In Surface and Form: 25 Years of Zulu Ceramic Innovation

By: Elizabeth Perrill and Ian Garrett

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Abstract:
Ceramics that are part of this ongoing and expanding tradition range from functional beer vessels made for brewing, drinking and serving indigenous utshwala beer in rural and urban homesteads to studio ceramic pieces made for international art galleries. Ironically both Naia and Mbonambi had first attracted attention by breaking with the norms of tradition to design innovative vessels to cater for a growing local market in tourist art.[4] At the time, the predominantly white art world was searching for exemplars of what was termed 'a Zulu vision in art'.[5] An exhibition of the same name, The Zulu Vision in Art was held in 1988 at one of the earliest and continuous national platforms in South Africa for the acknowledgement of cultural exemplars in theatre, music and the plastic arts: the Grahamstown National Festival of the Arts.

Keywords: South Africa | Ceramic | Art gallery | Underlying representation | Zulu

Article:

Contemporary Zulu ceramic expression is diverse and varied. Ceramics that are part of this ongoing and expanding tradition range from functional beer vessels made for brewing, drinking and serving indigenous *utshwala* beer in rural and urban homesteads to studio ceramic pieces made for international art galleries. This article will trace some key points of stylistic change that have enabled this extraordinary development over the past 25 years, revealing how form and surface have been used for expressing identity, both individual and cultural. Through the formal analysis of a few specific images, this article will reveal the active negotiation by artists and their multi-layered identities.

Some of the featured pieces clearly have built on the style of earlier works but this development should not imply a simple one-way progression from 'traditional' to 'contemporary' for all Zulu ceramists. Authors in African art studies, such as Anthony Appiah and Salah Hassan, deconstructed this false dichotomy in the 1990s.[1] Instead, we welcome the reader to see the complexity of Zulu ceramics expression, to witness how the diversification of ceramics expression tied to Zulu cultural roots has diversified to fill new opportunities as they have arisen. Many earlier forms of expression continue to be made alongside newer styles according to the

preferences and circumstances of individual makers. Furthermore, there is a complex interweaving of stylistic trends between makers and within individual careers beyond the scope of this article.

Prior to the 1980s, research on Zulu ceramics had a predominantly anthropological perspective and focused on recording technical processes of hand-building, burnishing and pit-firing. Categories of vessel forms intended for various purposes of household use were identified and anonymous examples acquired for ethnographic museum collections.

It was only in the 1980s that Zulu ceramics were seriously considered in a fine art context in South Africa. The first individuals to receive attention were Nesta Nala and Miriam Mbonambi. Mbonambi became the first named Zulu potter to have her work acquired into the Durban Art Gallery (a major public art collection) in 1984, the same year that Nala was covered extensively in Rhoda Levinsohn's publication*, Art and Craft of Southern Africa*.[2] This interest can be seen to coincide with an increasing international attention on hand-building and coiling in studio ceramic circles. Betty Blandino' s book, *Coiled Pottery: Traditional and Contemporary Ways*, was published the same year, bringing the work of traditional potters from around the world to public attention.[3] Through global distribution in South Africa, publications such as Blandino's created trends among local studio ceramics practitioners and connoisseurs, even in the midst of apartheid-era cultural boycotts.

Ironically both Nala and Mbonambi had first attracted attention by breaking with the norms of tradition to design innovative vessels to cater for a growing local market in tourist art.[4] At the time, the predominantly white art world was searching for exemplars of what was termed 'a Zulu vision in art'.[5] An exhibition of the same name, *The Zulu Vision in Art* was held in 1988 at one of the earliest and continuous national platforms in South Africa for the acknowledgement of cultural exemplars in theatre, music and the plastic arts: the Grahamstown National Festival of the Arts. Works by Mbonambi and Nala are featured as the title images in the 'pottery' section of the catalogue for this exhibition.

