

Symbols and Metaphors of Ceramic Sculpture Receptacles

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ABSTRACT

In Africa, the production of ceramic sculpture receptacles is a common artistic practice. This artistry has attracted a plethora of historical, cultural, archaeological, and ethnographic studies. Such studies have revealed some of these African ceramic sculpture receptacles' metaphorical, philosophical, social, and cultural contexts. However, the paucity of literature on the symbols and metaphors of the ceramic sculpture receptacles produced at Takoradi Technical University (TTU) in Ghana provides a research gap. The current study, therefore, sought to examine selected ceramic sculpture receptacles from the Ceramic Design Technology Department of TTU to reveal their symbolic and metaphorical connotations from the indigenous Ghanaian cultural context. The study utilised a qualitative research approach and a descriptive research design. Twelve (12) ceramic sculpture receptacles were purposively sampled, and triangulation of instruments, including non-participant observation, personal interviews, and document reviews, were used to elicit interpretative data from thirteen experts (lecturers & students of TTU), who were all practicing artists. The findings reveal that the twelve ceramic sculpture receptacles incorporate culturally revered animals (birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals) as decorative symbols. These animal-related metaphors are strongly tied to traditional Ghanaian society's sociocultural, religious, and political dimensions. These symbols reflect rich cultural values and philosophies, making the artefacts vital for preserving and promoting Ghanaian cultural heritage. The study recommends further research on other institutional artefacts to decode their embedded sociocultural repositories. This tends to promote and preserve Ghanaian cultural and artistic heritage, which serves as an educational tool for current and future generations.

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1. Introduction

Ceramic sculpture has been an important part of human artistic expression for thousands of years. In ancient civilisations such as China and Greece, ceramic art was used for both functional and decorative purposes, with ceramic receptacles often decorated with sculptural elements such as humans, plants, animals, and other figures (Tsetli, 2018). During the Renaissance era, ceramic sculpture experienced a resurgence in popularity, with artists such as Luca della Robbia and Andrea della Robbia creating intricate and decorative ceramic wares (National Gallery of Art, 2023). In the 20th century, the modern art movement embraced ceramic sculpture, with artists such as Pablo Picasso and Joan Miro experimenting with clay and other media to create abstract

and expressive works (Lauria et al., 2000). More recently, ceramic sculpture continues to be a popular form of artistic expression, with contemporary artists pushing the boundaries of the medium through innovative techniques and materials (Acero, 2001).

The production and use of pottery-sculpture artefacts is an important aspect of African culture. Pots, in particular, have been used for a variety of purposes, including totemic, ritual and ceremonial objects as well as for decorative purposes (Navei, 2021; 2020; Wiafe-Akenten, 2021; Atanga, 2019; Ekong, 2018; Jackson & Wilroy, 2011). In Ghana, ceramic sculptural receptacles continue to play an important role in the country's cultural heritage (Navei, 2021). These receptacles are significant artistic and cultural artefacts that embody various meanings and symbolic representations (Navei, 2021; 2020; Adom, Asante & Kquofi, 2016; Kwarteng, 2016; Hopper, 2008; Peterson, 1993). In general, totemic, philosophical and metaphorical symbols are commonly found on ceramic receptacles from various indigenous cultures around the world (Zhi-hao, 2023; DeGraft-Yankson & Essel, 2022).

Studies confirm that a receptacle with a totemic animal may be used in religious ceremonies or as a symbol of family or community identity (My Mondo Trading, 2023; Navei, 2021; DeBraak, 2018, Deikumah, Konadu & Kwafo, 2015; Werness, 2006; Chikwekwe, 1997). This suggests that totemic artefacts are revered as repositories for the construction of family and clan identity. For example, the outer walls of traditional Danji pottery in Ghana provide suitable platforms for potters to symbolically reveal their well-revered culturally related totemic motifs (Navei, 2021). The author further adds that some pottery receptacles are decorated with figures of totemic birds (crown bird), while others are decorated with figurative models of totemic animals such as the leopard, reconstructing the prominent role of such totemic animals in the cultural evolution of the Danji people of the Sisaala ethnicity. Similarly, totemic birds such as chicken, guinea fowl and eagle, as well as philosophical and metaphorical symbols, are used to decorate pottery wares produced by the Gonja and Kassena-Nankane (Sirigu) people of northern Ghana (Asmah, Mate & Daitey, 2016; Nortey & Asiamoaso, 2019; Asmah & Okpattah, 2013; Wemegah, 2009). It is against this background that Gyekye (1996) asserts that the semiotics of pottery decoration, such as the use of totemic, philosophical, and metaphorical symbols on receptacles, can have a variety of meanings and significance depending on the specific culture and context in which they are used.

