I agree with Bickford Berzock & Frank that ‘it is clear that today the market for African ceramics is outpacing scholarship. Published research on African ceramics is highly idiosyncratic and uneven in depth and cultural representation. Only a few traditions have been the focus of in-depth study by multiple researchers offering complementary perspectives’ (Bickford Berzock & Frank, 2007). Notwithstanding the lack of scholarly research, here I discuss the question of whether African ceramics is harboured or hindered by European industry, influence and appetite and its impact on village and studio practice.

The largest pottery studio in South Africa, Ardmore Ceramics is an interesting case. It was founded by white South African artist, Fée Halsted after she had trained a disabled black South African, Bonnie Ntshalintshali, and discovered a powerful dynamic in combining European and African craft traditions. By ingenuity, by thrift and by chance Halsted developed the style that has made Ardmore Ceramics internationally renowned (Ardmore Ceramics, 2010). Not quite African nor European in neither aesthetic nor sensibility. Intricately decorated ware in a Western ceramic tradition, the work is brightly coloured and the forms unique,
featuring flora and animal motifs with almost mythological figurines in fantasy narratives. The only thing African about them is perhaps the subject matter, the style of modelling and colouring. They seem to evoke a familiar African aesthetic, however they do not have a sense of traditional tribal pottery, the work more resembling narrative-based wood carvings of Malawi and Zimbabwe. Ardmore pottery would be most comfortable in an upmarket home, office or gallery; the concept is technologically European with an African aesthetic spin with justifiably heavy price tags. In 2008 eight Ardmore pieces fetched over GB£20,000 at Bonhams in London (Prendini Toffoli, 2008). The Ardmore website currently has a set of candlesticks for GB£7,500. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve coveted Ardmore Ceramics for years but have never quite had the funds to shell out for one. They are a fabulous example of co-creative practice. Each piece is made in stages of construction, sculpting and painting by different artists to produce a shared outcome.

The influence of the European drive for production and saleability might be a strong influencer in the style evolution of the potters’ wares.
It seems that the successful African potters are for the most part discovered then engineered into greatness by Europeans. Without European business entrepreneurship these potters would, it seems have
continued in their craft serving their communities. Their craft would then have remained in its pure, traditional and primarily functional form.

Ardmore is in stark contrast to traditional craft pottery of the African village. With the latter clay is dug by hand, dried and ground like grain, hand built by coiling and burnished. Then wood or smoke fired in aloe leaves as the first firing and a final firing in umTomboti wood – toxic while burning, its oils stain pots a deep lustrous black. The pots are finally glossed up with animal fat.

The now internationally renowned Nesta Nala from the Tugela Ferry area of Zululand worked exclusively in that tradition. Nala was the foremost potter who brought Zulu pottery onto the world stage. She passed on her skills to her daughters and at her death in 2005 many in South Africa considered her a national treasure. She represented South Africa at the Cairo International Biennale for ceramics in 1994, received South Africa’s prestigious Vita award for craft in 1995, in 1999 participated in the Smithsonian Institute's Folk Life Project in Washington, her work is represented in major collections in South Africa and worldwide (Ceramics Today, circa 2001). Her pottery was traditional in the true sense – functional pots used in everyday Zulu tribal life and was prized by the local rural community for its beauty. Considering the rudimentary equipment and method, her work is startling, exhibiting purity of form, perfect proportion and embellished with exquisitely simple reliefs. While much of her decoration style was in the Zulu geometric patterning tradition, she later experimented with fish and other motifs. Hints of European influence are found in her later pieces where she was encouraged to sign and date her work – a very unAfrican practice. Nala’s promotion and exposure at the Association of Potters of Southern Africa and Corobrik National Ceramics Exhibitions of the 90’s generated interest in traditional Zulu pottery. Had Nala not been discovered and catapulted onto the world art stage her work would have remained in rural obscurity.
Although world-renowned she remained a rurally based, traditional village potter until her death, never crossing the divide to a studio tradition. She left her legacy in the Nala family of potters and paved the way for other Zulu potters like the Magwaza family and the noteworthy Clive Sithole.

