

# Potshards of Zig-Zag cave at Port St Johns, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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Ceramic pots which once were whole and in use by peoples many centuries ago have, in most instances along the Eastern Cape coast of southern Africa, become fragmented and buried below consecutive layers of sand, soil, vegetation, and leftovers of people's lives. Yet, such potshards also pop up and become revealed as coverings move and peoples disturb resting places. Their omnipresence in parts of the archaeological landscape of this region has led several writers to record their presence and speculate as to various significances during the past century. This article, with reference to some ideas of ruination, takes a look at ceramic artifacts excavated at Zig-Zag and Umgazana caves in and near Port St Johns [with contextualization mainly from the likes of PW Laidler (1929), as well as from EC Chubb, G Burnam King and MA Mogg (1934); and from J Schofield's researches in the 1930s] as part of a process aimed at further establishing a setting for the visual arts milieu of contemporary rural potter Alice Gqa Nongebeza, who works in that area.

**Key words:** First-Millennium Agriculturist potters, ceramics praxis, bonfired ceramics, prehistoric southern African potshards, pots and potters of Pondoland.

## Iintsalela zoMqolomba i-Zig-Zag eSajonisi, kwiphondo leMpuma Kapa eMzantsi Afrika

Iimbiza zeselamikhi ezazingaphazamisekanga kwithuba elingaphambili kwaye zisetyenziswa ngabantu kwiinkulungwane ezininzi ezigqithileyo, kumaxa amaninzi ezinye zazo ugugutha ngonxweme lweMpuma Kapa kumazantsi eAfrika zaphasalaka zangcwabeka ngaphantsi kwemigangatho emininzi yesanti, umhlaba, izityalo kwakunye neentsalela zokuphila kwabantu. Kunjalo, ezintsalela ziyavela kwaye zibonakale njengokuba izinto ezizigqumileyo zisuka kwaye nabantu beluphazamisa ucwangco lweezondawo. Ukubakho kwazo kwindawo ezithile kulomhlaba walengingqi ukhokelele ababhali abaninzi ngokubhala ngobukho bazo benze namaqashiso ngokubaluleka kwazo okwahlukaklukaneyo kwinkulungwane egqithileyo. Eliphepha, ngokumayela neembono zeentsalela, liza kuthi lijonge kwiintsalela zeselamikhi ezombiwe kwimiqolomba yaseZig-Zag naseUmgazana eSajonisi nakufuphi neSajonisi [igxile ikakhulu kubantu abafana no-PW Laidler (1929), kunye nesuka ku EC Chubb, G Burnam no-MA Mogg (1934) kwakunye nakumaphando athe enziwa ngu-J Schofield ngeminyaka yo-1930] njengenxalenye yenkqubo enjongo ikukuseka nokuphuhlisa ngokupheleleyo indawo yenkcubeko esiyibonayo kwelishesha siphila kulo ngomxongxi wodongwe wasemaphandleni u-Alice Gqa Nongebeza, osebenza kulangingqi.

**Amagama amakaqatshelwe:** Abaxongxi bezolimo kwinkulungwane yokuqala, ukutshintshatshintsha nokujonga kokusetyenziswa kodongwe, iselamikhi etshiswe emlilweni, iintsalela kumaZantsi eAfrica phambi kwenkcubeko, abaxongxi bodongwe neembiza basemaMpondweni.

**T**hemes of ruin and ruination got me thinking about, amongst other things, my life and associated hopes and dreams, some of which have and are coming together, and of others which have become modified and / or collapsed with the passing of time. One of my many optimisms as a young adult was that I could subsist largely off the land and the fruits of my labor in a remote place and live happily ever after. I should have known better. In the process of finding that out I settled in a small Eastern Cape village called Rhodes, in the Eastern Cape Witteberge on the border of Lesotho and, with help, transformed a ruined mud brick dwelling into a home while also working as a potter on a kick wheel and firing with old engine oil because the nearest ESCOM power lines ended more than 60 km away in Barkly East. Our home, in Sauer Street, still stands, but the studio was sold about 20 years ago and has become a ruin (figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
**Left: Our Rhodes village home that we fixed up from being a ruin in the mid-1970s.**

**Right: The Rhodes village studio in which I became a potter during the 1970s, now a ruin after having been sold about 20 years ago (Photographs: the author, 2011).**

It was during the decade from the mid-1970s that, with our young family, we used to occasionally trundle over the mountains at Barkly Pass and Satan’s Nek to Engcobo, and then head for holidays at pristine coastlines such as those of Port St Johns in Pondoland, which is when my interest in pots and potters of that region was kindled. In those days, when much of the trip was on gravel roads, we usually stopped off at a favorite place in the shade of some large trees to view and sometimes purchase pots being sold alongside the R61 between Mthatha and Port St Johns. It has turned out that this spot at the Mthlala turn off ( $31^{\circ}37'40.77''S$ ;  $29^{\circ}22'42.52''E$ ) in the Tombo area is close to the home of octogenarian potter Alice Gqa Nongebeza (figure 2).



