

Revitalizing Indigenous Pottery Industries in The Gambia: Challenges, Opportunities and Sustainable Solutions

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Abstract:

This study examines the challenges confronting traditional pottery-making in the Upper and Central River Regions of The Gambia and explores the prospects for revitalizing the industry through sustainable strategies. For generations, pottery production has served not only as a source of livelihood for rural families but also as a means of preserving cultural identity and transmitting indigenous knowledge across generations. However, the industry is increasingly threatened by modernization, imported ceramics, and changing socio-economic realities. A qualitative research method involving field observations, interviews, and interactions with potters, traders, artisans, government officials, and cultural stakeholders in pottery-producing communities. Secondary materials on indigenous technology, cultural heritage, and pottery production were also consulted to support the analysis. Findings reveal that the pottery industry is experiencing rapid decline due to competition from cheap factory-made imports, poor infrastructure, limited market access, inadequate modern tools and glazing materials, weak institutional support, and declining youth participation. These challenges have reduced production levels and weakened the socio-economic relevance of pottery within local communities. Despite these difficulties, the study identifies significant opportunities for revitalization through technological innovation, skills training, cultural tourism, market expansion, and the formation of cooperative associations among potters. The study recommends increased government intervention in training, infrastructure development, and access to modern production facilities. It also emphasizes the promotion of indigenous pottery through tourism events, trade fairs, and cultural heritage programmes aimed at preserving traditional knowledge for future generations. The study concludes that revitalizing indigenous pottery industries is essential not only for safeguarding cultural heritage but also for creating rural employment opportunities and promoting sustainable local economic development in The Gambia.

Keywords: Indigenous Pottery, Cultural Heritage, Modernization, Sustainable Development, The Gambia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of pottery production in The Gambia occupies an important place in the social and economic evolution of many rural communities, particularly within the Upper River Region (URR) and Central River Region (CRR). In the previous study, Mboob (2025) offers a historical examination of pottery traditions in The Gambia's two regions – the URR and CRR - drawing on understanding from ethnoarchaeology. The work traces how pottery production has changed over time in response to shifts in livelihood patterns, colonial rule, and post-independence development.

In fact, long before the arrival of industrial ceramics and imported household utensils, indigenous pottery served as a fundamental aspect of daily life, functioning not only as domestic ware but also as an embodiment of cultural memory, artistic expression, and indigenous technological knowledge. Pottery production among communities such as the Sarahule, Mandinka, Wolof, and the wives of blacksmith families reflected deeply rooted traditions passed down through generations through apprenticeship and communal practice. Archaeological and ethnohistorical studies further reveal that pottery traditions in Senegambia date back several centuries and remain valuable markers of social interaction, trade, and technological adaptation (Delvoye, 2023).

Historically, pottery production in The Gambia was closely tied to the rural economy. Women, particularly in the interior regions, produced jars, cooking pots, incense burners, water containers, and ceremonial wares that sustained households and local markets. The industry provided supplementary income for many families and contributed significantly to local trade networks. In many communities, clay pots were preferred for storing water because of their cooling properties, while ceremonial objects such as the “Anda” and “Indee” retained ritual significance during marriages and traditional ceremonies. Pottery was therefore not merely an economic activity; it represented a living cultural institution embedded within Gambian society (Mboob, 2025).

The gradual decline of this indigenous industry emerged more visibly during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Increased commercial interaction along the Gambia River introduced imported ceramics, metal wares, and later plastic household utensils into local markets. Liza Gijanto observes that external trade and intensified socio-economic interaction historically altered ceramic production patterns within Gambian commercial centres, especially during and after the Atlantic trade era (Gijanto, 2011). Over time, imported industrial products became more attractive to consumers because of their durability, decorative glazing, and relatively cheaper prices. Modern ceramics produced through mechanized industries in Europe and Asia flooded Gambian markets, gradually replacing locally made pottery in homes, schools, hotels, and urban centres.

Modernization accelerated this transformation. The spread of urban lifestyles altered consumption patterns and reshaped public perceptions regarding indigenous wares. Locally produced pottery increasingly came to be associated with rural poverty and “old-fashioned” living, while imported ceramics and plastics symbolized urban

sophistication and modernity. This shift significantly reduced demand for traditional pottery products. Contemporary studies on pottery traditions in Senegal and The Gambia similarly argue that changing lifestyles, urbanization, and competition from industrial substitutes have endangered ceramic traditions across the Senegambian region (Delvoye & Mayor, 2025).

Another major factor behind the industry's decline lies in the absence of technological transformation. While industrial ceramic industries adopted mechanized kilns, glazing technologies, chemical finishing materials, and improved firing techniques, most indigenous potters in The Gambia continued to rely on traditional methods involving hand-moulding, open firing, and locally sourced clay. These techniques, though historically significant, increasingly struggled to compete within modern consumer markets. The lack of access to electricity, modern kilns, glazing chemicals, and technical training further weakened the productive capacity of rural potters. Consequently, many pottery communities became economically marginalized and unable to adapt to evolving market demands.

Infrastructure deficiencies also contributed substantially to the deterioration of the industry. Many pottery-producing settlements in URR and CRR remain isolated by poor road networks and inadequate transportation systems. Because pottery products are fragile, transportation over long distances often result in breakage and financial losses. This discourages potters from expanding production beyond local markets. At the same time, the absence of structured marketing systems and organized pottery cooperatives leaves many artisans dependent on roadside sales and seasonal buyers. Such limitations have made it difficult for indigenous producers to compete with imported goods that are widely distributed through urban commercial centres.

