

# CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CULT-CODE-CREED IN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS THROUGH CERAMICS IN NIGERIA

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**Abstract:** Ceramics are integral to religious spaces, representing beliefs and revealing worship, tenets, unity, and morality within faiths. This paper explores the conceptualization of cult, creed, and code in religious traditions through ceramics (pottery). The article employs the critical literary discursive and descriptive approaches by interrogating extant literature on the subject. The study shows that ceramics have become a significant part of worshipping places, churches, temples, mosques, and religious sanctuaries including serving as instructional materials for adherents. It is also indicated in the research that ceramic art makes religious beliefs tangible and influential, portraying religious cults and codes. It further unfolds the fact that ceramics are integral to African cultural traditions, serving as vessels for divinity and contributing to spiritual spheres.

**Keywords:** Ceramics, Pottery, Cults, Creeds, Codes, Religion, Nigeria.

## 1. Introduction

Ceramics have the quality to serve as one of the essential items in social life, sometimes for the purpose of satisfying the requirements of everyday living and other times for the purpose of having the capacity to operate as a medium of expression. In recent times, ceramics creativity has been finding its way through

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the deepest compartments of worshipping places including churches, temples, as well as mosques, pantheons of the divine beings, courts, and subterranean quarters of devotees of religion. Creating or honoring the holy in a manner that is perhaps physical or symbolic is something that faiths all over the globe are interested in accomplishing. This can be done in a variety of ways. The objective of art in relation to religions is to render beliefs tangible and visible, thereby rendering them a greater influence than sacred texts and textual comments. This is one of the reasons why art is so important. This common artistic desire serves as the primary lens through which it is able to evaluate religions in human civilization, revealing the unity that lies within the multiplicity of these diverse faiths (Ke 381). In this way, pottery or ceramic designs are thought to have played crucial roles in the lives of humans in general and religious believers in particular over the course of history. This is because pottery designs portray religious cults, creeds, and codes.

The attention to detail that humanity has given to the construction of sacred artwork and structures, both in the past as well as the present, provides ample proof for the truth that this statement accurately describes. Therefore, the objective of this essay is to investigate the conceptualization of cult, creed, and code in the context of many religious traditions through the visual medium of ceramics. In addition to this, the study investigates the creation of ceramics for religious purposes, highlighting the significance of these objects as residences for deities as well as receptacles for offerings. In particular, it addresses the intricate presentations of its instructional nature with regard to the cults, laws, and creeds that are associated with specific religions. This research acknowledges the privilege of aligning with these traditions and even expresses the desire that this work will serve as a memorial to persons, spiritual forces, as well as religious sects that these traditions represent. With the intention of continuing to grow and develop throughout the course of their professional and personal faith, it is highly hoped that these substantial contributions to art, along with religion's literature, will continue to grow and develop inside the ceramics or pottery makers in Nigeria.

## 2. Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Within the scope of this investigation, the terms that are given below have been logically defined according to the context in which they are utilized and inferred.

### a. Cult

The origin of the term can be traced back to the Latin word *cultus*, which can be rendered as either ‘care’ or ‘adoration’. By depicting the fundamental framework of beliefs and activities, the word ‘cult’ originates from the very beginning of culture itself; it is, therefore, an expression of the fundamental structure of culture. As per Swidler's definition, the term ‘cult’ encompasses all of the ritual activities that establish a connection between the adherent and one or more aspects of the supernatural as an entire entity, in either a direct or indirect way (8). For instance, worship and prayer are instances of the former, whereas precise formal conduct regarding representatives of the supernatural, including religious leaders, is a manifestation of the latter. There is not a single human being who does not belong to a ‘cult’ due to the manner in which they communicate and the actions that they take. When taken in its most literal form, a cult can be defined as a particular kind of religious worship, especially in relation to the rituals and rites that are connected to it. When used in a more pejorative sense, the term ‘cult’ refers to a cohesive social organization that is often made up of religious adherents who are seen by the society that surrounds them as being outside of the mainstream and possibly even destructive. In order to describe ‘cults’ in this context, the word ‘sect’ is widely used in Europe. This is true for the purpose of describing cults. There is a strong negative connotation that has been accumulated in common usage of the term ‘cult’, and it is usually used to cast doubt on the credibility of a religious group as a kind of faith-based activity (1). Kulik claims that this connotation has been accumulated over time (3). The term ‘cult’ is used in this article to denote a group of spiritual or religious teachings or beliefs, particularly one that is under the direction of charismatic and authoritative leadership.

