these classes is subdivided into a limited number of functional types, for example one pot type is used store water, another to store drinking water, one to cook yams, another to make the sauces (soup) that go with them. However, and despite the functional specificity of each vessel, the range of forms is limited, since a pot’s specific function is acquired from its use and not from its form. In other words, form is not dictated by the intended use of vessels, but their classification results from the use given to a pot. Thus, the functional classification provided by users is wider than the functional types mentioned by the potters, yet differentiations in vessel function along ethnic boundaries do not exist. In such an ethnically diverse area, women from different ethnic backgrounds learn potting with potters belonging to groups other than their own and the pots show designs that vary little from potter to potter, or even among potting centres.

Figure 2. Dorbour: a potter finishing a pot (note a number of homogeneous pots in the background).
A matter of style

Stylistic differences and similarities (usually akin to decoration) have been interpreted by archaeologists as resulting from social factors: relations among individuals or groups, namely ethnic identity (Hodder 1982; DeBoer 1984; for a critique see Croucher and Wynne-Jones 2006), information exchange (Wobst 1977; Pollock 1983), learning interaction (Deetz 1965; Whallon 1968; Hill 1970; Longacre 1970) and what Braun (1995, 126) calls "social-dialectics" (Miller and Tilley 1984). The appearance of the ceramic vessels produced in Dorbour, Adadiem and Bondakile is not dictated by the ethnic affiliation of producers (both Mo and Nafana potters use the same decorative techniques and decorative grammars) or consumers. The potters with whom I spoke were unanimous in acknowledging that individuals belonging to different groups would buy their wares and that they were not producing different vessel types or decorative patterns to please specific groups of consumers or specific markets. The widespread use of the decorative style adopted by the potting centres is clear, both in spatial and temporal terms: the pots from all three centres reach a wide and diverse number of markets with multi-ethnic consumers; archaeologically, ceramics decorated with maize cob roulettes were being used as early as the nineteenth century. If we consider decorative grammar (that is, the organisation of decoration on the body of the vessels) rather than only decorative technique, the similarities of ceramic decoration go further back than the mid-nineteenth century as pots recovered from the archaeological sites Early Makala (early nineteenth century) and Kuulo Kataa (c. AD 1300-1650; Stahl 1999, 2001; Stahl et al. 2008, 364) present similar grammars, but instead of maize corn roulette the technique used was cord roulette.

I contend that today neither the production nor the use of ceramic containers plays any role in defining the ethnic identity of producers or consumers. The decoration of ceramic vessels contains little deliberate information content (Wobst 1977) and the energy expended in the creation of decorative styles is not related to their social visibility. Cooking vessels, water storage, water coolers and ritual pots all have similar decorative grammars, in spite of their different functions and different visibility within and outside the homestead. Most of the vessels are only given a distinctive function by the user, thus the relation function/form/decoration is not determined during production. Some vessels have symbolic meanings and functions; however, it is the role that they play in rituals that gives them their symbolic role. Indeed, potters and consumers maintained when interviewed that any pot could be used for ritual purposes, since only after being used would it acquire its symbolic meaning. A single pot, the *wile*, was made to be a ritual pot used in funerals, but even this type of pot was used by different ethnic groups, including the Nafana and the Mo (Crossland 1989, 74–75). Moreover, in spite of its specific ritual function, both the form and the decorative treatment of *wile* are similar to those of utilitarian vessels, differing only in the fact that *wile* vessels have a perforated body (Figure 3).

Barbara Frank (1987, 1993, 1998, 2007), following Lechtman (1977), suggests that technical style (how and why potters make pots the way they do) is a culturally learned behaviour and that it is more distinctive than decorative style. Nevertheless, I argue that technical data will have to be combined with cultural, economic and historical lines of evidence to have relevant meaning. The difference in the techniques used by the potters is not only dependent on movements of people (Frank 1993,
2007), but also on the person from whom the potters have learned their craft. Both
the Nafana and Mo potters in Adadiem use the orbiting technique to manufacture
the pots (i.e. the pot remains in the same position, while the potter moves, walking
backwards and around the pot to build it; Rice 1987, 133), while the Nafana potters
in Durbour (less than 5 km from Adadiem) sit on the floor to make pots. In
Durbour, one Nafana potter used the orbiting technique, as did a former potter in
Dumboli, but both had learned the craft in Adadiem. In this village, the two ethnic
groups use the same manufacturing technique and the same decorative style;
therefore, ceramic style, in a broader sense, is not related to identity performance, but
results from the learning process of ceramic manufacture.

