

From Homestead to Roadside to Gallery: The Social Life of Late Twentieth Century and Early Twenty-First Century Zulu Ceramics

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Thembi Nala, Vessel (H22cm x Diam 28cm – 2011), Author's Collection and Photograph.

A Mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History, in the Department of History, University of the Western Cape.

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Key words

Ceramics
Tourist Art
Art Gallery
Museum
Ethnicity
Identity
Zulu
Tradition
Social Change
Homestead

Abstract



My research considers the vessels of select women ceramists in and from rural KwaZulu-Natal and reflects on the changing contexts in which their work is utilized, consumed and displayed. The emphasis of my research is on the significance of ceramics in cultural practices and how this has changed or been maintained due to altered social and political circumstances and the changing dynamics of research. Additionally, when ceramic vessels are purchased by tourists, collectors and patrons they are subjected to a range of dialogues between maker and buyer. Finally, vessels may be selected to be displayed in exhibitions or held in collections of museums and galleries; once again, then they will be spoken about and they will speak to us on different terms. Each one of these movements in the life of a pot is reflected in the artist's consideration of form, pattern, balance, shape, colour and symmetry of the vessels. Similarly, each one of these steps in the process engages with a different type of audience in a dynamic and significant way. I investigate how the authors of these vessels become involved in and negotiate a dialogue between themselves, their work and an exterior context that always projects its own voice about the artists and their work.

Declaration

I, Julia Buss, declare that “From Homestead to Roadside to Gallery: The Social Life of Late Twentieth Century and Early Twenty-First Century Zulu Ceramics” is my own work, that has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



Julia Buss

November 2018



Dedication

To the person who is and will always be my greatest love. My life and reason for being is ever richer and deepened by your presence, patience and support.

For Kobus Moolman

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my supervisor Prof Andrew Bank for providing support through this challenging process. I greatly appreciate his time, effort, guidance and the insights he has contributed to this work. I also thank the University of the Western Cape for providing me with the opportunity to pursue this thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to Sue Ogterop for being wonderfully helpful with sourcing information. Similarly I would like to thank Prof Elizabeth Perrill for her generosity in making her research material available. Naturally, there are also family and friends who gave me encouragement and space to keep going with this work – I give thanks to all of you. I would like to especially acknowledge Fiona MacCrimmon who worked with me and enabled me to get to this place. I will always be indebted to the late Prof Juliet Armstrong who took me out to visit the families of the ceramists she worked with and so admired. It awakened my appreciation for their work - we miss you Juliet.

I also want to thank from my heart of hearts all the ceramists who have made my world more beautiful with the objects that they make – I salute you!

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INTRODUCTION

Zulu¹ women residing in rural areas of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa have been preparing clay and hand making ceramic pots with a coiling method for a long time.² The knowledge required to make ceramics has historically been passed down from mother to daughter or mother-in-law to daughter-in-law and was maintained as a skill controlled by specialist families. Today some ceramists have learned their artistry from school or tertiary educational institutions, and it is even a field no longer dominated exclusively by women. Furthermore, makers now also reside in both urban and rural environments, although the ceramists I engage with in this thesis are mainly from rural areas.

My particular passion for Zulu ceramics is largely due to a love of art history and, in the latter half of my career, due to an ongoing love affair with the three dimensional handmade object. I am particularly interested in the artwork of women as “women’s work” that has been neglected in the official telling of history. Many of the rural artists mentioned in this thesis (and many who are not included) have encountered political, social and environmental hardships and have not always received the recognition that they should. In this sense I am seeking to express an appreciation for the artistry of women ceramists from rural KwaZulu-Natal who have experienced difficulties due to their gender, ethnicity and distance from urban centres. I cannot “speak” for them, but I do wish to acknowledge them, their exceptional skill and their vessels that never cease to astound me.

Between 2000 and 2015 I worked with Zulu women artists when I was employed by several arts institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. These included the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, uSisi Designs (a private craft/art business) and Zimele (a non-profit craft/art business), both also in Pietermaritzburg. In these positions I participated in the product development, skills teaching and market access for women art/craft practitioners. I was also actively involved in the economic development of rural women artisans in

¹ I will clarify my use of the term Zulu in the beginning of Chapter One.

² According to Gavin Whitelaw, the archaeological evidence found in rock shelters suggests that the earliest pottery in KwaZulu-Natal dates from 150BC to 300AD and was made by hunter-gatherers. G. Whitelaw “Twenty One Centuries of Ceramics in Kwazulu-Natal” in *Ubumba-Aspects of Indigenous Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds. Brendan Bell & Ian Calder (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 4.

KwaZulu-Natal through the production of original and handmade objects for the domestic and international market. In particular I had the privilege to engage with the famous families of rural Zulu ceramists, including the Magwaza and Nala families, and Azolina MaMncube Ngema through my association with art historian Juliet Armstrong. I myself have a collection of ceramics from KwaZulu-Natal and am a practicing ceramist.

As a ceramist, I have knowledge of the lengthy and complex process of producing a sound ceramic vessel. Because of this, I am constantly in awe of the acumen and skill required to hand-build a vessel with a thickness of 5mm or less that can survive the temperature fluctuations of open pit firing. My personal and work experiences have helped me to understand the complexity and range of the external and internal dynamics that impact on the production of ceramics. First and foremost, the maker is the most influential and active participant in the conceptualisation and creation of a vessel, and of course its intended use is a consideration when envisaging its resulting form, shape, colour and design. However, existing and particularly new outlets and markets for the sale of work similarly impact the production, output, and style of work. However, this is not the complete picture as we shall discover in my thesis. Art galleries and museums impose their own “messages” in the methods they employ in the display and labelling of works, which can influence how the viewer reads ceramics in exhibitions or collections.

As I have indicated, the focus of this study is on women who make ceramics in environments which are isolated and who experience challenges in accessing markets and gaining due recognition for their work. I am particularly interested in an approach which looks at dialogue or discussion. By dialogue I do not mean an analysis of what people have said, but rather something that surrounds the work, perhaps swirling around it like a fog, sometimes revealing and sometimes obstructing our view of it. This concept is something I will expand upon, but in my research I made a conscious choice not to interview ceramists about their work. While interviews might seem to provide first-hand information, this was not a feasible approach for a few pertinent reasons. Firstly, I currently reside in the Western Cape and most of the women live in areas of KwaZulu-Natal that are difficult to access. Secondly, some of the foundational ceramists are already no longer alive and I would have wanted to specifically include them. Thirdly and most importantly, I know through practical work experience that forming a relationship with the ceramists (or anyone else) is a long-

term project. For in-depth interviews, the process of getting to know people can and should take many years, in order to gain respect, understanding and foster openness on both sides. Ceramists are often inundated by researchers who pop in for a day or two and grill them for information with little regard for their time and artistry, or understanding of the nuances of their cultural background and situation. I therefore felt that for a Master of Arts mini-thesis personal interviews were neither practical nor fair to the ceramists whose lives would simply be disrupted by them. I am also aware that language barriers often lead to misinformation and misunderstanding, no matter how skilled a translator is, and my poor Zulu language skills would require a translator.

As much as possible I have included images of the vessels made by many of the artists that are discussed, to celebrate their beauty and acknowledge the makers. On reflection I also decided not to include pictures of ceramists themselves as I am not able to ask their permission and I think that it is only respectful to do so (although I do use images of people that have already been used in exhibitions that I review). The vessels I have included are all part of my own personal collection and the photographs are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

As I began in this introduction, pots of all kinds have been made, used and exchanged for everyday and ritual use in families, communities and kingdoms, a considerable time before South Africa experienced colonisation by outsiders. Ceramic vessels have been designed and created to be used in drinking, transporting and brewing *utshwala* (sorghum beer) and *amasi* (sour milk). The various vessels for making and drinking beer are; the *imbiza*, *uphiso*, *iphangela*, *ukhamba* and *amancishane* (see Diagram 1 at the end of the chapter).

Beer is traditionally brewed in the *imbiza*, which are large (often up to a metre high), un-blackened, wide mouthed pots which can hold up to 50 litres of liquid. Although they are not blackened, they are often smeared with cattle dung on the exterior walls. The *uphiso* is defined by its neck as it was made for transporting liquids and the neck stops spillage, particularly as it is often carried on someone's head. The *iphangela* is approximately 30-45cm in diameter and used for the storing of liquids or as a serving decanter. The most common and well known pot is the *ukhamba*, which has a size dictated by its use as a beer drinking vessel. The smallest of the pots is known as *amancishane* or *amancishana*.

This group of pots have become generically known as *izinkamba* (plural for beer pot) and some are still made and used today, despite more long lasting and convenient alternatives. The *ukhamba* (singular) is the most common of vessel styles today (and has almost become a generic name for any beer vessel).³ However, pots were also made for cooking and eating, although many of these latter styles and shapes are no longer produced in the twenty-first century as people have adopted plastic, enamel and metal alternatives.

This research will demonstrate that Zulu ceramics is not only a utilitarian matter of performing domestic duties, but can also operate in communion with the sacred, with buyers and in a museum. In fact, I would like to suggest that these vessels have a biography. By biography I mean that they have a history or past, which makes sense given that they have been around in KwaZulu-Natal since 150 BC. But this is not quite how I want to convey their story; as only being subject to the influences of their makers and keepers. I will explain their story in relation to their human associations because it is so intimate (these are handmade not machine-made objects). I suggest that vessels have a “voice” of their own, however one might want to explain “voice”. I like the playful analogy of mist revealing and obscuring. Although inanimate, these objects are deeply influenced by their contexts and in turn also affect their own contexts: in this way they can be described as actively social, as having social lives. This is the reason for the title – from homestead to roadside to gallery – since these are the places that represent the changing stages in the social lives of vessels as a pot moves from one to the other. Furthermore, these are also social places in which there is much discussion taking place, with noisy contestation and clamour.

I have earlier described my interest in the women who make the vessels and my attempt not to obscure their voices or be seen to speak for them – as I do not wish to ignore the personal connection that pots have with their makers, users, buyers and viewers. I intend to use the journey of pots from one place to another as a method of investigating the effect that these places and associated people have on the aesthetics and understanding of such vessels. How do vessels retain within their shape, colour and decoration a language that both receives ideas and expresses ideas? Zulu pots come from a particular cultural group and are embedded in the world view of this group.

³ See Elizabeth Perrill, *Zulu Pottery* (Noordhoek: Print Matters 2012).

In Chapter One I have used the voices of those who have written about Zulu ceramics from as far back as the 1910 to outline the changing ways in which pots and potters have been spoken about. The voices of this period were largely those of the coloniser who were attempting to fit ceramic vessels into a racialized framework in order to justify the superiority of one group over others and therefore to rationalise their activities in the country. Not long after, in the 1920s, disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology wanted to prove their validity and there was a development of departments for them in universities. Although there was at this time significant interest in cultural groups within South Africa and “scientific” methodologies of research, scholars were not overly preoccupied with Zulu material culture. Most ceramic vessels were written about in the light of their domestic function, since they were perceived as restricted to being used for eating, drinking and serving with. Something different or original was suggested about vessels from the 1980s onward. Partly as a result of a changing political climate in South Africa, the inclusion of art historical investigation in research, as well as a hybridised academic disciplinary approach and a more Africanist-centred appreciation, a new “paradigm” was developed. Rather than vessels being seen only as useful tools in the daily life of Zulu people, researchers began to become aware of them as purveyors of a range of “messages”. A new generation of scholars began to investigate and question how the aesthetics of pots informed users about social norms and gendered behavioural expectations. For example, Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw and Dieter Reusch produced a paper entitled “Pots that Talk – *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*” in which they expressed the concept that decoration on pots had intentionality and that vessels themselves were in active dialogue with people.⁴ Zulu beer pots or *izinkamba* are among the few vessel types to have survived the myriad of social, political and economic changes experienced in KwaZulu-Natal. Research has suggested that their survival may be due to their ability to be a conduit between this world and a sacred world. In beer ceremonies *izinkamba* are central to the activities of ancestral worship as objects that enable a conversation between living and dead ancestors.

⁴⁴ Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw, Dieter Reusch, “Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*”, Southern African Humanities, 20 (2008).

In Chapter Two I will investigate the next stage of the pots' journey, the hustle and bustle of the market place. As already mentioned pots have social lives and they circulate in diverse places and become involved with numerous people who view and engage with them in different ways. This is not to suggest that their movement is a linear one from homestead to roadside to gallery, or that all pots move. Some never leave home. Igor Kopytoff suggests that, "In every society, there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized."⁵ As he explains, these things are marked as sacred by a process of "singularisation" which resists their becoming commodities.⁶ With regard to Zulu vessels some will not be sold and are "singularised" due to their status in beer ceremonies and significance to families, and so they remain at home. This chapter will investigate the various types of market, with three main outlets (some for both training and selling) that had a dynamic impact on the careers of KwaZulu-Natal ceramists. Rorke's Drift, the African Art Centre and Vukani Association were instrumental in the retailing of work. However, as important as nearby selling outlets are, so too is the marketing of vessels through publications, exhibitions and awards. Ceramic artists became known and sought after because their work gained increasing exposure and recognition. This coincided with changing attitudes toward cultural artistic diversity and, of course, the ending of apartheid in 1990. As South Africa re-engaged with the world after sanctions, rural areas and therefore ceramists and their work were increasingly accessible. This chapter will highlight, through case studies of selected ceramists, the extent to which they were (and still are) fully engaged with and understand the needs of their buyers. Similarly, they fulfil their own needs as creators which, in turn, can influence the market. Despite their isolation and the labels of "tribal", "traditional" and "authentic" that are often attached, particularly to African art and more so rural art, ceramists are fully in control, if not controlling what happens to the aesthetics of their vessels in response to the market.

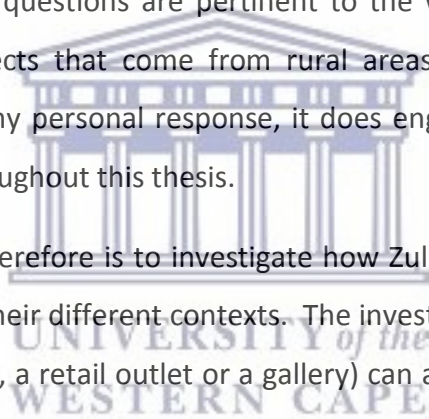
Chapter Three introduces us and the ceramic vessel to places which can be described as elitist and judged as communicating a sense of exclusivity and even arrogance. The very buildings can be intimidating and take on an authority over their subjects and visitors. The chapter investigates, from my own perspective, the experience of two exhibitions held in

⁵ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of things: Commoditization as Process" in *The Social Life of Things*, ed., Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 73.

⁶ Ibid, 73.

Cape Town. These exhibitions both feature Zulu ceramic vessels and are “Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics” held at The Castle of Good Hope and “Hidden Treasures” held in the South African National Gallery. Of course, one could ask: why choose Cape Town when all the ceramists are based in KwaZulu-Natal? The answer is really an attempt to demonstrate just how successfully (and with what complications) vessels do travel, since a vessel in an exhibition can be critically interrogated no matter where. These exhibitions were chosen as they demonstrate the different ways in which vessels communicate, because of the way they are displayed, and the institutions they are in. How does a viewer come to understand that presentation, lighting, labelling, space and description dictate whether the object they are looking at is designated as artefact or art? How do exhibitions enable or disable a viewer forming their own opinions or challenge them to question what they are looking at, or be led to investigate the circumstances that might surround the object? These questions are pertinent to the ways in which we display all objects, but particularly objects that come from rural areas of South Africa. Although Chapter Three is framed as my personal response, it does engage with the broader issues that I have grappled with throughout this thesis.

The intention of the thesis therefore is to investigate how Zulu ceramics are spoken about and how they speak to us in their different contexts. The investigation also debates how the context of the vessel (a home, a retail outlet or a gallery) can affect the resulting aesthetics of the vessel. And, of course, what of the voice of the makers, how do they project themselves into the shape, size, colour and decoration of a pot?



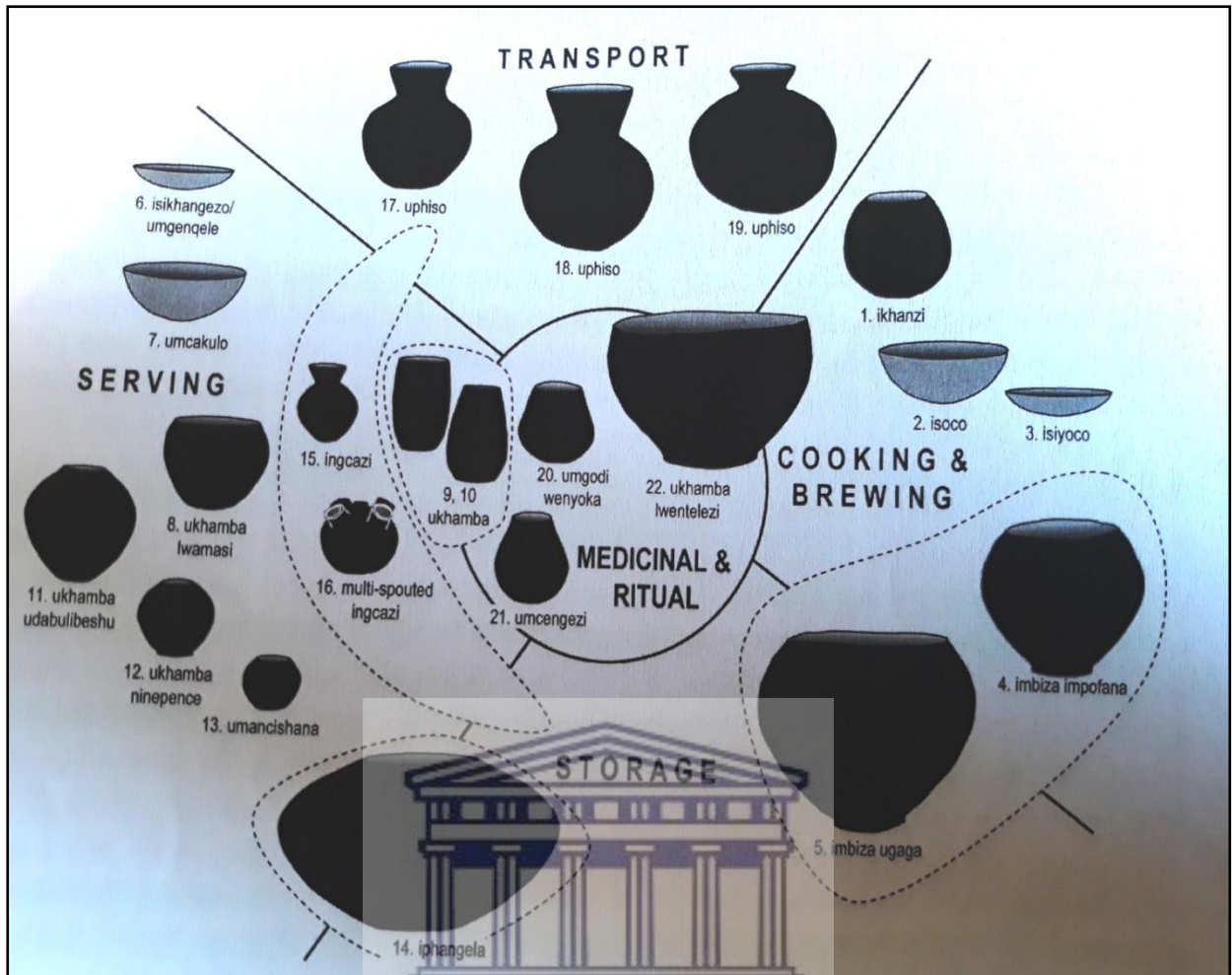


Diagram 1: Classification of Zulu ceramic containers.⁷

⁷ Kent D. Fowler, "Classification and Collapse: The Ethnohistory of Zulu ceramic use", *Southern African Humanities*, 18, 2 (2006): 98.

CHAPTER ONE

CERAMICS IN THE HOMESTEAD: CHANGING PARADIGMS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ZULU CERAMICS, c.1910 – 2018

It is appropriate to begin the investigation of Zulu ceramics at the core of the social life of people and of vessels – the home. The home is central in shaping an individual's values, behaviours, beliefs and the ethics expected of them, even today in the twenty-first century. The house or homestead was and still remains a significant space in which ceramic pots are active in the dialogue between people, both living and dead. This chapter will demonstrate that not only did the remains of Zulu homesteads and settlements reveal something about the identity of past residents, but that their ceramic vessels have been found to be intimately involved in the maintenance of the inhabitants "world-view".

It is important at this juncture, however, to first explain my use of the term Zulu (which includes Zulu ceramics, Zulu women, Zulu homestead). I am fully aware that Zulu identity does not reflect a single and homogenous unit, and that to identify people as Zulu commonly refers not only to language but infers a political and cultural entity with shared and similar practices. The early Zulu chiefdoms (before the late eighteenth century) were fluid, drawn from many originating groups of people. The "Zulu" were (and still are) a varied population due to marriage, agricultural and climate forces, movement and conflict. John Laband in his article, "The Land of the Zulu Kings", explains: "Men and women who believed they were descended from a common ancestor formed a social unit, sometimes called a clan ... the political unit or chiefdom, consisted of a number of clans..."⁸ In the late eighteenth century a process of expansion and political centralisation ensued, the reasons for which are complex and still debated by historians. I refer researchers to Laband's article

⁸ John Laband, "The Land of the Zulu Kings" in *Zulu Treasures: of Kings and Commoners – Amagugu KaZulu*, (Ulundi & Durban: the Local History Museums, 1996): 17-25.

and to John Wright⁹ for a detailed account of the geographic and political history that informs any discussion of the term Zulu. It is a complex term around which debate and analysis continues. But people will and do describe themselves as Zulu (as you will discover in this thesis), and I therefore use the term to talk about ceramics and ceramists who are from KwaZulu-Natal.

Ceramic vessels are active participants in the social life of people and have been assigned a “purpose”, be it symbolic or utilitarian, by those interacting with them. Within their specific social context vessels enable the continuation of social norms for their human, and in this case Zulu, users and operate as dynamic agents in a conversation with the ancestors of the living. However, it has taken time for scholars and researchers of Zulu society and their ceramic vessels, to view pots as having cultural meanings associated with a social function and a participatory role in ritual acts that maintain social dynamics and belief systems. The ceramic vessel is undoubtedly an involved participant in the social life of its maker and user, but surprisingly it also has a full and vibrant social life of its own.

In this chapter I aim to track the different ways in which Zulu ceramics have been interpreted by various academic disciplines in South Africa over the previous century. Although ceramic vessels express the world-view of their makers and users, they are similarly subjected to the world-view of those doing the investigation or assessment of their function. Much of ceramic analysis has been by observers who were from groups with political and economic dominance over the indigenous communities they sought to understand. The inability of ceramic vessels to “speak for themselves”, as it were, has meant that they have been subjected to the analysis of others who inevitably had their own political and social agendas. Interpretation of ceramics has gone through various phases as diverse disciplines – most prominently, anthropology, ethnology and archaeology – interpreted them according to the dominant theoretical paradigms of a particular time.

⁹ John Wright, “Making Identities in the Thukela – Mzimbuvu region c.1770-1940” in *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016),182-215.

As will be examined here, ceramic vessels were initially employed to indirectly prove successive concepts of the racial evolution of human types associated with the development of academic disciplines in modern South Africa. Early in the twentieth century these new academic disciplines actively identified racial groupings and strove to document the evolutionary stages or “progress” of these groups. At the same time, other researchers aimed to establish a timeline for the occupation of South Africa by different groups, sometimes in order to justify the colonial occupation and appropriation of land. The findings of research was regularly, and mostly inadvertently, exploited to rationalise the importance of separate development for differing races and the segregation of races which resulted in the creation of an apartheid state in 1948.

It was only towards the end of apartheid and after apartheid, during the 1980s and 1990s and its hegemonic agencies that South African researchers began to explore indigenous knowledge systems with greater sensitivity. Just prior to the turn of this century ceramic vessels came under investigation not as racial identifiers, but as dynamic participants in social and spiritual relationships between makers and users. Towards the end of this chapter, therefore, I provide detailed analysis of some of the aesthetic, technical and production methods of ceramic making that these new researchers have uncovered. I will link these directly to fresh insights into the communicative aspect of pots and how this is constrained and accommodated by a range of symbolic cultural practises.

Zulu Ceramics in a Racialized, Evolutionary Framework c.1920 – 1950

In the early twentieth century the study of South African societies was heavily influenced by British models of prehistoric studies and ethnography. Martin Hall reflects that: “In keeping with the functionalist ideas then dominant in British anthropology, these archaeological culture-societies were seen as unchanging units, replaced by similar units through the process of migration and invasion.”¹⁰ Writers of this time were “assigning tribes to positions in an evolutionary hierarchy according to nineteenth century concepts of social evolution. Such societies were believed to be largely incapable of change unless stimulus came from

¹⁰ Martin Hall, “Tribes, Traditions and Numbers: The American Model in Southern African Iron Age Ceramic Studies”, *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 38 (1983): 51.

another group at a higher level.”¹¹ These commentators discounted or ignored the capacity of “tribal” subjects to undergo change due to impetus that arose out of independent, internal dynamics and requirements.

In South Africa it is perhaps not surprising that anthropology became linked with “Native policy” and administration, as it became the professional study of “tribal” groups. John Wright emphasises the shift by which “native administration” gave way from around 1880 to more bureaucratised practices and the business of identifying, classifying and codifying tribal laws, customs and languages. It now became preoccupied with “controlling” native populations. So, for example, in 1881 a Native Affairs Commission was appointed in then Natal to make recommendations on how tribal laws and customs could be turned to the use of colonial administration.¹² Following the recommendations of Theophilus Shepstone, the Diplomatic Agent of Native Tribes, the Kingdom of Zululand was incorporated into Natal by the turn of the century. The former kingdom had been divided into regions for white settlement and farming, and separate reserves for blacks.

Prior to the development of distinct university-based academic disciplines, such as anthropology and archaeology, the late nineteenth century experienced a surge of interest in other cultures. In part this interest was prompted by the colonial imperial enterprise and by the application of emerging fields of knowledge production, in particular new evolutionary theories of progress based on assumptions about the superiority of the West. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first people in South Africa to contribute to gathering and collating ethnographic data were amateurs in the field. The people with interest and involvement in the groups they encountered when settling in South Africa were initially missionaries, travellers and officials.¹³ Much of the material they gathered was little more than journalistic, but it did constitute the beginnings of recording information about the differences in the groups they encountered, albeit primarily within the framework of hierarchy and difference.