### b. Creed

A credo or creed is an assertion of faith that gives a brief summary of the fundamental beliefs of a particular religion. A religion's

creed is the intellectual aspect of that faith; it comprises everything that goes into understanding the ultimate significance of existence (Swidler 8). When we talk about the creed, we typically refer to the intellectual element of that faith. According to Speight, the concept of creed is one that derives from the Christian world of thinking and is utilized in a variety of other religions, and some of these religions include Sikhism, Islam, and Hinduism (2). With regard to the religion of Hinduism, the Gāyatrī Mantra is seen as a form of faith. On the other hand, in Islam, it is recited as a testimony that fulfills two functions. It is in the first few phrases of the *Japji* sentence that the core ideas of Sikhism are articulated (2). As a basis for spiritual formation, as collaborative or individual responses to the supernatural revelation, as a demonstration of self-awareness, as a declaration of unity, or as a witness to the world, creeds can serve as an organizing principle for participation in a group of adherents, as a test of traditional beliefs, as a form of prayer that is employed in worship, as a basis for religious guidance, and as a basis for religious instruction. In specific cases, there are instances where creeds are expanded to include declarations of doctrine that are longer and more extensive. These declarations of doctrine are usually known as 'articles of faith' in the Christian religion, and they are also referred to as "confessions of faith" in the Islamic religion (3). There are instances of such doctrinal studies in Judaism, for example. In the context of this research, the term 'creed' refers to the official faith articles of many religions.

### **c. Code**

According to Swidler, the conventions and norms that make up the code of conduct or ethics, encompass all the rules and customs related to behaviour that stem from various elements of the Creed. These rules and customs are integrated into the broader code of conduct within many religions. In this context, the term "code" refers to the core moral principles established by religions. Central to these principles is the concept of 'loving God and others', which serves as the foundation for most religious codes.

### **d. Religion**

There are many distinct types of religions, and some instances of officially recognized definitions of these religions include a

religious system, a community or denomination that adores an identical item, a group that conforms to a sacred ideology, or a religion that is erroneous, unorthodox, or extreme. Religion can be defined as the belief in a god or gods, in addition to the actions that are connected with this belief. These actions include praying and worshipping in a place of worship, including a mosque, church, or temple. A definition of religion could be "an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life along with how to live appropriately." This definition would be founded on a certain understanding and lived encounter with the transcendent. There are triple "C's" that all other religions share: Creed, which is referred to as "an explanation of life," Code, which refers to an established set of behaviours and ethics; cult, which refers to deeds that tie the adherent to the transcendent; and community structure are all examples of concepts that are frequently used in religious institutions.

#### **e. Ceramics**

Ceramics, which were once limited to materials comprised of clay, have significantly expanded with the arrival of new generations of people, having an impact not only on day-to-day living but also on society as a whole. In addition to making pottery out of clay, they have advanced to the point of being able to cover the space shuttles and other significant locations with tiles. According to Subedi (80), ceramics have reportedly replaced clay pottery in recent years. The use of heat allows ceramics to be shaped into various shapes. Ceramics are materials that are non-reactive and unyielding. More than just pots and dishes, ceramics are utilized for a variety of purposes (81). Ceramics include a wide variety of materials, including clay, bricks, tiles, glass, and cement. Ceramics are inorganic, non-metallic substances obtained from the combination of both metal and non-metal constituents. Ceramics are considered to be inorganic. Some people also refer to ceramics as pottery. Not only are they materials that do not conduct heat or electricity, but they are also materials that are tough, hard, and brittle simultaneously. Chemically speaking, they are inert. Clay was traditionally used in the production of pottery, but in today's world, a wide range of ceramic materials are utilized in the production of objects for industrial, domestic, and building

purposes (Abamwa 70). Ceramics have the ability to withstand temperatures that are extremely high in the environment, in addition to being brittle, rigid, and resilient when subjected to compression. In addition to this, they are able to withstand the consequences of chemical degradation in environments that are acidic or caustic. Contemporary ceramic materials, such as silicon carbide and tungsten carbide, are highly respected for their resistance to abrasion. These materials gain applications in a variety of industries, including the mining business, the field of medicine, the field of electricity, and the electronics industry.