Stylistic variations and innovation in vessel form, decoration and forming
techniques are embedded in social relations and cultural practice (Dietler and
Herbich 1998, 235), as are the limitations placed upon stylistic innovation and
change. An important question to consider is how a potter acquires a personal and
widely accepted style. Informal learning, based on observation and participation,
seems to be the norm for the Banda region’s centres. Older potters often learned with
their mothers or other female relatives with whom they had lived for some time,
contributing to stylistic uniformity. The reasons why the younger apprentices had
lived with the older and experienced potters varied, but learning how to make pots
was never presented as the main reason. In spite of similarities between the styles of
experienced potter and those of apprentices, there was no replication as each potter

Figure 3. *Wile*: a sacred pot used in funerals.
incorporated new elements into her decorative style. A few women decided to learn potting recently, after they were married and realised the economic benefits of this activity as a complement to farming. They learned either with friends and neighbours, who are potters, or by observing potter specialists at work and trying on their own, but without formal apprenticeship. Yet, apprenticeship has implications for the propagation of styles – both technical and decorative – especially when apprentices lived with skilled potters for a period of time. Technical and aesthetic tendencies are learned as part of the general process of socialisation and are structured by networks of personal interaction, without any intention of communicating group identity.

Design schemes are very similar from potter to potter and from production centre to production centre. Subtle variation among potters and villages is due to the potter’s preference for a specific design and to personal innovation. Yet the overall decorative appearance and grammar are very uniform and similar decoration is applied to different types of pots. An arrangement in decorative fields, parallel to the rim, is the general rule, accepted by potters and consumers alike (Figure 4). The colour of vessels after firing, the higher intensity of burnishing, the size of vessels and the thickness and height of rim were some of the features allowing potters to distinguish the workmanship of the Adadiem and Dorbour communities. Nevertheless, potters do not recognise a community micro-style (Herbich 1987, 196); both

Figure 4. Water storage pot: detail of decorative grammar.
potters and consumers stated that the “pots were all the same,” with only Bondakile ceramics being distinguished due to their “golden sparkles,” i.e. the presence of scaly aggregates of vermiculite crystals. Innovation is accepted, but at the same time it is socially controlled, such that the end result is often similar to the traditional style accepted by the community. Archaeological ceramics from Makala Kataa yield the same pattern of innovation, with the transition from cord roulette to maize cob roulette. It is apparent that the process of innovation has simplified the potters’ tasks, increasing the efficiency of production, but the innovations were technical, always in the field of decoration, while the basic manufacturing techniques remained the same.

The concept of chaînes opératoires (Leroi-Gourhan 1943, 1945; Creswell 1972; Balfet 1973; Lemonnier 1986, 1990, 1993; Gosselain 1992, 1995, 2002) asserts that techniques are social productions. They therefore have social meaning beyond Wobst’s (1977) information theory. Lemonnier (1990) correlates technological factors with other aspects of culture and society, without reducing them to style and avoiding the narrow sense of decoration as formal differences and similarities. Variability within the stages of manufacture is evidence of the potters’ choice (van der Leeuw 1993) and emerges from material and social constraints. A potter makes her pots in a precise way, following the technical and social rules prevailing within her community. This is not simply a result of environmental and material impositions, but of the way society perceives and envisages the qualified mode of producing specific objects. Technical variants often designate different social realities, as observed in the case of the gathering of clay in Dorbour and Adadiem. They also designate specialisation in the production of goods (e.g. Adadiem and Dorbour specialise in the production of different pot sizes, while a nearby village, Kokoa, specialises in the production of spindle whorls). Lemonnier (1986) proposes that differences in technique mark differences in group affiliation (ethnic identity), but this is not the case in Banda.

Although style is often related to the marking of socio-cultural boundaries or the expression of rank and class differences (David and Kramer 2001, 218-219), in Banda ceramic containers do not have a symbolic significance in matters of identity for either users or producers (cf. Herbich 1988, 1991, 131), and social group interaction, especially informal craft apprenticeships and exchange/trade, provides mechanisms conducive to stylistic uniformity. In addition, ethnic style in the Banda area (and certainly in other neighbouring regions too, such as Gyaman; Terray 1995) is flexible and “the content of ethnic identity, the symbols and values that are a focal point for group cohesiveness, may vary significantly” (Stahl 1991, 251). Therefore, material culture, especially ceramic containers, cannot be used to define ‘ethnicity’. Nevertheless, ceramics do provide an understanding of mechanisms that generate internal variability in society, especially the contexts of their production and consumption.

