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Smashing Pots: Works of Clay from Africa

Nigel Barley

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Nigel Barley : Smashing Pots: Works of Clay from Africa before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Smashing Pots: Works of Clay from Africa:

The making and breaking of pots is a central ritual in African society. To smash a pot is to mark the end of something, whether virginity, incest or life itself. In "Smashing Pots", Nigel Barley surveys the role of pottery in traditional and modern Africa, the technologies it calls into play and the extraordinary aesthetic effects it achieves. He shows how pottery is used in cultural thought and how it reflects, in Africa, important ways of thinking about human bodies and powers, time and change. Pottery enters into religion and medicine, the structuring of sexuality and the control of fertility, and through it important differences emerge between European and African notions of gender. Illustrated with field photographs and pots from the British Museum's unsurpassed collection, this book provides a comprehensive introduction to African pottery.

From Library JournalConsidering the ubiquitous presence of pottery in Africa, a comprehensive survey of the ceramic traditions of Africa translated into English is long overdue. This book does not and is not intended to meet that need. Rather, it is an introductory overview to the subject utilizing photos of pottery from the Ethnography Department collection of the British Museum, where Barley is an assistant keeper. Barley organizes the text into short chapters,

focusing on major themes of pottery production, materials, form, style, decoration, and cultural meaning. The content of the chapters is sketchy, and the supporting evidence provided is frequently anecdotal in character rather than insightful. Also, while the pottery illustrated is fairly representative of the entire continent, the text generally emphasizes West Africa and, oddly, gives detailed attention to North Africa. Keeping in mind its limitations, this work is recommended for public and academic libraries, particularly as a fine source of photos showing a diverse collection of African pots. Eugene C. Burt, Art Inst. of Seattle Lib. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist

Barley's survey presents an authoritative ethnographic perspective on African pottery, but the book's stunning images may be appreciated sheerly for their aesthetic impact. Many exquisite vessels from the British Museum's collection are pictured, mainly unglazed ceramic jugs, water jars, and sculptural vessels. Barley discusses a range of forming and firing techniques and delves into the social implications affecting potters in their communities. In a central segment, Barley compares the functions and ritual uses of pottery across the African continent. But ethnography aside, it is a pleasure to examine these inventive, robust forms. Their incised decorations and highly burnished surfaces are stirring reminders of the remarkable cultural heritage of Africa's diverse peoples. Alice Joyce