### **3. Nigeria and Ceramics**

The day that Nigeria gained its independence from Britain was October 1, 1960. Nigeria is a nation located in West Africa. With regard to politics, economics, and population, Nigeria is believed to be the most important nation on the African continent with the highest population of over 200 million people presently (Ottuh & Eboh 243). Studies show that as of the year 2021, the country is comprised of around 2 percent of people who belong to other religious organizations or no religious group at all, while 47% of the population is Christian and 51 percent is Muslim (244). Despite having some of the worst rates of maternal mortality in the world, they go on to say that the hope that their religion provides is the foundation of their happiness. In the majority of Nigerians' lives, religion plays a significant role, regardless of whether they consider themselves to be Christians or Muslims. Religion in Nigeria serves multiple purposes, including but not limited to providing individuals with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives; fostering social cohesion and stability; acting as a mechanism for social control of behaviour; fostering physical and psychological well-being; and inspiring individuals to work toward the improvement of social conditions. It is said that ceramics or pottery is one of the most inexpensive forms of art that is practiced by almost all of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria, and that women are the ones who do the majority of the work. There is a significant amount of demand for pottery or ceramics products in the market, despite the fact that it is an age-old craft that is being practiced in the majority of regions in

Nigeria. Simply put, this is a validation of the practical applications and economic significance of this craft.

#### **4. Religion and Artwork**

According to Ross, it is possible to define religion as the desire of humans to seek meaning, to maintain links with the divine, to comprehend the occurrences that take place in life, to communicate with more substantial forces, to seek advice on moral acts, as well as to build solidarity among communities that do not share the same cultural background (xiv). These factors have a significant impact on the development, dissemination, and evolution of religions all over the world. This is due to the following reasons: It is the principal visual entrance or gateway into these belief systems that religious art serves as. Belief systems are led and motivated by religious art. Whether they are architectural constructs or metaphorical pathways into religious ideas, entrances and doorways can be found in a variety of settings. Ceramics are capable of serving as a medium for the construction of visual shapes, and the existence of these components frequently evokes as well as assists in it. There are many different ways that holy space can be created, including but not limited to events, performances, rituals, or the recognition of pre-existing sanctity in the worldwide community or natural landscape aspects. These are just some of the ways that holy space can be created. In addition to serving as an entryway, doorway, or pathway into active belief systems, visualization is a key component in the process of guiding and motivating belief. Visualization performs these functions.

There are some religious traditions in which art plays a role that is particularly instructive and faith-directing. Through the application of narratives that are visual or symbolic, it educates members about the core ideas that adhere to the faith. For example, paintings and sculptures, which are commonly seen at the real entrances to religious buildings, serve to strengthen the transition from secular to sacred interior space (Ross 27). Images or drawings, on the other hand, are frequently found at the entrances of religious buildings. Visual imagery not only adds to the richness of the interiors of sacred spaces by providing

knowledge and inspiration, but it also acts as a portal that leads into conventional religious actions within these locations. It is not the case that all religious traditions exhibit or share the directing and enlightening nature of these representations when it comes to the display of visuals, especially those that make use of figural imagery. In the case of Islamic art, for instance, figural as well as narrative imagery is often avoided in sacred locations; nonetheless, the fundamental objective of this art is to stimulate and give support to believers in their knowledge of the faith. Furthermore, the creation and effective use of sacred space serve as a significant and community entryway into the many belief systems that are present in different parts of the world from different cultures. What distinguishes artworks that reflect beliefs in religion from other sorts of artworks is that they depict a universe that is more expansive, more mysterious, more real, and generally more beautiful than the one that humans primarily experience. Among the various forms of art that reflect different aspects of humanity, this phenomenon is what distinguishes art from other sorts of art.

