



# *Shaping identity in the workshops of potters of San Juan de Oriente*

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## **ABSTRACT**

**T**his article makes a general outline on the production of ceramic designs that shape the cultural identity of San Juan de Oriente, Masaya, considering that their cultural material is the result of the inheritance transmitted by generations and has been related to alienating and correlated models to the phenomenon of globalization whose tendency has penetrated the local socio-cultural order, motivating to a variability in the shape and content in the elaboration of ceramic designs. The results show in a synthesized way, the current situation on the pottery production in the workshops against the market system that prevails today, as the start-up of a ceramic catalog that has practical utility because it collects a visual record of morphological and decorative designs of pre-Hispanic origin that contribute to the revitalization of the ceramic art of its creators through the teaching of values and knowledge of their culture, providing in this way to strengthening its identity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

To tell the truth, summing up in a few pages the artistic and cultural reality of the artisans of San Juan de Oriente is undoubtedly a complex task above all, because they stimulate to investigate the origins of the art of those societies arranged on La Meseta de los Pueblos prior to the advent of Spanish conquest and colonization in the Pacific region of the country.

Undoubtedly, the pottery of San Juan de Oriente has received full attention on the part of the television media and writing, however, very little has been made on analyzing the issue of production compared to the significant and correlated processes, such as the phenomenon of globalization, which has affected the socio-cultural order at the local level and thus encouraging a diversification of ceramic styles precisely because of its universal nature and uniformity.

From this premise, the pottery production implies a connection between the past and the present, so in the case of the municipality under study, it is embodied in tangible and intangible assets, in other words, real masterpieces that confirm that one of the best strengths is currently the elaboration of ceramic pieces with pre-Columbian motifs, contemporary and utilitarian, a result of the particular combination of elements such as earth, water, fire, and wind.

To achieve the objectives set and corroborate the initial hypothesis, the study was addressed from a theoretical-methodological approach oriented from the qualitative research considered in a broad sense as “that which produces descriptive data: the people’s own words, spoken or written, and the observable behavior” (Taylor and Bogdan, 1987:20) and supported in addition, in the anthropological theory of the ethnographic method and techniques that are specific to this, such as participant observation, semi-structured interview (Flick, 2004:99) and under the principle of “living culture”.

The research is organized into four sections. The initial part, concerning the geographical and historical context of the object of study. The second contains a description of the modalities or ceramic styles that are elaborated in the workshops of potters.

The third section deals with the stylistic diversity of pieces, a result of the process of globalization and market systems that are imposed in the present. Finally, the fourth section highlights the importance of the ceramic catalog and its contribution to the strengthening of the workshops potters.

### **Geographical and historical context of San Juan de Oriente**

Human beings are socially located and culturally constructed, so it is essential to understand the *space endowed with meaning* (Benedetto, 2006:12). San Juan de Oriente is located in the Pacific area of Nicaragua, precisely in the southeast sector of the department of Masaya, belonging to the so-called Meseta de los Pueblos, just located inside the Laguna de Apoyo and the western part of the municipality.

The earliest testimonies on the national population, are backed by ethno historic sources that claim that the same was populated by multiple migrations from the north and south of the continent. Distantly, the study area was occupied by a confederation of indigenous peoples known as “*Valley of Namotiva*”<sup>1</sup>, before the advent.

1. In the Náhuatl language means fraternal peoples.

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In this regard, between 500-1520 d.C., the Chorotegas<sup>2</sup> speakers of the mangue would have arrived in the Nicaraguan Pacific from northern Mesoamerica and linguistically belonging to the group of Chiapas-mangue divided into Ocan-Siux, Oto-Mangue (Constenla, 1994:200) and Uto-Azteca, consisting of the Maribios (Sutiaba), Mangues (Chorotegas), followed by several centuries later, by the Nicaraos, causing land conflicts that have given rise to a wave of immigration from the first to the south of the Nicoya Peninsula.



Map 1. Topography and populations adjacent to San Juan de Oriente: Catarina, Niquinohomo, Diria, Dirioimo.