In the African cultural space, ceramic sculpture has been the subject of scholarly inquiry for many years, with scholars exploring its historical, cultural, and artistic significance (Kwakye-Nuako, 2017; Adom, 2016; Kwarteng, 2006). A key aspect of these studies has been the examination of the ways in which African ceramic sculpture reflects and shapes cultural identity and traditions (Berzock, 2007). Another area of scholarly investigation has been the technical aspects of African ceramic sculpture, including the materials and techniques used to create these objects (Gong, Sukpasjaroen & Chankoson, 2022). For example, some researchers have explored the ways in which African potters have adapted innovative traditional techniques to create new and distinctive forms of ceramic art (Thebe et al., 2009; Fredriksen, 2023). In addition to these areas of research, some studies have explored the social and economic contexts of African ceramics. For example, studies have explored the ways in which the production and trade of ceramics played a role in shaping economic relations and patterns of exchange within and between African societies (Bonifay, 2022; Wemegah, 2009).

There is also a wealth of multidisciplinary research on ceramic sculpture in African culture, drawing on perspectives from art history, anthropology, archaeology and other

fields. In Ghana, for example, cultural and historical analogies have been reconstructed through archaeological studies conducted at Ntereso and Komaland, the two northernmost archaeological sites of the Kintampo cultural complex (Dartey, 2018; Insoll, Kankpeyeng & Nkumbaan, 2012; Insoll, Kankpeyeng, Nkumbaan & Saako, 2012; Kankpeyeng, Nkumbaan & Insoll, 2011; Anquandah, 1987; 1998). The authors reveal ancient pottery relics and various types of terracotta figurines such as crocodiles, equestrian figurines, stylised androgynous human heads, birds, and others, highlighting the cultural, historical, ritual/spiritual, totemic analogies of ancient cultural practices and Indigenous artistry of communities within the Kintampo cultural complex. Through this research, scholars have provided insights into the ancient production techniques and materiality of ceramic sculpture and the vital role that ceramic sculpture played in the historical and cultural evolution of African societies.

The insights and novelty of the aforementioned archaeological, ethnoarchaeological, anthropological, and art-historical accounts of ceramic sculpture call for further contextual research on other seemingly unexamined ceramic sculpture receptacles produced in contemporary Ghana. A classic example of some of these unexamined ceramic sculpture receptacles in Ghana are those produced at the Takoradi Technical University (TTU). In an attempt to fill this gap, the current study takes a semiotic look at some ceramic sculpture receptacles with coded symbolic decorations found in the academic space of TTU, Ghana. Specifically, the study takes a cursory look at ceramic sculpture receptacles created by some ceramic students and lecturers of the Ceramic Design Department of TTU to determine their symbolic and metaphorical meanings.

2. Theoretical Basis

The study was grounded on the theory of semiotics developed in the 19th century by Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher and logician (Yakin & Totu, 2014; Deacon, 2012; Peirce, 1906). According to Peirce's (1906) semiotic theory, signs are not simply arbitrary associations between signifiers and signified but are based on their practical use in communication. More specifically, Peircean semiotics is the study of how signs and symbols convey meanings in a given context (Swenson & Cipolla, 2020). Peirce identified three basic categories of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. According to Peirce, icons are signs that resemble or imitate their referent in some way, such as a photograph of a person. On the other hand, Peirce notes that indexes are signs that have a physical or causal connection to their referent, such as smoke indicating the presence of fire.

Symbols are signs that are conventionally associated with their referent, such as a flag representing a nation (Peirce, 1931-1935). However, Peirce notes that "a sign is not a mere juxtaposition of an object and a word, but a triadic relation between an object, a sign, and an interpretant" (Peirce, 1906: 494). The interpretations offered in Peircean semiotics about icons, indexes, and symbols and their relationship to the interpretant are consistent with artistic creations. This is because artists use coded signs, symbols, and designs to convey messages and feelings to the public (Navei & Donkoh, 2022; Najafi & Abbas, 2014). Therefore, this study took cognisance of the importance of Peirce's interpretant (the creation of meaning through signs) in the semiotic theoretical tenet to interpret the symbols and metaphors associated with selected ceramic sculpture receptacles produced at the Takoradi Technical University, Ghana.

The study reflects on Peirce's interpretant as the meaning that is generated by the sign in the mind of the interpreter and can vary depending on the context and cultural

conventions associated with the sign (Peirce, 1906); in this case, the embedded symbols and metaphors associated with the ceramic sculpture produced at TTU. This study, therefore, highlights the fact that the sign itself does not only determine meaning, but also the context in which it is used. The study provided a deeper understanding of the symbols (animal figures, shapes, colours, and patterns) and metaphors associated with selected ceramic sculpture receptacles found at TTU by considering the theoretical underpinnings of semiotic theory.