¹¹ Ibid, 51.

¹² Wright, “Making Identities in the Thukela”, 210-211.

¹³ Juliette Leeb du Toit, “Contextualizing Incentives for the Acceleration of Artistic Production and Patronage of Zulu-speakers in KwaZulu-Natal c.1920-1940” in *Ubumba-aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds. Brendan Bell & Ian Calder, (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 102.

These amateurs studied and recorded the rituals and daily lives of others for a variety of reasons. Missionaries in particular were involved in a direct relationship with their immediate communities and benefited from increased knowledge of indigenous languages and cultural systems. It was pertinent for them to have a fuller understanding of the people they worked with in order to further their proselytizing endeavours. Understanding cultural differences was essential to their work and increased discernment of the “other” ensured that a larger proportion of their subjects were retained under their influence.¹⁴

A.T. Bryant was the most influential amateur social evolutionist and ethnographer of Zulu tribal culture of the early twentieth century. A missionary priest stationed at Mariannhill in KwaZulu-Natal, Bryant arrived in South Africa in 1883 and over a sixty-year period studied and wrote extensively about the Zulu people. In his 1949 book *The Zulu People: As They Were Before the White Man Came*, Bryant frames his analysis of material culture in relation to the notion of social hierarchy. In a deliberation about Zulu ceramics, he states:

In the northernmost end of the African continent lived the Ancient Egyptians, who have left us the earliest African historical records and also the earliest, still extant, earthen-ware pots. And the earliest Egyptian pots, as shown in the British Museum, and made in pre-dynastic times, 9,000 years ago, are, in shape and technique, almost identical with those produced in Zululand in these present days.¹⁵

Bryant does not immediately account for how this similarity of pots between two distinctly different cultural and geographic groups is possible. He is, however, reluctant to concede that the skill level required to make Zulu pots could have emanated from the makers themselves. Instead he ascribes their skill level as somehow being related to a “higher” cultural group, the Egyptians. Bryant is repeating what has become known as the “Hamitic theory or Hamitic myth”, in which scholars classified the “Hamitic race” as a subgroup of the Caucasian race which included, among others, the Egyptians. The Hamites were believed to be related to the son of Noah, Ham, and became a term in ethnology and linguistics for a

¹⁴ Juliette Leeb du Toit, “Contextualising Incentives”, 102.

¹⁵ A. T. Bryant, *The Zulu People as they were before the white man came* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1949), 395.

division of the Caucasian race and the group of related languages these populations theoretically spoke.¹⁶ Although the Hamitic myth has changed greatly since its origins in the sixteenth century and being employed to justify, among other things, the slave trade, what is essential about this pervasive “myth” is that it was generally applied as a way of explaining how anything technically or culturally sophisticated or “civilized” could not be generated by black Africans. For example, it was asserted by one of its best known advocates, C.G. Seligman, that “the Negro race was essentially static and agricultural, and that the wandering Hamitic ‘pastoral Caucasians’ had introduced most of the advanced features found in Central African cultures, including metal working, irrigation and complex social structures.”¹⁷

Bryant’s writing epitomised the thinking of his time: that the “Other”, in this case the Zulu, could not have achieved technical and aesthetically proficient pieces of work without outside influence from a superior race. Thus he states: “But whenever he [the Zulu] is brought within range of the inspiring example and energising leadership of Caucasian man ... be it European or Asiatic he is capable of following with a hearty and effective response.”¹⁸ Bryant fails to appreciate how Zulu and other South African ceramists were able to connect with an indigenous “energising leadership” (to use his own term), long before the white man came. He describes being on a dig on the North Coast of Natal where he found pottery with a “rolled” rim or a concave neck, which for him was unusual since “no Bantu tribe that has ever lived in that region, or indeed anywhere else in South East Africa, makes earthen pots of such types.”¹⁹ He goes on to state that in the Cape Town Museum there were similar pieces that had been exhumed in Zimbabwe.²⁰ While Bryant does not directly make a connection with Bantu-like pottery being from Eastern Bantu groups migrating into South Africa, neither does his writing offer an explanation for where it came from. The rationalisation of the similarity is suitably vague when he asserts that: “The human mind is

¹⁶“Wikipedia on Hamites” accessed May 10, 2018 – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/hamites>, 5.

¹⁷ Ibid, 5.

¹⁸ Bryant, *The Zulu People*, 373.

¹⁹ Ibid, 396.

²⁰ Ibid, 396.

itself everywhere so identically fashioned, that it was practically bound to express itself in more or less similar ways in various places.”²¹

Bryant neglects to address the subject of ceramic production and distribution, and fails to recognise that the social networks and interaction in Southern Africa were the explanation for finding ceramic pieces that appear to come from elsewhere. Even when he does acknowledge that perhaps groups did develop pottery without outside influence, he is ambivalent about it being possible and derogatory in his definition of it. So, for instance, in a reflection on the style of the handles of Strandloper pottery in the Cape Town Museum, he states: “Plainly, then Bushmen either derived their pottery knowledge direct from the Strandlopers, or both peoples derived it from a single source – unless each of them invented it independently.”²² He is unconvinced that they did create the pottery and goes on to describe it in belittling terms: “The Strandloper pottery we noticed in the Cape Town Museum consisted of squatty ovoid vessels carrying a short upright neck.”²³ His use of language seems to indicate that the pottery was developed independent of outsiders which he alludes to in the statement: “Certainly both Strandlopers and Bushmen were at home in South Africa ages before the Bantu had ever reached there.”²⁴ Bryant not only believes that the creation of sophisticated ceramic pieces is attributed to racially superior people, but he alludes to levels of racial development. As Saul Dubow explains in his 1995 book, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, “Bantu speakers were mostly considered to be markedly superior to the ‘Bush’ races. And, whereas the latter were regarded as being in a state of terminal decline or degeneration, the Bantu were conventionally portrayed as being a ‘virile’ or ‘vigorous’ race.”²⁵

Bryant’s language usage in defining ceramic vessels clearly assigns racial inferiority to Africans and similarly defines hierarchical ranking of groups within South Africa. In addition, as Hall explains, doctors, clergymen and natural scientists like A.T. Bryant and P.W. Laidler who wrote about Southern African native life, emphasised what they saw as the primitive

²¹ Ibid, 394.

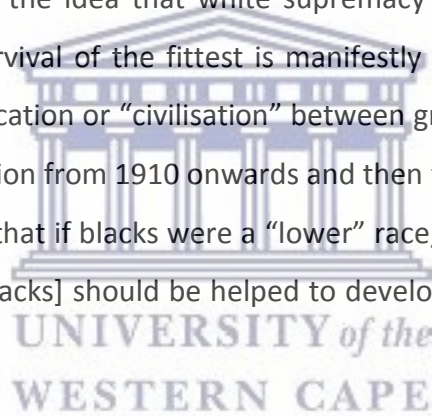
²² Ibid, 395.

²³ Ibid, 395.

²⁴ Ibid, 395.

²⁵ Saul Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), 66.

aspects. Their theories were shaped by assumptions about the superiority of various groups and attempts to plot from scraps of tradition and speculation, their sequence and directionality of the migrations and wars that had led to the contemporary distribution and cultural expressiveness of black society.²⁶ This ranking almost always placed the Bushmen as the first but most primitive inhabitants, followed in turn by the culturally somewhat higher Hottentots, and then the more advanced “higher” Bantu who migrated from the north. Creating a timeline of when various ethnic groups were present in South Africa was therefore imperative to the rationalisation of white rule. Scholars have called this approach the “settler paradigm or settler school”.²⁷ The “settler paradigm” provided justification for colonial expansion and appropriation of territories by creating a myth that intrusion by the colonisers was “the natural order of things”. Not only were the colonisers entering an empty land with the Bushmen nearly extinct but, as Dubow clarifies, “habitation and conquest serves to reinforce the idea that white supremacy is the natural outcome of a logical process where the survival of the fittest is manifestly seen to prevail.”²⁸ Similarly, categorising levels of sophistication or “civilisation” between groups, supported the political programme of racial segregation from 1910 onwards and then the institution of apartheid in 1948. It made perfect sense that if blacks were a “lower” race, segregation was permissible on the grounds that “they [blacks] should be helped to develop along the lines most suited to their nature”.²⁹



Changes in ceramic form or style were typically attributed not to interaction or socio-economic change and development within the one group, but rather to one group being influenced by another coming into their space. P.W Laidler, who was a Medical Officer and amateur researcher stationed in East London, wrote an article in 1932 entitled “The Bantu Potting Industry and Its Impacts on the Other Native Potting Industries in South Africa.” Laidler begins by attributing the introduction of pottery into South Africa to “the Hottentot.”³⁰ He goes on to speculate that there is evidence to suggest that the “Hottentot

²⁶ Martin Hall, “Pots and Politics: Ceramic Interpretations in Southern Africa”, *World Archaeology*, 15, (3) Ceramics (1984): 263.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 263.

²⁸ Dubow, *Illicit Union*, 70.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

³⁰ P. W. Laidler, “The Bantu Potting Industry and its Impacts on Other Native Potting Industries in South Africa”, *Southern African Journal of Science*, 29 (Oct, 1932): 778.

pottery (Type 1) of the west has certain affinities with that of the Bantu, and that in the east the degenerated and imitative potters were much influenced by Bantu practices from the north and west.”³¹ Almost immediately, Laidler utilises archaeological evidence to define the concept of a hierarchy of development and the superiority of Bantu groups coming from elsewhere to enhance the material culture of static, undeveloped, more “primitive” local populations. “The Bushmen, wherever he developed the art of working clay, did so imitatively, and only where there was long or close contact with the superior race ... The Bushman was deficient in the knowledge of potting technique.”³² Laidler ultimately concludes: “In origin both Hottentot and Bush [his term for Bushman] potting industries are due to impacts of Bantu civilization commencing, so far as the latter are concerned, during that period of Bantu culture known as the stone building or ‘Zimbabwe’ period.”³³

Zulu Ceramics as Functional Household Objects in Social Anthropology c.1930

In the course of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the period between the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War and the 1906 Bambatha rebellion, young Zulu men in particular began to cultivate a broad conception of their ethnicity, probably in reaction to the alienation of being migrant labourers in Johannesburg’s mines.³⁴ According to Paul La Hausse De LaLouvière, these inhospitable, overcrowded and alien environments were places where “miners took refuge in social solidarities, rooted in language, age and kinship ... If anything the migrant experience forged stronger ethnic identities.”³⁵ This was reinforced, and perhaps rooted in, various scholarly projects which entrenched the theory that a single tribal identity in KwaZulu-Natal was “Zulu” – an area that in reality had a much more fluid and complex population. This development of ethnic identity was further enhanced by political and economic developments in South Africa, including growing land shortages,

³¹ Ibid, 778.

³² Ibid, 783-4.

³³ Ibid, 791.

³⁴ Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer, “Tribing and Untribing the Archive” in *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, eds., Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2016), 16-17.

³⁵ Paul La Hausse De LaLouvière, “Death is not the end: Zulu Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Zulu Cultural Revival” in *Zulu Identities, being Zulu, Past and Present*, eds. Benedict Carton, John Laband and Jabulani Sithole (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2009), 258.

labour demands, increased taxation, and the policies of separate development which led to racial segregation and apartheid in 1948.³⁶

In the development of social anthropology in South Africa, the 1920s were what Thomas Kuhn would term a “scientific revolution”. Kuhn argued that changes or shifts in scientific thinking are not gradual, but proceed in sudden “leaps” or paradigm shifts. These adjustments to accepted thinking occur when current theory becomes inadequate and a new period of science is ushered in.³⁷

The new paradigm in social anthropology was to become known as structural-functionalism. It was, according to Hammond-Tooke, “fired by the almost messianic zeal that Malinowski, the ‘Arch-Functionalist’, inspired in his disciples, based on the belief that they now held the key to unlock the mysteries of these enigmatic cultures – participant observation based on extended fieldwork and functionalist explanation.”³⁸ However, despite the fervour and enthusiasm that the first South African fieldworkers such as Monica Hunter, Ellen Hellerman, Hilda Kuper and Eileen and Jack Krige had for this “new” method of research, the functionalists have been criticised. Some scholars have claimed that the method of “capturing the present moment” used by functionalists, created a somewhat romanticised portrayal of static and unchanging social groups. This was misleading given that these “groups” were already undergoing significant social change and cultural deprivation, with most black South Africans already living in designated reserves with their men employed as migrant manual labourers in urban centres.³⁹ Andrew Bank has encouraged a re-evaluation of the work and legacy of these structural functionalists, especially women scholars like those cited above. He persuasively argues that much of this criticism was from Marxist, Africanist and postcolonial critics who stereotyped social anthropologists as taking a “theoretical stance ... lending support to the divisive racial politics of segregation and

³⁶ Frank Jolles, “The origins of the twentieth century Zulu beer vessel styles,” *Southern African Humanities*, 17, (2005): 103.

³⁷ Cited in W.D Hammond-Tooke, *Imperfect Interpreters – South Africa’s Anthropologists 1920-1990* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1997), 71.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 7.

apartheid in South Africa.”⁴⁰ In fact, their perspectives were far more left liberal and Africanist. What has been overlooked, according to Bank, is the “extent to which they and their liberal peers actively challenged segregation and apartheid.”⁴¹

But despite the negative connotations and conceivably unfounded charges against functionalism, it certainly marked a radical shift from the earlier evolutionism and diffusionism that preceded it. Functionalists did, in general, view societies as consisting of parts or institutions that were interconnected, interdependent and supportive of each other, evident in the overview of Zulu history and culture published by Eileen Jensen Krige in 1936. Jensen Krige (1904-1995) spent her childhood in Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal, where she became familiar with the Lobedu people she would later go on to study. She had studied economics at Wits University but then switched to anthropology and became a student in the university’s very first social anthropology undergraduate class of 1924 with lecturer Winifred Hoernlé.⁴² Krige’s doctoral thesis was the result of in-depth research into the group she called the Zulus (although she does acknowledge the complexity of this term “as most of the tribes residing in Natal call themselves Zulus”).⁴³ According to Krige, her 1936 book *The Social System of the Zulus* was “a compilation rather than a result of personal investigations in the field [which] necessitated protracted correspondence with numerous persons living or working in Zululand, whilst incidentally I availed myself to a short holiday-trip through Zululand and Natal ... to clear up a few difficulties.”⁴⁴

Krige maintains a predominantly functionalist outlook in her writing on Zulu ceramics by breaking down her analysis into different “institutions” that keep the “whole” of society functioning. For Krige, Zulu ceramics plays merely a utilitarian function within the homestead as part of the overall economic life of the Zulu. Thus pots are dealt with under the sub-heading “Industries” in a chapter on the “Economic Life of the Zulus”. The chapter headings themselves are an illustration of the different social institutions that operated to create what she presented as a cohesive whole, in the sequence of Birth and Childhood,

⁴⁰ Andrew Bank, *Pioneers of the Field: South Africa’s Women Anthropologists*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 273.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 272.

⁴² *Ibid*, 45.

⁴³ Eileen Krige, *The Social System of the Zulus* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd, 1936), vi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, v.

Marriage Ceremonies, Political Organisation, Law and Justice, Zulu Religion, Medicine and Magic.

She categorises the ceramics made by Zulus as mere domestic utensils as she states: "Pots are used for cooking in, for holding beer, and there are wash-basins, as well as small saucer like plates for eating *amas*."⁴⁵ From this perspective ceramic vessels are instruments associated with practical and mundane tasks in daily life. With reference to the most sacred area in the Zulu homestead, the *umsamo* (at the back of a house, opposite the door), Krige states that: "The *umsamo* is used for keeping pots and other utensils ... Though the *umsamo* of every hut is sacred, that of the chief hut of the kraal is especially important, for here all the offerings to the spirits are made, and here the important guardian spirits of the kraal abide."⁴⁶ While Krige is accurate in her description of the *umsamo* as sacred and being used for pots, she makes no attempt to investigate why pots sit in this area. She is aware that this space is important to ancestral spirits, but does not connect the pots, the *umsamo* space and the ancestral spirits, as later anthropologists would do. Thus, for example, anthropologist Dieter Reusch in his study of the Mabaso ceramists of KwaZulu-Natal published in 1998, writes that: "In communion rituals with the ancestors, meat and beer are left overnight in *umsamo* as offerings to them ... Every time *utshwala* (beer) has been brewed, some will be left overnight in *umgodi wenyoka* [a type of small pot] in *umsamo* for the enjoyment of the ancestors."⁴⁷

Of course, it must be conceded that Krige's studies were not specifically concerned with the function of ceramics; in fact her section on pottery is only half a page, and hence her treatment of it is cursory. But if she made more allowance for interconnectedness, a relationship between pots, users and ancestors might have been revealed. As will later be discussed, even the most utilitarian of artefacts or objects are invested with social value that go beyond domestic function.

Zulu Ceramics as Tribal Indicators in Archaeology, c.1936-1965

⁴⁵ Ibid, 208.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 46.

⁴⁷ Dieter Reusch, "Imbiza Kayibil' Ingenambheki: The Social Life of Pots" in *Ubumba-aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds. Brendan Bell & Ian Calder (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998): 27.

Archaeologists working in the same time period in South Africa were actively using artefacts as evidence to support the theory of distinct “tribal” (later “ethnic” types) despite their methodology being different. Archaeologists did not observe cultural groups, but revealed the movement of people and who they might be through the assessment of found objects or, more often than not in the case of ceramics, pieces of objects. Archaeologist J.F. Schofield, who worked throughout South Africa and extensively in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1930s, sought to attribute pottery style and decoration to distinct tribal groups. I agree with Martin Hall’s criticism of Schofield’s interpretations of pottery as demonstrating “little departure from the untrammelled generalisation of settler literature.”⁴⁸ Hall states that: “[Schofield] felt that language and ceramic design were connected and could be linked with particular tribes.”⁴⁹ Like P.W. Laidler, Schofield saw “Hottentot pottery” as perhaps the original pottery in South Africa. However, unlike Laidler, he does not seem to have seen a connection or influence in their pottery from the Bantu tribes moving into South Africa. He states that: “Hottentot pottery was made for a considerable length of time in South Africa, yet the known deposits ... show no trace of any development.”⁵⁰ Schofield acknowledged that the Bushmen were the original inhabitants of South Africa. In his view they, “lived on easy terms with the Bantu tribes which were pushing down from the north and north-east.”⁵¹

Schofield, like others, was once again voicing the “settler paradigm” and “demonstrating the powerful effect of the political and economic environment on interpretation of the past.”⁵² Schofield was also interested in language as a way to study African cultures and determine how different ethnic groups and races were interconnected, primarily by using objects as signifiers of language to determine ethnicity. But using material culture as symbolic of language is of limited analytical use. As Patricia Davison eloquently explains: “Symbolic communication through material culture differs from the formal decoding of language. In

⁴⁸ Hall, “Pots and Politics”, 266.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 266.

⁵⁰ J. F. Schofield, “Natal Coastal Pottery from the Durban District : A Preliminary Survey – Part II”, *South African Journal of Science*, Vol 33 (March 1937): 996.

⁵¹ J. F. Schofield, “Natal Coastal Pottery from the Durban District : A Preliminary Survey”, *South African Journal of Science*, Vol 32 (November 1935): 521.

⁵² Hall, “Pots and Politics”, 262.

practice, symbolic communication works through evocation ... and [is] not entirely explicable in semantic terms.”⁵³

Nonetheless, Schofield came up with a method to divide ceramics into what he called “groups”, which were essentially tribal. As an example, there was “the Nguni group ... the Sotho group and the Venda group.”⁵⁴ Not only did Schofield assign tribal groups to various styles of ceramics, he also put ceramics into classes, such as:

Class NC1 – including all pottery which seemed to precede the Bantu occupation of the district.

Class NC2 – including pottery belonging to the earlier iron-using pastoral agriculturalists. This pottery shows a strong Sotho influence.

Class NC3 – including pottery belonging to the later iron-smelting pastoral agriculturalists. This pottery is probably due to Lala influence.

Class NC4 – including modern Native pottery and its immediate antecedents.⁵⁵

Each of these classes of pottery was described in terms of typology, based on shape and form, and the way in which vessels had been decorated. Similar to those before him, Schofield discusses the later stage pottery, particularly NC3 found in the “Tugela valley”⁵⁶ of Natal, as “very different to that of the Nguni peoples who at present occupy Natal and we must therefore seek its makers amongst the earlier tribes of iron workers who colonised this country.”⁵⁷ Schofield and others wrote with the expectation that ceramic classes did reflect tribes: so much so that it became a part of Iron Age studies “common sense”. Martin Hall reflects that the inference that “ceramic cultures are equivalents to peoples has remained unchallenged [into the 1980s] and is sufficiently axiomatic to be implicit in most publications.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Patricia Davison, “Material Culture, Context and Meaning – A Critical Investigation of Museum Practice with Particular Reference to the South African Museum” (PhD., Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town, 1991), 25.

⁵⁴ J. F. Schofield, “A Preliminary Study of the Pottery of the Bantu Tribes of the Union of South Africa”, *South African Journal of Science*, 39 (Jan 1943): 256.

⁵⁵ Schofield, ‘Natal Coastal Pottery – Part II’, 993.

⁵⁶ Actual Spelling used in the article - J. F. Schofield, “Natal Coastal Pottery from the Durban District: A Preliminary Survey”, *South African Journal of Science*, 33 (1935): 514 (current spelling is Thukela).

⁵⁷ J.F. Schofield, “Natal Coastal Pottery: A Preliminary Survey”, 515.

⁵⁸ Hall, “Pots and Politics”, 266.

This does seem to have been the case when we look at the later research and writing of Anne Lawton. Lawton was awarded a Masters of Arts degree in the Department of Social Anthropology in 1965 at the University of Cape Town. Despite the problems of the monographs on tribal societies being too general to engage topics in depth and their tendency to idealise and mythologise the “tribal” societies they reviewed, the period of between 1940s and 1960s saw a continuation of the tribal monograph.⁵⁹ Although not a monograph on a singular tribe, Lawton’s thesis was an extensive classification of different ceramic styles which she attributed to tribal groups in South Africa. The ceramics she used and referred to in her thesis were collected by experts or purchased at local markets throughout South Africa. While Lawton can be credited with making a significant contribution to the indigenous ceramics collection at the South African Museum in Cape Town,⁶⁰ the myth that ceramic change was the result of “successive migratory waves”⁶¹ remained explicit in her work of the 1960s.

Some of the empirical details in Lawton’s study, however, did point to a more considered, historicised analysis. For example, she did acknowledge that there was internal barter between groups, as some groups stopped making pots and purchased what they needed from others. “In the Transkei too, the Thembu and Xhosa peoples no longer manufacture their own ware, preferring to buy what they require from the Hlubi and itinerant Basuto potters.”⁶² She was also interested in the capacity for her findings to be used to investigate the contacts between groups. She anticipates that: “It might be possible to trace cultural and trade contacts between tribal groups, perhaps in this way to assist research in the fields of archaeology and cultural history.”⁶³ Furthermore, Lawton acknowledges contact between Nguni and Europeans as indicated by vessels with the addition of handles, and to an extent by the loss of “traditional” decorative techniques.⁶⁴ Similarly, one of her interviews with a “Zulu potter” reveals that the woman learnt the technique of pot making

⁵⁹ Hammond-Tooke, *Imperfect Interpreters*, 91.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics, 1960s-Present” (PhD, Department of the History of Art, Indiana University, 2008), 3.

⁶¹ Anne Lawton, “Bantu Pottery of Southern Africa” (MA, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, 1965), 1.

⁶² *Ibid*, 2.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 2.

⁶⁴ Lawton, “Bantu Pottery”, 160.

at a local school.⁶⁵ This negates the well-worn idea that ceramics was only taught within family groups by relatives and friends.⁶⁶

Despite her use of ethnic types to define different pottery styles, Lawton did explicitly acknowledge social change brought about by the transfer and trade of pots between groups, and the degree to which even style may have been influenced by such contact between groups. Furthermore, she recorded changes to the structure and shape of pots through western influences from shared ideas and European education. In these respects, her work may be seen to bridge the older “tribal” paradigm and the more modern historicised approach in ceramic studies.

Zulu Spirituality and Ceramics: Anticipating the Modern Paradigm, c. 1970s

There has been a strong emphasis in the modern literature on the spiritual associations of Zulu ceramics, as analysed in the following section. This emphasis has its roots in the work of Axel-Ivar Berglund who was born in South Africa to Swedish missionary parents. At a young age Berglund recalls having been aware of the meaning of apartheid and of his family’s disdain of it. On one occasion his father beat him thoroughly when he returned from his “white” school and spoke about Africans in a derogatory way.⁶⁷ He himself became a missionary with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa. He was initially led to study medicine, but ended up doing classics (Greek, Latin and Philosophy). He eventually went on to study theology and was ordained in Sweden. Berglund started his theological career in 1956 at a parish in Vryheid in Northern KwaZulu-Natal and was later placed at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Rorke’s Drift. In 1960 he became a member of the South African Council of Churches. As an adult Berglund became involved in the anti-apartheid movement and in the early 1980s returned to Sweden as life in South Africa became difficult due to his political stance. His book *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, published in 1976, focuses on the cosmological life of Zulu people.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 109.

⁶⁶ Juliet Armstrong, “The Magwaza Family” in *Ubumba – aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds. Brendan Bell & Ian Calder, (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 41.

⁶⁷ “Axel-Ivar Berglund” accessed at 19 May 2018, <http://liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/berglund>, 8.

Berglund's research signalled a major shift in focus, or paradigm as Kuhn would term it, from that of earlier ethnographers. He proposed a more intimate and in-depth association between the use of ceramic vessels and the spiritual life of Zulu people. Despite what Gluckman said in 1942, that the Zulu "ancestral cult" had died out, and what Krige similarly stated, that *only* the ancestral cult of chiefs remained, Berglund insisted that:

The existence and presence of the shades is not doubted [among Zulu people]. They are a reality which is so strongly interwoven into kinship relations that a world without them is not possible ... It is only of recent date that scepticism is finding its way into Zulu thought-patterns and expressed essentially among intellectuals, particularly those in urban settings.⁶⁸

With direct reference to Krige's work, Berglund states that the *umsamo* of the hut is sacred.

