

The Contribution of Ethnography in Ceramic Production in the Senegalese Space

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Abstract

The study of current Wolof ceramics could contribute to enriching the ethnographic knowledge developed in West Africa and in Senegal in recent years. This study, which has an ethnographic contribution to ceramic production in the Wolof environment, consists of questioning the traditional populations still alive in order to understand the purposes of an object within the framework of its socio-cultural space of manufacture. In fact, this ethnographic contribution to the Wolof environment can provide historical, cultural and religious data that could be verified in the long term by archaeological excavations.

Keywords: ethnography, ceramics, Senegal, archaeology, intangible heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Ceramics remain a fundamental and very rich source of information for archaeology. Beyond its importance in the reconstruction of the history of peoples in general and that specific to Senegambia societies. The ceramic object, as a center of study, arouses many reflections and issues as well as the different approaches formulated by researchers.

However, in the literature, we note that studies in ceramology (H.Balfet, 1966, p.1966) (an auxiliary discipline of archaeology, its objective is the systematic exploration of all the resources offered by ceramic documents) certainly have an interest, some of which we will list: the ceramic object allows us to first appreciate the evolution of art, then to follow the different phases of its technique, and finally, it is also due to the fact that the analysis of pottery manufacturing techniques is located at the intersection of many disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, sociology, physics, chemistry and geology.

In total, through the work of ceramologists, we can highlight three major thematic currents that emerge ethnographic studies, technical studies and scientific studies. This study aims firstly to present the problem of ceramics in archaeological research in specific contexts. Secondly, it is necessary to show the contribution of ethnography in this study.

I/ the Problem of Ceramics in Archaeological Research

The contextual framework of this study is not intended to be a presentation on Senegalese archaeology, which covers an even broader and more complex field. However, this overview is only an attempt to summarize the archaeological question on ceramic studies, which strives to shed light on the general context of the research of this study, rather taking a look at the considerations and approaches related to ceramic documentation often visible through archaeological heritage. Archaeological science has evolved over time and space, which means that it has had a variety of definitions reflecting the contribution of this discipline in the social and human sciences that have used it to shed light on certain gray areas and affirm or refute certain hypotheses. However, here in this research, we choose some of these definitions that will mainly allow us to shed light on the general context of the study.

Since the term archaeology (archéo = ancient, logos = discourse) has been used since antiquity but in the sense of "declamations of epic poems". It is only for two centuries that it has meant the "science of the past perceived through its material remains" and that it has supplanted that of antiques or antiquities, antiquarians being today only merchants. This brief etymological reminder is intended to put archaeology, a recent science, into context mainly in its prehistoric dimension (C. Descamps, 1997, p. 890).

However, this science has a more distant origin even if we conceive it as a recent discipline dating back to the end of the 19th century, which consists of exhuming, collecting and interpreting objects from the past. Therefore, this attempt at definition, limited only to the level of ancient things and witnesses of disappeared societies that we are trying to study, can go beyond the prehistoric and protohistoric periods.

This is why this definition can be broadened under a broader field by considering archaeology as a study to highlight civilizations, disappeared cultures, to find man (the one who preceded us) in order to understand his gestures, to penetrate his thoughts, his mentality and his culture, to know his way of life and existence, to grasp his environment, etc. (M. Thiam et al, 2009).

We understand that archaeology is this science that strives to study and reconstruct the past of man according to these different prehistoric evolutions and beyond by going from the protohistoric period to the historical one through all the material remains produced by the latter. This attempt to define archaeology presents two dimensions of it in particular: prehistoric archaeology, which attempts to highlight the study of prehistoric and protohistoric cultures then historical archaeology, which is interested in the study of cultures, which developed forms of writing. Even if we knowingly note that, this last division of archaeology excludes to a certain extent societies, which have known a civilization of orality. On the other hand, we exercise the study in a framework totally impregnated by the data of the oral tradition, which could indeed shed light on gray areas from which archaeological studies would present limits. Oral tradition reflects the way a culture defines itself through the past and it also serves to transmit knowledge and values, which makes it inseparable from the needs of the present. This remark is well attested in the field because during my research, oral tradition has been of immense contribution and has allowed us on several occasions to fill the void of documentation presenting limitations on several aspects, and to collect as well as decipher certain mysteries on which archaeological and written sources remain totally silent. We note that the results of the discoveries of past civilizations dating back millennia would present limitations whose written documents and oral tradition have shown their inadequacies and weaknesses.