2.1 Ceramic Sculpture

Further investigation is required to understand that ceramic sculpture has a long historical foundation in African culture dating back thousands of years (Cole & Ross, 1977). Artistic products of ceramic sculpture have been used in Africa for a variety of purposes, such as ritual and ceremonial objects, domestic receptacles, and others. In many African societies, distinctive ceramic sculpture receptacles have been associated with fertility and the creation of new life and have played various important roles in religious and cultural practices (Navei, 2021; Haour, 2010; Kleiner & Mamiya, 2005). One of the best-known examples of African ceramic sculpture is associated with the Nok culture of Nigeria, which is estimated to have flourished between 1000 BC and 500 BC (Breunig, 2017). The Nok produced a wide range of ceramic sculptural objects, including figurines, receptacles, and masks, many of which were highly stylised and expressive (Breunig, 2017; Kleiner & Mamiya, 2005), such as "a vessel with a face in the typical Nok style, excavated in 2006 at the Janruwa A site" (Breunig, 2017: 11). These objects were often used in burial rituals as well as in everyday life (Breunig, 2017; Kleiner & Mamiya, 2005).

In addition to the Nok culture, there are many other examples of African ceramic sculpture from across the continent. For example, the Dogon people of Mali are known for their intricate ceramic receptacles, which are used in a variety of contexts, from everyday use to ceremonial occasions (Vogel, Carrieri & Center for African Art, 1997). The Yoruba people of Nigeria also have a rich tradition of ceramic sculpture, including highly decorative receptacles used in religious and cultural ceremonies (Nanashaitu, 2017). Among the Sisaala people of northern Ghana, pipoi-bunbunu is a traditional ceramic sculpture with human figurative depiction used in the ritual bathing of corpses as required by the customs and traditional burial rites of the Danji culture (Navei, 2021). In general, African ceramic sculpture exhibits a wide range of styles, techniques, and cultural semiotics and is therefore valued and appreciated in this contemporary era for its aesthetic beauty, cultural and historical significance (Backman, 2022; Adom, 2016; Asante, Kquofi & Larbi, 2015; Gbogbo, Attuquayefio & Krobea-Asante, 2009).

3. Methods

The study was conducted using the qualitative descriptive research design. Using the qualitative descriptive research design, the study contextually provided an in-depth description (Creswell, 2013) of the various aspects of the symbols and metaphors found on selected ceramic sculpture receptacles produced at TTU-Ghana. The study used this approach to explore the symbolic and metaphorical meanings and socio-cultural significance of the ceramic sculpture receptacles from the contexts and perspectives of art lecturers, artists and art students at TTU.

The population of the study consisted of ceramic sculpture receptacles, art lecturers, and art students from the Faculty of Applied Arts and Technology, specifically the Sculpture Technology and Ceramic Technology Departments at TTU in the Sekondi-

Takoradi Metropolis, Western Region of Ghana. Since the study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, it was difficult, if not impossible, to collect data holistically from all population categories. As a result, a homogeneous purposive sampling technique was used to obtain twelve (12) ceramic sculpture receptacles with unique symbols philosophical and metaphorical repositories from among the various pottery receptacles found at TTU. The expert purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2015) was also used to sample five (5) art lecturers (artists) and eight (8) art students, all in TTU based on their practical skills and/or knowledge. The researchers were interested in exploring the experiences and expertise of art students, lecturers, and practising artists in the practice of ceramics, with particular reference to reconstructing the socio-cultural contexts embedded in the sampled receptacles.

In order to gain in-depth insights into the sampled receptacles, the study used a triangulation of qualitative descriptive research methods including photography, non-participant observation, personal interviews, document review to collect data from the respondents, and secondary sources. Observation took the form of direct observation and recording of participants' behaviours, actions, and interactions in their natural environment (Wang, 2021; Taylor-Powell & Steele, 1996). In the context of receptacle making, direct observation was used to capture the production processes involved in making ceramic sculpture receptacles, while also noting any symbols and philosophical metaphors associated with the sampled receptacles. Personal interviews provide rich, in-depth interpretative data about the totemic receptacles, allowing the researchers to understand the participants' perspectives and experiences (Allen, 2017). The study used a semi-structured interview format, with a pre-determined set of questions as a guide. This data collection method allowed the interview to flow naturally but with probes for further information and/or clarification. The researchers recorded the interviews with the consent of the participants and took detailed field notes as well (Patton, 2015).

The data collected was meticulously transcribed, reconciled with the field notes, and coded into themes. The data analysis process involved the use of both formalist and semiotic tools to analyse the transcribed data. The formalist analysis involved a close observation and examination of the twelve (12) sampled ceramic sculpture receptacles, paying attention to how the decorative elements were arranged and how they interacted to create a symbolic effect. This analysis tool was used to break down the work into its symbolic components (Speedy Paper, 2022), such as analysing the images of all the symbols and metaphors and the use of colour and patterns in the ceramic sculpture receptacles. Semiotic analysis, which focuses on interpreting the signs, symbols, colours, and other patterns identified with the formalist's tool, was rigorously carried out on each selected ware to reveal its design concepts and cultural relevance. Ethical considerations were also taken into account by obtaining written informed consent from the participants, protecting their privacy and confidentiality, and following all other ethical guidelines during the conduct of the study (DeRenzo, Singer & Moss, 2020).