These works are examples of the type of tourist art pieces both ceramists were producing at the time. Typical features include miniaturization and the imitation of other materials in clay, in this case a double gourd used to contain traditional medicine. Neither is a particularly practical or useful form and neither represents standard vessels of the repertoire of traditional Zulu household ceramics. Both, however, display fine workmanship, symmetry and carefully burnished surfaces. These two small vessels are indicative of an evaluative style common during the early 1980s. Collectors and gallery representatives stressed finish and attention to detail above all else. For instance, during a 1981 exhibition, the director of the KwaZuluNatal African Art Centre stated, "No artistic judgment was made, with works excluded only because of poor craftsmanship."[6] Art historian Sabine Marshall has noted that this era is marked by the tendency to treat art as a 'cause' that "perpetuated a patronizing and paternalistic attitude with a long tradition. . ."[7]

Despite the identification of these two ceramists as worthy of attention, there was little discussion of the meaning or importance of actual examples of their work. One can surmise reluctance on the part of curators/art historians to talk about Zulu aesthetic ideals, either indigenous or acculturated, as there was no established discourse around Zulu aesthetics. Ceramists producing for the local gallery market at this time faced a problem that Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner have identified as an international phenomenon: "Neither the speed and acuity with which indigenous artists responded to changes in taste and market nor the dialogical nature of their creative activity has been adequately recognized."[8]

Sadly, after this period, Mbonambi's career declined sharply; her contact with the art world was prevented by political violence in her home area.[9] In contrast Nala received growing attention and acclaim throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In 1995 Nala was awarded the prestigious national Vita Craft Award, a momentous achievement that established her as the doyenne of Zulu potters. The award similarly marked the piece, an *uphiso* (necked vessel for transporting/ pouring beer) as an iconic Zulu vessel by the art world and an image of the work was widely distributed through postcard reproduction and magazine publicity. By 1995 South Africa had already made its transition to democracy but, in the early post-Apartheid years, Zulu artists and those who promoted art were still searching for ways to celebrate local heritage and identity.

By the time of the 1995 competition, Naia had abandoned her earlier tourist forms and returned to making pots in the utilitarian beer-vessel genres under the patronage of art dealers and collectors who were increasingly interested in these forms. In a prominent review of the Vita Craft competition,[10] Nala's winning piece was lauded for its authenticity, despite the fact that she had not made work intended for actual use since 1979[11] and was working in the increasingly rare *uphiso* vessel type. Naia had also begun to push beyond previous boundaries of technical and aesthetic mastery in a manner recognizable to Zulu and non-Zulu audiences. To illustrate how Nala's award-winning piece differed from conventional Zulu ceramics, it is useful to compare her work to a vessel made for practical use.

Florence Ntshangase is a ceramist who sells her work regularly at the Mona market, where rural cattle and goods for spiritual use are sold near Nongoma, a centre of Zulu traditionalism. Ceramic work sold at this venue is often perceived as an authentic Zulu ceramics tradition, since it is predominantly made and purchased for use by Zulu people for drinking and brewing *utshwala* beer. In this local setting, the necked *uphiso* vessel has experienced a relative decline because transporting liquids in metal or plastic containers is considered far more practical. Indeed, today some young ceramists do not know how to create necked vessels that will withstand the thermal shock of traditional pit firing. Still, ceramics for drinking *utshwala* beer continue to be used as important cultural items. The illustrated piece takes the form of an *ukhamba,* a spherical vessel used for the social and spiritual drinking of *utshwala* beer.

Ntshangase’s piece has an uneven surface quality due to casual workmanship and minimal processing of the clay. Stone and organic inclusions in the clay body have created small divots in the surface. The form is robust and appears to have been quickly shaped. The coil building is asymmetrical along both horizontal and vertical axes. Likewise the decoration has been freely drawn and is appealing in its exuberant creativity and naïve confidence but does not exhibit exact symmetrical balance.