It must be said that archaeology remains the only source capable of attesting to the existence of a civilization with the contribution especially of modern dating methods such as (archaeomagnetism, thermoluminescence, chronometry, dendrochronology, palynology, archaeozoology, typology of ceramics and metals), which have, today, reduced any sterile controversy relating to the identification of certain dating periods of the different ages: Paleolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Classical Period, Middle Ages, Modern Times and the Contemporary Era. Which demonstrates that the successes of archaeology remain so obvious that it is detaching itself and taking more and more its independence from history to no longer become an auxiliary science of it. It is in this context that Jean Dévisse believes that “in a historical context where archaeology is the only provider of sources relating to millennia (...) it is not possible to reduce it to the role of a simple auxiliary” (J. Dévisse, 1981, p.56).

This new dimension attributed to archaeology during its evolution, testifies to a certain extent the complexity of this science which must call upon other disciplines such as: physics, chemistry, geomorphology, ethnology, etc.

As a science, it appeared at the end of the 19th century which almost coincided with the establishment of the colonial project in most African regions where the settlers, mandated by the various colonizing powers, had been motivated by multiple objectives that were at once strategic, political, economic and cultural. Some of these objectives of the European powers were generally declined to allow the latter to better develop and establish their ambitions and dominations in the African continent. Like any discipline, it must be recognized that archaeology was influenced by the social and political context of its time marked in Africa by the presence of the colonial system which had initially mobilized personnel not qualified in the field to discover and collect the remains of African civilizations. At the same time, archaeological research has evolved in the Senegambia area over time and space, following two main periods: the colonial period and the period of independence.

1.1. The Colonial Period

The colonial period was mainly marked by the studies of non-professionals in the field, including amateurs who sought to provide data intended for the commission of the various metropolises to discover the socio-cultural realities of African societies established for millennia. Unfortunately, most of this information had an orientation enhanced by the influence of the colonial mission. Let us note that this mission of domination was based on three main reasons among others:

The first reason is that Europeans believed that the populations of Africa were “primitive” and thought that they had the duty to “civilize” them because they wanted to convert other peoples to Christianity. The second reason was linked

to the various economic and social transformations of the 19th century emanating from the industrial revolution and explaining the growing interest that certain European states had wanted on the African continent.

The third reason is dictated by the surge of nationalism by which European states tried to increase their tutelage by carving out vast colonial empires for themselves. This situation resulted in a takeover of certain potentialities and key sectors of the continent during this period during which a good part of certain information delivered to the metropolis obviously testifies to their often unfounded characteristics and contents, leading to preconceived and even modified analyses. It is in this sense that J.Ki. Zerbo (2010, p.22) reiterates by considering that “the history of Africa must be rewritten. Because until now, it has often been masked, camouflaged, disfigured, mutilated”. It is true that Africa has until now kept traditional knowledge which we must learn to identify and document especially in their original contexts. Beyond the works of non-professionals that would be considered no less significant during this phase, the most important ones bore the names of Doctor Hamy (1877) and Georges Wartelot (1905-1909).