4. Results and Discussion

The aim of this study was to interpret symbols and metaphors such as animals, shapes, colours, and patterns associated with twelve selected receptacles found in the Department of Ceramic Technology of the Takoradi Technical University, Ghana. The study's empirical findings are herein analysed and discussed under coherent themes and sub-themes.

4.1. The Ceramic Technology Department, TTU-Ghana, and its Ceramic Sculpture Art

The Department of Ceramic Technology at TTU-Ghana is home to a diverse range of ceramic sculptures, including numerous striking pieces of pottery that serve as a testament to the students' and faculty ceramists' skill and creativity. These ceramic sculptures come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colours, with intricate designs and patterns etched into the surface of each piece. Walking through the department's exhibition area, one is immediately struck by the sheer variety of receptacles on display. Some are tall and cylindrical, while others are short squat, with bulbous curves and intricate handles that gracefully curve into elegant shapes. The glazes used to finish each piece also vary, with some having a shiny and reflective finish that shimmers in the light, while others are rough with an earthier, organic feel (Kleiner & Mamiya, 2005).

What is perhaps most impressive about these ceramic sculptures, however, is the intricate shapes and designs etched into the surface of each piece. These range from simple geometric shapes to more complex scenes depicting animals and other figurative designs. Each piece is a unique work of art that tells its own story. The level of detail and craftsmanship on display is truly remarkable, with each artefact clearly having been made with great care and attention to detail. As one spends more time exploring the ceramic sculpture artefacts on display at the Department of Ceramic Technology at TTU-Ghana, it becomes clear that these artworks are more than just objects - they are works of art that embody the creativity and ingenuity of the artists who created them. Whether you are a casual admirer of pottery receptacles or a seasoned collector, visiting this department will surely be a memorable and inspiring experience.

Generally, the ceramic sculpture receptacles at TTU serve symbolic, functional, and decorative purposes. This finding supports the notion of Ekong (2018) that receptacles in particular are used for various purposes, including rituals, ceremonies, and decorative purposes. The study further established that the ceramic sculpture receptacles found at TTU were made using both the potter's wheel and hand-building methods of pottery production, with various totemic and metaphoric figures, textures, patterns, and designs either carved, impressed, or modeled on the ware. Once the sculpting was complete, the pottery ware was allowed to bone dry before being fired in a kiln at the desired temperature to harden it and make it durable. After firing, the receptacle could be left in its natural state or decorated with glazes or other finishes. These receptacles come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from small and delicate to large and sturdy (Fredriksen, 2023). They also come in unique colours and designs to suit the style and preferences of the ceramists/potters or the space in which they are to be used.

The study found that aesthetic and intricate designs were important aspects of the production of ceramic sculpture receptacles in TTU, as ceramists used various techniques to create intricate designs or patterns on the surface of the receptacle. Studies confirm that a variety of decorative techniques and designs such as impression, incision, carving, painting, stamping, modelling, roulettes, and channeling are symptomatic of ceramic sculpture art in Ghana (Navei, 2021; 2020; Wemengah, 2014; Yussif, Adu-Gyamfi & Tabi-Agyei, 2018; Yussif & Adu-Gyamfi, 2017; Aquandah, 1998).

The study also found that the design semiotics of the wares often referred to local cultural motifs and symbols, such as animals, birds, reptiles, and geometric shapes that are important in Ghanaian cultural heritage. To embellish the wares, the artists incorporated natural materials and colours into their designs, such as plant dyes and earth colours. The ceramists or potters also developed various technical skills, such as controlling the firing temperature and using glazes to create different colours and textures. It was also found that TTU ceramists/potters were constantly innovating new

techniques to improve the strength and durability of their receptacles by adding tempering agents such as sand and grog, among others. This practice demonstrates that the potters' technical expertise and innovation are important in producing ceramic sculpture receptacles at TTU, as they enable the potters to produce high-quality and durable wares that can withstand everyday use. The innovative pottery skills of the student potters and lecturers at TTU identified in the study support Thebe et al.'s (2009) assertion that pottery production in Africa is characterised by the display of many innovative skills such as coiling and paddling to shape the clay and create the desired form.

4.2. Symbols and Metaphors Associated with Ceramic Sculpture Receptacles in TTU

The study used semiotic and formalist analytical tools to interpret the visual elements, contexts, and symbols associated with twelve (12) sampled ceramic sculpture receptacles found at TTU. Some of the visual elements examined by the study included the wares' shape, size, colour, texture, and patterns. The analysis of the selected wares focused on their historical, symbolic, and metaphorical semiotics within Ghanaian sociocultural contexts, as well as their materiality and production processes. The study found, among other things, that the selected TTU ceramic sculpture receptacles were decorated with culturally rich symbols and philosophical metaphors such as birds, reptiles, mammals, and amphibians.