The socio-economic consequences of this decline have been profound. As pottery production diminished, many artisans abandoned the profession for farming, construction labour, gardening, and urban migration. Younger generations increasingly viewed pottery as economically unrewarding and socially limiting. The decline therefore threatens not only livelihoods but also the survival of indigenous knowledge systems. Historians and anthropologists have consistently emphasized that technological traditions are central to cultural continuity because they preserve communal memory, social identity, and inherited systems of craftsmanship (Nanashaitu, 2017). The disappearance of pottery traditions consequently represents the erosion of an important dimension of Gambian cultural heritage.

Yet, despite these challenges, important opportunities exist for revitalizing the industry. One significant avenue lies in cultural tourism. The Gambia's tourism sector possesses considerable potential to promote indigenous pottery as a heritage craft capable of attracting both local and international visitors. Craft markets, museums, cultural festivals, and heritage centres can create sustainable markets for locally produced wares. Institutions such as the National Centre for Arts and Culture and initiatives like the Abuko

Pottery Center have already demonstrated the importance of documenting and preserving Gambian pottery traditions through research, exhibitions, and community engagement.

Technological adaptation also offers promising possibilities. The introduction of fuel-efficient kilns, glazing technologies, modern finishing techniques, and pottery training centres would significantly improve product quality and competitiveness. Such interventions need not erase traditional methods; rather, they can combine indigenous craftsmanship with appropriate modern innovations. Experiences from other African pottery industries demonstrate that integrating traditional knowledge with modern production methods can enhance sustainability while preserving cultural authenticity.

Government intervention remains essential to these revitalization efforts. Policies aimed at supporting local artisans through grants, infrastructure development, vocational training, and export promotion would strengthen the industry considerably. Pottery cooperatives could improve access to markets, reduce transportation costs, and encourage collective production. Furthermore, integrating pottery and indigenous crafts into educational curricula would help younger generations appreciate the historical and cultural significance of the industry.

Finally, the revitalization of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia extends beyond the survival of a traditional craft. It concerns the preservation of historical memory, the protection of cultural identity, and the promotion of sustainable rural livelihoods. Pottery production has endured across centuries because it adapted to changing social realities while remaining rooted in communal traditions. If properly supported through technological innovation, institutional backing, and cultural promotion, indigenous pottery can once again emerge as an important contributor to local economic development and cultural preservation within Gambian society.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative historical research methodology to examine the decline and prospects for revitalizing indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia with specific focus on the URR and CRR. The approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to reconstruct the historical evolution of pottery production, investigate the socio-economic and cultural factors responsible for its decline, and assess contemporary efforts toward its preservation and revitalization. The methodology combined oral historical accounts, ethnographic observations, archival inquiry, and secondary historical analysis in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of pottery traditions within their historical and social contexts.

For the primary data, there were collected through oral interviews conducted with fifteen (15) respondents comprising of traditional potters, pottery sellers, artisans, community elders, cultural custodians, and government officials connected to the arts and culture sector. Oral interviews were particularly important because much of the history of indigenous pottery production in The Gambia has been preserved through memory, apprenticeship, and intergenerational transmission rather than written

documentation. Elderly potters and community elders provided valuable narratives concerning the origins of pottery-making traditions, methods of production, gender roles within the industry, market systems, and the gradual decline of pottery production following the influx of imported industrial wares and modernization. Interviews were conducted in both structured and semi-structured forms to allow respondents the flexibility to share detailed historical experiences and local interpretations.

The study also relied on ethnographic observations undertaken within pottery-producing communities. The researcher visited production centres and observed firsthand the processes of clay collection, preparation, moulding, decoration, firing, storage, and marketing of pottery wares. Attention was also paid to the organization of workspaces, tools used in production, firing techniques, gender participation, and interactions between potters and consumers. These observations provided important insights into the material realities of pottery production and the challenges confronting artisans in contemporary times.

Also, archival materials formed another significant component of the research methodology. Relevant historical records, government reports, museum documents, cultural preservation reports, and records from institutions concerned with arts and heritage preservation were consulted to trace the historical development of pottery industries in The Gambia. Archival evidence helped situate local pottery traditions within broader historical processes such as colonialism, trade expansion, urbanization, and technological change.

Furthermore, secondary historical literature was equally utilized to complement primary findings. Academic books, journal articles, theses, and archaeological studies relating to African pottery traditions, indigenous technologies, material culture, and Gambian history were critically reviewed. These sources provided comparative perspectives and theoretical foundations for understanding pottery production as both an economic activity and a cultural institution.

A purposive sampling approach was adopted in selecting respondents for the study. Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement, knowledge, and experience in pottery production and marketing. Traditional potters, elderly community members, pottery traders, and officials connected to cultural institutions were deliberately targeted because they possessed specialized historical and practical knowledge relevant to the research. This sampling approach ensured that information collected was rich, detailed, and directly connected to the subject under investigation.