This is intelligible because the 19th century is an era characterized by the renaissance of national sentiment that developed in Europe and it will certainly have collateral consequences in the African colonies where the colonial powers, notably France and England, wanted to justify the historical and geographical origins of their distinctive nations and establish at the same time the different colonial projects respectively the two direct and indirect systems that have even dotted the forms of decolonization in Africa. In addition, this attempt at domination established by Europeans for several centuries, the 19th century was of capital importance in the ferment of ideas and three elements can be highlighted here: the emergence of nationalism, that of romanticism and that of positivism in general. It emerges that this positivism linked to the natural sciences or earth sciences was going to play an important role in the development of archaeology, a parasitic discipline par excellence, while nationalism and romanticism fascinate the orientation on the great circumstances of national history. However, this scientific and cultural effervescence in Europe will necessarily have repercussions on the progress of African societies since Africa was considered during this period as a laboratory for experimenting with certain projects of the Western powers. In the French colonial project, it was necessary to set up an institution responsible for harmonizing research in a more federal space than leaving it to the services of certain people scattered across the vast West African regions. In short, in their article entitled “archaeological research in French West Africa” C. Becker and H. Bocoum et al (1997, p.875) note and confirm that from the beginning to 1915, archaeological research “is marked by the almost total absence of orientation in the conduct of archaeological research and of a federating center that could centralize and disseminate the results acquired. During this period, the visibility of the research was mainly manifested through the reports addressed to the Governor General of the FWA. The results obtained as well as the almost unpublished descriptions have however contributed to linking African civilizations to the overall periodization of world prehistory”. It is in this momentum to harmonize research within the framework of the FWA that France set up an IFAN research institute in 1936, which gave archaeological research another scope with the beginnings of F that France set up a research institute IFAN in 1936, which gave archaeological research another scope with the beginnings of certain studies carried out by certain names that had left their indelible mark on the research center (Th. Monod 1939; J. Joire 1941; H. Bessac, 1951; R. Mauny 1961). In addition, the establishment of this federal institution offered research another dimension that was both more serious and also met certain scientific standards. Thus, this first stage corresponds to the period of discovery. As we see from the appreciation of the literature, this archaeological research is poor in the field of ceramic objects where field research has not yet really taken into account the ceramic material culture, the study of which remains sometimes absent, sometimes summary. With the exception of the study by Doctor Jouenne, which very often mentions megalithic pottery (M. Thiam, 2010, p.18). Capital of West Africa within the framework of the AOF (French West Africa), Dakar is home to the headquarters of this institution, which has given research fruitful advances in the field of archaeological research.

However, the literature review quickly shows that ceramic objects have always interested researchers, but that their role in the archaeological debate has changed little over time.

In short, we often noted in these different studies devoted to ceramics the absence of socio-cultural dimensions, which were considerably obscured in favor of the typological description of the objects.

1.2. The Period of Independence (1960)

The second period is marked by two phases that show the evolution of archaeological research in this Senegambia region. From 1969 corresponds to the beginning of the second phase, during which we note the advent of two important facts in the conduct of research.

First, it was a question of noting that prospecting and reconnaissance no longer obey situations, but are then the fruit of a harmonious project with well-indicated objectives. It is at this period finally that we witnessed the impetus of archaeological research in the West African sub-region with a series of studies and publications from which Martin and Ch. Becker are partly the actors of this new orientation. The first phase saw the revival of certain practices and continuities linked in particular to the presence of French research actors in the field (R. Mauny 1961; G. Thilmans and C. Descamps, 1974, 1977, 1982). For example, between the years 1969 and 1982, these two authors, in particular Martin and Ch. Becker, expanded the scope of knowledge on so-called protohistoric sites to the entire country. This is the inventory of protohistoric sites in Senegambia. However, the personnel who were supposed to delve into the rediscovery of Senegal's distant past were completely foreign and the few natives who accompanied the work were not well trained and were not as well prepared to take up a number of challenges to understand Senegal's protohistoric remains.

What is still relevant during this first phase of independence is a lack of quality of information and objectives assigned to national research which should be invested in the collection and investigation of protohistoric and historical sites with the aim of better understanding the different vestiges of the country.

Moreover, from the 1970s which corresponded to the advent of national researchers among whom we can cite M. Lame (1981), research was going to know a new national color which undertakes as best it can to travel and excavate certain regions of the country. It is in this movement that certain researches were carried out throughout Senegal notably those conducted by G. Thilmans, C. Descamps and H. Bocoum which show that the archaeological research on the sites of the middle valley of the Senegal River, has already led to the recognition of " ceramic families ". In the same wake of important archaeological works were carried out, which continue to the present time. Beyond that, we can note certain inadequacies and shortcomings linked to the very limited number of national researchers who could not crisscross a good part of the territory. Since this science of archaeology was not within the reach of just anyone because of the colossal means that it required particularly in a national context marked by other political and economic priorities than scientific research.