4.2.1 Bird-Related Ceramic Sculpture Receptacles in TTU

The study established that most ceramic sculpture receptacles in the Ceramic Design Department of TTU-Ghana were decorated with bird-related symbols. This could be due to the fact that some birds are believed to possess agility, intelligence, and many other social, cultural, political, or religious underpinnings. Hence, their symbolic images are often found in artworks such as traditional ceramic receptacles (Deikumah et al., 2015). For example, the use of birds such as chicken, guinea fowl, and eagle as totemic symbols on ceramic sculptural wares of the Gonja and Kassena-Nankane (Sirigu) people of northern Ghana could be mentioned (Asmah, Mate & Daitey, 2016; Nortey & Asiamoaso, 2019; Wemegah, 2009; Asmah & Okpattah, 2013).

The bird-decorated wares in Figures 1a and b are believed to represent important cultural and spiritual concepts such as strength, courage, and freedom. The use of bird symbols in the ceramic sculpture receptacles in the Ceramic Technology Department can also be found in the pottery of the Ashanti people of southern Ghana. The Ashanti of Ghana use intricate geometric designs and symbols in their pottery, often depicting birds such as the owl and the rooster. These birds are considered sacred in Ashanti culture and are associated with important spiritual concepts such as protection and wisdom (Asante et al., 2015). In both examples, the visual elements of the birds on the ceramic sculpture receptacles are deeply connected to the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people who created them. Therefore, the use of bird-related symbols and metaphors on the ceramic sculpture receptacles could convey important cultural and spiritual meanings and beliefs to the viewer.

The study found that the rooster ceramic sculpture observed in Figure 1a symbolises fertility and is associated with important cultural beliefs and practices related to agriculture and land use in the Ewe culture of Ghana. The ceramic rooster sculpture therefore highlights the Ewe visual culture worldview in relation to agricultural fertility and land use.

In Figure 1b, the ceramic sculpture takes the form of an eagle's head. An aesthetic analysis of the receptacle (Figure 1b) reveals that its eagle design could be derived from the general Ghanaian assertion that eagles are distinguished birds with enviable symbolic standpoints such as versatility, strength, power, nobility, greatness, superiority, and supremacy. The aforementioned symbolism of the eagle is evident in its ability to operate both in the air and on land; it avoids being hunted by its attackers by flying very high in the sky and yet successfully hunts other animals on land (Ayiku, 1998). Therefore, the symbolic adoption of the eagle in various aspects of Ghanaian life, especially in heraldry and emblems of the Ghanaian government, such as the state sword, proclaims these attributes of the state that owns it (DeGraft-Yankson & Essel, 2022; Donkor et al., 2020; Ayiku, 1998). Therefore, the use of the eagle symbol on the ceramic sculpture receptacle (Figure 1b) could be interpreted as the artist's quest to deepen the symbolic (strength, power, and majesty) prominence of an eagle in Ghanaian cultural space from a ceramic sculpture point of view.

The *Sankofa* philosophical bird, shown in Figure 1c, is an important *adinkra* symbol in many Ghanaian cultures, particularly among the Akan people. *Sankofa* is an Akan philosophical expression in Ghana - *san* means to return, *ko* means to go, and *fa* means to fetch, seek, take, get, and is fully translated as Go back and get it; or Go back and take it (Slater, 2019). It is used "as a symbol whereby knowledge of the past can be used to plan the future; or where a mistake has been made, the wrong can be rectified and lessons learned from the experience" (Slater, 2019: 2). Therefore, the *Sankofa* philosophical bird (Figure 1c) is depicted with its head turned backward, looking over its shoulder, while its feet point forward, indicating that the past must be revisited in order to move forward.

Kwarteng (2016) affirms that the *Sankofa* philosophical bird symbolises the worthwhile need and urgency for individuals, institutions, organisations, or a nation to constantly revisit past events (cultural ideals, concepts, traditions, and heritage, among others) in order to shape their current state of being. The *Sankofa* philosophical symbol "teaches the wisdom of learning from the past to improve the future. It also teaches people to cherish and value their culture and avoid its negative adulteration" (Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah & Nartey, 2016). Therefore, the *Sankofa* ceramic sculpture art (Figure 1c) found at TTU highlights the need to celebrate, preserve, and promote Ghana's cultural heritage, historical relics, and traditions while promoting a sense of unity and pride among the Ghanaian people, as confirmed by Kwarteng (2016) and Gyekye (1996).



a. Double-headed cock receptacle



b. Eagle-headed receptacle



c. Sankofa receptacles

Figure 1. Bird-related symbols and philosophical metaphors of ceramic sculpture receptacles of TTU-Ghana (Photo Credit: Fieldwork, 2023).