Flesh, beer and snuff which are used in communion rituals with the 'shades' are set aside in the *umsamo* overnight ... Then she puts one pot of beer in the place of the shades overnight ... Then they (shades) taste it. They become happy, seeing that we have remembered them.⁶⁹

The process of brewing beer is also performed as a communion with the "shades." Berglund notes that: "Women brewing for the purposes of communion with the shades will grind the necessary millet in the close vicinity of the doorway so that they [the shades] see their food which is being prepared for them."⁷⁰ In comparison to Krige, Berglund takes the association of beer rituals and pots further. He sees pots as being active participants and conduits in ancestral worship. Krige recognised beer as being "of great social importance,"⁷¹ but writes of it as an accompaniment to life events and as a means of affecting reconciliation between people when there is disharmony.⁷² Berglund, on the other hand, makes a connection between the pots in a beer ceremony and communion with the ancestors or "shades." It was not until later in the twentieth century that researchers would explore the more

⁶⁸ Axel-Invar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1976), 78-79.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 103.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 108.

⁷¹ Krige, *The Social System*, 58.

⁷² Ibid, 58 -59.

personal relationship between pots and ancestors, or the “shades” or *amadlozi* as they are also known, as I discuss later in this chapter.

The Modern Paradigm: Zulu Ceramics as Containers of Meaning, c.1980-2018

The 1980s was a time of “shifting sands” in South African history, with ideological and political change building up as the sway of the apartheid state was challenged. South Africans were either excited by the possibility of a new era or afraid of the outcome, as they experienced the internecine violence of the late eighties. The change brought with it new possibilities that are reflected in the work and writings of a new generation of researchers exploring Zulu ceramics. This enormous shift in political orientation enabled reflection into the nature of post-colonial and post-apartheid identity, which meant challenging white cultural centrality and reviewing South African distinctiveness from other viewpoints.⁷³ As Juliette Leeb-du Toit aptly states in her reflection of the work of Juliet Armstrong as artist and researcher on Zulu ceramics: “This [time] was reflected in the conscious eroding of boundaries long entrenched by policies of marginalisation and segregation. It also gave rise to shifts in preconceived values and paradigms coincident with the development of African centred curricula, cross-culturalism and cultural realignment.”⁷⁴

The notions of African centred, cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary work are distinctive features of the new generation of researchers that I associate with “the modern paradigm”. The formal boundaries in disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology and art history began to fall away, or at least become “fuzzy around the edges.” Researchers, particularly from the 1990s onwards, increasingly worked together across disciplines, whether out of personal connections or interests that drew them beyond their disciplinary frameworks. Whatever the formal or informal reasons, the former picture of discrete disciplines with set methodologies seems to have given way to a complex web of interdisciplinary ideas, countering the idea of a straight line of development within a singular discipline.

⁷³ Juliette Leeb-du Toit, “Referencing Africanness in the work of Juliet Armstrong” in *For Juliet – Ceramic Sculptor 1950 – 2012* eds Brendon Bell and Bryony Clark, (Pietermaritzburg: Tatham Art Gallery, 2014), 56.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 56.

The 1980s also brought the work of revisionist historians and anthropologists who were concerned with a range of ideas that challenged a universalist and timeless views of aesthetics and culture. Such new revisionist approaches included post-colonial, feminist, psycho analytic, as well as socio-political (including Marxist) critiques which, from an art historical point of view, broke down the singular privilege of Western Art. One strand of Marxist historical analysis focused on modes of production to explain pre-colonial states. Another was interested in social structures as a tension between the interests of the state and capitalism driven by class conflict. A third strand was that of social history, in which detailed “histories from below” were written. Oral histories were used to demonstrate the survival and resilience of the oppressed as well as “their” story.⁷⁵ In this part of my chapter an emphasis upon oral history and personal agency will be seen to be a feature of the work done by various researchers, and will be identified and detailed as I review their work.

However, at more or less the same time, there was also another type of story being told as the ceramics by Zulu practitioners began to be featured in art galleries rather than ethnographic museums, a literal shift from one building to another. Prior to this period, consideration of what was deemed art was definitely Eurocentric. As Alexander Duffey argued: “Art history in South Africa [before the 1990s was very much elitist, projecting the White mythology of Western man onto the South African world of Art.”⁷⁶ Art historians tended to take a modernist view by following the internal developments in the discipline, making assumptions about the autonomous nature of an artist and their work. Very often the approach was based on the idea of the “artist as genius”.⁷⁷ Furthermore, there was a clear distinction made between “high art” and “popular craft”. Zulu ceramics was definitely viewed through the lens of the latter and was relegated to the category of “primitive craft” or artefact rather than as “civilized art”.⁷⁸

Although there had long been an interest in Zulu material culture in archaeology and anthropology, as I have explained, it was not until the 1990’s that there were art historical

⁷⁵ Hammond-Tooke, *Imperfect Interpreters*, 169-171.

⁷⁶ Alexander E. Duffey, “Art History in South Africa: Past and Present” in *Memory and Oblivion: Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art, held in Amsterdam 1-7, 1996*, (Dordrecht, Norwell MA Kluwer, Academic Publishers, 1999), 114.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 114.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 114.

discussions about aesthetics and expression in Zulu ceramics.⁷⁹ One of the features of the work of art historians is that they root their studies in the scrutiny of individual objects and the biography of that object. Through the lens of art history the surface decoration, shape, size and colour of pots was now magnified to discuss the purpose or “meaning” of each element. Similarly, the vessel is viewed in its social context. As art historian Duffey explains: “The untenability of a closed linear chronology in art history was realised and a new emphasis was placed on the contextualisation of the work of art, the artist and the social system within which the art work was made and accepted.”⁸⁰ Along with this contextualisation of art pieces, there was also a renewed assertion of the validity of indigenous cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and an object’s relationship with social life including ritual.

In effect the dialogue about Zulu ceramics turned from being “the way vessels get spoken about”, as an element of material culture in a so-called holistic society in the first half of the twentieth-century, to an investigation of “how vessels are speaking to us” at the turn of the century. The idea of objects having communicative qualities through their decorative elements became a central theme and strongly informs my own analysis in this thesis. Even article titles began to reveal this shift of focus: titles such as “The Social Life of Pots” (1990) and “Pots that Talk” (2008) encapsulate this new paradigm. As a result, the analyses shifted from discussions about essentialised and fixed Zulu identity or ethnicity towards the creativity of the named individual in the production of their own distinctive artistry in a dynamic and rapidly changing world. My own discussion, therefore, will reflect this shift in focus from a Eurocentric to a more Afro centric view of the work being produced by ceramists. The rest of this chapter will also review the paradigm shift in terms of viewing vessels as utilitarian objects in daily life rather than as being purposeful and active participants in ritual activities. Vessels, the makers and the manner in which the pots are used are intimately linked: in short, pots cannot be separated from their social context.

Early twentieth century writers from the 1930s onward, such as ethnographic investigators like P.W. Laidler and archaeologist J.F. Schofield examined earlier, were highly influenced by

⁷⁹ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 4.

⁸⁰ Duffey, “Art History in South Africa”, 115.

European typological approaches to ceramics. Vessels were viewed or differentiated as types based on their shape, form, decoration technique and layout. These differences in vessel type were often seen as indicators of “tribal” identities, as has been already discussed. There are echoes of this even in recent writings. In his overview of “Twenty One Centuries of Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal”, archaeologist Gavin Whitelaw states that:

Archaeologists in southern Africa have done little work on establishing the precise function of vessels ... Style is the key concept in our understanding of early pottery. Style in this sense is ‘the patterned variation in appearance’ ... specifically it refers to sets of particular combinations of decorative motifs and vessel shapes.⁸¹

Indeed, his word style is actually the same as typology. Like earlier writers, he likens these differences in vessel type to groups of people.⁸² Even if his usage of terminology has changed from ethnic group to labels such as “agriculturalists or hunter-gatherers”, they are nonetheless groups set out in a chronological sequence of change.

But in the same article Whitelaw does allude to something different in the dialogue about vessels. He infers that particular combinations of decorations and shapes of vessels in pre-colonial societies were not infinitely variable. Analysis of ceramics shows that potters produced repetitive combinations of shapes and motifs, yet in an archaeological site pottery will contain only a few of the possible hundreds of combinations.⁸³ Whitelaw deduces that “pottery style has social significance. Motifs and motif combinations remind the viewer of the symbolic structures and themes upon which cultures are built. Indeed, pottery style functions as a structured and symbolic non-verbal form of communication.”⁸⁴ This late twentieth-century analysis ushers in a new dialogue about ceramics in the Zulu homestead. Ceramics seemingly has a voice and is now viewed as being a “communicator”.

I further propose that vessels were important to enable communication in several ways: with the ancestors of the homestead, to maintain social structure and normative behaviour

⁸¹ Gavin Whitelaw, “Twenty One Centuries of Ceramics in Kwazulu-Natal” in *Ubumba-aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds. Brendan Bell & Ian Calder, (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 3.

⁸² Ibid, 3.

⁸³ Whitelaw, “Twenty One Centuries”, 3.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 3.

and to preserve power relations and roles. It is therefore appropriate to look at the communicative and social value of ceramics in Zulu households or homesteads, in order to answer the pertinent question posed by Kent D. Fowler: “Why [does] ceramics continue to be made and used in rural African communities despite dramatic changes in material culture since the introduction of European substitutes [?]?”⁸⁵

The emphasis on spirituality is a central theme in the new paradigm and it is this association that recent scholars began to dissect. As Innocent Pikirayi and Anders Lindahl propose in their 2013 article, “[T]here is a communicative process between the living communities and the dead, on one hand, and among the living peoples themselves, on the other hand. The social dimension involving communication with the ancestral world is evident when you examine pottery.”⁸⁶ The “shades” are the dead of Zulu families, who remain in constant contact throughout people’s lives. As Elizabeth Perrill in her 2012 book *Zulu Pottery* states: “Even those who hold Christian beliefs [today] often integrate a deep respect for ancestors in their spiritual life.”⁸⁷

In stating this, it must be acknowledged that these scholars were not the first to recognise that ceramics were involved with ancestor rituals. As previously mentioned, Krige indicated that vessels were placed for the ancestors in the sacred space in a hut called the *umsamo*. Berglund took this further in positioning a communion with the shades in the act of beer drinking. However, what these later scholars recognised is that vessels perform the role of communicating by connecting the “shades” or ancestors with their living kin through decorative elements present on these vessels. In investigating the different ways in which Zulu ceramics have been interpreted by various academic disciplines in South Africa, I will now concentrate on scholars who have focused primarily on individuals and families of ceramists residing in KwaZulu-Natal.⁸⁸ Most of these researchers worked from the province’s capital city, Pietermaritzburg. All began to publish their work in the late

⁸⁵ Kent D. Fowler, “Classification and Collapse: The Ethnohistory of Zulu ceramic use”, *Southern African Humanities*, 18, 2 (2006): 94.

⁸⁶ Innocent Pikirayi and Anders Lindahl, “Ceramics, Ethnohistory, and Ethnography: Locating Meaning in Southern African Iron Age ceramic assemblages”, *African Archaeological Review*, 30. (2013): 467.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, (Noordhoek: Print Matters, 2012), 7.

⁸⁸ There will be further discussion on these ceramists in case studies in Chapter Two.

twentieth century. They include the work of archaeologist Gavin Whitelaw⁸⁹ from the Natal Museum and the late anthropologist Dieter Reusch⁹⁰ of the KwaZulu-Natal Museum Services in Pietermaritzburg. Reusch focused on the Mabaso people of the Msinga district in the Upper Thukela Basin (between the Mooi and Buffalo tributaries of the Thukela River). He also worked with late art historian Juliet Armstrong⁹¹ of the University of KwaZulu-Natal Fine Art Department (now the Centre for Visual Arts), who studied the ceramists of the Magwaza family in the mPabalane district north of the Thukela River on the banks of the Nsuze River (usually described as the Lower Thukela Basin). Armstrong was also involved in researching the Nala family of potters, also residents of the Thukela Valley at Oyaya. Elizabeth Perrill, an American art historian who did her PhD on Zulu ceramics in 2008 through the History of Art Department of Indiana University and is currently in the art history department at the University of North Carolina, has published numerous articles as well as the 2012 book titled *Zulu Pottery*. Perrill did substantive research into the Zulu families and individuals who reside in the Thukela river basin and the northern reaches of KwaZulu-Natal.

Collectively, these researchers have provided careful and comprehensive investigation into ceramic vessels in the Zulu homestead. Colour symbolism and its spiritual significance is one central theme in their new decorative stylistic analysis. In particular, Armstrong unpacks the detail of the ceramic beer vessel to reveal that there is something significant in the decorative element of the colour black. "In accordance with ancestral deference, all drinking and serving vessels are blackened by a second firing or *ukufusa*, performed after the initial biscuit firing. This blackening firing is only done once and involves the carbonisation of the outer walls for specific reasons concerning the ancestors."⁹² Armstrong, Whitelaw, Reusch and Perrill have similarly indicated that pots used in ritual beer feasts are intentionally blackened. Black and cool are the preferences of the "shades" or *amadlozi* (ancestors or souls): "The dark, cool places associated with the *amadlozi* include

⁸⁹ Gavin Whitelaw. "Twenty One Centuries of Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal" in *Ubumba - Aspects of Indigenous Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds., Brendan Bell and Ian Calder (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998) , 3-12.

⁹⁰ Dieter Reusch, "Imbiza Kayibil' Ingenambheki: The Social Life of Pots" in *Ubumba – aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds., Brendan Bell & Ian Calder (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 19-40.

⁹¹ Juliet Armstrong, "The Magwaza Family" in *Ubumba – aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds., Brendan Bell & Ian Calder (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998),41-46.

⁹² Juliet Armstrong, "Zulu Pottery" in *Indilinga Africa Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 4, 1 (2005): 341.

the *umsamo* (a cool area in the main room *indluinkulu* where the sacred area for the *amadlozi* is situated behind a small raised wall or *ubundu*), the womb, the gallbladder of cattle, the blackened pots and meat-platters as well as the blackened marriage-skirt (*isidwaba*).⁹³ In their view, ancestors move and commune with their kin within these spaces of darkness. Given that not all pots are blackened, and that the process requires an additional firing and therefore consumption of resources of time and material, I would agree that blackness has a more significant symbolism than just colour. It is the blackness that communicates to the user that the pot is appropriate as a sign of respect for the presence of the ancestors. Armstrong explains: "People in rural areas will frequently not sell vessels because of the familiarity the *amadlozi* have with the vessel, selling it could upset the order and harmony of the family."⁹⁴

I have already discussed the significance of blackness for pots, but why decorate further? Decorative features on pots are not confined to colour. Designs can be produced by incision, impression and the creation of relief elements, which can be done with fingernails, grass stems and nails, when the pot is in a "leather hard state."⁹⁵ Particular to the research of this period is the claim that the decorative surface treatment of pots is more than functional. This is both an indicator of an art historical methodology, attentive to the formal elements of objects, and an indication of the post-1960s anthropological turn to symbolic anthropology. Patricia Davison explains this term as involving "a different focus on objects as signifiers of meaning ... Objects were interpreted as symbolic representations, as vehicles of meaning, as conveyers of cultural identity."⁹⁶

The following discussion is an example of how interdisciplinary boundaries generated new ideas. Although decoration is primarily done on the shoulder of a pot, which as Armstrong asserts, enables "a firmer grip on the vessel when it is picked up for drinking,"⁹⁷ (since the vessel might be slippery with liquid), Innocent Pikirayi proposes something more than the utilitarian in his article "Ceramics and Group Identities." "It is in the way that the various

⁹³ Ibid, 341.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 342.

⁹⁵ Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw, Dieter Reusch, "Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*", *Southern African Humanities*, 20 (2008): 526.

⁹⁶ Davison, "Material Culture", 16.

⁹⁷ Armstrong, "The Magwaza Family", 42.

pattern elements combine with each other that a 'language' is constructed."⁹⁸ As previously indicated, not all pots or vessels for serving and eating food are adorned. Embellishment tends to be on vessels that are active participants in the social lives of people, and therefore meant to be more visible. As a consequence of their capacity to transmit messages, textured decoration is applied only to vessels used for drinking and serving beer.⁹⁹ The implication is that decoration serves a further purpose of conveying ideas within the social group and operates as a symbolic messenger.

Another instance of the interdisciplinary ferment and "symbolic turn" is evident in Armstrong, Whitelaw and Reusch's reading of the decorative element of a triangle, *umcijo*, a frequently used design on pots. The word *umcijo* was the name of a military regiment and also means "a sharpened stake, and the related verb *cija*, sharpen, incite or urge, as in *ukucija impi*, to urge on an army ... The sharpened stake is an obvious male symbol. Stakes in the cattle pen fence for instance should be planted only by men."¹⁰⁰ Hourglass motifs, or two triangles connected, are variations of male identity and are called *ihawa* (shield). "Hourglass motifs have been variously interpreted as representing married men,"¹⁰¹ because only a grown man and not a boy is able to carry a shield. Furthermore, a triangle/stake combination "might stand for the virility and fierce leadership that people value in their bulls. The hourglass/shield set perhaps represents the stability and the ordered calmness that people value in their oxen: In terms of authority and sexuality (the homestead head) is likened to a bull; in terms of social responsibility and value to the community he is like an ox. The two images could reflect the two sides of the complex role of maleness in [Zulu] society."¹⁰² The values implied by the pottery are those that are expected of men and particularly homestead leaders. This indicates that pots can enter into social and cultural life not just as metaphors for other things, but as a concrete embodiment of the transmission of cultural values.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Innocent Pikirayi, "Ceramics and Group Identities", *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 7, no.3(2007): 294.

⁹⁹ Armstrong et al, "Pots that Talk", 526.

¹⁰⁰ Armstrong et.al, "Pots that Talk", 529.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 531.

¹⁰² Ibid, 531.

¹⁰³ Nigel Barley, *Smashing Pots – Feats of Clay* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 76.

Although decoration viewed as a “communicator” of social values has further extended understanding of ceramic vessels, I would nevertheless caution that the individual intention of the maker and nuance of interpretation needs to be recognised. As Davison asserts, “By failing to account for the responses of individuals as human agents, structuralism overlooks the role of the active subject in society and thereby restricts individuals to rule-bound behaviour.”¹⁰⁴ The later twentieth century researchers did take the intentionality of ceramists they interviewed into consideration. As Pikirayi states, there are two “sides” to decorative style: “formal variation as an aspect of *emblemic* style that refers and transfers messages to a social group about conscious affiliation and identity and *assertive* style as a kind of variation particular to individual identity.”¹⁰⁵ Armstrong et al. offer a clear example of how individual ceramists imprint their own personal narratives in pot decoration and give an excellent example of “assertive” style on a pot. They refer to a letter-motif accompanied by an incised machine gun, “which reminds one that the Msinga area has a long history of bloody internecine feuds. The potter lost her husband in fighting. It seems the decoration on her pot promotes appropriate social norms, but with a clear warning of the violence that can erupt from drunkenness.”¹⁰⁶ Yet they are fully cognisant of the ambiguity of messages on pots and take into consideration Perrill’s warning that “the connotations and contexts for various designs are constantly changing.”¹⁰⁷ What should be taken into consideration is that material culture is continually in a process of being created and is therefore not a fixed representation or reflection of behaviour. What is similarly important is the interpretation of pots in “context” as part of active ritual and social action.

Unlike traditional Western art pieces, which become elevated to art status largely by being framed and stationed on walls or on pedestals, non-Western art is often “meaningful” when participatory and active in daily life. As Davison warns, “devoid of involvement in social practice cultural objects have no meaning at all, they are practically inert.”¹⁰⁸ The context of ceramic usage is salient, but frustratingly it is here that it is also often ambiguous. Again late twentieth-century researchers such as Dieter Reusch were not the first to realise that the

¹⁰⁴ Davison, “Material Culture”, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Pikirayi, “Ceramics and Group Identities”, 293.

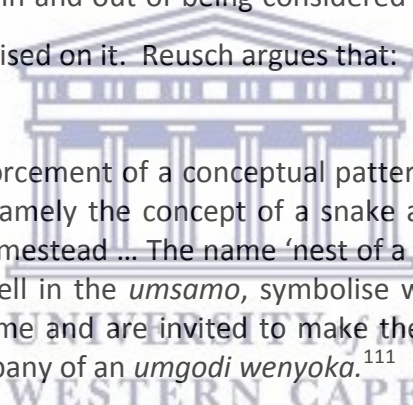
¹⁰⁶ Armstrong et al, “Pots that Talk”, 541.

¹⁰⁷ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 33.

¹⁰⁸ Davison, “Material Culture”, 35.

social context of vessels was important. Both Krige and Berglund mentioned pots in either social or spiritual ceremony. What appears to be different in Reusch's research with the Mabaso ceramists of the KwaMabaso chiefdom of the Msinga district is his view that "the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are constantly crossed in the usage of vessels."¹⁰⁹ This alerts us to the fact that pots are complicated to interpret outside of a designated social space or specific use. Arjun Appadurai explains: "Things can move in and out of the commodity state ... such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal."¹¹⁰

Reusch specifically examines the vessels termed the *umgodi wenyoka* (hole/nest of a snake) and *umancishana* (smallest of the beer drinking vessels), either of which can be used for setting beer aside for communion with the ancestors. What is interesting about these vessels is that they can move in and out of being considered sacred. The *umgodi wenyoka* pot has a design of a snake incised on it. Reusch argues that:



Here we have the reinforcement of a conceptual patterning of a religious order in another medium ... namely the concept of a snake as a manifestation of an ancestor who visits a homestead ... The name 'nest of a snake', and the fact that these snakes like to dwell in the *umsamo*, symbolise welcome. The ancestors are made to feel welcome and are invited to make themselves comfortable in the *umsamo* in the company of an *umgodi wenyoka*.¹¹¹

Yet, as Reusch points out, the *umgodi wenyoka* is only symbolically significant if and when it is used as a receptacle for serving the ancestor's beer. In other words, once it is no longer used in the *umsamo*, this pot can be used for other domestic activities.¹¹²

A further feature of contemporary scholarship on Zulu ceramics is close attention to the processes of ceramic production and a heightened awareness of gender roles. This later literature on ceramics also has greater interest in an African-centred interpretation of

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 36.

¹¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: University Printing House, 1986), 13.

¹¹¹ Dieter Reusch, "Reflections Concerning the Pottery from KwaMabaso, Msinga" in *Zulu Treasures: of Kings and commoners – Amagugu KaZulu*, (Ulundi & Durban: the Local History Museums, 1996): 121.

¹¹² Dieter Reusch, "Imbiza Kayibil' Ingenambheki: The Social Life of Pots" in *Ubumba – aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds., Brendan Bell & Ian Calder (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 28.

activities relating to ceramics and its manufacture. What was “part and parcel” of the methodology of participant observation of the early twentieth century, according to Davison, is that “... structuralists never claimed to be addressing the dynamics of practice ... In short, structuralism does not attempt to encompass a theory of practice, nor does it address the related issue of human agency or intentionality.”¹¹³ What changes late in the century was applying indigenous knowledge systems to the understanding of practices involved in ceramic production and validating the maker’s part in vessel production.

When explaining belief systems, Per Ditlef Fredriksen suggests that Western methods of engaging with the world are not always useful in understanding and interpreting African ideologies. He outlines a specifically “Sub-Saharan African way of thinking that trades on extended notions of material agency ... [T]he concept of *thermodynamic philosophy* refers ... to ... potentially polluting states and actions [being] considered ‘hot’ while cleansing agents are ‘cool.’”¹¹⁴ Similarly, for Zulus who follow traditionalist protocols, pollution can manifest itself primarily as darkness and similarly darkness can be associated with heat and impurity.¹¹⁵ This assessment offers an additional way to understand the relationship between women and pottery. Women are not only working with a substance of the earth, but one that also requires heat. This could be an explanation as to why there are many associated taboos when making pottery, from the digging of clay to the firing of pots through to decorating their surface and their uses.¹¹⁶

Let us briefly glimpse at the difference in description by a structural functionalist in an account of making a vessel and that of a later twenty-first century scholar. Krige states: “To make a pot, red clay is reduced to a fine powder and then worked into a proper consistency.”¹¹⁷ Armstrong et al mention restrictions associated with pollution beliefs: “Pregnant women do not make pots because the work conflicts with that of their husbands’ ancestors and interferes with the timing of the birth. This is because moulding the clay is

¹¹³ Davison, “Material Culture”, 36.

¹¹⁴ Per Ditlef Fredriksen, “When knowledges meet: Engagements with Clay and Soil in Southern Africa”, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 11 (2011): 289.

¹¹⁵ Whitelaw, “Pollution Concepts”, 205.

¹¹⁶ Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw, Dieter Reusch, “Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*”, *Southern African Humanities*, 20 (2008).

¹¹⁷ Krige, *The Social System*, 208.

considered analogous to the development of the foetus, which a man's ancestors mould in his wife's womb from the blood her ancestors supply."¹¹⁸ But despite many taboos that relate to pollution concepts and ceramic manufacture, not all apply today, for example, "menstruation does not prevent potters of the Magwaza family from working. This change is probably rooted in the full time nature of their work."¹¹⁹ As with all social practices, they evolve and change over time, one should therefore be wary of encoding taboos as an unchanging, "static" element.

Taboos and cultural practices that encompass ceramics are viewed by the later twentieth and twenty-first century researchers as enablers that express power dynamics and socio-political alliances. Davison states that "power relations may be expressed through artefacts"¹²⁰ and are therefore also part of the strict rules that maintain social order. These researchers identified that the typology of a ceramic vessel was not only an indicator of a social group that made it, but integral to the control of women to the advantage of men. As Armstrong et al state: "The accumulation and control of human creative and productive capacity was the dynamic principal on which society was founded ... [T]he ideology that supported this economic structure are still employed today to bolster the authority of men and chiefs."¹²¹

This ideology is essentially the enactment of *ukuhlonipha* (to honour, or be polite and respectful), which traditionally was (and in many cases still is) expected of married women. Zulu society is patrilineal and exogamous, which means that marriage cannot occur with a woman from any of the clans of a man's four grandparents.¹²² The wife therefore comes from outside the husband's clan and is probably similarly foreign to his geographic area. Her presence has potential to upset the harmony of a homestead as she brings with her unknown ancestors. It therefore makes sense that social regulations would control women in order to contain and maintain them as a resource and as a way to deal with the perceived dangers of strict clan exogamy.

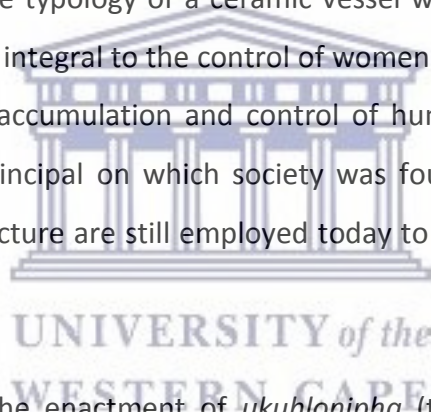
¹¹⁸ Armstrong et al. "Pots That Talk", 520.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 520.