2.1 The study area

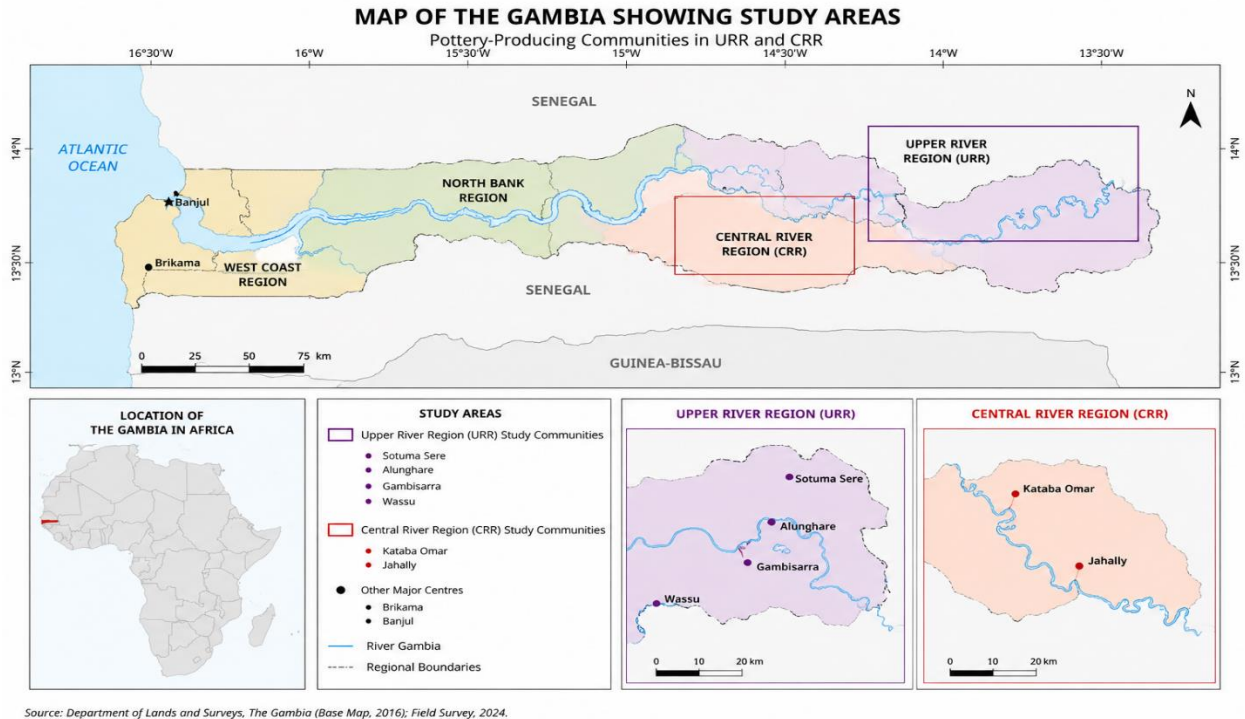
The study was conducted primarily in pottery-producing communities within the Upper River Region (URR) and Central River Region (CRR) of The Gambia, including Sotuma Sere, Alunghare, Gambisarra, Wassu, Kataba Omar, Jahally, and surrounding settlements where indigenous pottery traditions continue to survive despite increasing socio-economic transformations. These communities have historically functioned as

important centres of pottery production, with pottery-making deeply embedded in local livelihoods, gender relations, indigenous technological knowledge, and cultural practices (Rice, 2013). In many of these settlements, pottery production remains predominantly a women-led occupation passed down through generations through informal apprenticeship systems and oral traditions, reflecting broader patterns observed across West African craft societies (Gosselain, 1999).

The selection of these communities was informed by their longstanding historical association with pottery production and their continued relevance within local and regional exchange systems. Communities such as Wassu and Jahally are particularly significant because of their proximity to historical trade routes and agricultural settlements, where pottery wares traditionally served domestic, ritual, and commercial purposes. Pottery products from these areas have historically included cooking pots, water storage containers, ritual vessels, and decorative items used in both rural and urban households (Arnold, 1985). The persistence of pottery production within these communities therefore provides an important lens for examining continuity and transformation within indigenous industries in The Gambia.

Additional data were collected from urban craft centres and commercial markets in Brikama and Banjul, where pottery wares are displayed and marketed to local consumers, tourists, and cultural institutions. These urban centres were selected because they represent important spaces of interaction between rural producers and modern market economies. Brikama, in particular, has emerged as a major artisanal and commercial hub where traditional crafts increasingly intersect with tourism and contemporary cultural entrepreneurship. Similarly, markets and craft outlets in Banjul provide understandings into changing consumer preferences, commercialization processes, and the influence of globalization on indigenous craft industries (Nyamnjoh, 2017).

Below is the map of the study area showing the pottery communities in the two regions of The Gambia – URR and CRR.



2.2 Limitations of the study

Despite the usefulness of the adopted methodology, the study encountered several limitations. First, the absence of extensive written records on indigenous pottery traditions in The Gambia created heavy dependence on oral accounts, which are sometimes affected by memory lapses and subjective interpretations. Secondly, transportation difficulties and poor road networks limited access to some remote pottery-producing communities, particularly during the rainy season. Language barriers also posed minor challenges during interviews, requiring the assistance of interpreters in certain communities. In addition, some respondents were reluctant to provide detailed information concerning economic conditions and trade practices. Nevertheless, these limitations did not significantly undermine the reliability of the findings, as information obtained from interviews was cross-checked with archival records, ethnographic observations, and secondary historical sources to ensure validity and historical consistency.

3. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DECLINE OF INDIGENOUS POTTERY INDUSTRIES IN THE GAMBIA

The decline of indigenous pottery in The Gambia must be understood as part of a wider transformation in West African material culture, where long-established artisanal systems have been reshaped by colonial economic integration, postcolonial consumer change, and global industrial circulation. Archaeological and ethnographic scholarship increasingly frames this process not as sudden disappearance but as a gradual

reconfiguration of ceramic traditions under socio-economic and technological pressures (Delvoye & Mayor, 2025; Gijanto, 2011). In the URR and CRR, these dynamics have produced a complex crisis in which traditional pottery survives only in fragmented and increasingly marginal forms.

(a) Economic constraints facing indigenous pottery production: market exclusion and competition from imported goods

Economic marginalization constitutes one of the most enduring and structurally entrenched causes of the decline of indigenous pottery production in The Gambia. Historically, pottery functioned within tightly knit rural exchange systems in which goods were produced, distributed, and consumed largely within localized economies. These systems were not purely commercial but were embedded in reciprocal relations of kinship, ritual obligation, and seasonal market exchange. Pottery items such as water jars, cooking pots, and ceremonial vessels circulated through village markets and periodic trading networks, ensuring a stable though modest demand base sustained by everyday subsistence needs.