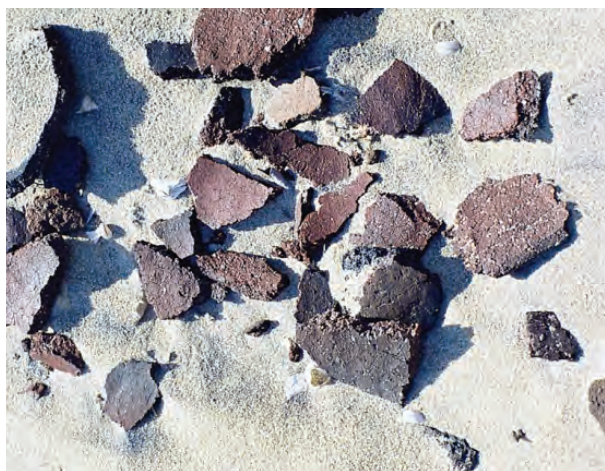
**Figure 2**  
**Left: Google Earth map showing proximity of Nongebeza homestead and Port St Johns (accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011).**

**Right: Alice Gqa Nongebeza (Photo: John Costello, 2010).**

I am not sure whether some of the pots purchased at the Mthlala turnoff, and in Port St Johns, on these trips were made by her or not, but it did transpire that we were destined to be introduced properly in the late 1980s, by which stage I was working at the Ikhwezi Lokusa Pottery in Mthatha. Our early connection as fellow potters has developed since then, thereby contributing to my ongoing interest in both participating in and documentation of her contemporary ceramics

praxis (Steele 2007, 2009, and Steele *et al* 2010), and to this paper’s effort at further partial contextualization of that setting by looking back further into the past to get some sense of what has been written and recorded by some researchers and archaeologists about early ceramics in the Port St Johns area.

Potshards in the archaeological record, as with early buildings, are things that started out as ideas which were acted upon using raw materials that were altered to create something such as a vessel or structure which occupied space and fulfilled certain aesthetic and other functions. Likewise, surviving pieces of pots and architectural traces from past times nowadays hint at initial shape and design, these parts of original wholes now taking on new “lives” as at least partial “texts about the past” (Ankersmit 2005: xiv).



**Figure 3**

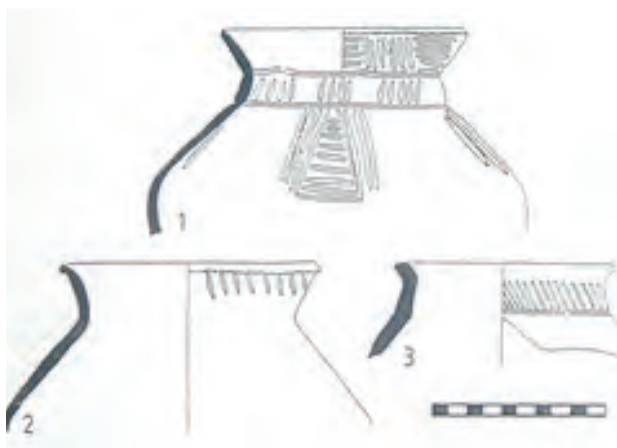
**Top left: Coarse clay potshards on the beach at Shelly Beach at West Bank, and at Kayser’s Beach, bottom left, near East London (photographs: the author, 2004).**

**Above: Illustrations of potshards from Canasta Place, at East London, thought to have been made by First-Millennium Agriculturist [EIA] potters, c. AD 790-857 (Nogwaza 1994: 105).**

Potshards of prehistoric and unknown origins can be found in abundance (figure 3) in the Eastern Cape, both just lying about amongst the perpetually moving coastal sand dunes such as at Shelly Beach on West Bank (33°02’35.24’’S; 27°36’42.65’’E) and at Kayser’s Beach (33°12’35.24’’S; 27°36’42.65’’E) near East London, as well as at documented prehistoric coastal sites such as at Canasta Place (32°40’10.52’’S; 28°29’05.79’’E, Nogwaza 1994) in East London, and at Mpame (32°04’58.88’’S; 29°04’12.66’’E, Hall & Vogel 1980; Cronin 1982) on the Wild Coast towards Port St Johns. Potshards at the latter two sites have been dated to between approximately AD 769 and 874 (Binneman 1996a: 30). Similarly dated prehistoric ceramics, often also featuring deeply engraved Kalundu Tradition (Binneman 1996a) geometric designs, have likewise been excavated at (figure 4) the First-Millennium Agriculturist village sites -also known as Early Iron Age sites, cf Steele 2001- of Kulubele (32°25’00’’S; 27°52’00’’E, Binneman 1996a) and

Ntsitsana (31°04'00"S; 29°12'00"E, Prins & Granger 1993), quite close to East London and Mthatha respectively.