¹²⁰ Davison, "Material Culture", 40.

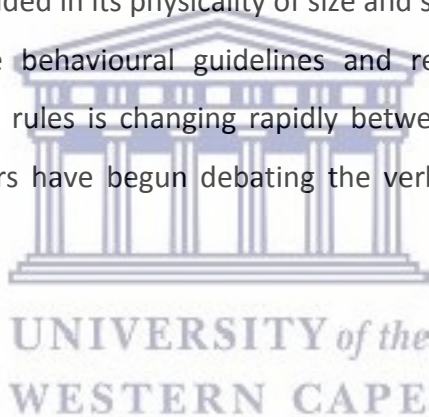
¹²¹ Armstrong et al, "Pots that talk", 514.

¹²² Ibid, 513.



Elizabeth Perrill endorses the role of vessels in the subtle and abstract connotations that exist between *ukhlonipha* as a physical act and the attributes of vessels. Perrill maintains that the beer vessel used for drinking is itself a symbolic device, as she affirms: “Because the physical dignity and politeness demands a restrained bodily position one sees the ceramics intended for use or presentation falling into a certain range of sizes.”¹²³ The ceramic vessel is handled in a respectful way because of its size and shape, requiring the user to perform actions that tell the participants that “human beings should be respectful, polite, *hlonipha* beings.”¹²⁴

The ceramic beer vessel is an enabler for the transmission of socially acceptable behaviour, which can be interpreted as the restraint of women, both through the ritual actions that accompany its use and embedded in its physicality of size and shape. But I agree with Perrill when she warns that these behavioural guidelines and regulations are complex and evolving: “[T]he use of these rules is changing rapidly between rural and urban areas of South Africa. Several scholars have begun debating the verbal aspects of contemporary *ukhlonipha*.”¹²⁵



Conclusion

The *ukhamba* or beer pot is one type of Zulu ceramic vessel that is still very much in use today. Its survival is due to its active role in maintaining social norms and harmony with ancestral spirits. Despite this, though, it must be remembered that ceramic beer vessels were not always used. Prior to ceramic beer pots, tightly woven baskets were used to brew, store and also drink beer. But by the end of the nineteenth century, according to Frank Jolles,

¹²³ Ibid, 144.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 144.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 132.

The well-nigh universal shift away from beer baskets and the adoption of blackened ceramic vessels in their stead, had important ritual concomitants ... As the shades were known to shun sunlight and bright places, the blackening of the beer vessels constituted an invitation to ancestral spirits to be present at ceremonies ... Taken in this context, the introduction of blackened beer vessels in place of the time honoured baskets could be interpreted as a measure to invoke the assistance of the ancestors in defending the customary way of life.¹²⁶

This statement by Jolles is a telling example of the particular way in which ceramics were studied and described in the latter half of the twentieth-century. Early in the century, as I argued, ceramics were considered an indicator of racial and ethnic identity. Vessels were attached to certain ethnic groups, and thus employed to demonstrate Western superiority and evolutionary hierarchy in order to justify the subordination and control of certain groups to the benefit of colonial expansion into South Africa. With the development of university subjects like anthropology and archaeology as distinct formal disciplines, the investigation into groups of people in South Africa underwent more defined approaches and methodologies. But still, Zulu material culture did not feature as a distinct area of study, and it was given rather cursory treatment. In most instances therefore, ceramic vessels were relegated to the status of domestic “functional” objects.

Only from the 1970s onward did researchers begin to investigate ceramic vessels as integral to the spiritual life of the users. By the 1980s, Zulu material culture (including beadwork and wood sculpture) was studied, not only from the perspective of anthropology and archaeology, but also significantly within art history. A distinct shift in the nature of research also meant that scholars were now more open to interdisciplinary work. Researchers of Zulu material culture from various Pietermaritzburg museological and educational institutions are an example of this, and their research combined the fields of anthropology, archaeology and art history. This research on Zulu ceramics which arose out of long term relationships with makers, revealed the extent to which vessels are a critical and, I would like to even say, a living communicator within the homestead. In this sense, then vessels are not really homebodies despite their appearance. They have a vibrant social

¹²⁶Jolles, “Zulu Beer Vessel Styles”, 111.

life and communicate the expectations of social norms and gender roles, and are similarly active participants in an ongoing dialogue between the realms of the living and the dead.

However, despite the ritual use of ceramic vessels (ensuring their survival for ceremonial purposes in predominantly rural environments, sometimes even urban locations), it cannot be ignored that vessels have been, and still are, a vital part of economic trade and barter. Sales of ceramic vessels often supplement meagre incomes for rural family homesteads, and this aspect has impacted the aesthetic attributes of the vessels. I will demonstrate in the next chapter that just as we discovered that vessels are in fact active participants in their own home environments, pot makers similarly are dynamic influencers of the aesthetics of pots – despite the considerable pressures exerted by the market. The dynamics of trade, and the individuals and institutions involved in this world-wide market, influenced the making and circulation of vessels. But other factors also drive aesthetic change in the ceramic vessel. In chapter two we will discover the wilful nature of makers, markets and pots, as ceramists carve a niche for themselves in the hustle and bustle of the global marketplace.



CHAPTER TWO

CERAMICS AT THE ROADSIDE: THE MARKETS AND MAKERS OF CERAMICS

In the last chapter we witnessed the ceramic vessel's shift in status from being perceived as a utilitarian object to being a participant in the homestead as a transmitter of messages. In this chapter I will describe how the vessel moves from its familiar and comfortable home to the often noisy and confusing world of the "roadside" – or what could be more formally defined as the "market". The ceramic vessel has been transposed from having a dialogue with a user and the immediate participants in activities within the homestead to being immersed in a multilingual and multidimensional conversation both beyond and within the homestead. Various organisations and individuals are now in direct contact with the vessel and they generally do not listen to, as much as talk to and about, the vessel and its creator. There are many voices and various types of market, not just on the roadside. All the participants in the market place impact on the life of the vessel maker and the style, shape, colour and decoration of the pot. The market has the capacity to stifle or drive innovation in the aesthetics of vessels. But it is not the only instrument creating such an effect. There are many voices that impact upon ceramists, not least of all the inner voice of the makers themselves.

This entrance into the market place for the vessel is not a new dynamic in their often lengthy and interesting lives. Ceramics made by Zulu women in or from rural areas, unlike many other types of "product", are made by specialists. Being a specialist product means that the vessels have always been an item of trade between individuals, house-holds and groups. Ceramic vessels have been sold or exchanged in South Africa for as long as they have been made. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, vessels have usually been exchanged for money. However, this chapter is not as concerned with the sociological impact of a cash economy as it is with the aesthetic effect that the encounter of trade has

on the vessels' formal qualities. It will also focus on the fascinating dialogue that occurs between maker and buyer and how "value" is ascribed to objects.

Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things*, quotes Georg Simmel as saying: "Value for Simmel, is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgement made about them by subjects."¹²⁷ In this sense, it is not the vessels themselves that reveal or express their economic, social or artistic value, but the people who are involved with the pots that imbue them with "significance", monetary or otherwise. This chapter will dwell on the ways in which pots are "encoded" by the forces of supply and demand which make up the market, as well as the conversations between the makers and markets.

I am primarily concerned with the conversations that occur between the maker and "others", and the resulting effect upon the pot. I will investigate not only how creating and selling influences vessels, but also how other unexpected world-wide and internal South African dynamics, from the political to the social, have encouraged or discouraged innovation. The chapter will discuss how vessels have shifted from being produced for internal or localised, domestic environments to external markets in the wider world, some ending up on pedestals in international galleries. In addition, I will also explore the types of markets in these settings from the literal roadside where pots are termed "tourist art" to what I would term "art art", which are works in museums and galleries or those bought by art collectors. These are very "fuzzy" definitions as pieces considered "tourist art" can become "art art" considering, as Appadurai states, that "things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations bestow them with."¹²⁸

As much as the vessels that ceramists make are defined and affected by forces outside of themselves, so too are the makers of vessels. This chapter will begin by presenting a series of case studies of ceramists living in rural and relatively isolated environments, which could seemingly impair their capacity to operate effectively in the external market place. However, as Elizabeth Perrill articulates, "the opposite also applies, as ... these savvy potters

¹²⁷ Appadurai, "Introduction:commodities and the politics of value", 3.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 5.

satisfied both indigenous and external aesthetic systems.”¹²⁹ Not only have these ceramists been adept at “reading” the market but they have been skilled at impacting it. However, as will be discussed, it is not just buying and selling that has influenced the aesthetics of ceramic vessels. Institutions and individuals have been vital to the development of ceramic vessels in KwaZulu-Natal. Larger historical movements and political change have similarly created shifts that have directed the market and makers. Public art events such as, exhibitions and publications, have exposed the artists to a broader audience than the homestead and enabled makers to diversify what and how they make.

Zulu Ceramists as Market Manipulators – Case Studies

I would like to begin this chapter with short pieces reviewing the work of vessel makers who will form the basis of my later arguments. These ceramists include Nesta Nala, Azolina MaMncube Ngema, the Magwaza family (an extended family of over 20 ceramists) and Clive Sithole. Sithole is different, not only because he is a man engaged in a woman’s domain, but because he is a younger, urban rather than rural-based artist.¹³⁰ These short case studies will demonstrate the ways in which not only the market and buyers affect a maker’s aesthetic choices, but how the ceramists have conversely influenced the market. As much as the market (galleries, shops, collectors or middlemen) are often in an animated, “buzzing” discourse about the vessel, the maker has an equally vital, quiet and constant conversation with the process of making. There are even times when the maker determines what the market should want, purely by ignoring suggestions and allowing their ideas to take precedence, thus creating new artistic directions.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Perrill, “Burnishing History: The Legacies of Maria Martinez and Nesta Nala in Dialogue: Part I: An Historian’s Perspective”, *The Journal of Modern Craft* (2016): 273.

¹³⁰ I am fully cognisant that Clive Sithole is not the only urban based artist, most of Nesta Nala’s daughters are urban based and there are many other ceramists who reside and work in South Africa’s major cities.

Nesta Nala (1940-2005)¹³¹

“Nesta,” as she was fondly known, was the daughter of ceramist Sipiwe MaS’Khakhane Nala and was reported to have begun making ceramics at the age of 12, taught by her mother.¹³² Of her seven children, Nesta trained five of her daughters and three have prestigious careers as ceramic artists. Levinsohn states that Nesta Nala “has neither ventured into new forms nor succumbed to the pressures of change.”¹³³ I would counter argue that Nala was adventurous in her exploration of form as well as decorative motifs. Beginning in 1976, Nesta Nala sold to the Vukani Association in Eshowe. She explored original forms based on Western prototypes and produced “salt-cellars, bottles and flower vases”¹³⁴ in response to her engagement with Vukani and her new “white tourist” market. But as Perrill points out, “Nala was a very insightful business woman and quickly realised that small pots for tourists were not the most lucrative market.”¹³⁵ Nala was both a master artist and an assertive personality. From the 1980s onward she reverted to refining and modifying the style of beer pots. Although regarded as conventional in shape and size, they became expressive in their detailed range of grids, scallops, *amasumpa* (raised bump decorations, which range in size and style), and figurative designs. Garrett states that “these (designs) are often used in unusual or even spectacular combination as if to draw attention to her sheer technical virtuosity and inventive brilliance.”¹³⁶ Nala’s burnished surfaces were far smoother than her previous domestic wares and the contrast between patterning and shine ensured her pots were sought after by international collectors.

Nala has been referenced as a “traditional” potter in publication descriptions, but I think that inventive brilliance best describes her approach to her work and ability to negotiate, evolve with, and capture new markets through adapting her repertoire accordingly. Furthermore, although Nala cultivated her markets, her drive was also the thrill of creativity,

¹³¹ Elizabeth Perrill gives 1945 as Nesta’s dates of Birth and Frank Jolles gives 1940 as indicated on her Identity document.

¹³² Garrett, “Nesta Nala: Ceramics 1985 - 1995” (Masters of Arts in Fine Art at the Faculty of Arts, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1997), 2.

¹³³ Perrill, “Burnishing History”, 268.

¹³⁴ Jolless, “Zulu Ceramics in transition”, 5.

¹³⁵ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 56.

¹³⁶ Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 19.

inspired by an inner dialogue with her vessels. As her daughter Bongi said: “maybe this should be written about my mother, that she loved her work so much.”¹³⁷ Nesta, as an award winning ceramist would undoubtedly be proud of the achievements of her daughters, as each has created new ceramic genres of their own. For example, Thembi Nala has branched out to do narrative figuration on the pot surface and Jabu Nala experiments with the shape of pots, creating multiple mouths and ovoid vessels recalling east African vessels. Bongi also produces pottery but does not promote her work in urban areas.¹³⁸ Sadly, Nesta’s two youngest daughters, also budding ceramists, Nonhlanhla and Zanele both died in 2006. The remaining daughter and a son are not ceramists.

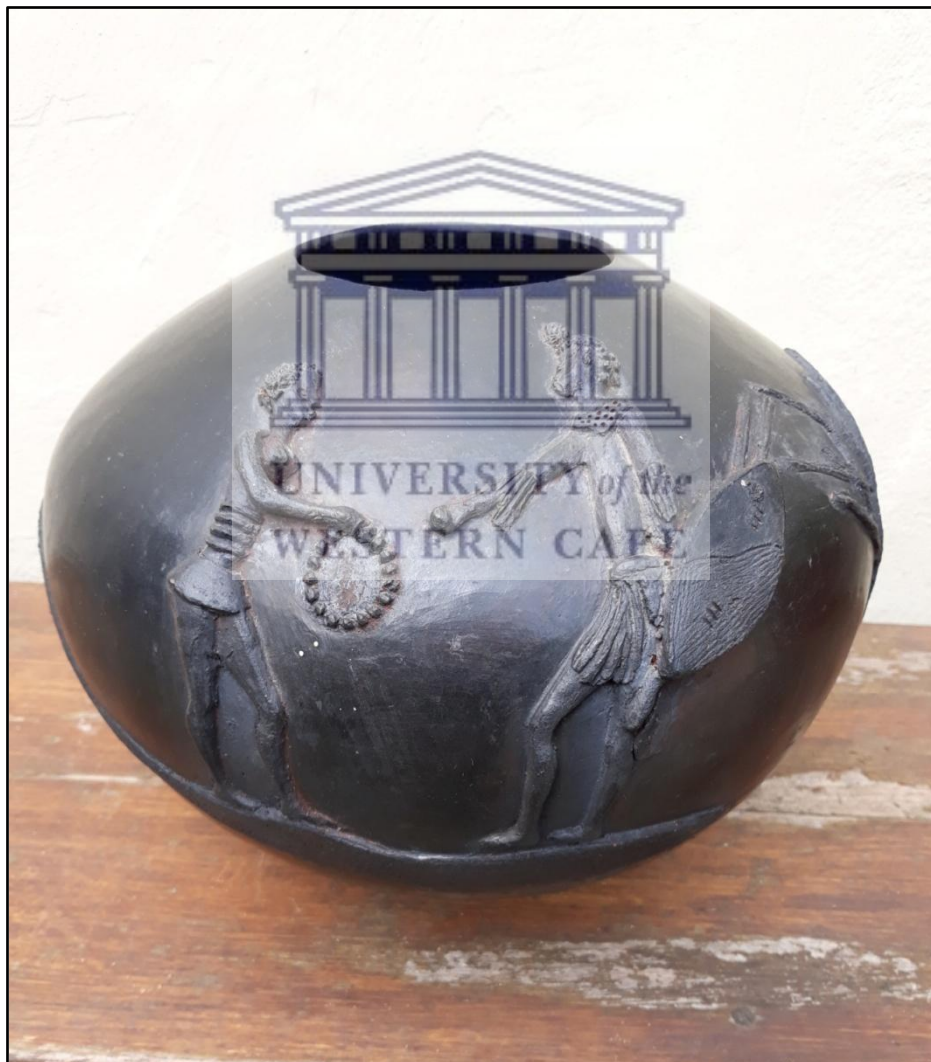


Fig 2.1: Thembi Nala Vessel (H22cm x Diam 28cm – 2011), Author’s Collection and Photograph

¹³⁷ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 58.

¹³⁸ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 63-68.

Azolina MaMncube Ngema (1936 – Unknown)

Azolina MaMncube Ngema and her ceramic vessels have been featured in several publications, which have contributed to her career development, despite ongoing confusion over the correct spelling of her name.¹³⁹ MaMncube has works in galleries in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as Switzerland and the USA, and has taught ceramics to a range of international visitors. Similar to Nesta Nala, Azolina MaMncube Ngema tapped into the international market in the 1990s with her distinctive and unique decorative technique. She either made a smooth continuous (often swirling or spiral) raised ridge or a ridge (broken into *amasumpa*-like bumps) on the body of the pot. But according to Jolles, unlike Nala, she did not receive the same level of promotion from the African Art Centre and Vukani Association (which is perhaps why she is less well known).¹⁴⁰ Dissimilar to Nala, who appears to transition from domestic to tourist to collector markets, MaMncube has been a master at maintaining diverse markets throughout most of her career.

MaMncube developed five distinct styles or lines of ceramic vessels which she produced according to her knowledge of consumers.¹⁴¹ One of her styles came about as a consequence of the South African migrant labour system. Sometimes it was not only men who were inspired by access to the new resources offered by city life. Ceramist Azolina MaMncube Ngema developed a range of “high end” ceramics for her local rural consumers. On a journey to Johannesburg to “illicitly visit” her migrant husband, Azolina was inspired by paint used on ceramics which she then adapted into her own work, thus developing a completely new decorative style.¹⁴² But despite MaMncube having seized the opportunity to develop a hybrid decoration style, travel to the city was restricted for most black women. Many ceramists (most of whom were women) were not exposed to “ideas” in the city as

¹³⁹ As is quite common for many married Zulu women (although not always so) - Mncube would be Azolina’s maiden name – Ma is honorific for “mother” and Ngema is her husbands’ family name as explained by Elizabeth Perrill in her publication *Zulu Pottery*. It is therefore somewhat, ironic and unfortunate that it was similarly misspelled (by the editor) in the *Zulu Pottery* publication, when Elizabeth Perrill went to great lengths to ensure Azolina’s title was correctly used.

¹⁴⁰ Jolles “Zulu Ceramics in Transition”, 22.

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth Perrill, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) & Zulu Ceramic Arts: Azolina MaMncube Ngema, One Woman’s Story”, *Interpreting Ceramics*, 10 (2008): 4.

¹⁴² Elizabeth Perrill, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems”, 8: It should be noted here that Azolina was not the first person to use painted finishes, it is documented that paint was used on ceramics since the 1930s. (See Elizabeth Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 44).

“strong patriarchal constraints restricted female movement in the traditional countryside.”¹⁴³ But of course this did not exclude materials of all types finding their way back to rural areas, as migrants returned home on leave.

Azolina MaMncube Ngema pointed out a particular type of customer, she referred to as “*abelungu* [white people] whose preferred style of vessel consists of *izinkhamba* ... that are blackened, often bearing raised *amasumpa* decorations ... are burnished and are subsequently polished with ‘natural’ substances.”¹⁴⁴ She is aware that “white” patrons did not enjoy the black “soot” (from the *ukufusa* – or blackening firing) on the surface of vessels coming off on their hands, but similarly thought shoe polish was inappropriate for what they perceived as “traditional” *amasumpa* decorated works.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Azolina’s use of painted beadwork designs which indicate a regional identity, as will be discussed later, were not a preferred line for “outsiders”. This decoration on vessels was specifically for the “high end” localised market for important events and was inspired by her trip to Johannesburg. I would agree with Perrill’s claim that Azolina “was an artist inspired by many sources,”¹⁴⁶ with a thorough understanding of audience desires. One of MaMncube’s creative inspirations is imbedded in her dream life, which could be considered our subconscious dialogue with self. As she stated in an interview conducted by Elizabeth Perrill, “... she dreams or simply comes up with these ceramic forms from her imagination, she is adamant that no one tells her how to make.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Fiona Rankin-Smith, “Beauty in the Hard Journey: Defining Trends in Twentieth-century Zulu Art” in *Zulu Identities – Being Zulu Past and Present*, eds. Benedict Carton, John Laband, Jabulani Sithole (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 409.

¹⁴⁴ Perrill, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems”, 5

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 5-7.

¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Perrill, “Chasing time: Azolina MaMncube Ngema, An Unknown Ceramic Artist in Foundational Galleries and Collections” in *Arts and Cultures*, 13 (2012):143.

¹⁴⁷ Perrill, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems”, 11.



Fig 2.2: Azolina MaMncube Ngema's Vessels (Left and Right H31cm x Diam 30cm – approx. 2001), Author's Collection and Photograph

The Magwaza Family

North of the Thukela River in the mPabalane area are several households of related potters who attribute their skills to Ngcongoshe MaHaye Magwaza, Esther KaMajola Magwaza and Qhikiza MaSibisi Magwaza. A Magwaza family member revealed that "... it is a disgrace if you are a Magwaza woman who is unskilled in ceramics."¹⁴⁸ The Magwazas have become particularly well known for a *qhumbuza* style of *amasumpa*, in which the vessel surface is made by pushing clay with a tool from the inner pot wall forming "bumps". Thandiwe MaBhengu is particularly expert at this form. The technique is "most often used on austere blackened vessels ... (creating) a controlled and reserved aesthetic."¹⁴⁹ The other

¹⁴⁸ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 59.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 60.

decoration type used on vessels is a sgraffito decoration which is a combination of geometric designs. Potters are also particularly partial to a design called *umxhofoso*, which correspondingly is a favourite with customers.¹⁵⁰ The Magwaza family produce for a diversified market, both international connoisseurs and local “tourist buyers”. Their local tourist genre is “destined for the campers at kaShushu and the nurses at Ntunjambili mission hospital, particularly interesting [as they are] ... catering for both black and white clients.”¹⁵¹ These wares are superficially similar in production and technique to domestic ware, particularly in relation to the form and decoration on the vessel. The nurses in the hospital use their vessels to hold arrangements of plastic flowers to decorate their bedrooms.¹⁵²

Although the Magwaza family is made up of several households, they sell from one particular homestead. Depending on the perceptions the makers have about the needs of the current crop of buyers, only certain styles of ceramics will be brought out from each house and presented by the women.¹⁵³ The Magwaza women have learned not only to “read” buyer preferences, but to diversify their aesthetic choices accordingly. However, it would be erroneous to suggest that buyer’s wants entirely dictate what ceramists produce, since this would not wholly explain innovation in work.

Bonisiwe Magwaza started to use plant motifs in her work and although this was not a “new” decoration for ceramists, it was new for Magwaza vessels. Bonisiwe Magwaza was apparently inspired by these motifs by a visit to hospital where she saw a similar design.¹⁵⁴ The Magwaza family have also developed the *Indoklo* or “flat” vessel (see fig 2:3). The top of a usually rounded pot is almost completely flattened horizontally, creating maximum surface area on which to enhance the display of decorative patterning. It is interesting that despite being aware that Juliet Armstrong, one of their long term patrons and supporters, does not like this particular shape deviation, it has become almost iconic of Magwaza

¹⁵⁰ Armstrong, “The Magwaza Family”, 42.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁵² Ibid, 43.

¹⁵³ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 173.

¹⁵⁴ Armstrong, “The Magwaza Family”, 42.

work.¹⁵⁵ This is a wonderful example of how these ceramists tenaciously silenced the mighty market in preference to trusting their conversation with the vessel itself. Similarly, this provides an example of how artistic innovation by ceramists is often suppressed or ignored by patrons in order to maintain what is considered appropriately “traditional”. The vessel makers make bold aesthetic changes regardless and create their own artistic identities.



Fig 2.3: Buzephi Magwaza’s Vessels (Both H12 x Diam 28 – 2005), Author’s Collection and Photograph

¹⁵⁵ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 174.



Fig 2.4: A Vessel made by a member of the Magwaza family (individual maker unknown), (H34cm x Diam 38cm – approx. 2005), Author's Collection and Photograph

Clive Sithole (1971 -)

Clive Sithole spent his formative years in one of the most cosmopolitan areas of South Africa, Soweto in Johannesburg. In contrast to the above mentioned ceramists, Sithole breaks the expected mould and is a man working in a previously women's only domain. Furthermore, Sithole did not learn ceramics through family members. He gained his skills through formal courses and private tuition.¹⁵⁶ He was tutored by ceramists Ian Garrett, Nesta Nala and Magdalene Odundo (a British ceramist), among others and studied at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Visual Art.

Sithole is different from the women ceramists in that "the relatively widespread knowledge of Sithole's general biographical outline bears a stark contrast to the bits and pieces of documented personal histories ... of female ceramists working in the *izinkhamba* tradition."¹⁵⁷ His well documented life is in part due to Clive's ability to negotiate with the art world. Sithole is based in Durban and therefore has access to major art institutions and can attend art exhibition openings and events, building his network and patronage. This is in contrast to the women I have investigated, who are largely remote and experience the added difficulty of transport issues as well as having limited English language skills, which makes negotiation with some patrons extremely difficult. Furthermore, Sithole is not constrained by polite or respectful *ukuhlonipha* behaviour, as many of the women under discussion would have been, given that they are of the older generation of ceramists.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Clive is fluent in English and is described by Perrill as having a "polished style of technical discussion and flamboyant style of personal presentation."¹⁵⁹ As much as the "art scene" loves the innovative artist as "genius", the "different" and "unique" individual is a quality celebrated in both the person and their work.

¹⁵⁶ Perrill, "In Surface", 57: It should be noted here that Azolina MaMncube Ngema was similarly not taught by family members – she was taught through formal schooling and neighbours.

¹⁵⁷ Perrill, "Contemporary Zulu Ceramics", 180.

¹⁵⁸ I would like to note here that part of Nesta Nala's success was her forthright personality. She often went against the grain of behavioural norms expected of Zulu women in her time.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 181.