Consequently, we cannot grasp the total history of a society if there would not be the combination of the different sources of which archaeology has a fundamental role to play.

The merit of the first Senegalese archaeologists (A. Diop; I. Diagne; M. Lam; M. Thiam; A. Dème; M. Sall etc.) who have truly played each as far as they are concerned their part according to their area of study. On the other hand, the work remains to be done given that until now the different governments that have succeeded one another in Senegal since independence to the present day have not absolutely paid particular attention to archaeological research for the moment. This is evidence of the disappearance of several prehistoric and historical sites, places of memory of our civilizations where entire sections of our ancient cultures are disappearing due to a poor policy of prevention of archaeological stations.

In Senegal, there is not yet a real policy of preventive archaeology which consists of supporting the major works of the State by specialists in the field ruling on archaeological problems such as those done in Western States. Furthermore, Senegalese archaeology presents certain difficulties inherent in the absence of an overall plan, dispersion of efforts, poverty of the means made available to researchers and the non-close collaboration of archaeology and ethnography. Even if we discover through the various human sciences that archaeological science brings a historical depth that ethnographic studies cannot give us.

Consequently, the Senegalese archaeological situation seemed quite complex and would show the need to carry out integrated studies of pottery, associating several different and complementary approaches. It is in this vein that some researchers suggest an approach that consists of combining historical reflection, ethnographic data and laboratory analyses. In doing so, this article could not respond to this multidisciplinary call because it does not integrate the technical phase of material culture. It only takes into account the first two dimensions, namely historical reflection and ethnographic data.

The Contribution of Ethnography in Ceramic Production in the Senegalese Environment

The evolution of ethnography in the Senegambia space has known and followed at the same time the same context of development as the archaeology that we had developed above while showing certain considerations both political and historical.

We will not return to some of these explanations but we will mention certain salient facts that have marked in space the history of this discipline. Jointly with archaeology, ethnology was used as a profitable instrument for colonization and its various institutions before it was oriented towards the reevaluation of African cultures that were often relegated to the background by missionaries and the first settlers. It is in this movement that it was necessary to place most of the ethnographic studies in the African space in general and Senegambia in particular. This is confirmed by an author who says that “directly or indirectly, the colonial authorities encouraged, or even instigated, historical or ethnographic work deemed useful for their information on the populations they had to administer” (J. Boulègue, 1988, p.398). Traditionally, ethnography was considered the description of primitive peoples to the extent that they were classified in the study of societies that did not show any signs of writing and that had not yet accessed the use of machinery. In this vein, Africa was housed in the concert of continents hiding primitive societies and cultures and that it is retained as a privileged place for data collection by ethnographic science with all the unfavorable prejudices. However, this ideological conception is only a cliché brandished by some Western thinkers to describe the civilizations of other peoples whom they considered as “backward” in other words as “savages” or “barbarians” who are closer to the natural order than to the human one. These peoples without civilization, without history, should receive the visit of Western nations who saw themselves believing and holding so-called civilized societies.

This ideological orientation had sparked a contradictory debate in the scientific world. But whatever the scientific orientations or motivations carried by a part of Western thought, ethnography can have meanings to varying degrees. Among these degrees, as being the descriptive part of ethnology (ethnos: people race, graphein: describe), often presented in the monographic form of a social group or an institution covering several groups (techniques, marriage, religious worship, etc.) Better, ethnology seeks both why and how men live in society because it strives to seek the links that unite the different ethnic groups or societies evolving in the same functional dynamic in time and space.

For some authors such as Leroi G, “the fate of ethnology is not to seek its functions, but to apply to the understanding of man all the means that appear to be effective” (1983, p.96). It results from the mobilization of all the sciences that could shed light on the knowledge of man. However, the great French ethnologist Marcel Mauss sees that “ethnological science has as its end the observation of societies, as its goal the knowledge of social facts (...) it must have the sense of facts and their relationships between them, the sense of proportions and articulations” (1926, p.7).