Returning to Nala's piece, in contrast the most striking feature is its technical expertise. Nala's aesthetic goals drive an attention to detail, which would have been evident to Award Judge Karel Nel, a noted collector of Zulu ceramics and member of the South African arts community. Nel may have realized the expertise entailed in the creation of necked *uphiso* vessels and certainly observed that Nala's piece has been meticulously burnished, a laborious process when carried out at a stage at which the clay is dry enough to take a high shine. The form displays a magnificent symmetry and regularity of line, the rim has been carefully levelled and the base scraped down to a narrow point to control the profile as well as to lighten the weight of the vessel. The graceful upward curve that results from this extra refinement makes the vessel's lightness visually apparent.

The decoration of Nala's vessel exhibits the same sense of precision utilized in her vessel profile. Intricate combinations of detailed texture and often symmetrical designs characterize the pattern, a hallmark of Nala's personal style with roots in Zulu aesthetic appreciation, in which abstract mathematical principles are often visually depicted in bead work, weaving and ceramics.[12] Though it still follows the Zulu trend of utilizing radial symmetry in its layout, Ntshangase's decoration has by contrast an economy of design dictated by the low monetary value attached to utilitarian wares. Nala's workmanship is refined to a level that allows it to contend for prizes such as the Vita Craft competition. Naia had realized that there was a viable career in ceramics that could cross the urban /rural financial divide. Official awards and subsequent gallery sales meant that her work could attract an expanded audience who were becoming literate in the style variations described.

During the mid- to late 1990s, there were discussions in South African artistic circles of Naia as a 'National Living Treasure' and she travelled to Washington DC to represent South Africa at the Smithsonian Institution's Folklife Festival.[13] It may have seemed to some that Nala's reputation was built upon her role in maintaining tradition but Nala was simultaneously pointing the way to the future. She was an independent artist creating a strongly personal style and pushing towards the boundaries of what could be achieved with her Zulu ceramic heritage.

Even before Nesta Nala's death in 2005, her daughters had begun careers of their own, building on the acclaim of their famous mother. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Zulu ceramics had gained an expanded audience through South Africa's growing international tourism and open scholarly environment. Zulu ceramics were increasingly represented at international ceramics exhibitions and events and in international galleries and publications that are focused on African art.

An example of a new generation's forays into the international art world can be seen in the careers of Nesta Nala's daughters. For instance, Jabu Nala, travelled to the Aberystwyth Ceramics Biennale in 2001. The illustrated example of Zanele Nala's work reveals continuity with her mother's style, particularly in the refinement of burnish and configuration of decorative elements.

Zanele Nala here has chosen to use a brown finish, a variation on the familiar canon /norm of functional beer vessels, which are usually blackened in respect for ancestors who are closely associated with coolness, dark places and the earth.[14] The artist appears to have chosen this finish in order to distinguish her work from earlier generations and thereby emphasizes her individuality. There is also a subtle alteration in form of her *ukhamba* from her mother's style. The line or profile of vessels by the Nala daughters' is often extended to create a more pointed base. The narrowing bases of their forms have become progressively exaggerated in recent pieces, distancing this style of work from practical use. This tendency is even more noticeable in the work of Ntombi Nala, a distant relative of the family who began a career in ceramics in the late 1990s.

The dramatic termination of Ntombi Nala's vessel breaks with conventions to create a form that abandons all practical usefulness as a beer vessel. The unsteadiness of a vessel of such large volume resting on such a narrow foot would prove impractical for drinking or serving. A further rather theatrical device used by Ntombi Nala is the inclusion of bead work. This entirely novel invention of the artist simultaneously confirms that the piece is removed from beer vessel conventions and emphasizes recognizable concepts of Zulu identity to an extended audience. International audiences are often unfamiliar with the symbolism of blackened traditional surfaces as a Zulu canon. In contrast, Ntombi Nala's novel bead work decorations are quickly interpreted

as a marker of generic African identity. The careful consideration of identity is becoming a common theme among ceramists' work drawing on Zulu forms.