Of various early writers who showed a fascination for pots and potshards of this region it is Percy Laidler (1929), a medical officer of health stationed in East London during the 1920's and 1930s, who is credited with having written the first "typology of southern African archaeological ceramics, a ... comprehensive classification of southern African pottery, both ethnographic and archaeological" (Sadr 2008: 104). It turned out, however, that Laidler (1929: 779) did not have much success in finding potentially prehistoric ceramics in the Port St Johns area, reporting that in this region he found "only a single small shard of squared lipped neck with incised string pattern. It is 5mm. thick at the lip and rapidly increases [in thickness] to 1 cm. at 2cm. depth". He also observed of this shard, which is regrettably not even illustrated, that the clay "body has a coarse natural admix, and the surface has a red burnish".



**Figure 4**

**Top left: Google Earth map, accessed 17<sup>th</sup> June 2011.**

**Left: Examples of Ntsitsana ceramics (Prince and Granger 1993: 160).**

**Above: Examples of Kulubele potshards showing some different engravings (Binneman 1996b: 72).**

The next publication of note which made mention of ceramics in the Port St Johns area came from Chubb, Burnham King and Mogg in 1934. They reported on what is probably the first relatively carefully documented archaeological excavation undertaken for the area near which Alice Gqa Nongebeza presently lives. They, in what Robin Derricourt (1977: 5) has described as a "well ordered dig", investigated the layout and contents at a cave (figure 5) located at the mouth of the Mngazana River (31°41'33.69"S 29°25'16.65"E), situated just slightly south of

Port St Johns, access in those days requiring a journey inland then back towards the coast of “20 miles [32.2km] by road from Port St Johns to the Umgazana Trading Store, then a journey of three miles [4.8km] by boat down the river” (Chubb *et al* 1934: 245). It is interesting to note that the journey to Umgazana Trading Store from Port St Johns would probably have been via Tombo and the Mthlala turnoff, and that in fact Mngazana River Mouth is only a few kilometres as the crow flies towards the coast from the Nongebeza homestead.



Figure 5

Above: Entrance to the cave at Mngazana River Mouth, situated in Quaternary Dune (photograph: John Costello, 2011).

Right: Stone tools illustrated included

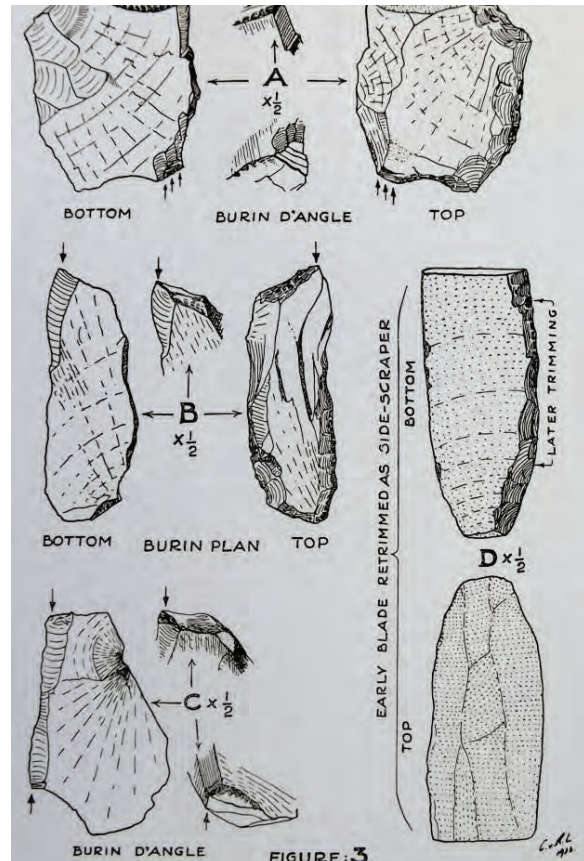
“A: Much worked double-ended *burin d’ angle*, showing hollow secondary trimming immediately adjacent to the burin below.

B: *Burin-plan* and side-scraper combined.

C: Double-ended *burin d’ angle*.

D: Broken Mossel Bay type blade retrimmed as a side scraper”.

Drawings are by C van Riet Lowe, signed and dated 1933 (Chubb, Burnam King, and Mogg 1934: 266).