4.2.2. Reptile-Related Ceramic Sculpture Receptacles in TTU

In the Ghanaian sociocultural setup, reptiles are commonly adopted as symbols and philosophical metaphors of high reverence. Some traditional Ghanaian beliefs associate certain reptiles with specific qualities or attributes. Hellbusch (1978: 49) agrees that in the Akan culture of Ghana "reptiles are associated with divine phenomena and have supernatural powers". Some popular proverbial, totemic, and/or sacred reptiles that are often depicted in African (Ghanaian) art to emphasise their symbolic reverence include, but are not limited to, chameleons, crocodiles, snakes of all kinds, lizards and others (Asmah, Mate & Daitey, 2016; Wemegah, 2013; 2009; Asmah & Okpattah, 2013; Hellbusch, 1978).



a



b

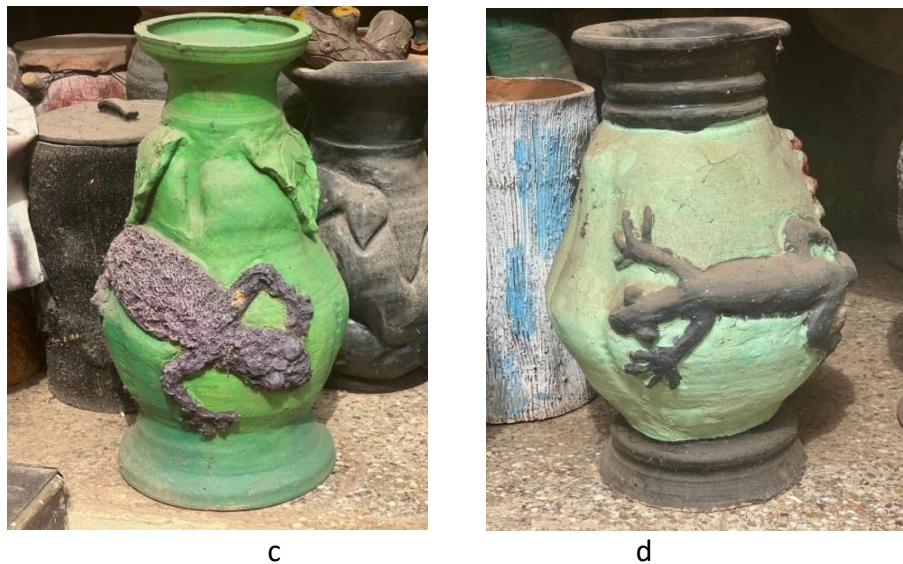


Figure 2. Ceramic sculpture receptacles with symbolic Lizard decorations in TTU (Photo Credit: Fieldwork, 2023).

The study also found ceramic sculpture receptacles at TTU with symbolic lizard decoration, as shown in Figure 2 (a, b, c & d). It was found that lizards are not just ordinary creatures but have strong cultural symbolic and proverbial meanings in the Ghanaian cultural space. One of the most common interpretations is that lizards represent transformation and regeneration due to their ability to regrow their tails. This symbolism is associated with the belief that the lizard-decorated receptacles shown in Figure 2(a, b, c & d) have the power to renew and regenerate and adapt to changing circumstances. In addition, some cultures, such as the Akans of Ghana, regard lizards as symbols of fertility and prosperity. This may be because lizards are often found in places with abundant vegetation and are seen as indicators of a healthy ecosystem. In some cases, lizards are also associated with cunning and trickery, particularly in Akan folklore. For example, the character of *Ananse* (spider) is often depicted in traditional stories as outwitting the lizard, underlining the lizard's perception as clever and quick-thinking. Lizards also characterise traditional Ghanaian proverbs. One of the many examples of lizard-related proverbs is that "it is difficult to throw a stone at a lizard clinging to a pot without breaking the pot" (Hellbusch, 1978: 109). This lizard-related proverb seems to be cautionary, highlighting some realities in life that need to be considered.

In addition to the socio-cultural symbolism of lizards, the study found that lizards also occupy a socioreligious space in the cosmological worldview of Africans (Ghanaians). For example, in some parts of Ghana, the gecko is believed to have supernatural powers that can protect against evil spirits. This belief is interpreted as the ability to ward off negative energies and provide spiritual protection. Hellbusch (1978: 6) confirms that "lizards are sacred to the *Adjukru* of the Ivory Coast and are treated with full funeral honours".

The foregoing revelation suggests that lizards have a unique social, cultural, and religious symbolism in Ghanaian traditional settings. The aforementioned reverence for lizards explains why the lizard is often adopted as a "favourite motif [in artistic expressions] not only among the Akan but throughout West Africa" (Hellbusch, 1978: 6). Therefore, any interpretation of lizard symbolism should be approached with an understanding of the cultural setting and historical context in which it is used (Navei, 2021; Hellbusch, 1978).



Figure 3. Ceramic sculpture receptacle with symbolic Crocodile Decoration in TTU (Photo Credit: Fieldwork, 2023).