Clive Sithole is another ceramist in the generation that has gained attention in the post-Apartheid era. He breaks cultural conventions in that he is a man working in what was historically solely a woman's medium. Moreover, unlike the previously mentioned female ceramists who learned ceramics through family tradition, Sithole has acquired his skills through an eclectic combination of formal art courses and private tutelage.

In general, Sithole's work has many similarities to Nesta and Jabu Nala's style and indeed he views Nesta Nala as one of his mentors. But equally important is the influence of British ceramist Magdalene Odundo, with whom the artist has had some contact. This influence can be detected in the flared form of the illustrated vessel's neck and the technique of firing the work within a saggar. Sithole feels free to switch between electric kilns, saggar and pit-firing as his aesthetic needs dictate.

In his *uphiso*, Sithole has incorporated iconography of cattle in order to reference their importance in the construction of Zulu masculine identity. The raised rectangular applied designs on the neck are a reference to the decoration of Zulu milk pails historically carved out of wood by men. A distinct parallel is formed between Ntombi Nala's use of bead work and Sithole's references to woodcarving. Both artists incorporate the iconography across media that simultaneously emphasizes Zulu cultural identity and the artist’s innovation.

This impulse to push the boundaries of innovation seems to have been acknowledged by South Africa's National Craft Council in The 2009 South African National Craft Awards. Vessels by Jabu Nala and Clive Sithole that break significantly with historical beer pot forms were selected as the First and Second Prize winners in this national competition, signalling a new moment for artists drawing on the legacy of Zulu ceramics.

Except for the burnished and smoke-fired finish, all references to Zulu beer vessels seem discarded in Sithole's award-winning piece. Sithole confirms this with his chosen title, *Transformation*, which suggests not only the processes of ceramic transformation to which the piece directly refers but also changes to the artist's career and aesthetic focus. A metaphor is suggested in which the emergence of a fired vessel from its saggar could be compared to the artist's emergence from the crucible of Zulu tradition. Sithole's wide knowledge of studio ceramics comes to the fore, with possible additional inspiration for the form of this work taken from other vessel-related traditions such as Japanese iron kettles or West African ceramic braziers.

Like Sithole, Jabu Nala makes a decisive stylistic break with her award- winning flattened oval vessels. These forms may have been inspired by East African wooden milking pails that Jabu Nala possibly encountered at Kim Sacks (African Art) Gallery, an important outlet for Nala's work in Johannesburg. The flattened vessel form creates a preeminent surface for the artist to highlight her continued attention to burnishing and textural patterns. Jabu Nala's forms accentuate the differences between her current work and the tradition of utilitarian production that was most often associated with her mother's ceramics.

A unique studio ceramic practice with Zulu cultural affiliations has developed progressively since the 1980s, gaining increasing attention and recognition. The work of Nesta Nala, the late doyenne of Zulu ceramics, played a pivotal role in opening new possibilities for development by a younger generation of art-oriented ceramists. At the same time, traditionalists such as Florence Ntshangase continue to make utilitarian beer-wares for household use, thereby maintaining a cornerstone of Zulu ceramic heritage. Innovations in personal style and decorative

motifs occur within this utilitarian tradition. Additionally, in their own creative output, ceramists producing work for art awards and galleries draw inspiration from or make reference to utilitarian wares from the past and present.

For instance, Muziwandile Gigaba, a young artist currently studying ceramics at the University of KwaZuluNatal, is inspired by *Udu* ceramic drums from west Africa. Unlike studio ceramics created for purely aesthetic goals, this work has been carefully made to meet the specific functional criteria of a musical instrument, a challenge similar to the demands of making Zulu beer-vessels for use. *Udu* drums are a form unfamiliar to the repertoire of Zulu ceramics but Gigaba incorporates formal elements that refer to Zulu ceramic traditions. The body of the drum, minus its neck and handle, follows the familiar shape of an *ukhamba*. The surface has been beautifully burnished, an element unnecessary to the functioning of the instrument and iconic in the Zulu repertoire. A floral pattern highly reminiscent of the motifs commonly seen on beerwares has been incised and impressed below the handle and his decorative motif refers to a complex Zulu proverb about the nature of human mortality. Gigaba has found a novel ceramic form full of expressive potential on which to display his prodigious accomplishment at the skills of traditional Zulu ceramic craftsmanship.