Chubb *et al* (1934: 247) described the cave as being situated “on the seashore ... facing south-east and the floor of its entrance is only 7 feet [2.1m] above present high water at spring tides”. The authors also commented that “the cave is a funnel shaped aperture ... 20 yards [18.3m] wide at the entrance” and “is 7 yards [6.4m] wide at 17yards [15.5m] from the entrance” with a floor that “slopes up from the entrance”.

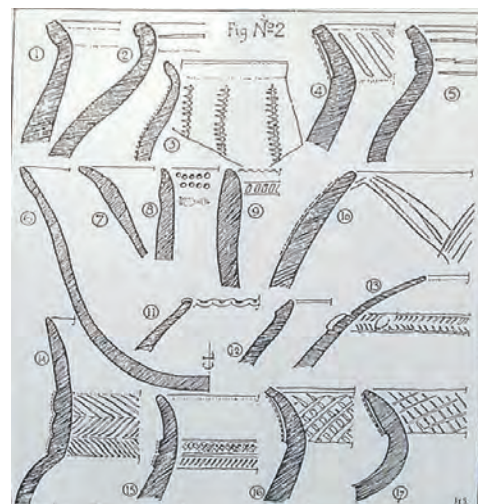
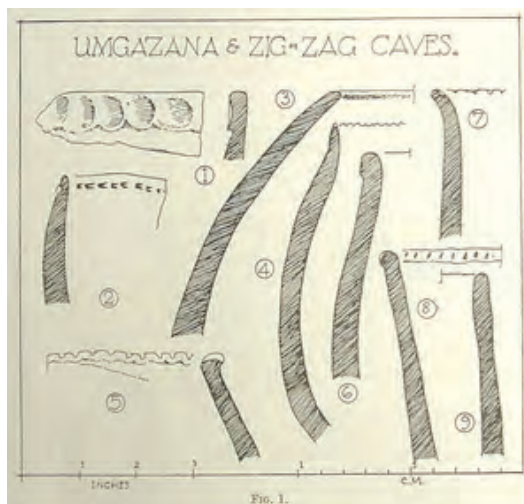
Excavation results revealed “abundant evidence of prehistoric occupation” (Chubb *et al* 1934: 245-262) as indicated by extensive stratigraphy as well as by presence of stone and bone tools, human burials including that of “a very young child”, and lots of potshards in the upper levels of the deposits. These ceramic fragments are described as “shards of coarse black pottery, containing grit ... forms represented are spherical, with round, or slightly flat bases”. Other useful observations include remarks about engravings, seen to only have been placed “around the rim ... [consisting] of simple forms impressed before baking”. It was also noted that among excavated ceramics “there are no lugs on any of the shards, but one has a conical

hole that has evidently been bored into it after the pot was baked”. There are, regrettably, no further comments pertaining to ceramics, nor any illustrations thereof, despite that excavated stone tools, for example, were extensively discussed and depicted, thereby showing that those researchers did not regard presence of ceramics potshards at this site as being of much interest at all.

John Schofield, writing a few years later in 1938 was, however, much more meticulous about recording ceramics and deliberately set out to rectify that omission after having announced (1938: 327) that “it is important that all finds of pottery ... should be fully described”. He went on to provide an excellent example of exactly what he meant by this in the form of a carefully drawn to scale documentation of what he had seen upon inspection of material lodged at the Durban Museum by Chubb, Burnham King, and Mogg, from both the Umgazana and Zig-Zag caves (figures 6 and 7), the latter site at Port St Johns being, in the 1970s, only “accessible at low tide” (Derricourt 1977: 128).



**Figure 6**  
**Supposed locality of Zig-Zag cave, south of the lighthouse at the Umzimvubu River Mouth at Port St Johns (Map: John Costello, 2011).**



**Figure 7**  
**Left: Schofield's illustrations of Umgazana and Zig-Zag cave ceramics (1938: 328), which can be compared with examples, right, of what he described as "Natal coastal pottery" (1937: 1005).**

Derricourt (1977: 128) has noted that in the 1970s the Zig-Zag cave was known locally as “Mbogintwini”, which he said could be found to lie about “1 km by path along the coast from Cape Hermes, south of Port St Johns. After a bay of large cobbles ... is a series of rocky protrusions into the sea ... between which lies the small cave”. This description of how to find the site fits with that of John Costello, a local resident of Port St Johns, who in discussions (2011) was of the opinion that the Zig-Zag cave itself has become a ruin, and has largely disappeared, hinting thereby also to ideas of aspects of “nature as ruin” as explored by Ginsberg (2004: 201-220). Costello maintains that Zig-Zag cave is disappearing because the coastline itself is friable and subject to high impact oceanic conditions (in conversation, 2011).