Clive Sithole is an exception. A true studio potter who studied traditional techniques under Nesta Nala. Heavily influenced by Nala his works feature traditional Zulu form with added sculptural elements and a more Western style pit-firing. His work is considered a new development in the history of the craft. Successfully positioning his pot-making as an art form he developed a style that incorporates bovine reliefs from the Zulu tradition of young boys making clay bulls (Van Wyk, 2010). His pots fuse the form and functionality of Nala’s and his own decorative style. While there are other examples, one hopes Clive Sithole heralds the future of African potters – creative practice unfettered by European influence yet relevant on the world art scene.

The end-use of African ceramics is fascinating and requires more research. Where the potter creates traditional ware, it is functionally useful to Africans as everyday or special occasion ware. The very same piece in the hands of Europeans becomes an art piece separated from its context and devoid of its utilitarian function yet prized for its beauty and market value. African Art Centre in Durban assists craft producers to sell their ware to collectors, interior decorators and particularly tourists. The high-end work is earmarked for galleries and collectors and the remainder is generally relegated to tourist curios. An unsurprising phenomenon is the plethora of studios of previously disadvantaged potters industriously churning out Africanesque pottery for Western consumption. Far worse is white South Africans churning out Western ceramics decorated in a kitsch quasi-African style. This is unduly harsh criticism of black craft studios as
tourist patronage keeps bread on the table of these craftspeople who otherwise have no source of income.

Contemporary African ceramics (in South Africa) is certainly a hybrid – born out of need. As European interest in their craft escalates, so does demand. Only when the potter steps outside of the village potter role and into the European context do they cross over from subsistence to potentially earning decently. The new South Africa i.e. post-Apartheid, has done very little to redress the inequality between rich and poor. In fact in the 15-odd years following liberation the mid to lower income groups have slipped further down the poverty scale. This has a marked affect on village-based craft practitioners and their traditional market – less money circulating. For now the European demand, interest, and influence is their saviour. One hopes when the black middle class grows they will see value in collecting local pottery and crafts.

South Africa’s extreme dichotomy of first and third worlds may help sustain traditional craft. While in the advertising industry in South Africa researching the urban black/African market, we found that although they lived as the Europeans do, on weekends they would return to the townships/ rural areas to get their ‘fix’ of African culture. Straddling their two worlds play a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of the traditional crafts. The use of pottery is fundamental to Zulu (the largest tribal group in RSA) ancestral ‘worship’. The blackened surface of beer pots (the uKhamba) is a reference to the ancestors. Drink offerings to the ancestors are poured out over pottery shards which remain permanently behind a particular hut in a traditional homestead (umuzi). Ceramic vessels are still central to various ceremonies including weddings.

Notwithstanding the urbanisation and Europeanisation of South African blacks, traditions remain vital to their cultural expression. The Zulu king and the country’s president partake fully in traditional ceremonies replete
with regalia, weaponry, animal sacrifice and indeed pottery. The populace, both urban and rural continues their practice of traditional herbalism (the inyanga) and sorcery (the sangoma), both of which utilize pottery vessels. One trend worth noting is the emergence of faux-ukhambas made of black plastic seen at urban markets sold alongside traditional pottery beer pots. Perhaps pottery is becoming prohibitively expensive for locals. This may have implications for pottery practice in the future.

The success of traditional pottery seems inextricably linked to Europeans; either as facilitators or business leaders on the one hand or the purchasers on the other. This symbiotic relationship has the drawback of the best artefacts ending up overseas, however the benefit is increased interest and trade in pottery (even from the tourism sector) allowing potters to develop and refine their practice and supports more people in the community learning the craft, ironically ensuring its survival as a tradition. At this juncture whether an African potter is studio-based or works traditionally does not seem to affect their fortunes, only that they are discovered and promoted. It is likely that as more potters like Clive Sithole come up through the ranks African pottery will organically develop its own aesthetic and become increasingly self-assured. And that which is created in studios will influence the village potter.

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