His social skills aside, Sithole has built a reputation based on his development of the *izinkamba* genre. He has manipulated and changed the placement of decorative motifs on his vessels to be in a frontal position. “[This] single sided layout accentuates that Sithole’s new pots are expected to be viewed within a fine arts context, on a pedestal.”¹⁶⁰ Similar to the women ceramists, Clive is an astute interpreter of his market and is clearly willing to generate work accordingly. Like Nesta Nala who referenced historic Iron Age designs in her work, Sithole depicts “traditional” motifs of cattle and their horns, which “... to those deeply familiar with Zulu cultural values: the cattle ... symbolise wealth and masculine success.”¹⁶¹ Sithole’s work is both a testament to his referencing of Zulu symbols and to abstraction, as his bull heads have evolved into gestural lines.¹⁶² According to Perrill, these etched bulls allude to the Lascaux cave paintings and Grecian black figure pottery, which indicate that Sithole is aware that his audience is also a connoisseur with “art historical interests”.¹⁶³

Sithole is astute at reinventing concepts of the “traditional” in his own work and reinforcing the idea that identity is both an internal and external dynamic. This ceramist is fully aware that the market considers certain vessel attributes to be indicators of “Zuluness” and works with these accordingly. However, I would hesitate to say that any of the ceramists, Sithole included, are purely making what markets demand. All of them have evolved highly personalised styles and motifs that are part of their conversations with self and their work, as much as they are with an external audience.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 188.

¹⁶¹ Elizabeth Perrill, “South African Rubber and Clay,” *Third Text*, 26, 5 (2012): 596.

¹⁶² Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 189.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 190.



Fig 2.5: Clive Sithole's Vessels (Left H19 x Diam 16cm – 2016, Right H19cm x 16cm 2004), Author's Collection and Photograph

Tourist and Commercial Markets for Zulu Ceramics, 1950s – 1980s

Leading on from a preliminary overview of the work of select Zulu ceramists who reveal the complexities of their different negotiations with the market, I now explore the ways in which vessels are “encoded” by the forces of supply and demand which have constituted both the internal as well as the external market from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Despite a tourist buyer often being delighted by their purchase of a so-called genuine and traditional Zulu pot from a roadside stall, tourist art is in many ways considered the antithesis of the authentic. Sidney Kasfir argues that “of all the varieties of African art that trigger the distaste of the connoisseurs and subvert the issue of authenticity, surely so-

called tourist art is the worst case scenario.”¹⁶⁴ However, it is important to examine exactly what tourist art is and what differentiates it from other forms of art. Bernadette van Haute defines tourist art as that which is produced “for an external market ... characterised by stylistic hybridity.”¹⁶⁵ Ian Garrett describes ceramic tourist art as “non-functional replicas of ‘traditional’ arts or entirely new art forms that have no function within the originating society.”¹⁶⁶

With these definitions in mind, I propose that tourist art can be considered non-functional or new forms based on outsider perceptions of the “traditional”, given that the idea of the traditional is often a projection from the West about art from Africa and is not actually an objective “thing”. As Appadurai so aptly put it earlier, “things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions and attributions bestow upon them”. In addition tourist art is about a buyer for whom, according to Jules-Rosette in *The Messages of Tourist Art*, “Art objects are valued not for their customary and ritual purposes, but instead because of their importance as markers and mementos of a tourist’s journey ... Tourist art mirrors the consumers’ expectations and reveals the artists’ perception of what consumers want.”¹⁶⁷

It would be incorrect to infer that ceramists moved away from their internal trade or localised markets entirely in order to embrace an external one. In reality they often differentiate their wares and produce work for more than one consumer type, as has been revealed in the case studies. The question I would like to engage with is, how and why did women in rural environments, largely constrained in those settings by patriarchal systems, begin to sell their wares away from home?

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that Zulu ceramists have been making and selling to a tourist market in KwaZulu-Natal from at least to 1905. According to Ian Calder, this was when “the Natal Museum first acquired some examples. The small tripod vessel ... was

¹⁶⁴ Sidney Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity” *African Arts*, 25, (1992): 55

¹⁶⁵ Bernadette van Haute, “African Tourist art as Tradition and Product of the Postcolonial Exotic”, *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 3:2 (2008):22.

¹⁶⁶ Ian Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 32.

¹⁶⁷ Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art – An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), 3.

donated by a Miss Armstrong.”¹⁶⁸ Both, Lawton and J.W. Grossert assert that tourist ceramics described as “vases, beakers and more recently even ‘flagon’ shapes were available”¹⁶⁹ at markets and on the roadside by the late 1960s. In fact, Eleanor Preston-Whyte in her publication *Black Women in The Craft and Curio Trade in KwaZulu and Natal* indicates that as early as the late 1950s as a result of increased motor traffic along the coastal areas of Natal, numerous informal “roadside” stalls selling tourist wares became a feature of roads to popular holiday destinations.¹⁷⁰

South Africa’s experience of the post-war economic boom driven by rapid industrialisation in the 1960s could well have provided surplus income for urbanites to have “holidays” but affected remote rural areas differently. Although most rural Zulu women were consigned to the homestead, for many their lives would become increasingly difficult. As the mines of Johannesburg absorbed more and more men from rural environments as migrant labourers, many of these men created second families. With established new families in the cities, many men no longer returned home or sent financial support to their previous wives.¹⁷¹ This was one reason why ceramists who still made wares for a largely local consumer were now required to extend their markets, to maintain their families. As Jolles indicates: “The attendant financial constraints and a growing popular recognition of African culture reinforced a trend towards the commercialisation of art forms.”¹⁷² For Nesta Nala, a single mother with a family of seven, access to places prepared to trade her work “at up to ten times the price she could obtain locally presented her with an opportunity to emancipate herself from the restrictions of the rural market.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Ian Calder, “Zulu Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal Public Collections: Pietermaritzburg and Durban”, *South African Association of Art Historians: Proceedings of the 13th Annual Conference*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 1996), 90.

¹⁶⁹ Juliette Armstrong, “The Tourist Potters at Mtunzini” in *Negotiating Identities, Proceedings of the 14th Annual conference of the South African Association of Art Historians*, (Johannesburg,: UNISA, 1998): 4 – Please note: the name Juliet Armstrong is incorrectly spelt on the paper.

¹⁷⁰ E. M. Preston-Whyte, “Black Women in The Craft and Curio Trade in KwaZulu and Natal”, *Final Report to the Human Sciences Research Council* (Durban: Department of African Studies, (1983):7-8.

¹⁷¹ Frank Jolles, “Zulu ceramics in transition: Siphwe Ma’Khakhane Nala and her daughter Nesta Landeleni Nala”, *Southern African Humanities* 25 (2012): 5.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 5.

Miriam Mbonambi was one of the first ceramists whose vessels were collected as art pieces rather than anthropological artefacts in the 1980s.¹⁷⁴ Although little has been recorded of her life, she and Nesta Nala both continued to target a new and growing “tourist” market into the late 1980s. At a seminal exhibition in 1988, both women’s work was featured in a catalogue and designated as examples of tourist pieces they were producing at the time.¹⁷⁵ The characteristics that constitute vessels as tourist wares may include miniaturisation of beer drinking pots and imitations of other materials in clay, such as gourds.¹⁷⁶ Garrett points out that some of Nesta Nala’s vessels are considered “tourist art” but are actually very minimally altered pots called *omancishane*, which are sometimes still found and used within the Zulu homestead.¹⁷⁷ Alteration to vessels through size and decoration, and the creation of vessel types that are considered to be outside the Zulu speaking socio-cultural preserve appears to designate them as tourist art. Similarly, “tourist art” is often seen as being “mass produced” with the repetition of certain forms in response to buyer tastes.

In the previous chapter I noted that “blackened” vessels are used within the Zulu homestead and in urban environments for rituals. In producing for a tourist market, the ceramist is often engaged in transforming their wares from a symbolic to a commercial product. As “blackening” is imbued with significance, ceramists frequently modify their wares for the tourist buyer by only bisque firing the vessels to leave them a red/terracotta colour, or colouring the vessel surface with various different types of polish, shoe polish being popular. These alterations allow the vessels to be sold to tourists who may be unaware of these adaptations, but nonetheless buy them as items of cultural authenticity and symbols of “Zuluness” and perhaps indications of an idyllic, “static” rural past. Even the often shabby, informal stalls at the roadside that sell tourist wares are viewed as optimising “the real Africa” with goods that are described as “genuine”, unlike those in curio stores.¹⁷⁸

Roadside stalls are also “trader” environments and within the KwaZulu-Natal context, “middlemen” transport pots to the markets and sometimes sell them on behalf of makers

¹⁷⁴ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 54.

¹⁷⁵ Elizabeth Perrill, “In Surface and Form – 25 Years of Zulu Ceramic Innovation”, in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 85 (2011): 55.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 55.

¹⁷⁷ Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 32.

¹⁷⁸ Preston-Whyte, “Black Women”, 48.

who can be some distance away. These “middlemen” are often mediators of ideas. As described by Preston-Whyte: “In some cases middlemen suggest new features to the potters and may even produce photographs or drawings of items which they think will sell well. Middlemen also affect production in that they order and buy what they find by experience is both durable and saleable.”¹⁷⁹ Ceramic vessels are relatively fragile objects (particularly when pit fired) and therefore consideration of the size and strength of vessels is important. But what is salient here is that “trader” environments, whether tourist roadside stalls, curio shops at an airport, retail outlets, or commercial galleries all communicate with makers about what and how things should be made. As I will further elaborate, these organisations and the individuals involved mediate between maker and buyer about what is considered an “authentic” Zulu vessel and stimulate the creation of modified vessel types to fulfil these perceived new tastes.

Kasfir infers that tourist art can be considered “crude, mass produced and crassly commercial.”¹⁸⁰ It can also be regarded as a reclamation or acknowledgement of cultural traditions stimulated by a drive for economic survival, for both the person that sells it and the one that makes it. I propose that both the ceramist and the seller of vessels are aware that the consumer has a want for the “culturally different” and they capitalise on this by perpetuating ideas about ethnic identity through modified symbols of “Zuluness”. The Zulu ceramist is as astute at manipulating the consumer as a buyer is at prescribing their needs, as has been demonstrated in the case studies. In this way it can be argued that tourist art are examples of works that have developed out of producer/customer relations and can actually demonstrates dynamic creativity. It should further be acknowledged that what some consider “crass” tourist art can sometimes crosses boundaries and becomes “fine art” and reside in a prestigious gallery collection.

¹⁷⁹ Preston-Whyte, “Black Women”, 13.

¹⁸⁰ Kasfir, “African Art and Authenticity”, 55.



Fig 2.6: Unknown maker (unsigned) (H53 x Diam 44cm – approx. 2006) - purchased “on the roadside” in the Eshowe area of KwaZulu-Natal. An example of tourist art (un-blackened vessel, too large for ceremonial use).
Author’s Collection and Photograph.

It almost goes without saying that gallery patronage (both public and private) and commercial retail outlets were vital and sometimes pivotal in the development of ceramists and their careers. The Vukani Museum (Eshowe), Tatham Art Gallery (Pietermaritzburg) and Durban Art Gallery are, according to Perrill, the three largest ceramic collecting art

institutions in KwaZulu-Natal.¹⁸¹ I would now like to discuss the key KwaZulu-Natal institutions involved in selling, but, not necessarily collecting ceramics.

As early as the 1960s three key outlets provided the capacity for ceramists to earn higher amounts for their vessels than they could in their rural localised markets. These were The Vukani Association in Eshowe, the African Art Centre of Durban (and later Pietermaritzburg), and to a degree the Evangelical Lutheran Church Arts and Crafts Centre at Rorke's Drift (or as I will refer to it, the Rorke's Drift Centre which was predominantly an arts training centre).¹⁸² These organisations all operated out of a desire to assist in the economic development of Africans and, in particular, rural black women. During the set up of these organisations there was a realisation that "craft" was a way to initiate financial empowerment, as many men and women had existing skills. Although there has been criticism that these quasi development organisations treated art as a "cause" that perpetuated a patronising and paternalistic attitude toward the makers and their products,¹⁸³ they were nonetheless instrumental and vital as "traders" or links to the outside and, in several cases, the international market.

Nesta Nala's engagement with the Vukani Association in the early 1970s was, according to Garrett, a "decisive turning point in her career" and she soon began producing exclusively for external patronage.¹⁸⁴ Partly, she sought an external market, because her increased decoration, and "high shine" burnishing took more time and effort than her local market could afford. She was also a single mother and the increased income was welcomed, as it would be by any person reliant on selling their creations for a living. Azolina MaMncube Ngema found that she could sell her wares for larger amounts to "white" patrons who visited her home than she could if she took her wares to the local rural "Zulu" market. In the process she also saved on transport and possible breakage costs.¹⁸⁵ In dissimilar ways

¹⁸¹ Perrill, "Contemporary Zulu Ceramics", 252.

¹⁸² I acknowledge that Ardmore Ceramics was also a key organisation founded by Fèe Halsted-Berning. I have chosen not to elaborate on Ardmore as it developed in the 1980s (later than the other organisations) and is disparate in that it is a purely commercial and privately owned business.

¹⁸³ Perrill, "In Surface and Form", 56.

¹⁸⁴ Ian Garrett, "Nesta Nala an Overview" in *Ubumba – aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, eds. Brendan Bell & Ian Calder, (Pietermaritzburg: Albany Print, 1998), 47.

¹⁸⁵ Perrill, "Contemporary Zulu Ceramics", 46.

both women engaged in providing for a “new”, predominantly “white” customer base. This new customer was not only culturally dissimilar but as has been and will be distinguished, often prescribed the necessary or ideal aesthetics of vessels.

The African Art Centre (AAC), established as an outreach of the Institute of Race Relations, began as a small beadwork initiative run by the then secretary Jo Thorpe. Thorpe founded the centre in 1963 and managed the AAC for the next 30 years. The AAC expanded to have an outlet in Pietermaritzburg, but only the Durban branch remains, continuing to provide a sales outlet on Florida Road. The centre has always been both a training centre and retail sales outlet for the artists of KwaZulu-Natal, with a focus on giving opportunity to “black” artists. Jo Thorpe became known by many of the artists she sold for as a “culture broker”, a term used here to describe the role a person can play in transforming traditional craft skills to meet new circumstances.¹⁸⁶ Her ethos has been described in the following way: “The hierarchy which sees fine arts as superior and crafts as a lower species was foreign to her.”¹⁸⁷ The AAC was instrumental in selling the work produced at the Rorke’s Drift Centre (both tapestries and ceramics) from 1965 onwards.

The publication *It’s Never too Early*, Thorpe’s historical account of the development of the AAC, has no imagery and makes minimal mention of ceramists, ironically giving precedence to paintings and sculpture. However, it was and still is, instrumental in selling and promoting ceramic art work. Work from Miriam Mbonambi and Rorke’s Drift ceramists was assembled at the AAC for the exhibition *Traditional Art and Craft of KwaZulu* that was held at the Natal Society of Arts Gallery in 1984.¹⁸⁸ What is striking about this exhibition is that Miriam Mbonambi became one of the first Zulu ceramists to be collected by the Durban Art Gallery as a result of this exhibition.¹⁸⁹ In addition, the Nala and Magwaza family of potters benefitted from sales at the AAC and are still selling work at this outlet. Although predominantly a local sales outlet in KwaZulu-Natal, the AAC was involved in exporting to

¹⁸⁶ Jo Thorpe, *It’s Never too Early – A Personal Record of African Art and Craft in KwaZulu-Natal 1960-1990*, (University of Natal:Indicator Press ,1994), 1.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 3.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 80.

¹⁸⁹ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 107.

America in the 1980s.¹⁹⁰ Undoubtedly, the AAC promoted and gave exposure to ceramists before their work was even considered “worthy” of being deemed art pieces. Although there are scant records of the influence these “trade” environments had on ceramists and their work, Perrill gives an account of observing the dialogue between outlet and maker. The ceramist Deliwe Magwaza was advised by AAC staff as to the aesthetic preferences of potential customers.

Specifically, the smoothing out of the mouths of the pots was desired. The adherence to explicit sizes was to be taken into account for future commissions, some larger pots and some small pots for tourists. Also the use of an alternative polish, clear Cobra floor polish, was suggested, as it would reveal the swirling marks left after a smoke-firing but not smell as strongly as shoe-polish.¹⁹¹

The preferences different buyers have for alternative polish types are often discussed by makers (as has been revealed) and pot size is an obvious requirement for an international tourist’s suitcase.

North of Durban, in Eshowe, the Swedish missionary Reverend Kjell Lofroth established cooperatives of woodworkers, beadworkers, basket makers and potters at the Vukani (“wake up and go”) Association in 1972. It was Lofroth as manager of the Vukani Association who “approached Nala after ‘talent scouting’ in her area.”¹⁹² It is interesting to note that the pots made by Nesta Nala for the tourist market were not only miniature but quite innovative. Not only was the size modified from a normal *ukhamba* for beer drinking, but the designs were new ones inspired by the iron-age shards she was shown by van Schalkwyk (to be further discussed).¹⁹³ Small pots were important to increase the sales of her wares as Vukani had direct links with an international market (in particular Scandinavia), and smaller pots survived the rigours of long distance transport better than large ones. As this serves to demonstrate, “tourist” wares are not only derivative of “traditional” work, but are also dynamic creative explorations, utilizing new ideas and motifs.

¹⁹⁰ Thorpe, *Its Never too Early*, 81.

¹⁹¹ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 160.

¹⁹² Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 3.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 22.

Although primarily an arts training centre, the ceramics from Rorke's Drift have been famous since at least 1968 for their distinctive glazes and decorative styles.¹⁹⁴ These wheel thrown and hand built wares were purchased by organisations such as the African Art Centre who acquired work from the artists based there. Similarly, these products were purchased by retail outlets such as Helen de Leeuw's Craftsman's Market in Johannesburg and Cape Town, Klaus Wasserthal and Paptso in Pretoria and environs.¹⁹⁵ Durban Art Gallery also purchased work for its collection from the Centre in 1970. In addition, Rorke's Drift had well established markets in Sweden and Germany.¹⁹⁶

The students at Rorke's Drift "had been encouraged earlier by Olsson and Tyberg [instructors] to uphold and source their work in Zulu and Sotho ceramic traditions which had originated in the work of one of the foundation hand builders, Dinah Molefe ... loosely based on the *ukhamba*-like vessel."¹⁹⁷ It was a combination of introduced Bauhaus-based training in design and encouraging the use of Zulu and Sotho inspired designs that created unique ceramic ware that in Leeb du Toit's view, "has distinguished the ceramics from Rorke's Drift for decades."¹⁹⁸ A founder member of Rorke's Drift expressed the view that training engendered "a new creative freedom that did not restrict the designers solely to tradition."¹⁹⁹ Training was, nevertheless, aligned to the preferences the market had for post-World War II Danish and Swedish designs. The ceramic advisor Marietjie van der Merwe was well aware that this design preference "had come to represent the acme of modernity,"²⁰⁰ for both their international and South African customers.

As a training centre Rorke's Drift ultimately did exert more control over the type of ceramic products that were made, as the artists that worked there were in many respects in the

¹⁹⁴ It should be noted that Rorke's Drift was not only known for ceramics. It began with four workshops (weaving, textile printing, sewing and pottery as well as a one year domestic science course). The centre later established a Fine Art School, with its first students graduating in 1969. See *Ubumba - Aspects of Indigenous Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal*, 86.

¹⁹⁵ Juliette Leeb du Toit, "Mediating Indigeneity and cross-cultural aesthetic in work by ceramists from KZN in the collection of the Durban Art Gallery" in *All Fired Up, Conversations between Storerooms and Classrooms* (Exhibition Catalogue, Durban Art Gallery (n.d): 68.

¹⁹⁶ Juliette Leeb-du Toit, "Rorkes Drift Ceramic Traditions in Context", in *All Fired Up, Conversations between Storerooms and Classrooms* (Exhibition Catalogue, Durban Art Gallery, (No date given): 82.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 83.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 83.

employ of the centre, as they were “paid a small stipend” as well as proportional amounts for items sold.²⁰¹ But, as demonstrated in the case studies, it is not only training or customers that can affect the aesthetics of vessels. The artist is in dialogue with the pieces they produce and makes creative decisions which impact the market. Furthermore, just as there are different types of makers and product, there are also different types of events and publicity that influence ceramic output.

Exhibitions and New Exposure for Ceramic Vessels, 1980s – 1990s

It is not just the conversations between creator and consumer that enable trading to thrive. Firstly, each party requires introduction and then time to become acquainted and familiar before they “work” together. In short, business is still about relationships based on understanding and trust, even in the late twentieth-century. Furthermore, in order to understand each other, it is important to investigate the type of language used by these divergent voices. In addition to “selling”, there are alternative ways in which a rural maker of vessels becomes known to a potential customer.

During apartheid, art for black students was dissimilar to what was taught in white schools. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 introduced subjects that geared black students toward manual labour.²⁰² “Bantu Education” was a means to instil cultural difference, so black students were instructed to make useful functional objects through sewing, basketry, carpentry and ceramics. This “emphasis[ed] the functional value of the school as an institution for the transmission and development of black cultural heritage.”²⁰³ Craftwork was persistently seen as the domain of black students, whereas white learners did “fine art”, whether painting, printmaking or sculpture.

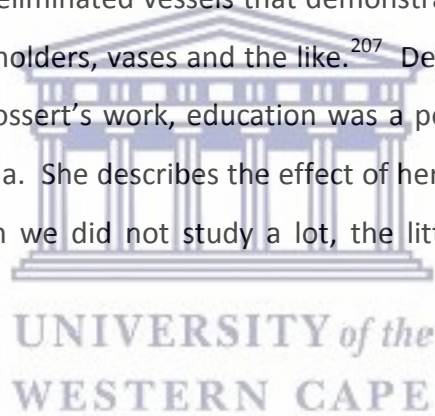
John or Jack Grossert, as he was commonly known, was in charge of “Native” education in the 1950s and 1960s and did a considerable amount to ensure “crafts” were part of the

²⁰¹ Ibid, 85.

²⁰² Nontobeko Ntombela, “Shifting Contexts: Material, Process and Contemporary Art in Times of Change,” in *Tribing and Untribing the Archive* eds. Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2016), 93, 99.

²⁰³ Elizabeth Perrill, “An Illustrative Legacy: Art Education and Zulu “crafts”, *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, 8 (2014): 15.

curriculum in rural schools. In 1953 Grossert published *Art and Crafts for Africans: A Manual for Art and Crafts Teachers*.²⁰⁴ Grossert's work provided opportunities for thousands of students and at the same time entrenched symbols and motifs which became associated with a distinctly "Zulu" visual identity. A calligrapher by training, Grossert, produced an image of three pots, each with *amasumpa* designs (see Fig 2.7). This image would be used extensively in his publications and, according to Perrill, "would become a staple in the representation of Zulu arts, making an appearance in an isiZulu cultural handbook, gallery advertisements, international newspaper articles, didactic museum information, and other outlets to the present day."²⁰⁵ Grossert would go as far as to infer that other incised designs were invasive additions to the Zulu tradition of pot decoration.²⁰⁶ According to Perrill, Grossert's most widely distributed booklet, *Zulu Crafts* of 1978 had 12 vessels with *amasumpa* motifs, but he failed to acknowledge or represent the true diversity of designs. Furthermore, he eliminated vessels that demonstrated Western influences, like spice containers, candlestick holders, vases and the like.²⁰⁷ Despite some of these negative constraining influences in Grossert's work, education was a positive influence for a potter like Azolina MaMncube Ngema. She describes the effect of her schooling in an interview, in the following way: "Although we did not study a lot, the little things we have made us prosperous."²⁰⁸



²⁰⁴ Ibid, 14

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 16.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 18.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 22-23.

²⁰⁸ Perrill, "Indigenous Knowledge Systems", 11.

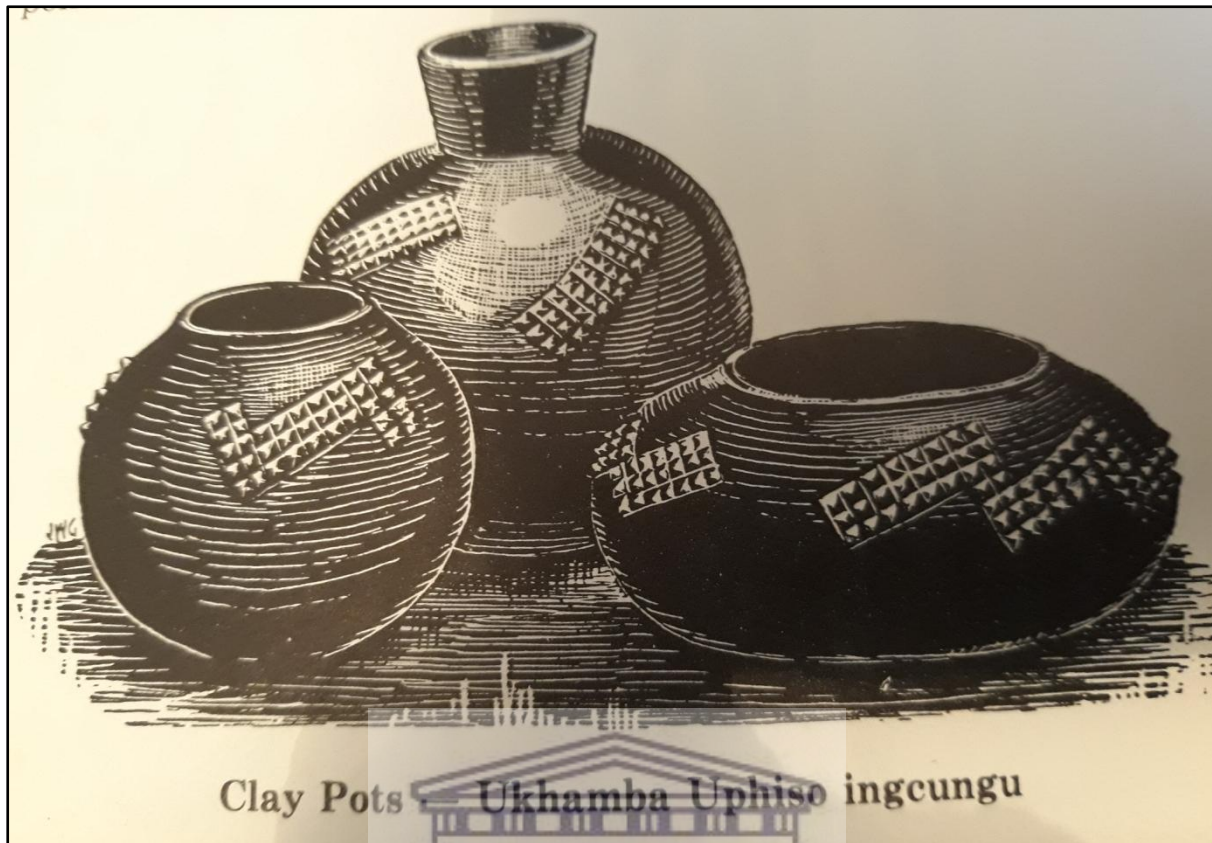


Fig 2.7: From J.W. Grossert, *Zulu Crafts* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter & Shooter, 1978), 8.