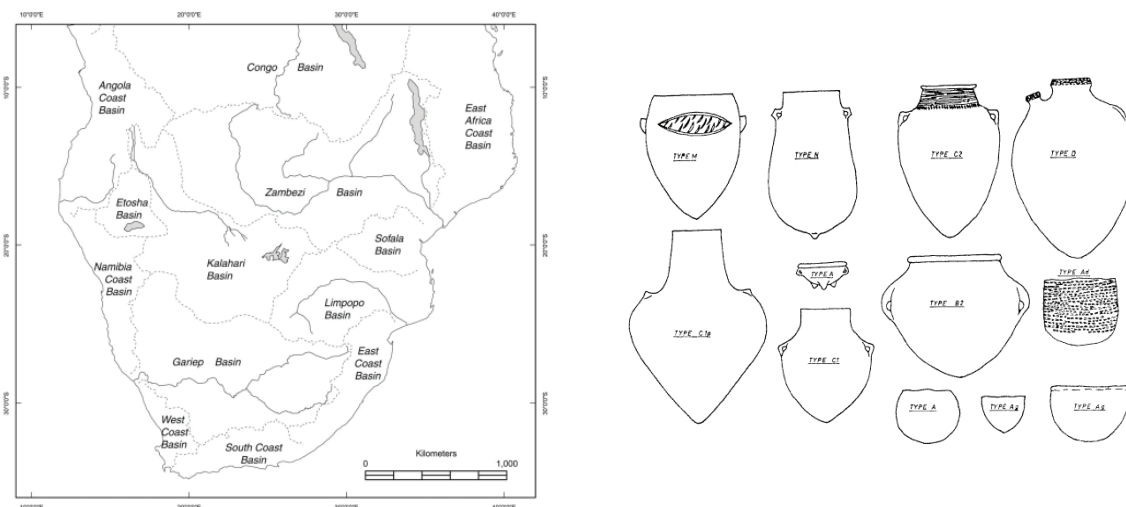
With regard to ceramics excavated at Umgazana and Zig-Zag caves Schofield (1938: 327-332) has indicated, referring to his illustrations of 1938, that items 1-4 originate from Umgazana cave, and 5-9 from Zig-Zag cave. He confirmed observations by Chubb *et al* (1934) of impressed decoration located on or near rims, and was able to reconstruct vessels #3 and #4 which he described respectively as a “large Spherical Pot” and a “small-shouldered Bowl”. He also described other shapes coming from Umgazana cave as being of three main types, firstly “Circular Dishes - the sides slope towards the center at an angle of about 45°”, as well as, secondly, a type he called “Beaker Bowls - the sides are more or less vertical, #1, and it would appear that the bases were flat”, as well as, thirdly, a type he called “Spherical Pots - of large size and similar to modern wares”. Schofield (1938: 327-332) also commented that Zig-Zag cave ceramics were “similar to those from Umgazana but with a greater preponderance of beaker bowls, some of which were of large size”.

John Schofield also made some general observations regarding the Umgazana cave ceramics assemblage including that “the pottery is exceedingly rough, but some attempt has been made to obtain a smooth surface” (1938: 328), as well as that there are several notable “features ... such as the notched edge of #4, and the stylus impressions of #2” (1938: 329), and that there is little to distinguish these from some “wares found on other coastal sites in Natal” (1938: 328), although the latter feature a much higher percentage of strongly everted necks as well as deeply engraved geometric designs applied to wet clay prior to firing.

It has been confirmed by Karim Sadr and Garth Sampson, in their authoritative survey of 2006 pertaining to available radiocarbon dates for archaeological sites and artefacts in southern Africa, that no reliable dates have, even long after initial excavations took place, been ascertained for items from either Umgazana or Zig-Zag caves. Yet it has by now become clear that extensive stylistic differences in ceramics praxis and shape was at least a partial indicator of possible differences in eras and peoples responsible for creation of such works. It thus became noted with a reasonable amount of certainty that the Umgazana and Zig-Zag caves assemblages stood in direct contrast to such South Coast Basin ceramics (figure 8) as were, for example, documented for sites closer to Cape Town, as have been illustrated in Rudner 1979, among others. This was clear because Umgazana and Zig-Zag caves assemblages just did not feature “any trace of ... internally reinforced lugs, [nor] thin well-burnt ware, and ovoid forms” (Schofield 1938: 328).