Witty Nyide, an art student at the Durban University of Technology, creates ceramic sculpture that draws on clay's connotation as a women's art form. It reflects and comments upon the ways in which young women are, like clay, moulded into adulthood. The accidental markings of the smoke-firing process serve as further evidence of life's journey. The sculpture's similarity in appearance to broken and discarded plastic doll-heads hints at the rites of passage along the way. Much has been written on a metaphoric relationship often encountered in ceramics between vessels and the female human body.[15] Here Nyide shifts her emphasis from the womb or fertility to the head, intellect and identity politics that lie at the centre of conceptual art making.

A new generation of artists' continued attention to the burnished or smoke-fired surface seems to acknowledge that both international and domestic audiences still desire to see some aesthetic tie to the artist's Zulu identity and heritage. The need to simultaneously innovate and maintain cultural identity has become a common set of expectations in international circles. Through bead work incorporated on to the surface of vessels, new award-winning pot styles highlighting burnished surfaces and sculptural explorations, artists in KwaZulu-Natal utilize clay to create new forms: ceramic works that are inquiries into Zulu identity.

Footnotes

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2. Levinsohn, Rhoda. *Art and Craft of Southern Africa: Treasures in Transition*. Barbara La Vine, ed.

3. Blandino, Betty. *Coiled Pottery: Tradition and Contemporary Ways.* Randor, PA: Chilton Books, 1984.

4. See, Garrett, Ian William. *Nesta Naia: Ceramics, 1985-1995*. Masters of Fine Arts Thesis, Faculty of Arts, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1997, Ch. 1; and, Perrill, Elizabeth Autum. *Zulu Ceramics: 1960s to the Present*. Ph.D. Thesis, Dept. of the History of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2008, Ch. 2.

5. Campbell, Neil, *The Zulu Vision in Art*: an exhibition on view at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival held in Grahamstown, 1-9 July 1988. Durban: Hirt & Carter, 1988; see also, Addelson, Jill. "The Zulu Vision in Art," Lantern. 39,1 (Feb. 1990): 60-67.

6. Jo Thorpe, *It's Never Too Early: African Art and Craft in KwaZulu-Natal*, 1960-1990 Indicator Press, Durban, South Africa, 1994, 66.

7. Sabine Marschall, "Strategies of Accommodation: Toward an Inclusive Canon of South African Art," *Art Journal 60*, 1, Spring 2001, 54; Sabine Marschall "Who is in and who is out? The Process of Rewriting South African Art History in the 1990s," Mots Pluriels 12, Dec. 1999.

8. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*. University of California Press, US, 1999, 9.

9. Mbonambi is also reported to have gone blind in 1996 for unknown reasons. Her death date is currently undocumented. Anthea Martin and Hlengiwe Dube Personal Correspondence unpublished, South Africa, 2 Apr. 2009.

10. Munnik, S. "Celebrating Heart," *National Ceramics Quarterly,* South Africa, 33: 27.

11. Garrett, 7.

12. Van Heerden, Jannie, Chonat Getz, and Helene Smuts. *Africa meets Africa: Making a Living Through the Mathematics of Zulu Design*. Johannesburg: *Africa meets Africa*: 2004.

13. Naia travelled to the 1999 Folklife Festival as part of the South African delegation. Greenberg, Sue. Formal Interview unpublished, South Africa, 13 June 2006.

14. Reusch, Dieter. "Imbiza Kayibil' Ingenambheki: The Social Life of Pots," in Ubumba: Aspects of Indigenous Ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal. Ed. Brendan Bell and Ian Calder. Pietermartizburg: Tatham Art Gallery, 1998.

15. Vincentelli, Moira. *Women and Ceramics*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.