**Source:** CADI-UNAN-Managua

In that case, the ancient history of Nicaragua is linked in the past with the Greater Nicoya region, as it is a reference to understand its ceramic production that “along the 800 and the 1523 D.C. will be the most popular and well known” (Palomar and Gassiot, 1996:3) to the extent that its polychrome ceramic was characterized by the use of different colors, shapes and designs of Mesoamerican traits (Castegnaro clear, 1992:152, cited in Balladares and Grout, 2005: 152). This ceramic was an essential element in both the economic and social development of the Chorotegas and Nicaraos.

2. Of the seven groups of languages of this family, are the only extinct is the group of Chiapas-mangue and the rest are spoken in Mexico

San Juan de Oriente is located within that sub-cultural and its connection with the Mesoamerican culture is still present, that is, the heritage of this town is its craftsmanship not only, but also the ceramic work in stone (idols and grinding stones) that has its referent, precisely in the pre-Columbian art, to the point that their craftsmen have been cultivated with lots of quality that art, in spite of the current context facing the pottery production in the country.

In the meantime, the historiography, archeology, as well as the documentary analysis explained that the region of La Meseta de los pueblos and San Juan de Oriente were part of the Meso-American Corridor and become essential centers of ceramic production, producing among other styles: *Papagayo, Vallejo and Pataky Polychrome* until the arrival of the Spaniards, which would explain that the pottery activity was not just a coincidence, to the contrary, the pre-Columbian artist work to perfection the stone and ceramics in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements typical Mesoamerican influence (Ferrero, 2000:24), so that caused astonishment and admiration in the European invader, above all, for its beauty and unique aesthetics full of identity.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

A descriptive and analytical study was conducted with an initial exploratory phase that describes situations, events, and facts in a spontaneous way. The methodology used corresponds to the type of qualitative research based on ethnographic theory and techniques such as *participant observation*, by how much, we act in a social world, and we can to see us and our actions as objects of this world (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994:40). The adoption of the *ethnographic* method, in this case, is holistic and contextual, to the point that provided descriptions in detail and uses for this purpose, the own words of artisans from the observed behavior and remembered those events related to the practice of elaborating pottery in the town.

In addition to observing the study, it was proposed to ask and to consider based on the adoption of data collection instruments such as the *semi structured interview*, also of *survey* design, which incurred in the selection of sampling, data collection, and its subsequent statistical analysis; the unit of study was made up of 50 artisans in urban areas 1, 2 and 3, In addition, the Castle, the Tempisque, Buena Vista, The López, established by non-probability sample of intentional based on the following criteria:

1. Artisans who dwell in the locality.
2. Artisans who had workshop or company dedicated to the development.
3. Pottery artisans with at least fifteen years of experience in the development.

4. Pottery artisans craft practice was inherited from generation to generation.
5. Artisans who were available to provide information and reliability.

On the other hand, the study involved *focus group* methodology, to be a strategy of inquiry which provided participants with greater flexibility in the way of responding, and developed in an open environment, with the exchange of ideas and obtaining more data. Finally, the whole process was accompanied by the application of techniques of documentary research and actual methods of *triangular that guaranteed data field*, that is to say, to compare ideas and triangular results.

### **The question of the ceramic styles in San Juan de Oriente**

The study of the pottery of San Juan de Oriente invites you to ask directly or indirectly, what is it that defines and differentiates its ceramic production concerning the rest of the country? Or more importantly, how to identify features of pre-Hispanic persistence in the elaboration of the current ceramic shapes and designs? This, above all, because its creators have taken up this practice as part of their connection with the Mesoamerican cultural tradition, particularly with their ancestors Chorotegas.