However, the colonial reconfiguration of West African economies fundamentally altered these indigenous exchange systems. The expansion of monetized trade, the integration of rural production into broader colonial market circuits, and the establishment of formal weekly markets introduced new forms of competition and value determination. As Gijanto (2011) demonstrates in her study of ceramic production along the Gambia River, colonial and postcolonial trade expansion significantly transformed local ceramic economies by embedding them within wider commercial networks that privileged imported goods over indigenous production. The emergence of cash-based transactions gradually weakened the reciprocal economic systems that had previously sustained pottery production, thereby exposing rural artisans to external market pressures beyond their control.

In the contemporary time, these structural vulnerabilities have intensified. Gambian potters now operate within increasingly fragmented and competitive markets dominated by imported industrial goods. Cheap ceramics, plastic containers, enamel cookware, and aluminum vessels produced through highly mechanized global manufacturing systems have saturated both rural and urban markets. These products possess clear economic advantages: they are mass-produced, widely distributed, visually uniform, and significantly cheaper due to economies of scale in industrial production.

The result has been a steady displacement of indigenous pottery from its traditional functional domains. Whereas clay pots once served essential household functions such as cooking, water storage, fermentation, and ceremonial use, these roles are now largely occupied by imported substitutes. Delvoye and Mayor (2025) observe that across Senegambian ceramic traditions, imported containers have progressively replaced locally produced wares in domestic and commercial settings, leading to a marked contraction in the functional demand for indigenous pottery. This shift is not merely

material but also symbolic, as imported goods increasingly define modern consumer aspirations and household aesthetics.

Moreover, Gambian potters face severe limitations in accessing broader markets beyond their immediate localities. The absence of structured distribution networks, limited access to urban retail spaces, and inadequate transportation infrastructure significantly constrain their ability to compete in regional and national markets. Most pottery producers remain dependent on roadside sales, periodic local markets, and informal intermediaries, all of which offer unstable and unpredictable income streams. The fragility of these market structures discourages large-scale production and restricts opportunities for economic expansion.

Transport costs further exacerbate these constraints. Pottery is inherently fragile, and the poor condition of rural road networks increases the risk of breakage during transportation, resulting in direct financial losses for producers. In many cases, potters are forced to sell locally at reduced prices rather than risk transporting goods to distant markets. This reinforces a cycle of low productivity, limited investment capacity, and persistent poverty among artisan communities.

Additionally, the pricing structure of indigenous pottery is inherently disadvantaged in comparison to industrial imports. Unlike mass-produced ceramics, which benefit from mechanized efficiency and global supply chains, Gambian pottery production is labour-intensive and time-consuming. The costs associated with clay collection, preparation, shaping, firing, and finishing are borne directly by individual artisans, with minimal external support. As a result, even when potters attempt to compete in price, they are often unable to match the affordability of imported alternatives without incurring economic loss.

In the end, the economic decline of indigenous pottery reflects a deeper structural imbalance between localized artisanal production systems and globalized industrial commodity chains. While pottery once thrived within culturally embedded rural economies, it now exists at the margins of a market system dominated by imported goods, uneven infrastructure, and shifting consumer preferences. This economic displacement continues to undermine the viability of pottery as a sustainable livelihood in contemporary Gambian society. As a result, traditional potters operate within shrinking rural markets characterized by irregular demand, lack of transport infrastructure, and limited access to urban retail networks. This economic exclusion reinforces poverty cycles among artisan households and discourages investment in production expansion.

(b) Sociocultural transformations of declining prestige and generational disinterest

The decline of pottery is also deeply rooted in sociocultural reorientation. Historically, pottery-making was embedded in gendered labour systems, particularly among rural women, and was associated with cultural continuity and household economy. However, modernization and formal education systems have altered perceptions of artisanal labour.

Within many communities, pottery is increasingly perceived as an occupation of low prestige, associated with poverty and rural stagnation. This shift reflects broader transformations in value systems shaped by urbanization, migration, and exposure to global consumer culture. As Delvoye and Mayor (2025) observe, changing lifestyles and aspirations have contributed to reduced transmission of ceramic knowledge, particularly among younger generations.

The erosion of apprenticeship systems further intensifies this rupture. Where pottery skills were once transmitted intergenerationally within households, younger individuals now often pursue alternative livelihoods, leaving fewer successors to sustain the craft. This generational disinterest constitutes a critical threat to the long-term survival of indigenous ceramic traditions.

(c) Technological and industrial competition: plastic, steel, and aluminum products

Technological substitution represents one of the most decisive forces undermining indigenous pottery. The proliferation of plastic, steel, and aluminum household goods has fundamentally altered material culture in The Gambia. These industrial products offer durability, affordability, and convenience that traditional ceramics struggle to match.

Scholarly studies across Senegal and The Gambia indicate that the twentieth century witnessed a significant narrowing of ceramic usage due to the widespread adoption of non-ceramic containers (Delvoye & Mayor, 2025). Plastic basins, aluminum cooking pots, and steel utensils have replaced clay vessels in cooking, storage, and transport functions. Unlike pottery, which requires extensive manual skill and lengthy production cycles, industrial products are mass-produced and distributed through global supply chains. This structural imbalance places indigenous producers at a permanent competitive disadvantage, effectively displacing pottery from everyday domestic life.