This chapter will investigate further the ways in which pots and people are “spoken” about, visually and verbally, constraining them into narrow ideas about “Zuluness”. However, artists frequently utilise these concepts to market themselves and their products to their advantage. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, art work from Africa has a relationship with both anthropology and art history, and these two domains dispute the right to contextualise and represent these objects. The dynamics of “art” in South Africa has been dominated by Western notions of aesthetics with figurative painting and sculpture being considered the pinnacle of “fine art”. In the process “fine art” was seen as superior to utilitarian objects deemed to be “craft” or anthropological “artefact”. But this would soon change, as explained by Marion Arnold in *Between Union and Liberation*: “Postmodernism, however embracing inclusiveness, abandoned purist definitions of practice and offered a way of acknowledging cultural creativity and diversity.”²⁰⁹ This meant that from approximately the 1970s onward objects considered “craft” and even “women’s work”

²⁰⁹ Marion Arnold, “Visual Culture in Context, the Implications of Union and Liberation” in *Between Union and Liberation, Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*, eds. Marion Arnold & Brenda Schmammann (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 13.

could now be collected by galleries and museums, and accorded visibility and status as art objects.

Thousands of kilometres from South Africa the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* opened in 1982. Featuring art from Africa and Europe along-side each other and held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it did much to bring art work from Africa to the attention of the art going public and has generated numerous critical articles, critiques and debates. It is not my wish to enter the debates about modernism's appropriation of art work from Africa, but it was a significant event that introduced the world to African objects and enabled them to be considered "art" rather than "artefact". Of course, it is difficult to be certain to what degree such an exhibition impacts the South African "art world", but it is hard to imagine it remained unnoticed.

In South Africa as early as the 1970s and increasingly in the 1980s, there was "a distinctiveness marked by local indigenous and other African and oriental referencing [that] was clearly discernable and widespread, not least in various aspects of ceramic practice."²¹⁰ In line with this increased openness to cross-cultural and inter-racial visual dialogue, tertiary education institutions were encouraging cross cultural aesthetics in art work. For example Maggie Mikula, trained at the now Durban University of Technology, "emulated African forms and decorative embellishment"²¹¹ in her ceramic work. In the mid-1980s students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Fine Arts Department (now the UKZN Centre for Visual Arts) studied African ceramic traditions. Many of these names we already know from their research and publications. Ian Calder and Juliet Armstrong made significant contributions to furthering our insight into ceramic vessels. Former fashion designer Clive Sithole, inspired by working with ceramists Ian Garrett, Nesta Nala and Maggie Mikula, retrained and became known for works that "emulate both Zulu traditional wares and Garrett-inspired burnishing."²¹² Ceramist, Ian Garrett studied with Nesta Nala and would produce one of the most thorough examinations of her life and work in his 1997 Masters

²¹⁰ Leeb-du Toit, "Mediating Indigeneity", 69.

²¹¹ Ibid, 70 .

²¹² Ibid, 71.

Thesis. Garrett's research validates Nesta Nala as a dynamic innovator who did not really fit with the often used description of "traditional" ceramist.

Visibility for South African ceramic vessels was further enhanced by other seminal publications showcasing the works of Zulu women. Nesta Nala was featured in the 1984 book by Rhoda Levinsohn – *Art and Craft in Southern Africa* - and was one of the first Zulu ceramists to have her work purchased by the Durban Art Gallery in the same year. Hand-building as a ceramic technique was also being given credibility, as Elizabeth Perrill outlines; "Betty Blandino's book, *Coiled Pottery: Traditional and Contemporary Ways*, was published the same year, bringing the work of traditional pottery from around the world to public attention."²¹³ The importance of these publications was that they invariably opened up avenues for intercultural dialogue, appreciation and perhaps inspiration, or at least demonstrated alternatives to wheel thrown pottery.

Prior to this shift in focus in the ceramic art world, wheel work and Bernard Leach with his Anglo-Orientalist style, had a resounding influence on many "white" potters in South Africa.²¹⁴ Further exposure for Zulu ceramists (notably Rebecca Mathibe, Miriam Mbonambi, Bina Gumede, Nesta and her mother Sipiwe Nala) was gained through the publication of *Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa* in 1991 by ceramist and scholar Wilma Cruise. In this publication Cruise states: "An embryonic hope for the revival of the art of pottery lies in new markets ... the impetus provided by people like Len van Schalkwyk may be vital."²¹⁵ This gives us a clue as to how individuals also performed a vital role in exposing the work of relatively secluded artists. Publications brought public attention to the art form of Zulu ceramists, but individuals and institutions often created the important "trader" or "cultural broker" links with the market.

In an oft-cited incident, Nesta Nala was inspired by pottery shards shown to her by archaeologist Len van Schalkwyk who had found them in a dig near the Nala homestead in 1983. Although I would agree he introduced her to the possibility of new motifs (from old

²¹³ Perrill, "In Surface and Form", 55.

²¹⁴ Perrill, "Burnishing History: the Legacies of Maria Martinez and Nesta Nala in Dialogue: Part 1: An Historian's Perspective", *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 8:3 (2015): 267.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 274.

sources) in her work, he did not further her market. According to Ian Garrett, it was the Art and Craft Advisor for KwaZulu-Natal schools, Jannie van Heerden who was “instrumental in introducing Nala’s work to collectors and patrons. These included the Durban Art Gallery, the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, African Art Centre in Durban and Kim Sacks Gallery in Johannesburg.”²¹⁶ Furthermore, Nesta Nala was already selling her work to the Vukani Association in Eshowe and had been doing so since 1976. Armstrong was intimately involved with promoting the work of Azolina MaMncube Ngema, the Nala family and the Magwaza family of ceramists. From the 1990s until her death in 2012, Juliet worked with and befriended the women of the Magwaza homestead. Over time she introduced these ceramists to the Tatham Art Gallery, William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley, the Centre for Visual Art at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and galleries in the USA and Korea, as well as numerous individuals and collectors.²¹⁷

However, despite Zulu ceramists and their work becoming familiar and indeed “famous” through publications and institutional and individual patronage, they are still scrutinised from a peculiar “static” perspective which relegates makers to a state of stagnation. Unlike Western art where a piece is related to a named individual and prized for its “newness” in technique and concepts, non-Western art is often labelled as belonging to a generic unchanged group. This idea as outlined in the previous chapter does not actually arise from art history but is, according to Kasfir, a relic from anthropology “... and has manifested itself most clearly in the ‘one-tribe one style’ model.”²¹⁸ The publications by Levinsohn and Cruise, both use the term “traditional” to describe the ceramic vessels and therefore the ceramist Nesta Nala.²¹⁹ The use of the word “traditional” here, according to Garrett, does not mean “from generations ago”, but “is [used] to identify a perceived grouping ... often linked with an ethnic or culture group.”²²⁰ Similarly, certain vessels shapes and their decoration have become sought after indicators of “traditional” and therefore “tribal” Zulu ceramics.

²¹⁶ Ian Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 3.

²¹⁷ Ian Calder, “Carrier Shells: Juliet Armstrong and *Xenophora Juliensis*” in *For Juliet – Ceramic Sculptor 1950 – 2012*, eds. Brendan Bell and Bryony Clark, (Pietermaritzburg: Tatham Art Gallery, 2014), 21.

²¹⁸ Sidney Kasfir, “One Tribe, One Style? Paradigms in the Historiography of African Art” *History in Africa*, 11 (1984): 163.

²¹⁹ Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 29.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 29.

The decorative technique called *amasumpa* has become the icon of “traditional” in the literature on ceramics. A.T Bryant, J.W Grossert, A.C Lawton and C. Kennedy, all cast *amasumpa* as the Zulu norm in decorative techniques.²²¹ As previously discussed, this was in part created by Grossert’s widely disseminated imagery of vessels. I propose that two other factors contributed to the perpetuation of the desire for *amasumpa* decorated vessels. One is *amasumpa*’s supposed associations with Zulu royalty and the other, consumer “taste”.

The reasons given by researchers and ceramists for using bumps or *amasumpa* (see as example in Fig 2.8, a type of *amasumpa*) as a decorative style are varied and range from the decorations being similar to those on other Zulu material objects; to being patterns indicating ploughed fields, to representations of body scarification. Nonetheless, *amasumpa* is shrouded in mystery, perpetuating ideas from the romantic to royalist, which undoubtedly assists in the successful promotion of vessels. One of the most often cited reasons for the employment of this decorative technique is the associations it has with the Zulu royal family and monarchy. This has been a powerful selling point, despite there being quite limited evidence of the relationship. As stated by Armstrong et al: “Several vessels at the local history museum in Durban were apparently from the Zulu capital Ondini when British imperial troops sacked it on 4 July 1879. *Amasumpa* occur on the two large *izimpiso*. In addition, 14 out of 19 beer vessels in a 1907 photograph of the Zulu King Dinuzulu’s wives are decorated with *amasumpa* motifs.”²²² Frank Jolles makes a pertinent point, when he asserts that pots adorned with *amasumpa* became more visible in collections and galleries as other vessels were ignored by collectors wanting “antique” pots. He explains that “the large unburnished and undecorated *izimbiza* on the other hand, and many pots decorated with incisions were left in the field.”²²³ Similarly, potters themselves consider *amasumpa* embellishment to be indicative of “Zuluness”. As Juliet Armstrong asserts “they (*amasumpa*) are generally described by potters as *isiZulu* (the Zulu way).”²²⁴ *Amasumpa*

²²¹ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 45.

²²² Armstrong, et al, “Pots that Talk”, 533.

²²³ Jolles, “The Origins of the Twentieth Century”, 105.

²²⁴ Armstrong, et al, “Pots that Talk”, 533.

have clearly captured the imagination of collectors, writers and ceramists and have become a decorative motif that defines “real, traditional, Zulu” pots.



Fig: 2.8: F. Ngcobo Vessel (H36 x Diam 31cm – 2001), Author’s Collection and Photograph

Not only are vessels deemed “genuine” due to decorative technique, but makers also become “authentic” through particular types of adornment. It is still quite common to see a ceramist represented as bound by notions of a “static” tradition, as per a marketing catalogue for the 2004 Brett Kebble exhibition. In the catalogue Ntombi Nala is represented in the following way: “The catalogue layout sets up a contrast between the white studio painter on the right and Nala, a black rural woman dressed in neo-traditional outfit: Nala is working clay within this photograph in a formal ensemble and beaded jewellery that no potter would wear while working.”²²⁵ But the association is clear: that her work and person are “traditional.” What is even more interesting is that Nala herself is aware that dressing in a manner considered “traditional” for a Zulu woman has marketing mileage. At exhibition

²²⁵ Perrill, “Contemporary Zulu Ceramics”, 236.

openings, she was known to wear “the clothing she purposefully renounced with her Christian conversion.”²²⁶

Tribal and traditional are convenient methods of labelling art from Africa, not because the artists were unknown rather that the piece may have moved out of Africa into an ethnographic museum and then later perhaps an art museum and lost its identity in the process. Labelling confines the object and maker to the boundaries of them and us, modern and primitive. Olu Oguibe discusses how classifying places African art in a space that is faceless and powerless, but also desirable:

The imposition of anonymity on the native ... deletes her claims to subjectivity and works to displace her from normativity. Not only does this conveniently underline her Otherness, her strangeness, her subalternity, anonymity equally magnifies the invented exoticism of her material culture.²²⁷

The creation of an exotic otherness or anonymity about an artist is also valuable in monetary terms. Despite her agency and capacity to control her market, Azolina Mncube Ngema’s works in the exhibition *Africa: Art of a Continent* had their provenance “misplaced” before being published. But this “loss” actually increases a vessel’s value. If the buyer knew that similar items could be made by a person still alive, the rarity and value of the item is lost.²²⁸ Maintaining the “unnamed” ceramic artists is partly a way of “othering” and a display of the superiority of Western art forms over others, which can ironically increase an item’s value. Even Durban Art Gallery attributed their first Nesta Nala work to being by an unknown artist.²²⁹ Similarly, a collector in the 1990s who sent “runners” out to gather up pots in the area of the Nala’s homestead did not record their provenance and only a few are traceable to the maker.²³⁰ Not only did particular ceramic motifs indicate ethnicity, but a “type” became desirable and indicative of “traditional”. It was not until around the 1990s

²²⁶ Ibid, 236.

²²⁷ Olu Oguibe, “Art, Identity, Boundaries, Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art” in *Reading the Contemporary – African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, eds. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1999), 21.

²²⁸ Perrill, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems”, 5.

²²⁹ Garrett, “Nesta Nala”, 31.

²³⁰ Jolles, “Zulu Ceramics in Transition”, 9.

that innovation in ceramic vessels was permissible and supported by the dynamics of the market, so long as it didn't stray too far away from "Zuluness".

Zulu Ceramics Become Collector's Pieces, c. 1990s - 2000s

Ian Garrett defines fine art ceramics, or what I would call "art art", as "works that conform to [the] culturally embedded aesthetic and formal standards while being produced with external sale in mind."²³¹ And the consumer is "distinguished from tourists by their connoisseur status and serious financial or scholarly interest in the collected art. Institutions, such as art galleries and museums rather than individuals, are often responsible for the patronage of collectors wares."²³² Yet I would assert that they have similarities to a tourist buyer, as the "collector" can also be seeking a vessel that is "authentic" and "traditional" and is indicative of their perception of what a "Zulu" vessel should look like.

With the transition democracy after 1994, South African institutions became increasingly open to consideration of greater racial inclusivity in their policies for collecting art. Although limited and sporadic, purchases of indigenous ceramic works by public galleries did occur as early as the 1960s.²³³ In the "new," South Africa, black artists became part of a creative nationalism in the formation of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's concept of "The Rainbow Nation".²³⁴ Similarly, South Africa suddenly opened to foreign tourists attracted by the new democracy and even rural homesteads became accessible to overseas buyers, previously put off by apartheid politics and sanctions. Perhaps as a consequence, the international market for Zulu ceramics skyrocketed during the 1990s and continued to do so after the turn of the century.²³⁵

It cannot be refuted that inclusion in collections, as well as awards, assisted Zulu ceramists to become more visible, as it did for many artists and art forms. Nesta Nala won the prestigious FNB Vita Crafts Now Award in 1995, and the National Ceramics Biennale in 1996

²³¹ Garrett, "Nesta Nala", 50.

²³² Ibid, 45.

²³³ Perrill, "Contemporary Zulu Ceramics", 92.

²³⁴ Perrill, "Burnishing History – Part I", 276.

²³⁵ Perrill, "Chasing Time", 144.

which, according to Perrill, “established her as the doyenne of Zulu potters.”²³⁶ The vessel she made for the Vita Award was an *uphiso* (used for transporting and pouring beer), an image of which was widely distributed through press and publications. At this point in her career, Nala had already abandoned her “tourist” pieces and returned to the genre of beer-vessels (*ukhamba*, *uphiso* and *umancishane*) as she was receiving patronage from dealers and collectors for such items.²³⁷ Nala had crossed the boundary from making customary domestic ware for an internal market to reproducing similar vessel types with heightened technical expertise and meticulous attention to detail which attracted the connoisseur or collector, but which buyers in her area considered too expensive.

In the 1990s it was the *uphiso* (a necked vessel for carrying beer) that Nala focused on, as it was “what the outside market wanted.”²³⁸ Undoubtedly, buyers were also influenced by her award recognition and the subsequent dissemination of imagery. It might well appear that Nesta Nala was building a career and receiving recognition for her “traditional Zulu” vessel types, but she was an astute innovator as well. As her decoration became more refined, the common wave pattern of the Oyaya area (in which she lived) mutated to become geometric patterns based on triangles and rhomboid shapes.²³⁹ In addition, her designs were influenced by the Early Iron Age motifs as previously indicated, which, according to Jolles, enabled her work “to survive and compete as artworks in a growing international market.”²⁴⁰ Correspondingly, Nala was receptive to experimenting with new technologies and tools for her design making and burnishing. What is ironic is that Western art makers are applauded for being innovative and breaking artistic “boundaries”. However, it was only when Nala reverted to the earlier beer-vessel genre, highly indicative of “classical” or “traditional” Zulu wares, that she received international recognition.

A modification that assisted ceramists in gaining recognition as artists and not just anonymous members of a “tribe” or lowly “crafters,” was the signing of their work. The practice of individuating the artist is a feature of the Western canon of “fine art”. Prior to

²³⁶ Perrill, “In Surface and Form”, 56.

²³⁷ Ibid, 58.

²³⁸ Jolles, “Zulu Ceramics in transition”, 19.

²³⁹ Ibid, 19.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 19.

the 1980s, most work by Zulu ceramists remained unsigned and consequently few of the makers have been singled out and acknowledged for their work.²⁴¹ Signing work does two things: it allows an artist's work to be traceable over time and therefore aesthetic development can be appreciated, and it satisfies a "particular" patron. If someone like Nesta Nala is considered a "doyenne", then a collector, be they a gallery or an individual, is more likely to desire a piece of her "fame" and a signature identifies her work.²⁴² Nesta Nala began signing her work in about 1984 and no doubt it assisted her to cross from "craft" maker to renowned artist and enter into the category of "fine art".

The collector of "antiques" is not so interested in signatures, as "older" wares should be detached from their individual maker. In this case a lack of signature becomes proof of age and perhaps rarity. Similarly, claims that an art piece is authentic or "old" immediately changes the value of an object. In the case of ceramic vessels, evidence that the vessel has been "used," perhaps in a beer ceremony, can shift its status to that of an antique, even if it was made last week. The use of the word authentic does not imply the opposite of fake or unoriginal. It is the notion that non-Western art comes from a pre-colonial society that is cohesive and devoid of internal competition or still in a "pure" state. As Kafir explains, the idea that "before colonialism most African societies were relatively isolated, internally coherent and highly integrated has been such a powerful paradigm and so fundamental to the West's understanding of Africa that we are obliged to retain it even when we know that much of it is an oversimplified fiction."²⁴³ Furthermore, a piece of African art is usually deemed authentic or inauthentic by the connoisseur or dealer and not by the artist who made it, which as Kafir infers, is "powerful, one sided and usually final."²⁴⁴ But the irony is that the collector or dealer is not always the dominant voice in this conversation and contrary to Kafir's opinion, patrons do not consistently have the final say on definitions of authentic.

²⁴¹ Juliette Armstrong, "The Nala Dynasty: the relevance and importance of these *utshwala* vessels", ed. Jenny Stretton, in *All Fired Up, conversations between storerooms and classrooms*, (Durban: Durban Art Gallery [n.d.], 73 – incorrect spelling of Juliet's name in catalogue.

²⁴² It goes without saying here that a signature can be forged and is not a guarantee of an "original". There have been instances of potters making pots which are signed by another person.

²⁴³ Kafir, "African Art and Authenticity", 4.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 45.

Ceramist Clive Sithole hosted an *ukubuyisa idlozi* ('bring back an ancestor') ceremony, usually undertaken when migrant labourers died and were buried far from their ancestral homelands. Sithole conducted the ceremony despite having a "township" and therefore a largely urban upbringing.²⁴⁵ Perrill reports that it was of utmost importance to the metropolitan Sithole that the vessels used in the ceremony were, in his words, "real" and "typical" Zulu pots. They were approximately twelve to fourteen inches in diameter, roughly burnished, blackened, and either inscribed with geometric designs or painted with enamel paints.²⁴⁶ Sithole himself revealed that although "many think of [me] as a 'city slicker' ... [I] wanted to make sure the entire event had the proper Zulu material culture."²⁴⁷ This statement reveals that dealers are not the exclusive agents in deciding what is "authentic". Makers and even local, domestic buyers, look for specific aesthetic attributes that indicate to them that a vessel is "genuine".

The power of identity creation and allegiance to a language about the self being of a particular ethnicity can be shown most clearly in the ceramic work of Azolina MaMncube Ngema, who not only identifies herself as Zulu but insists that she specifically makes "Zulu" ceramics.²⁴⁸ Ngema is from the Nongoma region of KwaZulu-Natal, once an area enmeshed in Zulu nationalism. She decorates her ceramic vessels with designs specifically from Nongoma style beadwork with colours which have strong associations with the Buthelezi royal clan. Zulu nationalism drew on images of the Zulu kings to formulate its rhetoric.²⁴⁹ As argued in the previous chapter, beer vessels are decorated because they are used in public events and can communicate messages to an extended audience. MaMncube's choice of decoration as described by Perrill, "fits in with the increased desire for regionalised Zulu identity to be displayed in regalia that would accompany life events, such as weddings, coming-of-age ceremonies, funerals, or other *umsebenzi* functions."²⁵⁰ Utilizing Nongoma beadwork designs, gives a clear message of allegiance to the Buthelezi clan and the lineage of Zulu kings. I would agree with Elizabeth Perrill in her assertion that

²⁴⁵ Perrill, "Contemporary Zulu Ceramics", 205

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 210.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 211.

²⁴⁸ Perrill, "Contemporary Zulu Ceramics", 58.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 139.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 59.

“in the case of Zulu nationalism the beer pot has entered into this repertoire of symbols,”²⁵¹ that speak to an audience about an identity that is “Zulu”. In her use of decoration, Ngema engages with a language of “self definition” as much as with her social or “collective identity.”

The creation of identity reflected in visual objects comes not only from numerous influences in the external environment, but is also internally generated by the maker. For what is salient here is that the maker is not always a pawn in the market, nor are they a silent and powerless recipient of ideas and discussions about their identity. The ceramist is actively participating in and manipulating the dialogue that attempts to relegate them and their work to a type.

Conclusion

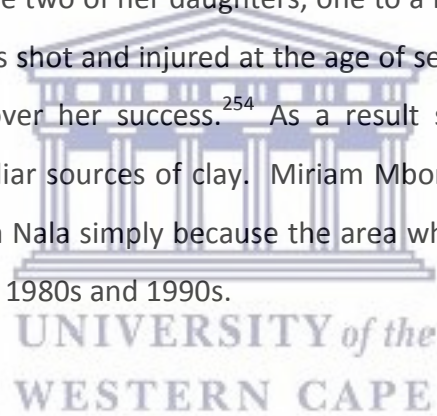
Despite the many voices and kinds of market – from roadside stall to high end gallery involved in the transactions around Zulu ceramic vessels – these are not the only influencers when it comes to aesthetic change. Zulu ceramists themselves, as I have demonstrated, are active participants in their own artistic definition and development, sometimes even despite the loud contrasting declarations from the market. Similarly, there are a range of influences that are not strictly confined to buying and selling. Specific historical moments in South Africa as well as major internal change in political orientation have contributed significantly to the exposure and promotion of the work of such artists.

Even the more subtle and slow moving shifts from a Western dominated perception of art to one that is less hierarchical and more inclusive have increased the appreciation for Zulu ceramic vessels. Ironically, as we have witnessed, some of these movements have resulted in a sanctioning of ideas around “otherness” and “Zuluness” that are embedded in different decorative techniques. But despite their rural lives, artists are not ignorant or naive, and they employ these aesthetic motifs in their work fully cognisant of its appeal to different markets and customers. Some collectors and commentators have even criticised the

²⁵¹ Ibid, 61.

changes that ceramists make to their work, in a quest to hold on to purist ideals. Juliet Armstrong, one of the most ardent champions of rural ceramists, expresses the complexities involved in the changes to ceramic vessels: “I think that [ceramics] is alive and well, but it may soon die if the art of producing work within the context of culture is not promoted and given its true worth.”²⁵² Here, even Armstrong expresses the need to contain Zulu ceramics within the boundaries of a mythical tradition with a concern that the works will be “commodified and bastardised”²⁵³ by entrepreneurs.

What is perhaps more disturbing than a desire to retain works and the artists that make them in the framework of “traditional”, is the difficult lives that many women have – despite, and sometimes even because of, their recognition. Nesta Nala died in 2005 without running water or electricity in her home, despite her awards and international recognition. After her death she would lose two of her daughters, one to a fatal shooting by a boyfriend. Azolina MaMcube Ngema was shot and injured at the age of seventy because of unresolved family issues and jealousy over her success.²⁵⁴ As a result she had to leave her home permanently, losing her familiar sources of clay. Miriam Mbonambi received less publicity than her contemporary Nesta Nala simply because the area where she lived was embroiled in the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s.



²⁵² Juliet Armstrong, “Zulu Pottery”, *Indilinga African journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 4, no. 1 (2005): 345.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 344.

²⁵⁴ Perrill, “Indigenous knowledge Systems”, 14.

Despite their numerous challenges these ceramists have persevered and been acclaimed, although it was really only from the 1980s that South African and international audiences and connoisseurs began to document the artists and their work. Of course, the task of documentation is not a simple one, as vessels are stored in museum and gallery basements often with no record of their makers or where they were from. Vessels have moved from homestead to roadside to gallery, and have been classified as artefact and then as fine art. They have travelled across the ocean to live in foreign environments without any identification or provenance, sometimes even the incorrect ones. In the following chapter I will explore the ways in which vessels have stoically held their ground in the rarefied, hushed environment of the exhibition space, complete with bright lights, shiny glass and personal security guards.



CHAPTER THREE

CERAMICS IN THE GALLERY: CERAMIC VESSELS IN THEIR FINAL RESTING PLACE – OR NOT?

The idea that museums are not free from employing social control, dominant voices and distorted history is an unsettling one, especially since these institutions appear so venerable, authoritative and hence trustworthy. Susan Vogel, herself a long time curator of exhibitions, admits that “the museum exhibition is not a transparent lens through which to view art, however neutral the presentation may seem”.²⁵⁵ Museums and art galleries, and by implication their exhibitions, are active in the carrying out of ideological and political messages, which are imparted to the public that visits them. In the rarefied environment of the exhibition room the Zulu ceramic vessel can be silenced as never before. Its communicative powers within the homestead and its activity within the market are hushed. It becomes an object for contemplation and any information about it is either filtered through the authority of the institution, or intentionally minimized to enable the private dialogue of the viewer to take precedence. Patricia Davison succinctly observes that: “Viewers bring their own meanings to displays and ambiguity characterises the museum experience.”²⁵⁶ There is no single way of seeing an exhibition or understanding its story as a viewer, so I must state that the reflections in this chapter are my own unapologetically subjective impressions of two select exhibitions.