### **5. Religious Significance of Ceramics**

Postnak claims that ceramic vessels and objects are used in the cultural and religious frameworks of African peoples as a way to house divinity and provide contributions to the spiritual sphere (1). He believes that this use of ceramics fulfills their intended purpose. These pots can be found in beautiful altar cabinets or on clay floors in both religious and secular locales. In addition to being sung to, drummed to, and finally prayed to, they can also be encountered in these settings. On top of that, they are submerged in a wide range of substances. A vessel, which is a symbol of a little portion of a much bigger spiritual essence, is where a spirit temporarily stays so that it can be protected from harm. In other words, every vessel symbolically represents a small part of a larger spiritual essence, providing a temporary home for a spirit to protect it from harm. While senior priests possess numerous vessels, initiates only have one vessel for a specific spiritual force. Senior priests are more experienced than



initiates. It is possible that the vessels come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and materials like the one shown below.



*Source: Postnak (2)*

Rare metals were the major material that was utilized in the production of luxury ceramics during the period before the Islamic period. Despite this, these ceramics have regained favour in the Islamic world due to the fact that they are available at affordable prices and have an appealing look. The majority of the techniques and styles that are utilized in these ceramics were developed independently, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which maintains that Chinese imitations only make up a small fraction of the luxury ceramics that are manufactured in the Near East (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2). Indigenous potters in the Near East employed clay, slip, and cobalt blue motifs to resemble Chinese porcelain as well as porcelain ceramics (2). These designs were used to create the illusion of porcelain ceramics. These potters made use of the materials that were native to the area, and during the Safavid era, which lasted from 1501 to 1722, a significant amount of influence from Chinese ceramics had an impact on Islamic pottery (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2).

## **6. Comprehending Cult in Religion through Ceramics**

Ceramics are used to depict worship and reverence of God or gods in religion. Pictorially, adherents understand religious worship or cultic activities in religion through ceramics art. The

congregation is able to experience a setting that is both subjective and reminiscent of baroque art thanks to the enormous blue and white ceramic walls that were seen inside churches and sacred places. The oscillation among recognized motifs of faith and sensory pleas led to a deconstruction of design. This occurred as a consequence of the faithful's behaviour within the building. Through the systematization of iconography aims and the cataloguing of qualities such as ceramic coatings as well as figurative composition frames, it is feasible to improve study perspectives on iconographic programs in Portuguese Baroque art (Carvalho 11). This is achievable because of the fact that it is within the realm of possibility. The examination of data allows one to acquire a more profound comprehension of the manner in which numerous types of art interacted within a multifaceted communication system, as well as the manner in which the faithful experienced the results of these communication interactions.



*Source: Carvalho, 2021*

According to Ekong, the Ibibio and Efik people of Nigeria frequently used clay containers for worship, ceremonies, and storing sacrifices for the spirits in graves and shrines (67). These practices were central to their spiritual worship. For example, shabtis production included the use of canopic jars adorned with baboon headdresses, while loutro-phoros were used for ritual washing of newlyweds. In African cultures, the mkpakpa (offering pot) was placed at shrine pillars and totem trees, and various religious pots were used as instruments in ceremonies

honoring local deities (67). Among the Efik and Ibibio ethnic groups, additional varieties of pots such as abang idiong, abang odiong eka, and abang ibok were also found.

Ekong further explains that traditional forms of devotion involved the use of clay lamps known as *Fitila oloju merindinlogun* for illumination during rituals (2). Garbo adds that perforated receptacles for burning incense, called *ajere*, were used in these devotions. Additionally, medicinal rings known as *ikoko oruka ere*, made up of miniature medicinal pots called *konjo*, were utilized for purposes such as contraception, spiritual power, and curing dizziness. It is crucial that these containers do not come into contact with the ground. In Eastern countries such as India, Tibet, and Nepal, rituals of *Abhishekam* are performed to purify both the atmosphere and the essence of newly created artworks. During these rituals, *Brahmin* priests chant mantras while pouring libations, such as milk, rosewood paste, and various scented oils, over the statues of gods being worshipped.