This point has stood the test of time, and unlike the Zig-Zag cave, still stands as firmly as it did in those early days of archaeological assessments of prehistoric ceramic types present in the southern African landscape. Several significances emerge from Schofield’s observation on the absence of thin walled fibre tempered well-burnt ware in these assemblages, including that Umgazana and Zig-Zag works cannot be associated with earliest southern African ceramics, dating to approximately “2000 years ago”, such oldest ceramics being of a “thin-walled and smooth surfaced” style (Sadr & Sampson 2006: 235), perhaps even locally and independently

invented in southern Africa by “autochthonous hunter-gatherers ... [perhaps living] in the upper Karoo region of South Africa” (Sadr & Sampson 2006: 247).



**Figure 8**

**Left: Greater southern Africa showing East and South Coast Basins respectively (Sadr 2008: 107).**

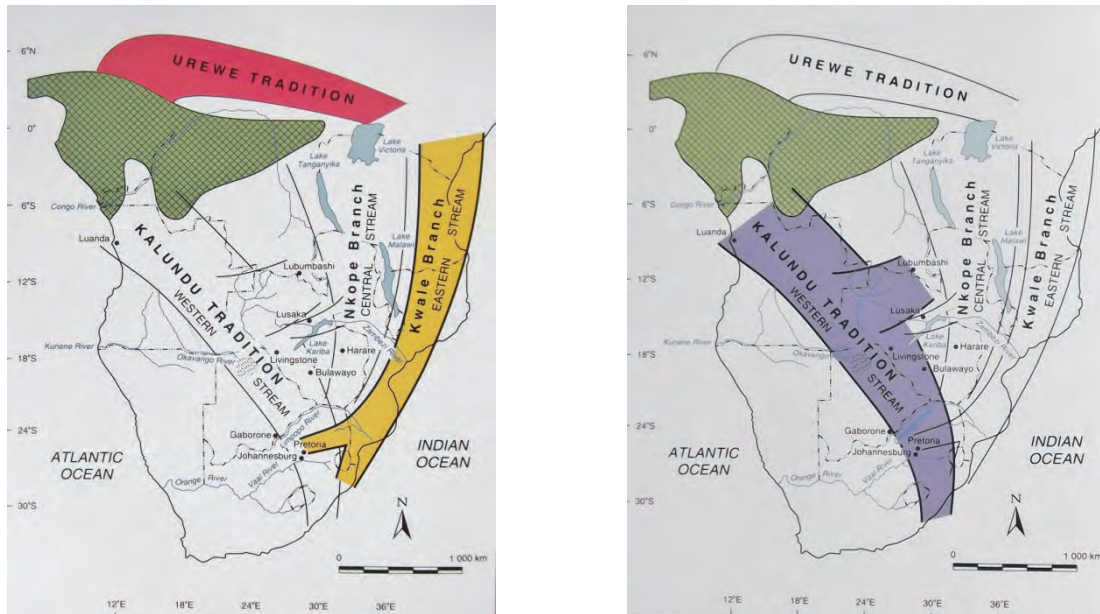
**Right: Illustrations (Rudner 1979: 11, 13) of Khoikhoi ceramics from mainly southerly East and South Coast Basin regions. These vessels are usually of a thin-walled, fibre-tempered type (Sadr & Sampson 2006: 248), sometimes featuring internally reinforced lugs.**

Also, by way of further contextualising the Port St Johns area ceramics, it turns out that Gavin Whitelaw (in press: 137), archaeologist and chief curator of the Human Science Department of the Natal Museum, has largely confirmed Schofield’s classifications, and thereby indicated association of Umgazana and Zig-Zag thick walled coarse surfaced assemblages with farmers northwards both along the coast and inland in the East Coast Basin.

In essence, Whitelaw’s (in press: 136, 137, citing also Huffman 1982, 2001; Kuper 1982; Guy 1987; Whitelaw 1994, 1994/95; Greenfield & Van Schalkwyk 2003) reconstruction is that early farmers first entered present day KwaZulu-Natal and then Eastern Cape spaces “in the mid-fifth century AD” and that archaeological evidence indicates that such “farming societies have been patrilineal and hierarchical, with status defined in terms of concepts such as age and gender”. He has also suggested that ceramics and other evidence points to “earliest farmers belonging to the Urewe tradition”, with other “Kalundu tradition” (figure 9) farmers following “in mid-seventh century”, settling throughout both “the coastal and bushveld regions of KwaZulu-Natal and further south, reaching the western limits of summer rainfall probably by 750AD” (Whitelaw, in press: 137).

Of direct relevance to situating the ceramics of Umgazana and Zig-Zag caves within this big picture is to first note (figure 10) that there is an absence of vessels with strongly everted necks featuring deeply engraved geometric designs of the style characteristic of Kalundu Tradition ceramics previously seen to be evident on potshards excavated at Eastern Cape sites such as Canasta Place, Kulubele, and Ntsitsana. Whitelaw (in press: 137) has also usefully added, in this regard, that out of Urewe Tradition ceramics a sub-branch type known as “Blackburn” emerged by the “mid-eleventh century ... [this] facies being associated with the earliest Nguni speakers in southern Africa”. Blackburn ceramics (Beater & Maud 1963, Davies 1971, Robey 1980) are characterized by “Rim notching, spaced motifs, chevrons, punctates and appliqué” type surface treatments (Huffman 2007: 157).