(d) Environmental challenges: clay scarcity, deforestation, and fuel shortages

Environmental constraints further complicate pottery production. While clay remains available in many parts of The Gambia, access is increasingly constrained by land pressure, agricultural expansion, and environmental degradation. This reduces the spatial availability of traditional clay extraction sites. Equally significant is the issue of fuel scarcity. Pottery firing in rural Gambia relies heavily on firewood, linking production directly to surrounding forest resources. Studies on West African ceramic systems show that environmental pressures such as deforestation significantly affect firing practices and production sustainability (Delvoye et al., 2024). As forest resources decline, potters face increased costs and longer travel distances to obtain fuel, reducing profitability and production frequency. These environmental pressures therefore intersect with economic constraints, reinforcing the fragility of the industry.

(e) Weak institutional and policy support with heritage neglect and cultural underinvestment

The final structural factor is institutional weakness. Although The Gambia possesses cultural institutions such as heritage and arts agencies, pottery production remains under-supported in national development frameworks. There is limited investment in training centres, technological upgrading, and market development for indigenous crafts.

Research on cultural industries in West Africa highlights that artisanal sectors often suffer from policy neglect despite their socio-economic importance (Delvoye & Mayor, 2025). In the Gambian case, the absence of strong heritage preservation policies has left pottery largely within informal economic structures, without credit facilities, modern infrastructure, or state-backed innovation programmes.

Furthermore, the lack of integration between cultural heritage promotion and tourism development has reduced opportunities for commercial revitalization. Without institutional intervention, pottery remains vulnerable to continued decline.

In a nutshell, the decline of indigenous pottery in The Gambia is the result of intersecting economic, sociocultural, technological, environmental, and institutional forces. Rather than a linear process of disappearance, it reflects a historical transformation of material culture under the pressures of globalization and uneven development. The persistence of pottery traditions therefore depends on addressing these structural constraints through coordinated cultural policy, technological adaptation, and renewed valuation of indigenous knowledge systems.

4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR REVITALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS POTTERY INDUSTRIES IN THE GAMBIA

While the preceding discussion has emphasized the structural challenges confronting indigenous pottery in The Gambia, it is equally important to situate the craft within a horizon of possibility. The historical resilience of pottery traditions in the Upper River Region (URR) and Central River Region (CRR) suggests that, despite present decline, the industry retains significant potential for reconstruction if properly supported through cultural, economic, educational, and technological interventions. Revitalization, in this sense, requires not only economic investment but also a reconfiguration of how pottery is valued within Gambian society and beyond.

(a) Cultural heritage preservation: pottery as intangible cultural heritage

One of the most viable pathways for revitalizing indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia lies in repositioning pottery within the framework of cultural heritage preservation, particularly as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Within this interpretive lens, pottery is not reduced to its utilitarian function as domestic ware, but understood as a living repository of embodied knowledge, communal memory, ritual symbolism, and gendered craftsmanship transmitted across generations. In many rural settlements in the Upper River Region (URR) and Central River Region (CRR), pottery production has

historically operated as a social institution rather than a purely economic activity, structured through apprenticeship, kinship-based learning, and culturally embedded production routines.

The concept of intangible cultural heritage, as articulated by UNESCO, emphasizes practices, representations, expressions, knowledge systems, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural identity and continuity (UNESCO, 2003). Within this definition, indigenous pottery in The Gambia clearly qualifies, as it embodies intergenerational knowledge systems concerning clay sourcing, preparation techniques, firing methods, decorative aesthetics, and ritual applications. The craft also reflects gendered divisions of labour, where women in many communities have traditionally been central to production, thereby reinforcing pottery as both an economic and social identity marker.

Reframing pottery as intangible heritage has significant implications for its preservation and revitalization. First, it transforms policy perception by shifting pottery from the margins of informal rural economy into the centre of cultural governance and heritage protection. As UNESCO (2013) notes, safeguarding intangible heritage requires not only documentation but also the active transmission of knowledge through education, community participation, and institutional support systems. In the Gambian context, such recognition would strengthen the justification for integrating pottery into national cultural policy frameworks, museum programming, and educational curricula.

Secondly, heritage recognition enables systematic documentation and archival preservation. Much of the knowledge surrounding indigenous pottery in The Gambia exists in oral form, transmitted through practice rather than written records. Without formal documentation, there is a significant risk of knowledge erosion as older generations retire or pass away. Heritage-based interventions such as ethnographic recording, audiovisual documentation, and community archives would ensure that technical knowledge and cultural meanings embedded in pottery traditions are preserved for future generations (Smith, 2006).

Furthermore, heritage framing enhances community pride and cultural valuation. One of the underlying causes of the decline in pottery production is the diminishing social prestige attached to the craft, particularly among younger generations who increasingly associate traditional occupations with poverty and rural stagnation. However, when a craft is officially recognized as cultural heritage, it gains symbolic legitimacy and renewed social value. This revalorization has been observed in other African contexts where heritage designation has contributed to the revival of endangered craft traditions by increasing both local pride and external interest (UNESCO, 2015).

Notably, heritage recognition also creates pathways for institutional funding and international support. Global cultural agencies, development partners, and heritage conservation bodies often prioritize projects that safeguard endangered cultural practices. By positioning Gambian pottery within this global heritage discourse, opportunities emerge for technical assistance, capacity building, and sustainable cultural

financing. Such interventions are essential for addressing long-standing structural constraints, including lack of training facilities, inadequate technological support, and weak institutional engagement.

Here, cultural heritage preservation provides not only a theoretical framework but also a practical strategy for the revitalization of indigenous pottery industries. It reframes pottery as a dynamic cultural asset rather than a declining rural occupation, thereby enabling new forms of engagement between communities, the state, and international heritage institutions. In doing so, it restores pottery to its rightful place as a living tradition central to the cultural identity, historical continuity, and creative resilience of Gambian society.