This chapter is an exploration of how museums and art galleries create a story about Zulu ceramics that is readily perceived as believable, through the way that objects are housed, displayed and written about. But this chapter also asks the questions: who is writing the story, why, and for whom are they writing? This chapter will make use of Margaret

²⁵⁵ Susan Vogel, “Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections” (New York: Museum for African Art), 1988, Reprinted with permission of the Museum for African Art, 210.

²⁵⁶ Davison, “Material Culture”, 91.

Lindauer's essay "The Critical Museum Visitor" in *New Museum Theory and Practice*.²⁵⁷ Lindauer offers methods by which to look at how and why things are presented in the way that they are. Lindauer's method of critique provides a device through which the exhibition, "Fired: An Exhibition of South African Ceramics", at the Castle of Good Hope will be analysed and then contrasted with work shown at the South African National Gallery (SANG) in the exhibition, "Hidden Treasures". My critique will look at the haunting question of how an artefact metamorphoses into an art piece and how we recognise the difference. How do the processes of exhibition collection, production, and design create the exhibitionary meanings intended? As opposed to our previous explorations into the communicative power of pots in the homestead and the diverging ways in which their makers are utilising vessels to give them a voice in the market, what happens as the pot balances precariously on its pedestal behind glass? Furthermore, how does a particular exhibition or museum function to disclose wider considerations about public history, curatorship and the role of expertise? But firstly, let us go on a short tour to visit the institutions where the abovementioned exhibitions are being held and provide a description of their content.

"Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics" and "Hidden Treasures" – Two Exhibitions Investigated

The exhibition, "Fired: An exhibition of South African Ceramics", is on show in the Granary at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town and has been there since 2012.²⁵⁸ The works in the exhibition are from the Social History Collections Department of the Iziko Museums.²⁵⁹ Although all the museums are amalgamated under the banner of Iziko, each museum nevertheless retains its own specific research and curatorial character. The "Fired ..." exhibition is based predominantly on the collections of the South African Museum and the dominant curator of the exhibition is from this institution, which is essentially what might be

²⁵⁷ Margaret Lindauer, "The Critical Museum Visitor", in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

²⁵⁸ Please note that the exhibition was briefly closed in 2015.

²⁵⁹ The five state-funded museums in the Western Cape which include the South African National Gallery and South African Museum were amalgamated under the Southern African Flagship which was officially renamed Iziko Museums of Cape Town in July 2001.

described as an ethnographic museum.²⁶⁰ In contrast, the exhibition, “Hidden Treasures”, is distinctly part of the South African National Gallery and is being held at this institution. In this chapter, there will inevitably be a disproportionate discussion of the “Fired ...” exhibition versus the “Hidden Treasures” exhibition. This is because the former is a dedicated exhibition of ceramics (with a large number of extremely impressive vessels), while the latter is a mixed exhibition of objects from different countries in Africa (with a few ceramic vessels) whose primary theme is to reflect the “innovation, virtuosity and originality”²⁶¹ of Africa’s art.



Fig 3.1: Front of the South African National Gallery, Author’s Photograph

²⁶⁰ With the formation of the Iziko Museums, all of the former separate collections from predominantly the South African Museum (now called Iziko South African Museum) and the former South African Cultural History Museum were amalgamated to form the Social History Collections Department .

²⁶¹ Panel description: “Title panel” that introduced the whole exhibition at the entrance to the exhibit.

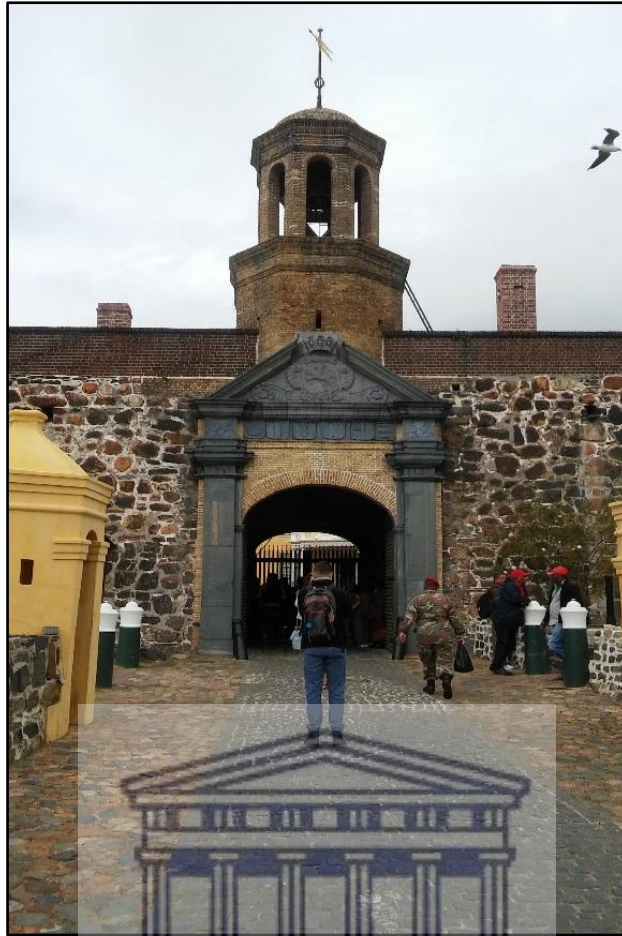


Fig 3.2: Front of the Castle of Good Hope, Author's Photograph

To begin with the “Fired ...” exhibition, I find the location of the exhibition intriguing and even obscure. What is the relationship between ceramics and one of Cape Town’s oldest settler buildings, a 17th century fort, (see Fig 3.2) built originally to safeguard Table Bay? Why is the exhibition not being held at one of the Iziko museums? Why did the curators choose this specific venue? Unfortunately, there was no mention of the exhibition on either the Museum’s website or on the Castle’s website at the time of my research. But let me firstly describe the exhibition itself.



Fig 3.3: Interior of “Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics” at the Granary, the Castle of Good Hope, Author’s Photograph

As mentioned, the exhibition is held in the granary of the Castle (originally a storage facility for grain, see Fig 3.3 above). The room is vaulted like a storage cellar (similar to a very old wine cellar), and you feel that you need to bend your head, but it also has a tomb or womb like feel and is actually quite cosy. The walls are immaculately white, both necessary to lighten the atmosphere and to create a sense of space which is essential in such a confined setting. The room itself is long and narrow and the visitor is compelled to walk from the entrance to the rear and then back again to the entrance which then also serves as the exit. As you enter the exhibition there are large explanatory or didactic panels running the whole length of the right-hand wall. Immediately on the left are a group of pots situated in a

“grotto” or small cave, and directly in front of you the floor has been excavated to reveal layers of soil and clay, and covered in plexiglass. If you are standing facing into the exhibition to your left around a small corner is another “grotto” with a video loop of ceramic production in rural environments. Directly in front of you the space is broken up into an array of differently shaped display cases (tall, short, multi-layered and flat) containing ceramic ware. All the items are in clear glass or plexiglass display cases on plinths of various sizes and heights. The boxed items also include two very large terracotta lions at the far end of the room, finishing the exhibition like a pair of bookends. As per a panel description, the lions once adorned the gates of the Castle until they were damaged toward the end of the twentieth century.²⁶² Why they are part of the exhibition is not explained. Is it a convenient storage space to provide protection against further damage, or are they an intentional part of the exhibition? Given that they are also in a glass box and labelled, one would surmise that their presence is deliberate.

The floor of the exhibition is terracotta tiling which complements the very substance that all the items displayed are made of. The exhibition showcases a large and representative cross-section of ceramic production in Southern Africa and moves from archaeological fragments, to the trade that brought ceramics to South Africa, through to symbolism and ritual. There are also panels dedicated to contemporary ceramics, production pottery and studio pottery.

There are large didactic panels accompanied by pictures which give detail on symbolism and ritual in ceramic works and the earliest existing production of pottery in South Africa. The panels also describe the different methods of pottery construction, from the making of a shape, to decoration, to the firing of pottery. There are also timelines giving the dates or time frames in which archaeological evidence of ceramics appeared around the world and similarly when ceramics was found in archaeological digs in Southern Africa. The scope of items in the exhibition is substantial. The introductory panel states that the exhibition is “focusing mainly on ceramics made or used in South Africa. The exhibition brings together the work of African potters, local studio pottery, imported wares of historical significance

²⁶² Panel description accompanying the pair of terracotta lions in the exhibition.

and contemporary ceramics.”²⁶³ On first reflection the exhibition appears to be a straightforward linear and historical account of when and how ceramics were made and the different methods of production that occurred in South Africa. The exhibition is clearly intended to educate the viewer on the history of ceramic production in South Africa and to celebrate the diversity of work.

In reviewing the exhibitions “Fired ...” and “Hidden Treasures”, the contents of the display cases and the detail of the didactic panels will be dealt with in depth, as and when they are relevant. I will focus very specifically on my concern about how objects are signified to the viewer as either artefacts or art objects. This focus will be pursued in order to delve into some of the larger questions about how and why these definitions arose historically. With this in mind I will pay particular attention to the presentation, display and labelling of ceramic work which originate from rural environments, or are categorised as African pottery. I have done this because in South Africa there exists a sense of division between the urban and rural ceramist, similar to a perceived and enacted division between African objects and Western objects. The urban and rural potter is thought to utilise different production methods and may have different intentions for doing the work they do. It also enables questions to be asked about whether these objects are ethnographic artefacts or art. In taking this very specific approach to the two exhibitions, it is to be noted that I will not deal with all the material on exhibition as it is too broad.

This chapter began with Susan Vogel’s assertion that museums are not neutral places and Tony Bennett would certainly agree with her. In *The Birth of the Museum* Bennett likens changes to museums to the reforms in prisons during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Bennett describes how social hegemony went from public displays of punishment by hanging to more subtle forms, which were private and focussed on the reform of the individual in an enclosed prison environment. Bennett perceives an alignment with Foucault’s notion of “carceral archipeligo”. He states: “The scaffold and the body of the condemned, which had previously formed part of the public display of power, were

²⁶³ Panel description: “Title panel’ that introduced the whole exhibition at the entrance to the exhibit.

withdrawn from public gaze as punishment increasingly took the form of incarceration.”²⁶⁴ Margaret Lindauer suggests starting the critique on a museum/gallery by looking at the museum’s architecture and “what unspoken messages are sent”²⁶⁵ to the viewer. It is not without irony that the Castle of Good Hope, although a fort for protection, was also a prison, and the architecture certainly conveys these “messages”. The entrance is imposing with stone walls indicative of military might and punishment, with huge impenetrable and intimidating doors (see Fig 3.2 above). Bennett explains that social reformation is meted out in prisons and museums, although opposite methods are exercised: “Museum expositions realised some of the ideals of panopticism in transforming the crowd into a constantly surveyed, self-watching, self-regulating and, as the historical record suggests, consistently orderly public – a society watching over itself.”²⁶⁶

Museums were and still are architectural sites that operate as a civilizing mechanism, prompting Lindauer to ask: “How do you feel as you approach and enter? Are you calm ... Do you feel cultured, sophisticated, herded, under surveillance, or enlightened?”²⁶⁷ With regards to the Castle of Good Hope, the building itself is intimidating and was designed to be. It is a building of surveillance and one that enacted violence both on the internal prisoners and the external threats. It seems therefore a most unlikely place to hold an exhibition of ceramics, and would be rather better suited to exhibit ghoulish instruments of torture, or military uniforms of the 18th century, or something similar.

The “Hidden Treasures” exhibition is housed in the South African National Gallery, which was purpose built in 1930 by the Public Works Department with funds from Government and the City Council. It is clearly a colonial building and akin to a temple elevated above the ground, with Grecian columns surrounding the entrance way (see Fig 3.1). The analogy of temple-like building would certainly have been purposeful, to create “a combination of aesthetic and spiritual authority, implicitly conferring credibility on their collections and on the knowledge conveyed within them.”²⁶⁸ The Gallery is part of the Company Gardens’

²⁶⁴ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 60.

²⁶⁵ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum”, 207.

²⁶⁶ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 68.

²⁶⁷ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum”, 207.

²⁶⁸ Davison, “Material Culture”, 94.

complex and placed at the head of a promenade of formal fish ponds and formally arranged gardens. Unlike the Castle with its ominous ambiance, the Gallery is grand and stately, but clearly colonial in the style of its building. Davison's commentary that exhibitions "imbue the past with present intent, they re-make the past and re-present it in another context"²⁶⁹ is pertinent here. This is relevant to the "Hidden Treasures" exhibition which actively states that it is doing just that, making amends for past indiscretions and silencing, as an accompanying didactic panel explains. This panel states that the works "can be viewed as an official post-apartheid attempt to redress past omissions and exclusions."²⁷⁰ The same panel also refers to the work on display as "some never previously exhibited, others newly re-discovered."²⁷¹ Perhaps there is an intention in this because some works were not previously considered worthy of exhibition and have been "newly re-discovered" purely out of a move to be politically correct in a changed South Africa. These are strange words indeed for an exhibition which consists of very little South African work: most of the objects are from elsewhere in Africa. Does the SANG take responsibility for Africa, or is it simply "inspired by the global interest in African Art,"²⁷² as per the descriptive panel? But on reflection, what if these buildings are alluding to an even more sinister idea, that of the triumph of the colonial powers over the indigenous population, with indigenous material culture still under its control in glass boxes? Is it possible that this could indeed be the message that was intended when such buildings were built and then used as exhibition areas?

It is relatively straightforward to end up asking the above questions if you review the ways in which the early Western museums displayed objects in order to convey and convince their publics of the correct way to think about social order. Before the Great Exhibitions of the 19th Century, "natural and artificial objects gathered from the conquest and exploration of foreign lands were arranged together in 'cabinets of curiosities' belonging to Europe's elite."²⁷³ In the second half of the century these "cabinets of curiosity" entered public buildings and carried with them their cultural elitism as they became displays for public

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 90

²⁷⁰ Description on exhibition Panel entitled "Hidden treasures from the Permanent Collection" of SANG.

²⁷¹ Ibid as above.

²⁷² Ibid as above.

²⁷³ Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 108.

consumption. At the same time academic disciplines began to want independence from each other and recognition as “serious” fields of study. One of these disciplines was anthropology which “began to evolve from amateur avocation to scientific enterprise”²⁷⁴. Objects from around the world were not only public, they were arranged in order to be seen in particular ways. The Western museum exerted social control over its publics and it located this public in a hierarchy of achievement. Much anthropological and art historical work was grounded in the “Hegelian notion of progress.”²⁷⁵ According to Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, this was “the idea of progress in history (which) closely parallels the belief in the historical evolution of human material cultures”²⁷⁶ discussed previously in Chapter One. As Tony Bennett maintains, objects from other nations were subordinated to imperial powers, through the ordering of objects²⁷⁷. By ranking the objects on display in terms of progressive stages of manufacture, the museum could reduce non-Western culture to the bottom of the scale of evolutionary theory and educate the Western viewing public of their rightful place at the top of the human developmental ladder.

The discipline of anthropology was also responsible, not only for claiming “discovery” – or as the South African National Gallery states, the “re-discovery” of objects made by other cultures – but for saving these very cultures and their objects from extinction. Is this pervasive idea what is meant in the wording of the “Hidden Treasures” exhibit? To this day museums often reveal this tendency for a reverence of the past as an indicator for the viewer to register objects as authentic, traditional, or from a “pure” state of existence by referring to objects in the past tense. A critical examination of the text featured in the “Fired ...” exhibition reveals that most of the didactic text is in the present tense, except for the panel titled “Symbolism and Ritual” and a panel describing Khoesan ceramic work. These panels use descriptors that are in the past tense regarding ritual use of ceramic vessels, indicating that ceramics is no longer ritually used and the people who made them no longer exist, perhaps because of contact with Europeans? Either way the past tense

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 108.

²⁷⁵ Ruth B Phillips and Christopher B Steiner. “Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1999), 8.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 9.

²⁷⁷ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 81.

leads us to believe that the work on display or depicted in photographs is genuine and authentic because it is from a pre-contact past.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, notions of the “traditional” are frequently applied to people, and the photograph of a Zulu woman (see Fig 3.4 below) in “traditional” dress is indicative of placing someone permanently in a static past rather than in current attire or modern surroundings. An accompanying picture of a “white” potter shows him in a modern studio (see Fig 3.5 below), similar to those used by the likes of Thembi Nala or Clive Sithole, for example, who are urban-based black ceramists.



Fig 3.4: Image from the didactic panels at the exhibition “Fired – An Exhibition of South African Ceramics”, Author’s Photograph



Fig 3.5: Image from the didactic panels at the exhibition “Fired – An exhibition of South African Ceramics”,
Author’s Photograph

As Richard Handler and Eric Gable infer, current scholarship about museums have a common set of concerns: “First, are questions about cultural representation, how do museums collect, classify and display material artefacts to convey images of various human groups understood to be culturally different?”²⁷⁸ In conjunction, the exhibition “Fired ...” is being reviewed not only on the grounds of how the “other” is viewed (in the South African context of rural and urban or black and white), but also by what means pieces are articulated, as artefact or art. Lindauer suggests that the way to gain an understanding of the museum’s representation is through looking at the display. Here it is important to understand the separation of artefact and art and how this occurred, particularly in relation to non-Western objects.

Susan Vogel argues that an object in a museum is “not material that ‘speaks for itself’ but material filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular

²⁷⁸ Richard Hander and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

presenters at a particular moment in time.”²⁷⁹ This is most apparent in the consideration of whether pieces are artefacts or art. Once non-Western collections moved from private collections and were placed in museums, most were initially classified as ethnographic objects. Objects were considered ethnographic because they were seen as utilitarian and did not fit in with the Western criteria of what was designated art, which was “optical naturalism”, or painting and sculpture as I discussed in Chapter One.

A second important characteristic that enables something to be free of its ethnographic label is the requirement that the object is for contemplation and enjoyment. Monni Adams argues that “this aesthetic attitude promoted an understanding of art as something uniquely free of worldly imperative, the very opposite of tool.”²⁸⁰ Similarly in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Sally Price explains that in order to designate something as art “what should ‘happen’ between the object and viewer is relatively constant; the museum visitors task-pleasure, for both Primitive and Western objects, is conceptualised first and foremost as a perceptual–emotional experience, not a cognitive-educational one.”²⁸¹

Pots on a Pedestal - The Beginning of the End of a Journey

I will now look more closely at these debates and investigate how they play themselves out in the relevant exhibitions and the ways in which vessels have spoken and been spoken about. As the vessels have moved from homestead to gallery, the dialogue has gone from pots being interactive and purposeful at home, to being utilised by makers to assert themselves in the market place. But do vessels end up having their life blood removed by the time they are on display? In “Fired ...,” the work that caught my eye as being displayed in a manner that designated the pieces as ethnographic objects were contained in four separate boxes, each with 4 or 5 pots in them, all framed by a large photograph of a kraal structure, with faces carved into the kraal posts and a thatched rondavel in the background (see Fig 3.5). The cattle kraal immediately references these pots as rural and African and

²⁷⁹ Susan Vogel, “Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 201.

²⁸⁰ Monni Adams, “African Visual Arts from a Historical Perspective”, *African Studies Review*, 32, No 2 (1989): 58.

²⁸¹ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83.

they become artefacts from several points of view. Firstly, they are contextualised by the photograph of the kraal (in the background of Fig 3.5 below) which stipulates that they come from a particular place, signifying to the viewer thereby that they are “ethnic” and “tribal”.



Fig 3.5: The Display entitled “Embodied Earth”, Author’s Photograph

The pots are also displayed close to ground level and clustered, another technique designating them as artefact. As Susan Vogel points out, anthropologists gathered vast collections of objects based on their similarity. As they “sought what was typical of culture rather than what was unique, they often exhibited ... vast series of closely similar objects, often arranged typologically.”²⁸² The display of the work close to ground level both contextualises them as “closer to the earth” and is actually the intended way of viewing, using and appreciating them. Most pots from a rural environment were meant to be seen from the top – as they were placed on the ground in beer drinking. The decoration

²⁸² Vogel, *Art/Artifact*, 211.

significantly is also on the top half of the pots as Juliet Armstrong argues because it is useful for “facilitating a firmer grip on the vessel when picked up for drinking.”²⁸³

Interestingly, the whole display is categorised by its label “Embodied Earth”, which makes reference to the rural production of ceramics and rural people being closer to the earth, more in touch with nature and living a life which could be viewed as more instinctual, harmonious and free. Price asks with reference to African art: “Are artists in conscious control of the aesthetic choices they adopt? Or are they rather producing objects through some combination of instinctive behaviour and inherited tradition?”²⁸⁴ In the art versus artefact debate “[a] common ingredient in Western conceptualisations of Primitive Art is that it is produced more spontaneously and less reflectively – with less artistic intentionality.”²⁸⁵ One could well ask whether linking rural and African works to the earth is making this sort of statement about them. The reference to earth is of course a general association of clay being sourced from the earth, but it does also have deeper connotations with reference to African women. Dieter Reusch, when referencing Zulu ceramics, points out: “Gender divisions also have a cosmological underpinning ... there is an interesting connection between the sky, earth and the ancestors ... Sky lord is perceived as masculine and the earth as feminine.”²⁸⁶ Similarly the exhibition associates Zulu vessels as being symbolic of earth, fertility, female fecundity and of course pregnancy and child birth. This is directly referenced by the label on the works stating: “Some of the vessels and sculptures on display here are resonant with the shape of the human body ... [they have] curved lines and rounded features which are reminiscent of the human shape.”²⁸⁷ On another label titled “Archaeological Fragments,” there is direct reference to the fact that “smelting and forging were technically and symbolically linked to making and firing pottery and both were symbolically linked with giving birth.”²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Juliet Armstrong, “The Magwaza Family”, 42.

²⁸⁴ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 88.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 89.

²⁸⁶ Reusch, “Imbiza Kayibil”, 19.

²⁸⁷ Display panel called “Embodied Earth” situated next to the three show cases of Limpopo pottery with terracotta and graphite decorations.

²⁸⁸ Display panel called “Archaeological Fragments”.

Another common feature of objects and particularly African objects is that those assigned to being artefacts are deemed anonymous as I discussed in Chapter Two. In the display of “Embodied Earth” (see Fig 3.5), several of the pots are labelled “unnamed Venda artists”. There is an important technical difference between the connotations of unknown and unnamed. If they are unknown, it is because perhaps there was no record and no memory of who made the work. But does unnamed suggest a disturbing intent to not recognise the maker?²⁸⁹ The appreciation of an artist also has connections with the conception of the named individual, with a known life history and a place within the literature of art, where they exist at a “specific point in the evolving history of civilization.”²⁹⁰ On the other hand, “Primitive Art” is often regarded as tied to the stipulations and restrictions of ritual and ceremony. As Sally Price articulates: “[the] anonymous maker is thought to have operated on the basis of the community, that precluded artistic reflection or the innovative solution to design problems.”²⁹¹ The display in the SANG foyer of an unknown Zulu vessel is therefore questionable (see Fig 3.6). The label is titled “unknown maker 1900” and the designation is KwaZulu-Natal. It is surprising that SANG displays an unknown vessel given that there are only three ceramic vessels on display in the whole gallery and that they must have a collection of them that are from known makers. In fact, we are aware from Chapter One that Anne Lawton’s collection of ceramics from her research would now be incorporated into the Social History Collection. Does this imply a degree of disrespect, counter to the claims of “redressing past imbalances?”²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 83.

²⁹¹ Ibid. 88.

²⁹² I do also acknowledge that SANG could well want to give a sense of equality in display by not only showing works that are signed or have a record of the maker.



Fig 3.6: Unknown maker 1900 – KwaZulu-Natal, South African National Gallery, Author's Photograph

Furthermore, in the “Hidden Treasures” exhibition the only two pots on display are problematic from a number of points of view. The larger black pot is labelled as being “Nala Family Ceramic Workshop” (see Fig 3.7 below). What is meant by ceramic workshop is unclear, but to not know which member of the Nala family made the vessel is also odd. It cannot be Sipiwe Nala (Nesta Nala’s mother) as she was dead by the date given as 2000. It was indeed Nesta Nala who reverted to working in the *ukhamba* genre and who by this date was no longer making for ceremonial purposes (so she is a distinct possibility). Her daughters did distinctly different styles, so it is unlikely to be them. Furthermore, Nesta Nala’s daughters are still alive and could surely have identified the vessel. So why were they not consulted? Similarly, to label it as “*Ukhamba/Ceremonial Vessel*” is strange as it is clearly too large to be used in any beer ceremony: it would be very heavy to use once filled with liquid. The small vessel in the middle in the picture (Fig 3.7) below would be more akin to those used in a beer ceremony.



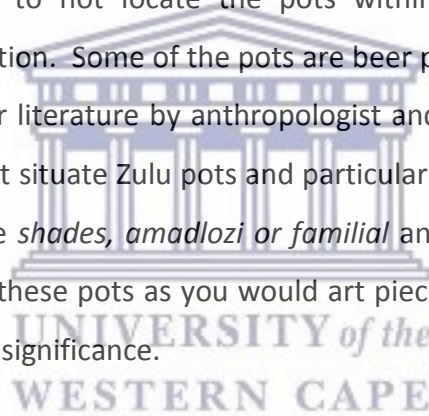
Fig 3.7: Display of Vessels in the “Hidden Treasures” Exhibition, Nesta Nala’s vessel on the right, Author’s Photograph

In the entrance to the “Fired ...” exhibition there is a small “grotto” with several pots both named and unnamed in it (see Fig 3.8 below). This is an intriguing set up, as the pots are situated just behind a raised lip and placed at various levels within the enclosed space. Some of these vessels are *izinkamba* or beer pots, but the space itself does not have any didactic labelling. The pots have what Sally Price describes as the “dog collar,” which is a short sharp description with the credentials of the artist and name of the piece.²⁹³ Usually the smaller the label, the more the work is intended to be seen as an “art” work rather than an ethnographic object, because it is free of a context and is thus “art for art’s sake”, not a

²⁹³ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 83.

utilitarian object. This, as Sally Errington points out, “constitutes the object as a mere representation of a model of the world rather than a part of the world.”²⁹⁴ So devoid of ethnographic labels that describe “geographic origin, fabrication, function and esoteric meaning ... elucidated at length,”²⁹⁵ the piece becomes closer to art than artefact. As a viewer I am subconsciously aware that the piece is art not artefact because of the length of the label. However, it is also pertinent to ask why these pots are situated in such a place. It is hardly by accident because as we have seen, all display has an intention.