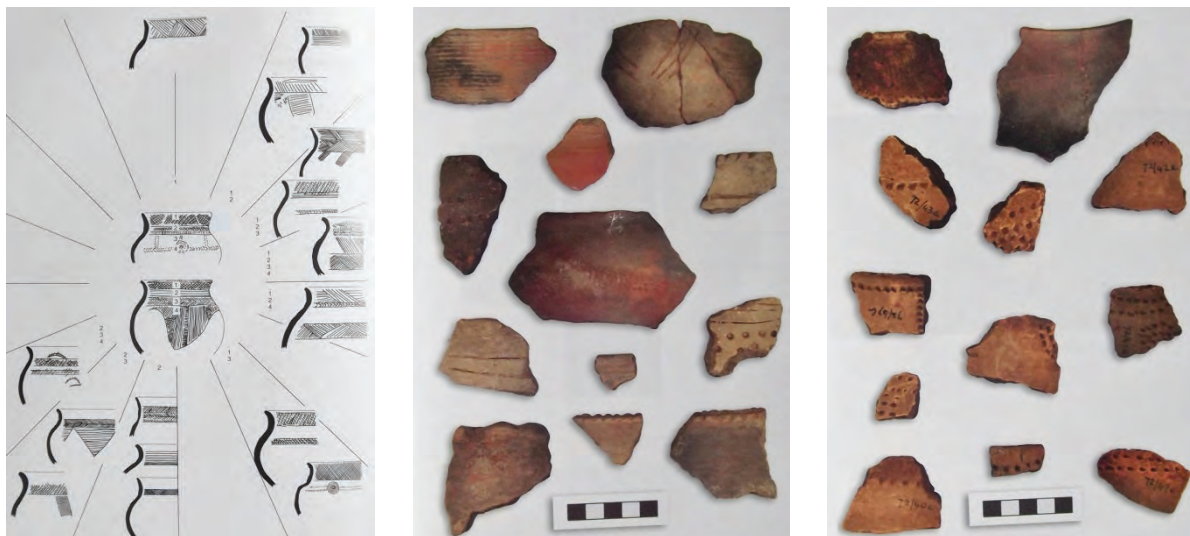




**Figure 9**

Gavin Whitelaw (in press) and Tom Huffman (2007) agree that prehistoric southern African thick walled coarse surfaced ceramics are usually associated with farmers moving into present day KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape, earliest “Urewe Tradition ... farmers of the mid-fifth century ... being followed by Kalundu Tradition farmers ... in the mid-seventh century (Whitelaw, in press 136, 137).

Presence of ceramics respectively attributed to such farmers has been graphically represented, above left and right, by Tom Huffman (2007: 122, 212).



**Figure 10**

**Left:** Examples of Kalundu Tradition (Huffman 2007: 306 showing Msuluzi style) ceramics of a similar style to have been seen on Canasta Place, Kulubele, and Ntsitsana potshards.

**Centre:** Examples of Blackburn style ceramics (Huffman 2007: 157).

**Right:** Examples of Moor Park style ceramics (Huffman 2007: 161).

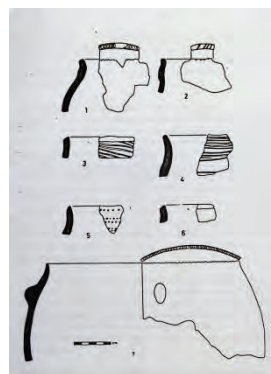
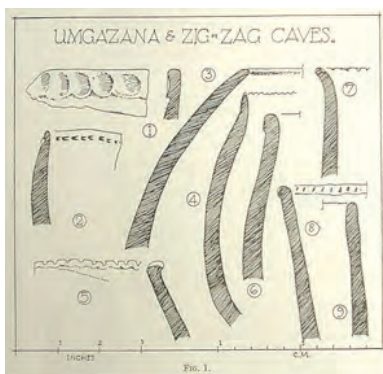
Moreover, Whitelaw (in press: 137) maintains that “Blackburn develops into the Moor Park facies (figure 11), which in KwaZulu-Natal has dates of 1300-1650/1700 ... [and that] Umgazana Ware resembles ... for the most part Moor Park” type of ceramics, key features of which include “punctates, rim notching, and appliqué” surface treatments (Huffman 2007: 159-161, referring

also to Davies 1974, Derricourt 1977, Mazel 1997, Pistorius 2001, as well as to Whitelaw 2000 and 2001). Thus, despite that “Umgezana Ware was originally known only from the Pondoland coast” (Whitelaw, in press: 137) it has more recently been shown to be stylistically linked to ware further north, and furthermore, Whitelaw (in press: 137) has also pointed out (figure 12) that Simon Hall (1986) has “recovered shards with Moor Park-like lip notching from north of Grahamstown ... dating to the fifteenth century”, thereby stretching connections southwards from Port St Johns as well.