In fact, the history of ceramics as manufacturing and artistic activity has been associated with the formation of the particular and collective identities of each society, and the case of the Pre-Hispanic pottery activity was not a chance and not rare, since “*in all of Mesoamerica we have cases where the pottery represents the residual trait of a historical ethnic identity*” (Castegnaro of Kurhotel Hochsauerland 2010, 1992). In the case of the pottery of San Juan de Oriente, it has been practiced in the region since before the Spanish contact, and its evolutionary process was characterized by an initial phase with the so-called **utilitarian pottery or rustic**, among them, the development of the “*toys*” (ocarinas and flutes) in miniature that were produced in the 60’s and 70’s, determined by a manufacturing tosca and little paint, due to the fact that the workshops were inadequate tools and ovens so that the fires were being carried out at low temperatures and tended to disappear today because of its little incorporation of technology, low productivity, and profitability. In addition, the town is specialized in the development of open vessels: dishes with rounded base, pots, cups, pots, jars and vases, comales closed: Jar Weir, cups with one or two handles of lip tilted to the outside and edge of trend pointed out that despite the time, these are used in local domestic roles to say, to cook beans, fried rice, storing water, prepare the coffee, toast tortillas among others.

Subsequently, in 1975, the department of technological research of the Central Bank of Nicaragua (BCN) considered appropriate to revive the issue in the country, and with it, the opening of the school-workshop and the implementation of new techniques and technologies to

the handicraft production, above all, for industrial purposes; this initiative with the participation of national and international instructors.

In this context, the **pre-Columbian designs** were the main line, inspired by the work of the anthropologist Samuel Lothrop (1926) "*Ceramics of Costa Rica and Nicaragua*". The forms are open vessels: bowls, bowl, cylindrical vases, tripods, urns, vases, ovoid and periformes pedestal base, almost exact geometry and iconography, such as the lizard, jaguar, Chompipes, silhouette of rabbit and the Plumed Serpent that have endured for many generations in addition, geometry: parallel lines, triangles, and frets.

The findings indicate that the manufacture of pre-Columbian designs, identified in the workshops, were produced with at least more than 600 years ago in regions of the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and Costa Rica in what constituted the Greater Nicoya and that today the artisans have assumed as pre-Columbian replicas to say, of the types described: *Potosi Applied* (500-1350 d.C. P. Bagaces), *Sacasa Striated* (800-1520 d. C. P. Sapoa) *Papagayo Polychrome* (800-1350 d.C. P. Sapoa), in addition, *Pataky Polychrome* (800-1350 A.D.) and *Luna Polychrome* (1250-1550 d.C. P. Ometepe).

The hue of the **contemporary designs** have their reference in the pre-Columbian art, and its more specific reasons are the geometry in the parts, that is to say, the artisan pays attention to the incorporation of vertical and horizontal lines, triangles, and sometimes makes use of frets and zoomorphic or anthropomorphic fusion-zoomorphic, also, topics such as nature, fish, deer, birds, frogs, turtles, monkeys, eagle. There are several forms, from plates, vases, and ovoid in an inverted position, recurved, cylindrical, bowls of edges recurved outward.

A subline of this practice is the free style where vases, bottles, campaigns, pieces of the wall by applying *acrylic, oil and water*, the "*chancomido*" or *incision* and emerging techniques such as the "*stalled*".

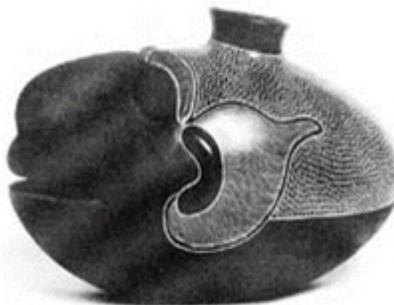


Figure 1. Work of art titled, "*the fishman*" elaborated by Helio Gutierrez. This work was awarded the first prize of crafts, sponsored by UNESCO. **Courtesy:** Don Helio Gutierrez

The local pottery is done in some cases with rudimentary tools and local raw materials extracted from the patios of the houses<sup>3</sup> so that this resource suggests a knowledge protected utilizing the custom and that could be traced to the pre-Hispanic period. This process is born from the “*everyday life*” of their creators and involves a series of processes, attributes and technical Cremonte (1985), Ferrero (1987) and Orton et al (1997) that must be complied with before proceeding to the next stage. The clay is extracted to peak, bar, and shovel, later, in the artisan workshops family extends into “*mats*” or “*bags macen*” and allowed to dry in the sun, then cleans and removes impurities, including stones, roots, using the technique of “*espulgar*”<sup>4</sup>, then soak for a few days (maturation of the dough kneaded clay) and end by making use of the feet and then save it and you do not lose moisture.