Consumption of ceramic vessels: “the social life of things”

Demand, equated with the concept of consumption, has been paramount in material culture research and anthropological work has called attention to the role of commodities in the social reproduction and naturalisation of ideology (Bourdieu 1984; Appadurai 1986) and the re-socialisation of commodities (Miller 1995, 1998). Banda populations had to adjust to new consumption preferences as the region was
integrated into a market economy and recent shifts in demand away from locally produced clay vessels in favour of more resistant metal containers have had a deep impact on production and consumption. The contextualisation of consumption at the intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors brings a new dimension to material culture. The desire and demand for domestic goods is not ‘culture free and in Banda the replacement of clay vessels by metal and plastic containers is a matter of material durability and a sign of modernity. Today, the main consumers of ceramic vessels, especially of clay grinding bowls, are the owners of ‘chop bars’, small stalls owned by women who cook and sell fufu, using grinding bowls to serve the food. As a result, Bondakile and Adadiem, previously major producers of large storage clay pots, have shifted their production to grinding bowls. In Dorbour, the production of small cooking pots has been maintained, but the use of the pots has changed as both men and women buy them to use on farms, but especially in rituals or for storing medicinal herbs.

The change in consumption habits resulted from deep changes in production and trade strategies. The types of vessels produced locally are similar to those produced in the recent past, although the range of pot forms has dramatically decreased, along with the quantity being produced. On the other hand, the use given to the pots has also changed: their use in quotidian activities has been replaced by metal containers, but clay vessels have maintained their traditional, ritual and symbolic roles. However, they are not distinct from utilitarian vessels and only once a vessel assumes a ritual role does it move out of the economic realm to acquire a new, symbolic value. In Banda both the vessels used during funerals and those employed as men’s personal gods were pots produced initially as simple economic goods that become an important device for creating and maintaining relations between people through contexts of use. It is clear that neither the production nor the everyday use of ceramic containers plays any role in defining the ethnic identity of either producers or consumers.

Conclusion

The main goal of this analysis has been to provide a case study illustrating how the production, distribution and consumption of objects and the role of material culture in the construction of social relations can be rich and complex, although devoid of ethnic meaning or any role in constructing identity, by focusing on mechanisms that relate artefact variation and variability to socio-cultural contexts and by inferring mechanisms and processes of cultural change (David and Kramer 2001, 50). Ceramic production and consumption in Banda illustrate the danger of uncritically using ethnographies to map the present onto the past (David and Kramer 2001; Stahl 1993, 2001) and of selectively establishing trans-continental and trans-temporal ethnic and cultural connections. The social, economic and cultural contexts of how material culture is produced and used change over time under the influence of historic factors, while ethnic identity may be intangible (as in the case of Banda) or context-based. It is essential to understand such changes, to realise that the socio-cultural meaning of material culture is historically contingent and to acknowledge that historic and cultural contingency sets boundaries to the appropriation of the past by the present.

Although we cannot discard or understate African legacies in the African Diaspora, attempting to map modern ethnic groups onto the past or to draw
continuities between past and present populations (both within Africa and between Africa and the Americas) in ways that do not take into account the complexity of culture change and the fluidity of identity politics is a naïve enterprise. The diversity of historical experiences, the ambiguities of identities and the disruptive nature of enslavement and colonialism all call into question the validity of analogical reasoning. Ceramics are but but one aspect of material culture that may participate in the definition of identity and, as the Banda case warns us, material culture may not even be involved in the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘others’. Other cases (e.g. Atkinson 1989; Cruz in press) show the danger of extrapolating recent identities into the past; even when historical documents identify a group with a term used today, what it meant to be Shona, BaKongo or Igbo in the seventeenth century is not necessarily the same as being Shona, BaKongo or Igbo today. This cautionary tale illustrates the dangers of projecting ethnic identities into the past and of equating them with material culture styles, particularly ceramic styles, that “spread through acculturation and migration” (Huffman 2007, 110). Archaeologists who overlook not only the more easily recognised colonial interventions and inventions in identity formation, but also mutations and nuances extending back into the precolonial period, forego a long list of reasons why material culture changes (beyond acculturation, migration and identity), as well as the situational meanings of both identity and artefacts.

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