**Figure 11**  
**Left: Map showing presence of Blackburn style ceramics (Huffman 2007: 154).**

**Right: Map (Huffman 2007: 159) showing presence of Moor Park style of ceramics, which is thought to have developed out of the Blackburn style (Whitelaw in press: 137).**

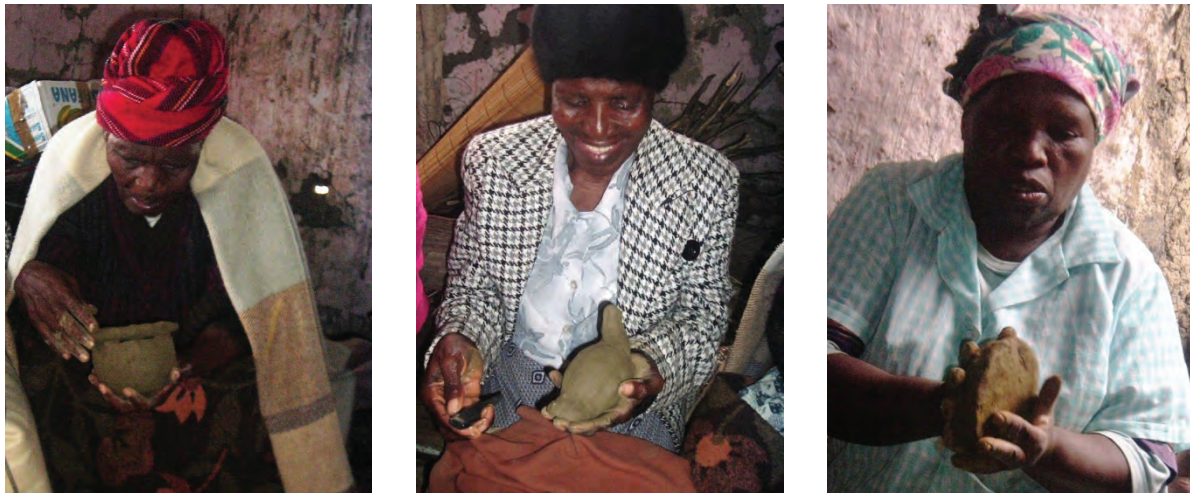


**Figure 12**  
**Far left: Schofield's (1938: 328) illustrations of potshards from Umgezana and Zig-Zag caves, which can be compared with examples, centre left, of Moor Park like ceramics featuring lip notching – items 1 and 2 from Welgeluk, and 7 from Adelaide- that were excavated by Simon Hall (1990: 253), north of Grahamstown.**

So, in conclusion then, it comes to mind that creative deeds are such that, when working with clay or most other media, any combination of actions can arise, influenced by a vast variety of factors. As it turns out it would seem that creative acts engaged in by potters who created the Zig-Zag and Umgezana vessels may well have been influenced by, amongst other factors, certain conventions pertaining to shape and placement of particular engraved motifs, thereby linking them to other early farming societies in the region.

Furthermore, these Zig-Zag and Umgezana potshards evoke in me a sense of awe at the presence of quite a deep history of potters working in the Port St Johns region. They also hint at “phosphores of interconnectedness” (Manton Hirst in conversation, 1999), thereby evoking

in me sensations of linkage with both past as well as with contemporary practitioners such as Alice Gqa Nongebeza by virtue of shared tactile and other sometimes pleasurable, as well as sometimes challenging, experiences of some smells, sights and feelings associated with clayworking activities such as at times of clay collection, preparation, shaping and bonfiring. Be that as it may, it is pertinent that Alice Gqa Nongebeza and a few other potters in this area such as Debora Nomathamsanqa Ntloya and Nontwanazana Dunjana (figure 13), without necessarily in any way being directly descended from the early potters of Pondoland, are creatively using local natural resources and bonfiring in much the same way as was practiced many centuries before.



**Figure 13**

**Matriarch contemporary potters of Pondoland in the Port St Johns region, left to right: Alice Gqa Nongebeza, Debora Nomathamsanqa Ntloya, and Nontwanazana Dunjana (photographs: the author, 2009).**

## **Acknowledgements**

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