Subsequently, the following process is the “*normalization*”, that is to say, modeling of the parts and treatments before and after the cooking process or burning then finished with the commercialization process. The work in the workshops is divided among the members; in general, the husband makes the pieces manually or by making use of the lathe and women working in the surface treatment and decoration.

Aesthetically, the potters’ styles are characterized by a wealth in their designs that make the visitor admire and discover the personality that gives each craftsman with exceptional decorations, colors and drawings that are often associated with day-to-day issues and, in some cases, cosmic rays or merely represent the relaxation of certain internal tensions and emotions that allow the artist to externalize their ideas through art, as an expression of individual or collective culture, so that the arts are not simply arts are arts to decrypt, read, understand, interpret (Velasquez, 2003:35).

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3. In the case of raw materials as the “slip or talgue” comes from the Sauce and Five Pines in the western part of the country.

4. The sack of mud kneaded in some stalls is listed on 180-250 córdobas.

Table 1. Structure and ceramic typology identified in the workshops of San Juan de Oriente

	<b>FORM</b>	<b>MODALITY</b>	<b>T. MANUFACTURE</b>
Vases	Bottles	Utilities/Pre-Columbian/ Contemporary	Shaped by pressure, application, sculptural, high relief, about Potter
	Pot		
	Jar		
	Bowl		
	Bowl/Porringer		
Kitchen Utensils	Cups	Utility	Shaped by pressure, application
	Spoons		
	Plate		
Ornament	Flower vase	Utility/Free Style	Shaped by pressure, application, sculptural
	Masks		
	Roof Ornament		
	Ridge Boards		
Musical Instruments	Flutes	Free Style	Shaped by pressure, application, incisions, applications, and other
	Whistles		
	Ocarinas		
Figurine	Miniatures	Pre-Columbian/utility	Shaped by pressure, application

**GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION**



Fig2.



Fig3.



Fig4.



Fig5.

Contemporary Design: techniques of the "chancomido", chains of interlocking lines, triangles, and zoomorphic designs, in addition to the technique of the draft paragraph.



Fig6.



Fig7.



Fig8.



Fig9.



Fig10.



Fig11.



Fig12.



Fig13.



Fig14.



Fig15.



Fig16.



Fig17.



Fig18.



Fig19.



Fig20.



Fig21



Fig22.



Fig23.