Which leads to field work focused on direct observation depending on the collection of data to describe and also the possibility of explaining certain socio-cultural phenomena because all these elements fit into a global system that would give meaning to the life of the human community. It is likely that “the specific aspect of ethnographic research is in a total image of society, that is to say an analysis of the “how” of interactions”. However, these interactions must be read through the socio-cultural dimensions of man who is both a biological animal and a cultural being. Thus, Marcel Griaule, who in the 1950s in his *Manual of Methodology of Ethnography*, defined the latter as the discipline knowing “the material and spiritual activities of peoples, techniques, religions, law, political and economic institutions, arts, languages, customs” (1994, p. 10).

In our study, the contribution consists in focusing on the Wolof ethnic group in these different socio-cultural compartments through ceramic production as an object of both historical and ethnographic reflection. Specifically, we focus on the intangible heritage of this material production because “the study of the material life of men only has meaning if technology has a lucid awareness of the facts studied. (...) (Its) materials will only come to life if they are developed according to the economic, aesthetic and social relationships that unite them, not only to the craftsman, but to the more or less large community to which he belongs” (A. G. Leroi, 1952).

In fact, supernatural beings, spirits and ancestors, who intervene in any human action, refer to the mythical links of departure of this material creation. In Africa, material practices are subordinate to the associated possession of supernatural knowledge bequeathed by the elders, which could complement the good understanding of production. Initially, ethnographic studies were considered to result from research into the lifestyles of certain societies often considered ancient, but for several decades, we have witnessed changes in the orientations of ethnographic studies (M. Griaule, 1966), which will first focus on the collection of certain myths. Then, some ethnographic studies will focus their attention and their interests on Africa, especially where the different peoples and cultures are the subject of monographs or thematic studies (kinship, political organization, economy, religion and symbolic systems). Finally, ethnographic studies are increasingly interested in ways of doing things in the technical and social fields. These different

contributions attest that the use of information related to the ceramic production of Wolof potters could be considered as a certain ethnographic approach because it calls upon ethnographic data that will allow us to better understand in another aspect the process of transformation of clay in a society in full transformation caused by both internal and external factors.

Among these factors we can cite at the internal level the socio-cultural changes relating on the one hand to the dynamics of African societies and on the other hand at the external level political upheavals linked mainly to contexts revived by the wind of Islamization, the slave trade, colonization and the new mutations produced by globalization.

We discover that with the socio-cultural dynamics of African societies in particular that of Wolof society, we increasingly note a crumbling of traditional knowledge and know-how of artisans in this case potters.

This will have the effect, among other things, of the progressive loss of intangible cultural heritage over the different generations as the transmission belts become more and more elastic due to the internal and external factors mentioned above. In this sense, the study of the intangible culture of living societies such as that of the Wolof society, especially in the production of ceramics, can provide useful information on the different aspects of its past and establish links with the present. It also allows, specifically through the study of current ceramic objects, to try to restore the socio-cultural and symbolic function of these containers. However, it also subsequently offers archaeologists the opportunity to use these ethnographic surveys collected in the field and to have knowledge of the problems of historical ceramology.

In other words, informed historical ethnography provides the key to documentation and allows for a better understanding of the corresponding changes in the social context of pottery production, consumption and distribution of material culture. In short, the contribution of ethnography to the archaeological field is essential because it will have to participate in the understanding of ancient and current ceramic production. Since ethnographic studies can provide critical data for archaeologists who are interested in studying a number of issues related to ceramic production such as production sites, the choice of particular technologies, the specific principles of ancient spatial and social organization and to better examine the different varieties of material cultures in time and space. All of the above allows us to see that the new development of ethnographic research contributes to the general anthropological understanding of material culture and society.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of ethnography to understand and interpret different productions such as that relating to ceramic production, could provide hypotheses and information on the manufacture or socio-cultural use of an object. However, ethnographic observation alone is not enough; we must go beyond this by trying to reconstruct the intangible heritage of these ceramic objects throughout the entire operational chain. We grasp, once again, the importance of this new contribution, which completes the inadequacies of archaeology on material culture while questioning current populations in order to make socio-cultural and historical reconstructions. In addition, this work fills a gap in ceramic studies because in Africa, it is almost rare to find research on pottery systematically taking into account the immaterial dimension as a center of interest.

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