Artists have the ability to imbue their work with a particular consciousness, influenced by both the subject matter and their emotional engagement. This consciousness can linger over time, giving the artwork a lasting spiritual resonance. For Japanese and Korean artists, spiritual reverberation is influenced by cosmic variables, such as the relationship between heaven and earth, which affects their reverence for established traditions and recognition of these elements. Some artworks possess the capacity to merge the metaphysical and the concrete, leaving viewers with a profound spiritual impression.

## 7. Understanding Creed in Religion through Ceramics

In Nigeria, ceramics and pottery significantly impact the promotion of religion and spirituality. Additionally, other art forms such as sculptural designs, woodwork, and stained-glass designs also facilitate the collaboration between art and religion for mutual expression (Ottuh, Omosor, & Abamwa 121). Igbaro observes that in Nigeria, many artists draw comfort and inspiration from the Christian faith, while others find their artistic muse in Islam, particularly in the decoration of mosques and the illustration of books (496–498). The complex relationship between

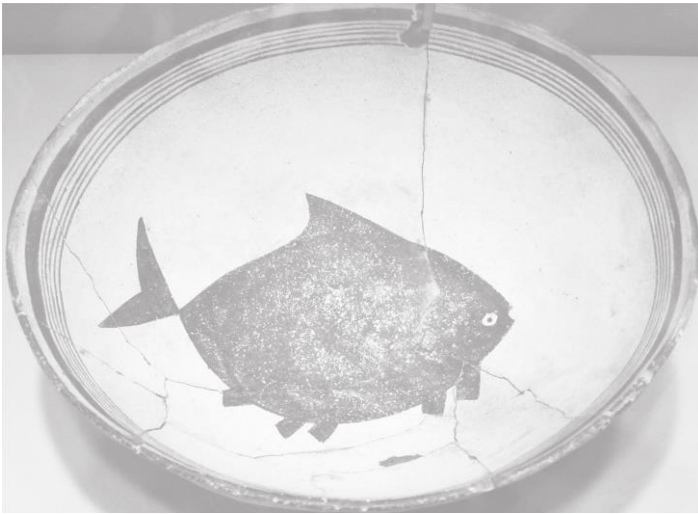
art and religion is influenced by various religious rites; for instance, ceramics featuring rosary designs serve as reminders of Catholic faith and creed.



**Source: Russell, Klassen, and Salazar (American Antiquity) in Klassen and Russel (2019)**

Igbaro contends that for the sake of bolstering their beliefs, traditional African civilizations included ceramic art into their daily activities, relationships with others, and religious ceremonies (496). There were depictions of gods in works of art particularly ceramics that were three-dimensional, as well as places of worship that were decorated with symbols and motifs from the world of ceramics art. Through the drawing of pictures showing a variety of gods, traditional religious rituals offered artists a way to achieve spiritual independence and direction. This was accomplished through the drawing of pictures on ceramics. Ere-ibeji, dolls, and ancestor clothing were some of the images

that were used to represent spirits and protect the bearer from negative energy. Other instances of these images include dolls. Among the Kalabari Ijaw people, the cult of water spirits is promoted through the employment of various art forms that includes ceramics. Some examples of these practices include sculptures, headdresses, and masks. Fishing and the sea are essential to their way of life and provide for their livelihood hence ceramics or pottery found in this region carries such symbols.



*Source: The Clay Studio (2015)*

Alva posits that art has long been recognized as a significant medium for expressing spirituality (27). Traditional Islamic ceramic forms, such as calligraphy, geometrical patterns, and arabesque motifs, are commonly used in Islamic art. Ceramics, utilized in writing passages from the Quran and other holy texts, holds an esteemed place in Islamic art (27). Ceramic art communicates complex concepts and aids individuals in exploring their mystical experiences in a tangible manner (Rtistiq Team 3).