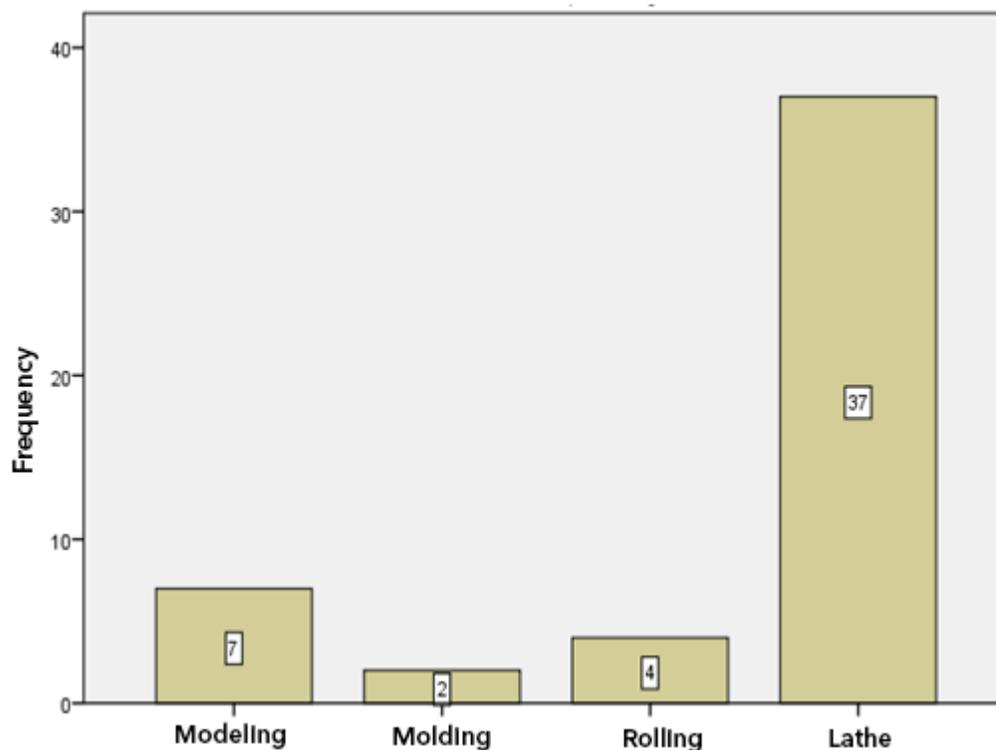


Fig.24

### Globalization and pottery production: the diversification of ceramic styles

As it has already been pointed out, the pottery production part of specific cultural values and symbolic aspects that from the same artisans have internalized in their actions, in their social relationships and in the ceramic objects, however, the entry into force of traits in the workshops is under the premise of potential threats of extinction or replacement of techniques and traditional forms of manufacturing by new styles that are generated by the type of commercial demand and the effects of economic policies implemented on the basis of which, the sovereign national states intermingled and intertwined through transnational actors and their respective probabilities of power, orientations, identities, and networks” (Beck, 1998:27).

In this regard, the findings indicate that, the designs are subject to their interests of market supply and demand, which confirms that the same does not precisely represent a continuity and tradition without rupture or “a sequence of actions, cohesion and identity as a quasi-stable repetitive unit” (Nash, 1975: 54, Piaget, 1952: 224 and 1963: 224 Flavell, cited in Carrasco, 2002: 58) On the contrary, today the office has experienced changes in their methodology with the incorporation of the use of the lathe as the primary technique in a 74 % as it speeds up the process of manufacturing.



Graphic 1. Manufacturing Techniques used

Consequently, a good part of the handicraft production, and in particular the traditional pottery, is disappearing in many parts of the world, to be absorbed the producer groups by cutting capitalist societies (Garcia, 2008:47) and in the case of San Juan de Oriente, was integrated into

the capitalist dynamics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the point that gender transformations. On the one hand, were left to produce objects that were no longer necessary in modern society; and second, because the artisan was not able to compete with industrial products, but that does not mean that its manufacturing pottery this disappearing, but yes, the topic has been incorporated into the nuances of “*hybridization*” a result of the process of cultural modernization through the spread of mass media of communication, that is to say, “most of the goods and the messages it receives on a daily basis each people have been generated outside its territory or in transnational companies, which still residing within the country itself, adjust their production to global standards” (Garcia Canclini, 1993:259 cited in Vergara y Vergara, 2002:2).