(b) Tourism and creative economy potential

The tourism and creative economy sectors constitute one of the most promising frontiers for the revitalization of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia. Within contemporary development discourse, cultural tourism is increasingly recognized as a strategic instrument for linking heritage preservation with local economic empowerment. As Richards (2018) argues, the creative economy thrives on cultural distinctiveness, authenticity, and experiential engagement, all of which are inherent qualities of traditional craft systems such as pottery production. In this regard, Gambian pottery occupies a potentially valuable position within both domestic tourism circuits and international heritage markets.

The Gambia, often referred to as “the Smiling Coast of Africa,” has long established itself as a destination for leisure and cultural tourism, attracting visitors from Europe, North America, and other parts of Africa. However, much of this tourism has historically been concentrated on coastal hospitality and wildlife experiences, with limited integration of inland cultural industries. Embedding pottery production within tourism circuits specifically in regions such as the URR and CRR would diversify the tourism economy while simultaneously strengthening rural livelihoods. Timothy and Nyaupane (2009) emphasize that craft-based tourism enables the direct interaction between visitors and artisans, thereby transforming cultural production into an experiential and educational activity rather than passive consumption.

Craft tourism offers a particularly sustainable model for indigenous pottery revitalization. Unlike mass tourism, which often leads to cultural commodification, craft tourism encourages participatory engagement. Visitors are able to observe the processes of clay extraction, shaping, firing, and decoration, thereby gaining appreciation for the skill, time, and cultural knowledge embedded in each product. This interaction not only enhances the perceived value of pottery but also strengthens artisans’ income through direct sales and experiential services such as workshops and demonstrations. Cultural festivals and heritage exhibitions further expand this opportunity by positioning pottery within broader narratives of national identity and cultural continuity. According to Richards (2021), creative festivals play a critical role in transforming intangible heritage

into visible and marketable cultural capital. In the Gambian context, pottery-focused festivals could serve as platforms for showcasing regional styles, promoting inter-community exchange, and attracting both domestic and international tourists. Such events would not only stimulate economic activity but also reinforce cultural pride and intergenerational knowledge transmission among younger populations.

In addition, heritage exhibitions and museum collaborations can elevate the status of indigenous pottery by situating it within curated cultural narratives. When displayed in formal cultural institutions, pottery is no longer perceived solely as utilitarian household ware but as artistic and historical artefact. This recontextualization enhances its symbolic and economic value, thereby strengthening its position within both local and global creative economies (UNWTO, 2018).

Beyond tourism, the export potential of Gambian pottery represents a significant yet underdeveloped opportunity. In global craft markets, there is increasing demand for handmade, ethically produced, and culturally authentic goods. Niche international markets particularly in Europe and North America, value artisanal products that carry cultural narratives and sustainable production histories. If properly branded and supported through quality improvement, packaging, and marketing strategies, Gambian pottery could enter these markets as a distinctive cultural product.

However, realizing this potential requires institutional support in branding, logistics, and quality standardization. Without such support, artisans remain excluded from global value chains dominated by industrial producers. Integrating pottery into the creative economy therefore demands coordinated efforts between cultural institutions, tourism agencies, and development partners to ensure that artisans benefit equitably from expanded markets.

In essence, the tourism and creative economy offer not merely supplementary income streams but structural pathways for reconfiguring the social and economic value of indigenous pottery. By embedding pottery within experiential tourism, cultural festivals, and global craft markets, The Gambia can reposition this declining tradition as a dynamic component of its cultural economy and national development strategy.

(c) Educational and research opportunities

Educational and research integration represents a fundamental pathway for the long-term revitalization of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia. At the core of the current crisis is not only economic marginalization but also the gradual erosion of intergenerational knowledge transmission. When traditional crafts are excluded from formal education systems, they risk being perceived as obsolete cultural remnants rather than as viable domains of knowledge, creativity, and economic activity. In this regard, embedding indigenous pottery into educational structures becomes a critical strategy for both cultural preservation and skills renewal.

Incorporating pottery knowledge into school curricula, particularly at the primary, secondary, and technical/vocational levels, would serve multiple functions. First, it would

ensure that younger generations are exposed to indigenous knowledge systems at an early stage, thereby countering the growing disinterest associated with urbanization and modern occupational aspirations. Second, it would help reframe pottery as a legitimate field of applied knowledge that integrates history, art, geography, chemistry (materials science), and cultural studies. As UNESCO (2017) emphasizes, education systems play a central role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage by transmitting skills and fostering respect for traditional knowledge systems.

Curricular integration could take the form of practical craft modules, cultural heritage studies, and experiential learning programmes where students engage directly with local artisans. Such initiatives would not only preserve technical skills but also cultivate appreciation for the cultural and environmental knowledge embedded in pottery production such as clay sourcing, kiln construction, and sustainable resource use. This pedagogical approach would bridge the widening gap between rural artisanal practices and formal education systems that have historically privileged Western scientific and industrial knowledge frameworks.

Beyond formal education, research collaboration offers an equally important avenue for revitalization. Partnerships between potters, universities, museums, and cultural research institutions can significantly enhance the documentation, analysis, and innovation of indigenous pottery traditions. Academic institutions can contribute through ethnographic research, material science studies, and historical reconstruction of pottery typologies and production techniques. Such research not only preserves endangered knowledge but also generates new insights into indigenous technological systems and cultural adaptation processes.

Museums, on the other hand, function as custodians of material heritage. By collecting, preserving, and exhibiting ceramic artefacts, they provide public platforms for cultural education and heritage appreciation. In the Gambian context, stronger collaboration between rural potter communities and national institutions such as museums would help situate indigenous pottery within national historical narratives, thereby enhancing its visibility and symbolic value.