During Ramadan, ceramics help Muslims connect with their faith through intricate calligraphy and vivid paintings, enhancing religious devotion. Contemporary artists like Laila Shawa and Ahmed Mater have created works that capture the essence of Ramadan, showcasing the deep connection between art

and faith. Their creations highlight the intertwining of religious observance and artistic expression, demonstrating how art can play a significant role in spiritual practice during this holy month. (see the figure below).



*Source: Art Insight (2023)*

### **8. Internalizing Codes in Religion through Ceramics**

Ceramics serve as a medium for depicting religious morality and teaching the principles of religious life. For instance, while no Christian in Nigeria has seen Jesus Christ physically or witnessed his actions, ceramic art illustrating Christ's moral attitudes, such as love and kindness, helps adherents internalize these values. Oney and Cizer argue that the term "taboo" originates from the Polynesian dialect and can be interpreted in two ways: sacred and hazardous (4). This term is analogous to creation stories, as it relates to the process of moulding and creating with clay. The Babukusu community in East Africa holds two different creation myths: one involves WeleKhakaba constructing heaven with clay, and the other revolves around cosmic dust and clay. These myths are set in the divine clay pits known as Siumbwa, regarded as reservoirs of human life. Similarly, in Cameroon, the clay pits called Mvoh are linked to the palace's interior space, where the king creates children to ensure

the kingdom's continuity and welfare according to religious and cultural traditions (5).

Artists draw inspiration from a wide array of sources, including memories, natural reflections, spirituality, and their inner soul and beauty, which can influence perception and belief. Although external forces can repress artistic impulses, they can also be stimulated by interactions with other creative individuals, mentors, and significant artistic statements and principles. For the sake of communication and following the right path, non-literate cultures relied heavily on figurative and visual forms, which were crucial for their survival. In this context, figural ornamentation on ceramic vessels conveyed religious morality to individuals and societies, serving a didactic rather than aesthetic purpose (Gagic Kicinbaci 1279). These vessels encoded socio-cultural information through their embellishments. Linguistic research has revealed connections between the oldest terms for adornment, ornament, and jewelry, and legendary perspectives. These connections highlight the unique human ability to reflect on and transmit experiences through representations, such as ceramics, which are part of the sacred awareness inherent in every human being.

Symbols can be described and interpreted in various ways, depending on the interpreter's intelligence and awareness. Different types of symbols are used to convey religious truths, including words, stories, proverbs, parables, icons, and masks. These symbols not only communicate intellectual concepts but also emotional ones, such as the wrath and holiness of God, which humans are encouraged to internalize. Significant contributions to the understanding of symbols have been made by Carl Jung and Morris Charles. For Jung, symbols are defined as names, identities, or images associated with specific implications (173). Art associated with religion represents complex ideas that can be interpreted in various ways. The liberal arts explore how symbols can influence the thoughts and behaviours of believers, while social anthropology focuses on the use of symbols in public contexts and their interactions (Ofuafo, 394). In essence, symbols in religious art overtly emerge from subconscious processes like creative thought, memory, and perception. Mystical sensations, however, can vary among individuals depending on factors such

as awareness, mental and physical alertness, morality, and social conditions.

## 9. Conclusion

Ceramics have become a significant aspect of worshipping places, churches, temples, mosques, pantheons of divine beings, courts, and subterranean quarters of devotees of religion. The objective of art in relation to religions is to render beliefs tangible and visible, making them more influential than sacred texts and textual comments. Ceramics have played crucial roles in the lives of humans, particularly religious believers, over the course of history, as they portray religious cults, creeds, and codes. Ceramics are integral to African cultural and religious traditions, serving as vessels for divinity and contributing to spiritual spheres. In Nigeria, people commonly use clay containers for worship, ceremonies, and storing sacrifices for spirits. Contemporary ceramics also convey both intellectual and emotional concepts, representing complex ideas that can be interpreted in various ways. Contemporary ceramics or pottery are used to convey religious statements, articles of faith, and morality and also serve as instructional and worship materials, thus influencing beliefs and behaviours in public contexts.

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