Another symbolic ceramic sculpture at TTU was a vase decorated with a crocodile motif (Figure 3). In establishing the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of the crocodile-decorated receptacle (Figure 3), the study found that crocodiles are considered sacred animals in many parts of Africa, including Ghana, and hold great cultural significance in Ghanaian traditional beliefs and practices, as confirmed by previous studies (Wiafe-Akenten, 2021; Atanga, 2019; Hellbusch, 1978: 49). The crocodile is associated with "scepticism, scrupulousness, suspicion, and progress, [and is seen as] both a destroyer and a symbol of fertility". Other studies assert that the crocodile motif in artistic creations symbolises adaptability, unity, diversity, and democracy (Mawuli, 2019; Adom, Agyemang & Manu, 2018; Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah & Nartey, 2016).

For example, the Akan people of Ghana have a proverb that says, "the crocodile does not die in the water, so the water does not kill it" (Wiafe-Akenten, 2021). This proverb emphasises the strength and resilience of the crocodile and is often used to inspire people to be strong and persistent in the face of adversity. In addition to its association with strength and power, the study found that the crocodile is also believed to have protective powers. This is evident in some Ghanaian communities where crocodile ponds are considered sacred and believed to be ancestral spirits' dwelling place (Jackson & Wilroy, 2011). The ancestral spirits are believed to inhabit the crocodiles and protect the community from harm (Jackson & Wilroy, 2011). This suggests that the crocodile holds a special place in Ghanaian culture and is revered for its strength, power, and protective qualities.

Hellbusch (1978: 49) agrees that "the cult of the crocodile is apparently the most widespread and accounts for numerous proverbs, mythological origins, and representations in art". For example, the mythological crocodile found in Ghana, with two heads and two necks merging into a common belly but with two tails, clearly represents a metaphor that expresses the notion of a communally oriented people (unity in diversity) (Hellbusch, 1978). Therefore, a crocodile modeled with two heads represents the need for cooperation between the heads because food (or safety) is best enjoyed together (Hellbusch, 1978). The totemic, philosophical, proverbial, mythological, and metaphorical attributes of the crocodile have led to its symbolic adoption as an artistic decorative motif for textiles, sculptures, leatherwork, ceramics/pottery, murals, and others in Ghana (Adom, Agyemang and Manu 2018;

Asmah, Mate & Daitey, 2016; Wemegah, 2013; 2009; Asmah & Okpattah, 2013; Wright, 1999; Hellbusch, 1978). These scholarly perspectives ably support the symbolic and metaphorical references associated with the crocodile-decorated ceramic sculpture receptacle (Figure 3) found at TTU.

4.2.3. Amphibian-Related Ceramic Sculpture Receptacles in TTU

The study also identified ceramic sculpture receptacles with amphibian-related decoration in TTU. The most commonly found amphibian-related decorated ceramic sculpture wares in the TTU were those with frog symbols (Figure 4a & b). The research participants unanimously interpreted the frog symbols observed in the receptacles as signifying fertility, abundance, growth, adaptability, and transformation. Adom, Asante, and Kquofi (2016) affirm that the frog's ability to lay numerous eggs represents fertility, which is an important aspect of Ghanaian culture. It is also argued that in the traditional Ghanaian setting, the croaking of the frog is a sign of good luck and prosperity (Backman, 2022).

In addition, the frog is seen as a symbol of adaptability and transformation due to its ability to live both in water and on land (Gbogbo et al., 2009). In some traditional Ghanaian religions, the frog is also believed to have spiritual significance and is sometimes used in rituals to communicate with the spirit world (Adom, 2016; Ojua et al., 2013). The foregoing empirically corroborated viewpoints strongly affirm the frog as an important amphibian with social, cultural, and religious symbolism in Ghana, on the basis of which its imagery has been adopted, as in the design semiotics of the ceramic sculpture receptacles (Figure 4a & b) found at TTU.