More importantly, these collaborations also open pathways for innovation. Research institutions can work with artisans to experiment with improved kiln technologies, alternative glazing materials, and enhanced production techniques that retain cultural authenticity while improving durability and market competitiveness. Such knowledge exchange challenges the long-standing divide between “traditional” and “modern” knowledge systems, fostering instead a hybrid space of creative and technological synthesis.

Indeed, educational and research opportunities provide the intellectual foundation for the survival of indigenous pottery. Without structured knowledge transmission and institutional engagement, the craft risks continued marginalization. However, when integrated into education systems and supported through collaborative research

frameworks, pottery can be repositioned as both a cultural heritage practice and a dynamic field of innovation capable of engaging contemporary developmental needs.

(d) Women's economic empowerment

Indigenous pottery production in The Gambia is deeply embedded within gendered systems of labour, where women have historically occupied a central position as both primary producers and distributors of ceramic wares. In many rural communities across the Upper River Region (URR) and Central River Region (CRR), pottery is not merely an occupational activity but a socially structured livelihood system through which women contribute significantly to household economies, food security, and local trade networks. This gendered character of pottery production makes it a particularly important site for analyzing rural women's economic agency and development potential.

From a historical perspective, women's involvement in pottery has often been shaped by limited access to formal employment opportunities, land ownership, and wage labour markets. As a result, pottery has functioned as an alternative economic space in which women exercise relative autonomy over production processes, resource use, and informal market exchange. However, the decline of the industry, driven by competition from imported goods and changing consumption patterns, has weakened this economic autonomy and increased rural vulnerability.

Revitalizing the pottery sector therefore carries significant implications for women's empowerment. Strengthening production systems would directly enhance rural female livelihoods by restoring a stable source of income, particularly in areas where alternative employment opportunities remain scarce. According to UN Women (2020), supporting women-led informal enterprises is a critical pathway for reducing rural poverty and advancing gender-equitable development in sub-Saharan Africa. In the Gambian context, pottery revitalization aligns closely with these objectives by reinforcing women's participation in local production economies.

Practical empowerment strategies include expanding access to microcredit and financial services tailored to rural women artisans. Many potters operate without formal capital support, limiting their ability to invest in improved tools, raw materials, or expanded production capacity. Cooperative structures would also enhance collective bargaining power, enabling women to pool resources, standardize production quality, and access larger markets. Such cooperatives have been widely recognized as effective mechanisms for strengthening women's economic resilience in artisanal sectors (IFAD, 2019).

In addition, targeted training programmes focusing on business management, product innovation, and marketing would enhance the competitiveness of women-led pottery enterprises. These interventions would not only improve income generation but also facilitate leadership development within rural communities, where women often occupy informal but influential social roles. Therefore, pottery revitalization should be understood as a gendered development strategy rather than a purely cultural or economic

intervention. By strengthening women's control over production systems and market access, the industry can contribute meaningfully to reducing structural inequalities, improving household welfare, and reinforcing rural socio-economic stability.

(e) Digital and contemporary market expansion

The expansion of digital technologies in the twenty-first century presents transformative opportunities for the revitalization of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia. Historically, Gambian potters have been constrained by geographically limited markets, weak distribution networks, and reliance on localized sales systems. However, the emergence of digital platforms has fundamentally altered the dynamics of cultural production and consumption, enabling artisans to bypass traditional intermediaries and engage directly with global audiences.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok now function as powerful tools for cultural visibility and product marketing. Through visual storytelling, artisans can showcase production processes, highlight cultural narratives, and build brand identities rooted in authenticity and heritage. As UNESCO (2022) notes, digital technologies are increasingly central to the safeguarding and promotion of intangible cultural heritage, particularly by enabling communities to transmit knowledge and reach wider audiences without geographic limitations.

Online exhibitions and virtual marketplaces further expand these opportunities. Platforms dedicated to handmade and ethical products allow artisans to display and sell their work to international consumers who increasingly value sustainability, cultural authenticity, and artisanal craftsmanship. This shift is particularly significant for Gambian pottery, which possesses strong cultural distinctiveness and aesthetic uniqueness that can appeal to niche global markets. E-commerce integration also allows for more direct participation in global value chains. Utilizing platforms such as Etsy or similar artisan marketplaces, potters can engage in cross-border trade without relying solely on local intermediaries or tourism flows. This direct market access has the potential to significantly increase income levels while reducing dependency on unstable local demand structures.

However, digital expansion requires targeted capacity-building interventions. Many rural artisans lack access to digital literacy training, internet connectivity, and marketing knowledge necessary for effective online engagement. Without such support, the benefits of digitalization risk being unevenly distributed. Therefore, development programmes that combine craft training with digital skills acquisition are essential for ensuring inclusive participation in the digital economy.

Furthermore, digital platforms offer opportunities for cultural preservation through documentation and storytelling. Video recordings of pottery techniques, oral histories of artisans, and interactive exhibitions can serve as digital archives of indigenous knowledge systems. This not only enhances global visibility but also contributes to intergenerational knowledge transmission within local communities. Obviously, digital

and contemporary market expansion represents a critical frontier for transforming indigenous pottery from a locally constrained craft into a globally connected cultural economy. No doubt, Gambian pottery can achieve renewed relevance, economic viability, and cultural sustainability in an increasingly interconnected world if integrated to digital tools with traditional knowledge systems.

5. SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIES FOR REVITALIZING INDIGENOUS POTTERY INDUSTRIES

The revitalization of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia requires a coordinated blend of policy reform, community action, technological adaptation, knowledge preservation, and institutional partnerships. Rather than treating pottery as a declining rural practice, it should be repositioned as a sustainable cultural industry capable of contributing to livelihoods, heritage preservation, and local economic development.