I can only assume that the symbolism of the “grotto” with the raised lip at the entrance is a direct reference to the *umsamo*, which is located at the back of a designated rondavel in some rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Such a clear reference to the pots situated in a “sacred” space would need explanation. But conversely, the lack of labelling other than “storage vessels” seems intentionally to not locate the pots within their social context, ritual significance or utilitarian function. Some of the pots are beer pots and there is a researched and documented link in other literature by anthropologist and art historian, Dieter Reusch and Juliet Armstrong et al that situate Zulu pots and particularly blackened beer pots within ceremonies that venerate the *shades, amadlozi or familial* ancestors of a household.²⁹⁶ It seems contradictory to label these pots as you would art pieces and yet situate them in so obvious a context of “sacred” significance.



²⁹⁴ Shelly Errington, “What became of Authentic Primitive Art”, *Cultural Anthropology* 9, 2 (1994): 210.

²⁹⁵ Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 84.

²⁹⁶ Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw, Dieter Reusch, “Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*”, *Southern African Humanities*, 20 (2008).



Fig 3.8: Group of vessels in a “Grotto” at the entrance of “Fired ...,” Author’s Photograph

The most obvious signifier of a piece of work being art rather than artefact is, as Margaret Lindauer states, “a room with white walls and pedestals upon which individual objects are placed, spatially isolated from one another to accentuate aesthetic qualities.”²⁹⁷ In the exhibition “Fired ...” there are several such examples, where a singular object or pair of objects have significant space around them, are perched on a white box and caged in glass. As Sally Price indicates, “The isolation of an object both from other objects and from verbose contextualisation carries a definite implication of value.”²⁹⁸ But minimal labelling and situating works separately does something more, it directs the viewer to engage with the aesthetic principals of a piece rather than its social context or meaning. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett articulates succinctly that “the written label in an exhibition was a

²⁹⁷ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum Visitor”, 209.

²⁹⁸ Price, *Primitive Art*, 84.

surrogate for the words of an absent lecturer.”²⁹⁹ But in the case of designated art works, the label and therefore the lecturer are all but absent. Without a label descriptor the viewer is enabled to perhaps engage in some “higher realm”. In order for many artefacts to become works of art and be appreciated purely for their aesthetic qualities, they were stripped of soft parts, rendering them “modern looking and preserving or creating a particular aesthetic.”³⁰⁰ The art of other cultures was most prized for what Western art determined were formal aesthetic qualities that defined a piece as art by “ignoring the indigenous systems of value and meaning attached to objects.”³⁰¹

In contrast to the *umsamo* gathering of pots, which should have a contextual label, is a grouping of Nala family (Nesta and her daughters Thembi and Jabu’s) works, which has a relatively long explanation. There is contextual explanation labelled “Inspired by the Ancestors”, and although this might immediately indicate to the viewer that the display is all about pots and ritual purpose, none of these women made vessels for ritual use. Given the date of the Nesta Nala piece as 1995, we are aware from the previous chapter that she was distinctly making vessels for an exterior “art” market at that stage of her career. And although in the genre of *izinkamba*, the vessels were not intended for use, the label states that “The offering of beer in earthenware vessels continues to form an integral part of important cultural rituals,”³⁰² This is not incorrect as Chapter One attests, but the label does finish the explanation with wording which states that indeed vessels are created not only for ceremonial but also for decorative or decor use.³⁰³ However, the descriptors still do not mention that they are “art”. To me as a viewer, the term “decor” reads as shallow and frivolous and is often linked with “craft”, whereas the word “art” connotes something serious and more meaningful.

²⁹⁹ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 395.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 204.

³⁰¹ Phillips and Steiner, “Art, Authenticity and Baggage”, 7.

³⁰² Text on label “Inspired by Ancestors”.

³⁰³ Label “Inspired by the Ancestors”.



Fig 3.9: Display of Nesta, Jabu and Thembi Nala's vessels, Author's Photograph.

In the exhibition "Fired..." there are several pieces that indicate to the viewer that they are "art" through their placement, display and labelling. One such striking piece is a large vessel indicative of an *ukhamba* but larger than that which could be used for drinking. The pot is black as per a "traditional" pot, but it is decorated with red enamel paint around the opening and bordered by a string of blue beads. (It is hard to determine if these are applied glass beads or clay in the shape of beads). The label for the pot is: "**Kgwarane German Mahlase Vessel named after the Zulu Queen Nandi, Cape Town 2004**".

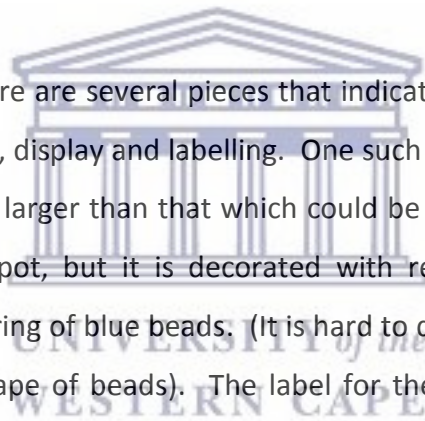




Fig 3.10: Kgwarane German Mahlase – Vessel named after the Zulu Queen Nandi, Cape Town 2004.

This is clearly a “dog tag” label with no ethnographic contextualisation of the vessel’s use or significance. The piece is out on the open floor and spotlighted, and displayed low, so one can look down at it. But the detail of the label is cryptic. Is the name Kgwarane German Mahlase the artist, or does it state the name of the famous Zulu Queen, Nandi (King Shaka’s mother)? It is difficult to determine what is being referred to unless you know the names of Zulu queens. But it is not a Queen’s name so therefore it is the artist. Despite this, it is interesting to see how this piece in particular, which pays homage to more “traditional” shape and design but utilizes “modern” substances and style of decoration (enamel paint and glass beads), is signified to the viewer as an art object. The question is: does a piece like this get designated as art because it ceases to indicate by its presentation a cultural context? Or more to the point, is it art when it begins to take on a more Western and modern aesthetic in the form and materials in the decoration (the enamel paint)?

In complete contrast the South African National Gallery displays Zulu pots as art if we go by their “dog tag” labels. Yet it groups the objects together (see Fig 3.7) as if they are meant to signify ethnographic objects. Reading the messages of these two different exhibitions is complex. Both institutions move between referencing pieces as art and artefact and vice versa in the same exhibitions. Perhaps this is an indication of the breaking of boundaries

between disciplines of anthropology and art? At the SANG exhibition the lone “unknown artist” vessel mentioned earlier (Fig 3.6) is displayed in a manner distinctly encouraging it to be read as “art”. The pot is alone in ample space and elevated on a pedestal with a small label and artfully lit from above. The irony is of course that a Zulu vessel is meant to be seen standing on the ground (as per the exhibits of “Fired ...”), prior to being picked up, with the decoration at the top half of the vessel for this purpose – as we discovered in Chapter One. Elevated to the status of an art object, it loses its intention, as a conveyor of messages. It is also interesting that the two vessels in the gallery that are of the blackened and burnished variety are decorated with *amasumpa*, indicative of “authentic” Zulu pots, as I have previously debated. Is this a conscious construction by curators? Or is it also an indication of institutions having larger collections of pots with *amasumpa* because they were considered indicative of “Zuluness”?

There is another object in the showcase of Nala vessels mentioned earlier (Fig 3.11), which I shall examine. In the display case are several pots by the Nala family placed next to work by Barbara Jackson (below) titled “Calabash Shape” with a red and white striped top and black and white speckled bottom. There is no descriptive text indicating why this vessel is with the Nalas, apart from perhaps it being a calabash and therefore a signifier of the idea of the “rural.” The combination of “traditional domestic pottery” by Zulu artists from KwaZulu-Natal and a Cape Town artist raises the question: does the traditional ware become “significant” because of its association or proximity to a Western artist?

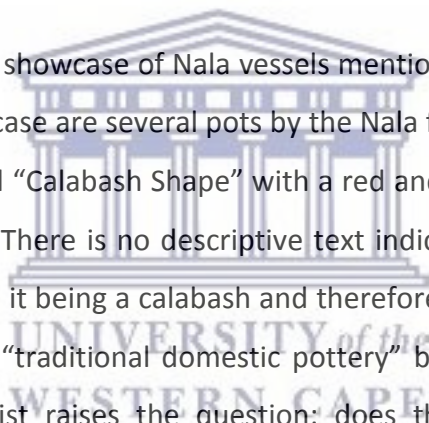




Fig 3.11: Pot by Barbara Jackson, "Calabash Shape", Authors Photograph

If we look at the history of Western art, African sculpture came to the attention or was "discovered" by Western artists such as Klee, Braque, Brancusi and Picasso and by association and appropriation entered the realms of art. When modernist pieces by the some of the above artists were displayed in an exhibition *Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity between the Tribal and the Modern*, they were exhibited with the African objects that theoretically inspired the likes of Picasso and associates. As Sally Price contests:

Primitive Art is elevated in status by being shown in the context of Modern art ... Modern art holds claim to the titles of authenticity and recognised masterpiece status, and much of the popular admiration of Primitive art is based on association with features that first caught our interest through the work of twentieth-century Western artists.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Price, *Primitive Art*, 96.

The label on the works at the “Fired ...” exhibition attests that the Western and non-Western works demonstrate the same features, those of the human body. But nonetheless, is there a Western curatorial perspective that prevails, actually indicating the worthiness of some work because of the presence of others?

It is important to acknowledge, as Errington does in her statement, that “the vast majority of objects found in fine art museums were not created as art, not intended to be ‘art’: they were originally other things ... [M]any of the objects that we count as ‘art’ required a ‘metamorphosis’ in order to become art.”³⁰⁵ Yet the Nala grouping of pots contests this idea, as all the vessels to me were produced as “art” and not for ritual use, despite their confusing labelling. So in an odd twist the curator decided that as rural objects they were not created as “art” but had a ritual function or decor (with associated connotations of being “lowly” craft). Again do we accept the institution as “representing the objective truth?”³⁰⁶ Susan Vogel points out that “we exhibit them (art from non-Western cultures) for our own purposes in institutions that are deeply imbedded in our own culture.”³⁰⁷ Vogel is drawing attention to the fact that the artefacts or art objects are not only “voiceless”, but that they are manipulated by individuals and institutions who perceive and assume authority in a certain way. As Sally Price tells us, “the eye of even the most naturally gifted connoisseur is not naked but views art through the lens of a Western cultural education.”³⁰⁸ Secondly, she states “that many Primitives (including both artists and critics) are also endowed with a discriminating ‘eye’ – similarly fitted with an optical device that reflects their own cultural education.”³⁰⁹ But are we hearing the “voice” of Western perception or of the artist that made and therefore knows the intention of the object?

³⁰⁵ Errington, “Authentic Primitive Art”, 203.

³⁰⁶ Davison, “Material Culture”, 96.

³⁰⁷ Vogel, “Art/Artifact”, 215.

³⁰⁸ Price, *Primitive Art*, 93.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 93.

Curatorial Expertise and Efforts to Convince the Viewer

It is a rare thing even in new museums, to hear the voice of the maker of an object. As Elizabeth Perrill states: “The silence of ceramic artists’ voices surrounding the display, description and inclusion of the ceramic medium in anthropological and art historical museums still predominates.”³¹⁰ The descriptions in the exhibition “Fired ...”, according to Margaret Lindauer, take the form of “truth speak”, which as she clarifies “shows off curatorial expertise while devaluing perspectives among people whose work is on display.”³¹¹ Similarly, in “Fired ...” the “voice” of the exhibition appears to emanate from the external expert or curator and advisors on the subject of South African ceramics. The tone and style of the information does not appear to engage the active participation of the viewer. Lindauer’s following statement is an accurate assessment of the exhibition’s curatorial style: “It situates the visitor as a passive consumer of simple, undisputed information rather than an intellectually engaged participant.”³¹²

Inevitably, such discussions also turn our attention to the role of curators within museums and galleries. Since the 1920s the role of the curator has shifted from someone who took care of the objects in museums and exhibitions to someone who is almost credited with making the objects, through display and labelling, particularly in art galleries. Paul O’Neill has suggested that curatorial practice in the 1960s became an art form in itself, as art could be considered the production of ideas about art. Even those that contextualise and explain art gave the appearance of being producers, by the manner of the presentation of their ideas. By the 1970s curators were no longer simply “carers” for artworks but took on organisational, discursive and creative functions as well, evident in labelling and didactic panel descriptions.³¹³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains that, “The ethnographers lecture is a long label, a performed description that elevates what would otherwise be viewed as ‘trifles’. Neither modest specimens nor the dry facts are expected to interest the listener. Rather it is the ethnographer’s own expenditure of time and effort – his or her expertise –

³¹⁰ Elizabeth Perrill, “Ceramic Displays, African Voices: Introduction” in *Interpreting Ceramics*, 17 (2016): 4.

³¹¹ Lindauer, “The Critical Museum”, 213.

³¹² Ibid, 216.

³¹³ Paul O’Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 2-18.

that creates value.”³¹⁴ This certainly appears to me the viewer to be what is implied by the didactic and other panels in the “Fired ...” exhibition. I certainly left the “Fired ...” exhibition being very impressed with the amount of knowledge that had been gathered and the manner in which it had been disseminated and I did indeed admire the curator and advisors for that. However, the curator involved appears uninterested in posing alternative perspectives or posing provocative questions. This methodology of curating situates the audience as passive receptors of expert knowledge. The exhibition is framed in such a way as to be someone else’s point of view. Yes, although it was very informative, highly educational and I the viewer as a ceramist learnt a great deal from it, it did not reveal much of the hidden and complex debates about the place of objects in South African art history.

The assertions of the experts including curator and advisors in the exhibition “Fired ...” and “Hidden Treasures” (although lacking much text) is clear, by the nature of the directive text panels and absence of open ended enquiry. Although the educational aspect deals with ceramic production in South Africa, it neglects to delve into any issues of political inequity among people of diverse social, economic, cultural or racial histories. As a viewer I was highly impressed by the attempts at integrating rural/urban and black/white makers and their work. However, more enquiry or “shared enquiry” might have resulted in something akin to curated exhibitions which exude a dynamic and engaging social interrogation, in addition to information. The question is whether there is a place for these types of exhibitions to “challenge the racist, exoticising rhetoric of the ‘primitive’ ... [that] art historians, curators and anthropologists in particular, have employed to distance and dehumanize native peoples and people of colour?”³¹⁵ Although this may seem a harsh criticism or beyond the scope of these exhibitions, there is much potential to explore the debates around colonialism and its impact, even just with regard to ceramic objects. As we have seen, ceramic objects have been part of people’s lives for a very long time, “twenty one centuries” according to Gavin Whitelaw. Whitelaw’s essay argues that ceramics vessels from KwaZulu-Natal have been dated from 150 BC to AD 300.³¹⁶ Ceramics are physical

³¹⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography”, 396.

³¹⁵ Maurice Berger, Jennifer Gonzalez, Fred Wilson, “Collaboration, Museums and Politics of Display: A Conversation with Fred Wilson” in *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000*, (Baltimore MD: Centre for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore, 2001): 11.

³¹⁶ Whitelaw, “Twenty One Centuries”, 3.

objects that have not only been spectators of South Africa's turbulent and eventful past, but active participants within it, and they offer an obvious opportunity to give a "voice" to those less represented. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the "Hidden Treasures" exhibition did state its intent to "address past inequities". But this very same didactic panel opens in the second paragraph with "Inspired by the global interest in African art ..."³¹⁷ I as the critical viewer wondered whether they (the institution) did this exhibition because "Africa is flavour of the month", or because they genuinely want to celebrate the beauty of all of South Africa's art makers?

At the beginning of this chapter there was a review of the Castle as a prison and a fort and there appeared to be a disjuncture between the ceramics on display and the building. One of the didactic panels in the exhibition poses a wonderful opportunity to incorporate the symbolism of the building and ceramics, and open a vibrant discussion or pose some uncomfortable questions. The panel titled "Of Khoesan Origin" states: "This type of [Khoesan origin] pottery was still being made in the south-western Cape when the Dutch arrived, and fragments have been found in the lowest layers of seventeenth century archaeological sites, including the Castle."³¹⁸ This is such a shockingly passive statement describing such a calamitous event. For the Khoekhoe herders, their culture, way of life and means of existence were literally buried under the foundations of colonialism! Granted, I as viewer did now understand the symbolism of having this exhibition in this venue – as fragments of ceramics were found in the foundations – but the opportunity to "dig" deeper was lost.

In Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine's publication there is a valuable distinction about museums, having two sides: "the traditional one of the museum as temple and the newer one of the museum as forum. As temple ... the museum plays a 'timeless and universal function, the use of structured sample of reality, not just as a reference but as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions.' In contrast, as forum, the museum is a place for

³¹⁷ Didactic panel "Hidden Treasures" exhibition.

³¹⁸ Didactic panel "Fired ..." exhibition.

‘confrontation, experimentation, and debate.’”³¹⁹ Although the exhibition “Fired ...” is not the whole experience or the only presentation of the Iziko museums, it is nonetheless an example of one of its voices to the public. I would have thought the type of objects in this exhibition offers an opportunity for the display to operate as a forum for larger debates or to raise more open-ended questions about human interactions in South Africa. The “Hidden Treasures” exhibition is even more frustrating because as a Gallery it tells one so little.

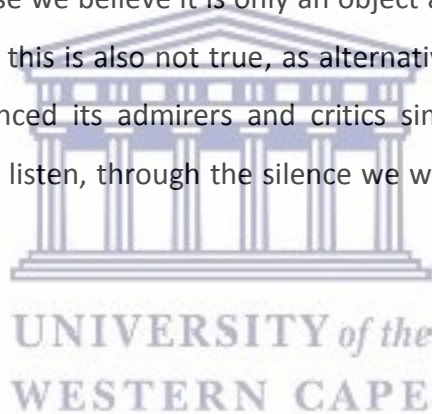
Conclusion

Susan Vogel rightfully points out that “if the original African experience was variable and can be only imperfectly simulated outside its culture, then a museum presentation can be arbitrary and incomplete.”³²⁰ This could, of course, be said of many cultural groups and their objects, not just African. But it does articulate that display is often a veil that obscures complexities, secrets, misinformation and lies, both internal and external to the museum itself. Museums and art galleries present objects in buildings that exude authority. They similarly exert conviction by the manner in which they write about displays and how and what they display. Museums and galleries, are in fact entities that can be considered material culture. Yet, as has been demonstrated, museums and galleries are also actually “smoke and mirrors”, artfully constructing stories they or an expert wish to tell. Of course the museum visitor will critique, interpret and respond to the museum objects according to their own vision of the world. As much as a museum is an arrangement of items, the visitor carries with them a concept of how the world should look and they will interpret the display accordingly, sometimes despite every effort to encourage them to see differently. And in saying this, I am fully aware that as a visitor I have done the same and may have missed salient points or information. But this is exactly what happens in the interface between visitor and institution. I acknowledge that both parties are subject to the possibility of misinterpretations of each other.

³¹⁹ Ivan and Steven Lavine, “Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 3.

³²⁰ Vogel, “Art/Artifact”, 214.

The Zulu ceramic vessel has traversed many different types of space in this journey, from a house, to market shelf to white walls. In this, its final visiting spot, the Zulu ceramic vessel has never been as exposed and yet oddly never been so quiet. It has many a story to tell from its travels. It has seen and done many things. Yet it has become an object for contemplation and all information about it is either filtered through the authority of the institution, or intentionally minimized to enable the public's interpretation to take precedence. The vessel seems somehow depleted of its wealth of experience, sucked dry of all the exuberance of the human lives it has accompanied, its vitality sapped and dissipated. Perhaps this has occurred as a result of its long, tiring activities. Or is it the effect of the "tomb-like" place it has ended up in? But this is of course just an opinion. I too am the viewer and can only begin to understand the exact spirit and voice of the pot, according to what other people have presented and told me. The vessel like many objects appears to be denied its voice simply because we believe it is only an object and has no inner life, none of its own stories to tell us. Yet this is also not true, as alternatively the vessel could actually just as well finally have silenced its admirers and critics simply by its presence on the pedestal. And if we stop and listen, through the silence we will hear what it has to tell us, simply by looking.



CONCLUSION

I began this study because I wanted to express my admiration for the astounding vessels made by the women ceramists of KwaZulu-Natal. But admiration is one thing. I also wanted to understand how such vessels were subtly able to negotiate the different contexts in which I encountered them, and how they spoke back to the constraints of such contexts. Despite the economic and social hardships faced by many of these women, they have competed and excelled in a complex web of global dynamics.

In this thesis I have revealed the manner in which vessels have spoken and been spoken about. I have used the concept of voice literally and metaphorically, as I have also used the notions of space, momentum and travel. As ceramic vessels made by women (and some men) of KwaZulu-Natal have moved out of the homestead, have stopped at the roadside and then perhaps proceeded to a museum or public gallery, the dialogue that they have conducted with such stops has changed. Vessels began by being seen only in relation to their domestic usage. They then moved to the centre of assertive debates by makers and buyers in the market, and finally ended up rather aloof (sometimes physically elevated) but nonetheless serene and beautiful in the quiet and dignified space of a gallery.

Before beginning to investigate precisely what ceramic objects were telling us in their originating environments, I investigated the way that pots were written about from 1910 onward. South African studies at the time were amateur at best, and they categorised objects in a style that gave the loudest voice to colonial opinion and need. Ceramic pieces were found in archaeological digs throughout KwaZulu-Natal and attributed to distinct tribal and ethnic groups. Hierarchies of human development and the movement of groups into and within South Africa were mapped out from the shards of vessels and remains of human habitation. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, these methods became more honed and distinct methodologies of understanding other cultures were developed. Yet despite considerable categorising and differing levels of sophistication being applied to investigations, it was only just prior to the turn of this century that ceramic vessels were viewed differently. From the 1980s a new generation of researchers and scholars understood vessels as dynamic participants in the social and spiritual relationship between makers and users, as well as being items with aesthetic properties that have purpose and communicate various

messages. As with most shifts or changes in perceptions or adjustments of the way in which objects are talked about, these new viewpoints were a result of complex political, social and academic developments. An enormous shift in South African political orientation enabled reflection into the nature of post-colonial and post-apartheid identities which meant challenging white cultural dominance and reviewing national distinctiveness from other viewpoints. It also gave rise to shifts in preconceived values and paradigms coincident with the development of African centred curricula, cross-culturalism and cultural realignment.

No less complex are the interactions that vessels have within the chain of supply and demand. Simplistically, someone makes a vessel and then someone buys it. Or does the buyer want it and then someone makes it? A good marketing text book will instruct an entrepreneur to “make what the market needs”, which means that the buyer wants it and someone makes it. But Chapter Two convinces us that this is not entirely correct. In this chapter I explored the complex dynamic of vessels within different markets, firstly as tourist art and then as art or collector’s pieces. But as my investigation revealed there are less differences between these types of wares and the buyers than we thought. And as for the original question of which came first, the vessel or the buyer, it appears that neither did. Ceramic artists became known through the publications that featured them, the exhibitions that presented them and the awards they won. As a consequence, collectors began to desire them. The consumer, be they individual patron or institution, impacts upon the formal attributes of their vessels, although not as a straight forward transaction. Through case studies of specific ceramists, I revealed that despite competing pressures and demands, these vessels are not voiceless, passive or inert in these negotiations, despite their rural and some might think naive origins. The concept that an artist has of their personal and social identity is powerful and provocative and affects the attributes of pots.

In my third and last chapter I reviewed museums and art galleries, and by implication their collections through two particular exhibitions. This chapter was a personal perspective on how institutions are active in carrying out ideological and political messages, which are imparted to the public that visits them. I reviewed how the processes of exhibition collection, production, and design create certain meanings. Furthermore, I explored the ways in which a particular exhibition or museum functions to disclose wider considerations about public history, curatorship and the role of expertise. Similar to the vessels

represented in them, exhibitions have a history which continues to evolve and be reviewed as their larger contexts change. Objects from around the world were originally collected and displayed in private homes as “cabinets of curiosity”. Collections then became important instruments of instruction and education and were put in public institutions where artefacts were arranged and ordered in particular ways. The Western museum exerted social control over its publics and it located this public in a hierarchy of achievement, through the manner in which objects from other countries and peoples were shown.

I then investigated two South African institutions and two exhibitions; one dedicated to a history of South African ceramics and the other to a display of objects from all over the African continent. In reviewing these, I discovered that display is often a veil that obscures complexities and secrets, and reveals hidden, subliminal agendas of curators and institutions. Museums and art galleries present objects in buildings that exude authority; they similarly exert conviction by the manner in which they write about displays and how and what they display. Yet as I have demonstrated, museums and galleries are actually artfully constructing a range of narratives. Similarly, the museum visitor will critique, interpret and respond (as I did) to the museum objects according to their own internal stories. As much as a museum is an arrangement of items, the visitor carries with them a preconditioned arrangement of how they see, filtered by their education, upbringing, ethnicity, gender, age, political affiliation and religious beliefs. Museums can either situate the visitor as a passive consumer of simple, undisputed information or challenge them as intellectually engaged participants, inviting them to participate in the stories being told.

I believe that vessels will continue to be the focus of differing ideas about their origins, their place in the homestead and their purpose within it, and I propose that even the most utilitarian artefacts or objects are invested with social value that goes beyond domestic function. I also believe the so-called mighty market is not that powerful and even a distant voice can be heard.

In the end, I would hope that this study would contribute in a small way to encouraging more accurate documentation and records of individual makers. In all honesty, I feel that ceramics in general is still considered craft, and I would be happy if this study could help in

enlarging the critical reception of Zulu ceramics as an art form of convincing validity and presence.

I have found ceramic vessels to be both beautiful and elusive creations and it has been my purpose to discuss them in a manner which both unveils and veils. These vessels are not reducible to tools or objects. They are in essence other to me, and despite my best efforts I cannot wholly understand them since the language they speak is ultimately mysterious.



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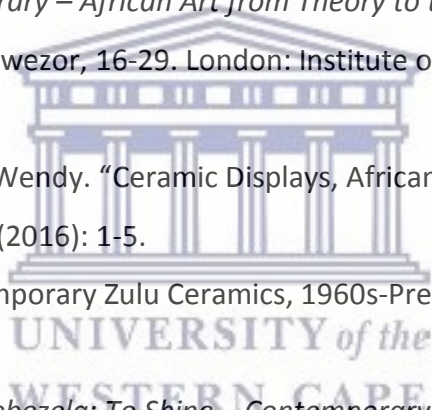
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EXHIBITIONS

1. “Fired: An Exhibition of South African Ceramics”, Iziko Museums in The Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, 2012 - Ongoing.
2. “Hidden Treasures”, Iziko Museums in The South African National Gallery, Cape Town 2018.

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