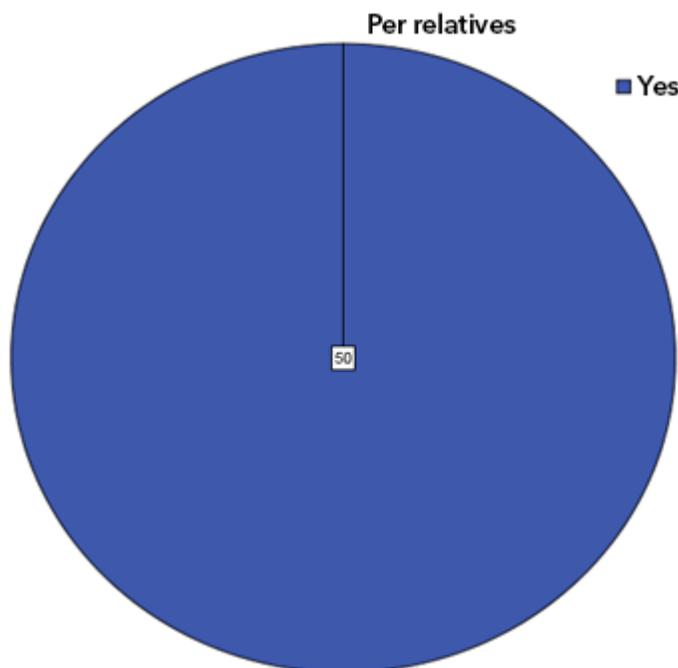
On the other hand, there is no doubt that, from this type of manifestation, in the workshops are built cultural traditions, such as symbolic product, what today we call crafts (Turok, 1996, Canclini, 1990, Novelo, 1993) and that by analyzing the context of local production it is confirmed that the filiation of the craft is transmitted by generational line or “*agnatic*” in that they reserve the inheritance, based on tenure of land, that is to say, land and territorial legacy constitute that plots on which the primary raw material (mud). This transmission of knowledge is reflected in a 100% and can be understood as the set of patterns that a generation inherited from the past, taught by family, friends, school, institutions, among others (Boas, 1964:180).

Also, it should be noted that in spite of the fact that San Juan de Oriente is an inevitable part of the so-called culture “*neo-traditional*”<sup>5</sup> their workshops, in addition, be the place of coexistence of families also, its construction is logically thought to develop objects, for experimentation, for the creation and production of countless pieces with the same design, or otherwise, of unique crafts and exclusive, i.e., there will be parts in the process that are discarded, disrupted, re-used, and others in the process of transformation or development (Freitag, 2012:161). In such a way, that the duality learns and pass works as an integrator, in other words, a sort of continuous transmission of traditional knowledge.

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5. The tastes of consumers are “select” strongly influenced by the media.

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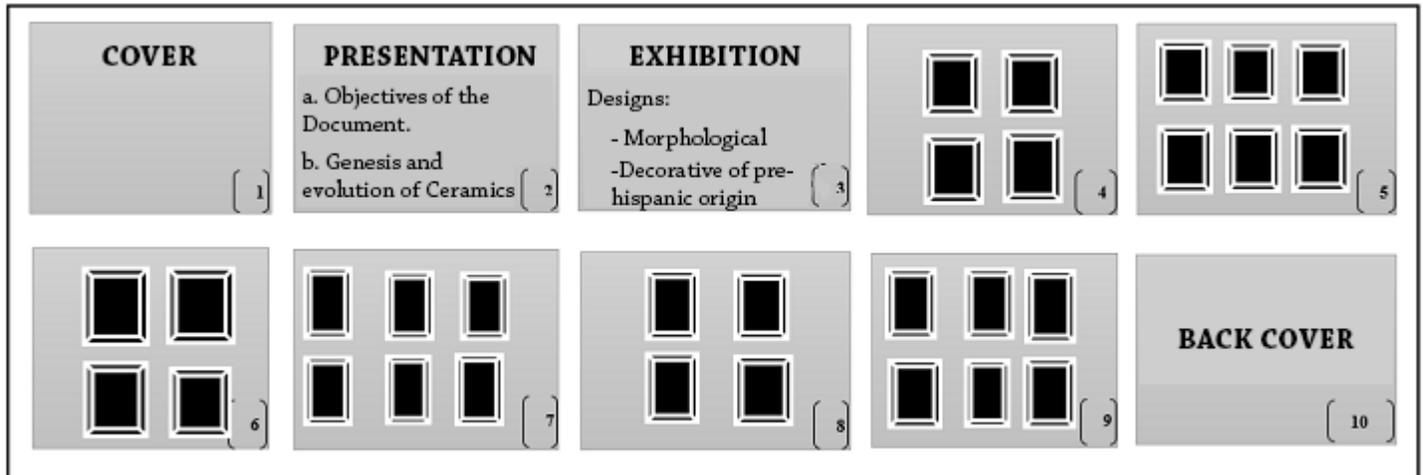
Graphic 2. Transmission of craft knowledge

In any case, the local pottery represents the face cultural and material of the country, it is the synthesis of all lessons learned and transmitted with an identity forged with the ancient Chorotega impetus, but also symbolizes an income-generation activity significant for its creators as it is the primary economic activity of the municipality (61.2%) and in the day-to-day, to say, for the food, clothing, essential services, education and others.