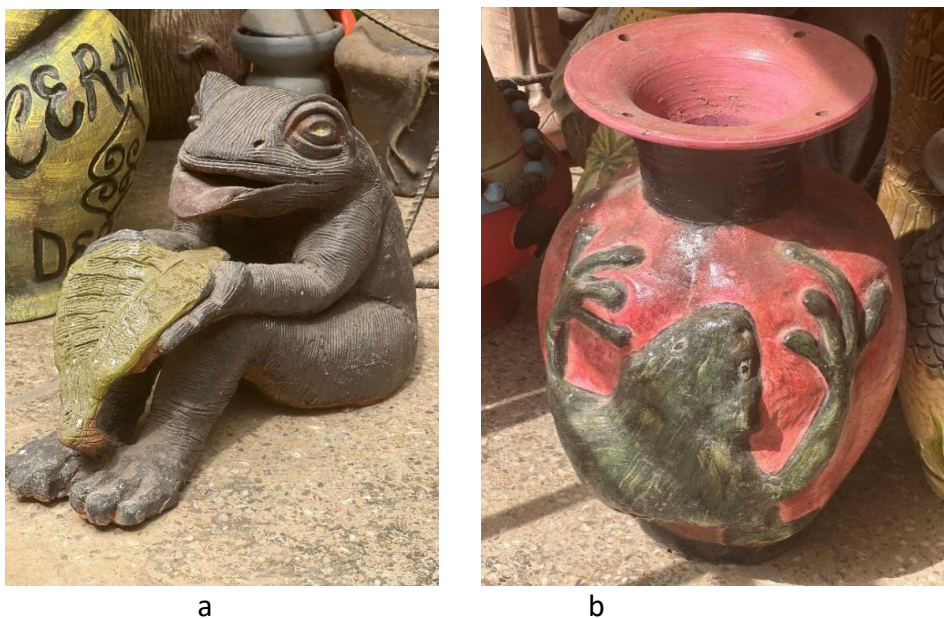


Figure 4. Frog-related Ceramic Sculpture art found in TTU
(Photo Credit: Fieldwork, 2023).

4.2.4 Mammal-Related Ceramic Sculpture Art in TTU

In Ghana, mammalian imagery (motifs) constitutes the design semiotics of many traditional arts, as observed on some of the ceramic sculpture receptacles (Figure 5) produced at TTU. The receptacle (Figure 5) depicts an elephant's head with its trunk extended upwards. It has been shown that in Ghana, particularly in the Asante Kingdom, elephants are revered as royal and sacred animals and are believed to be incarnations

of past chiefs (Ojua et al., 2013; Hellbusch, 1978). They are the most common symbols found on royal houses and stools, in the regalia of gods, woven into royal cloths, painted on temples (Kwarteng, 2006; Hellbusch, 1978), and adopted as a symbol of political identity in Ghana.

The research participants corroborate that the elephant, with its huge size, symbolises; aggressiveness, great power, and strength, among others. Previous studies have attributed the aforementioned symbolism of the elephant to its huge size and unmatched strength in pulling down trees (Kquofi, Amate & Tabi-Agyei, 2013; Ayiku, 1998; Hellbusch, 1978). Because of its symbolism, Ghanaians have coined a number of wise sayings to illustrate the superior nature of the elephant. For example, the Akan proverb; *Esono nni wuram a anka ekoo ye bopon* (But for the presence of the elephant in the bush, the buffalo would be a huge animal) is attributed to eminent chiefs of the Asante chieftom as praise of their powers, which place them second to none (Hellbusch, 1978).

Another Akan proverb, *Obi nni Esono akyi mmoro hasuo*, translates as no one follows the elephant (in the bush) and gets wet by the morning dew (Kquofi, Amate & Tabi-Agyei, 2013; Hellbusch, 1978). Symbolically, the elephant used in the proverb refers to a powerful or prominent person in society who gets his close associates out of trouble (Kquofi, Amate & Tabi-Agyei 2013). In addition, the elephant could be used metaphorically in a proverb to project it as a wise and patient creature; thus, "the elephant never rushes" (Kwarteng, 2006). It explains that a wise person does not rush into things but takes time to consider all options before taking a decision (Kwarteng, 2006). The metaphorical, proverbial, philosophical and religious symbolism commonly associated with elephants in Ghana define Figure 5 in context.



Figure 5. Elephant-shaped Ceramic Sculpture art found in TTU
(Photo Credit: Fieldwork, 2023).

5. Conclusion

The problem addressed in this study was the paucity of in-depth understanding of the symbols and metaphors of ceramic sculpture receptacles found in the Ceramic Design Department of the Takoradi Technical University (TTU), Ghana. The study addressed this gap by conducting a semiotic study of the symbolic and metaphorical contexts of twelve selected ceramic sculpture receptacles found at TTU. The study found

that culturally revered and/or sacred birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals in Ghana formed the decorative semiotics of the twelve selected receptacles. By subjecting the aforementioned animal symbols and metaphors to formalist and semiotic analysis, the study found that their totemic, proverbial, mythological, philosophical, and religious connotations are symptomatic of indigenous Ghanaian ethnic visual cultures. While some of the symbols and metaphors found on the receptacles signify fertility, versatility, strength, power, nobility, greatness, superiority, and supremacy, others relate to the value of the past, transformation, regeneration, skepticism, scrupulousness, suspicion, adaptability, unity, diversity, democracy, great powers, strength, among others.

In light of the findings of the study, it could be concluded that the symbols and metaphors associated with the ceramic sculpture receptacles of the Takoradi Technical University are underpinned by the sociocultural, religious, and political facets of typical traditional Ghanaian society. The receptacles could, therefore, serve as important reference artefacts for the transmission, preservation, and promotion of traditional Ghanaian cultural knowledge and values for the present and future generations. The study recommends further research on other institutional artefacts to reveal their embedded sociocultural symbolism and significance. This tends to promote, preserve, and educate the current and future generations of Ghana on the cultural and artistic heritage of the country, which is expressed through institutional arts.

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7. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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