First, policy and government intervention is fundamental to any meaningful revitalization effort. The government must develop and implement robust cultural heritage policies that formally recognize pottery as part of the nation's intangible cultural heritage. Such recognition strengthens institutional protection and ensures access to funding and development support. UNESCO (2003) emphasizes that safeguarding intangible heritage requires state commitment through legal frameworks, education, and resource allocation. In addition, financial support mechanisms such as grants, subsidies, and low-interest loans should be provided to rural potters to ease production constraints and improve competitiveness against imported goods.

Second, community-based preservation initiatives are essential for sustaining pottery traditions at the grassroots level. Establishing cooperative societies would enable potters to pool resources, strengthen collective bargaining power, and improve access to wider markets. Furthermore, structured apprenticeship systems should be promoted to ensure intergenerational transmission of skills, especially among younger generations who are increasingly disengaged from traditional crafts. As Howard (2003) argues, heritage sustainability depends heavily on embedding knowledge transmission within community life rather than relying solely on formal institutions.

Third, technological modernization must be pursued in a way that does not erode cultural identity. The introduction of improved kiln technologies can enhance production efficiency, reduce fuel consumption, and improve product quality while still maintaining traditional design aesthetics. Likewise, design innovation should be encouraged to allow artisans to respond to contemporary consumer preferences without abandoning indigenous styles. This reflects the principle of adaptive continuity, where cultural practices evolve while preserving their core identity (Ruggles & Silverman, 2009).

Fourth, documentation and archiving of indigenous knowledge are critical for long-term preservation. Oral histories from master potters, particularly elderly artisans, should be systematically recorded and preserved. Museums and cultural institutions should serve as repositories for both physical artefacts and intangible knowledge systems.

UNESCO (2015) highlights that documentation is a core pillar of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, especially in contexts where knowledge is transmitted orally and at risk of disappearance.

Fifth, public-private partnerships and NGO involvement are necessary to expand the scope and sustainability of revitalization efforts. Collaboration between government agencies, private sector actors, and non-governmental organizations can support cultural entrepreneurship, training programmes, and market access initiatives. NGOs can also provide microfinance support and capacity-building, while private actors can assist with branding and market integration. According to UNDP (2020), such multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential for linking cultural heritage preservation with sustainable development outcomes.

Finally, the sustainability of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia depends on an integrated strategy that combines institutional support, community participation, technological adaptation, knowledge preservation, and collaborative partnerships. When effectively implemented, these strategies can transform pottery from a declining traditional craft into a resilient cultural and economic sector.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study raise broader questions about the place of indigenous pottery within processes of social change, economic transformation, and cultural identity in The Gambia. Beyond its material decline, pottery represents a meaningful site through which larger historical and contemporary tensions can be understood.

First, pottery can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance against cultural homogenization. The increasing dominance of imported ceramics, plastics, and industrial goods reflects wider global processes that tend to standardize consumption patterns and weaken local production systems. In this context, indigenous pottery persists not only as a craft but as a cultural statement that affirms local identity, indigenous knowledge, and alternative ways of producing and living. As UNESCO (2003) notes, safeguarding traditional practices is essential for maintaining cultural diversity in an increasingly globalized world.

Second, the relationship between historical continuity and modernization emerges as a central theme. Pottery in the Upper and Central River Regions illustrates how indigenous knowledge systems have historically adapted to changing environments while maintaining core cultural principles. However, recent shifts toward industrial goods have disrupted this continuity, creating a gap between older generations who preserve traditional techniques and younger populations who are more oriented toward modern lifestyles. This tension reflects what Smith (2006) describes as the ongoing negotiation between heritage as lived practice and heritage as modern reinterpretation.

Third, indigenous industries such as pottery remain closely linked to discussions of sustainable development. Unlike mass-produced goods, traditional pottery is often rooted in locally available materials and environmentally adaptive practices. This makes

it potentially compatible with contemporary sustainability agendas that emphasize low-carbon production and resource efficiency. Supporting such industries therefore contributes not only to cultural preservation but also to environmentally responsible economic models (UNEP, 2019).

Finally, the relationship between heritage preservation and national identity is particularly significant. Pottery is more than a utilitarian craft; it is embedded in the symbolic construction of community identity and historical memory. When such practices decline, there is a risk of weakening the cultural narratives that connect communities to their past. Conversely, when they are supported, they reinforce a sense of belonging and continuity. In this sense, heritage preservation becomes an important component of nation-building, particularly in postcolonial contexts where cultural identity is continuously being redefined.

The foregoing discussion suggests that the decline of indigenous pottery is not simply an economic issue but part of a wider cultural and developmental transformation. Its revitalization therefore requires attention not only to production systems but also to the deeper social meanings that sustain the craft.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has reaffirmed the historical significance of indigenous pottery industries in The Gambia as an important part of rural livelihoods, cultural identity, and local knowledge systems. For generations, pottery has served not only as a practical craft but also as a marker of cultural continuity and community heritage, especially in the Upper and Central River Regions. The key findings show that the industry is currently in decline due to a combination of factors, including competition from imported industrial products, changing consumer preferences, limited market access, weak institutional support, and declining interest among younger generations. These challenges have weakened both the economic viability and cultural transmission of pottery-making traditions.

The study therefore emphasizes the urgency of revitalizing the industry. Without deliberate intervention, there is a real risk of losing an important part of Gambian intangible cultural heritage and the livelihoods that depend on it. Revitalization efforts are needed to sustain both the craft and the communities that practice it. The broader implication therefore is that, the decline of pottery has significance beyond economics as it affects cultural preservation, historical continuity, and local identity, while also raising important questions for development policy. Supporting indigenous pottery can contribute to cultural sustainability, rural employment, and inclusive development strategies in The Gambia.

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