### **The Catalog of Reproductions: a contribution to the craft potter**

Accordingly, the proposal of a ceramic catalog that will integrate morphological and decorative elements of pre-Hispanic origin is presented in this study, precisely because it contributes to the revitalization of the local potter art through the teaching of values and knowledge of their own culture. The preparation of this text has its epistemological and methodological foundation in the History of Art since any artistic creation is the result of human activity and various purposes: aesthetic, communicative, ideas, emotions, and others.

Precisely, for being the theme craft potter carrier of local identity of its people, and because we live in a changing context, has practical impact the introduction of this material, since the pottery tradition is more competitive and globalized economy, precisely because the context of modernity that rebels against the normalizing function of tradition, because the modernist culture has penetrated the values of everyday life (Habermas, 1980:3).



Scheme 1. Proposal of ceramic catalog: morphological and decorative of pre-hispanic origin (material of reproductions)

The intentions of the proposal to display a look of how the artisan can be fed from the inputs of archaeological research and other purposes, above all, of symbolic and aesthetic contributions that allow the artist to find that traditional knowledge, “always”, the one that accompanies it from before birth.

### Concluding observations

In accordance with the analyzed, the findings in question have been allowed to disclose and explain the nature of the pottery production in the workshops of San Juan de Oriente, faced with the prospect of what some call “globalization”, others, “global civil society”, “transnationalism”, “cosmopolitanism”, or “modernity”. No matter what term is the best suited to deal with this scenario, what is certain is that you drag to the pottery production toward two opposing realities, one positive and one negative: the universality and uniformity (Krazov, 2003:240), which explains why today the diversification of ceramic styles and the variability in the manufacturing techniques subject to the use of the potter, as well as the replacement of natural pigments by synthetic dyes.

As a result, the capitalist dynamics at the end of the twentieth century, and with it the subject of tourism in the country, established a market demand that stimulus to local artisans to rediscover innovative techniques, in addition to the already learned in the schoolworkshop, that is to say, it worked on ancestral knowledge such as the so-called “pre-Columbian replicas” with exponents such as Gregorio and Norwin Bracamonte, in addition, the technique of the “chancomido” in the year 90, under the authorship of Helium Gutiérrez and others, with techniques such as the “acrylic” and the “stalled”. The duality of this market has affected the persistence of the iconographies ceramics, but also brought about as a result, the existence of heterogeneous ceramic typologies by creating “artisans by despair and not by choice”, which in practice, for the craft production is suffocating because that saturation of parts in the market

make the sector to be unattractive for the presence of various competitors, which means that the intermediaries have high bargaining power, complicating the marketing channels.

This scenario explains the need to bet on a coherent organization, aware of the weaknesses and strengths of the sector, and it is therefore appropriate to the participation of the municipality and related institutions that advance issues of organization, technical assistance and outreach with financial entities considering that those who make up this office usually live how can almost always poor, with little or no school, in places lacking essential services and without any social protection (Novelo, 1993:73). It is valid to recognize the policies promoted by the Government of *Reconciliation and National Unity*, however, according to the momentum and findings emerged, explained that the scene of the fairs is quite competitive and not all the artisans are encouraged to participate in them.

Finally, the pottery production has experienced in the need for a new dialog between the design, and the ceramic shapes in which the tradition of the artisan has much to contribute to the current culture without this means a delay in the designs, on the contrary, it is intended to give feedback on work done by hand with the toolkit to empower both, so that the local pottery production expresses, to the naked eye, perceptual elements of originality that intertwine and reveal the theme of the collective identity of its inhabitants.

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