

# Finding the best clay: experiences of rural potter Alice Gqa Nongbeza contextualised

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When creating artefacts that belong in the material world artists choose specific raw materials for particular reasons, including that selected resources are accessible and well suited to fitness for purpose and expression of intentions. Many potters in Africa are engaged in zero electricity usage ceramics practice, and each creative cycle usually starts with extracting clay from local sites according to preferences and well established procedures that may sometimes include certain rituals. Ways in which some potters who source their own clay are particular about certain factors that are thought to be capable of influencing the effectiveness of physical properties of that raw material are explored, with particular reference to what is known about the practices of Eastern Cape potter Alice Gqa Nongbeza, of Nkonxeni Village [31°37'59.66"S, 29°23'22.26"E], Tombo, near Port St Johns. Specific choices enacted by potters when gathering and using clayey raw materials are considered in order to better understand some aspects of conceptual and social frameworks that may influence clay extraction procedures. Thus, by means of comparisons between particular potter's practices, as well as through analysis of interview material and observed events, this paper aims to contextualise how it transpired, *inter alia*, that clay seams close to the Nongbeza homestead were ignored by her in favour of a relatively distant and almost inaccessible site that yielded a particular clay well suited to her unique firing style of placing raw ware onto an already roaring bonfire, thereby effectively creating pots for daily use and enjoyment.

**Key words:** Alice Gqa Nongbeza ceramics praxis, clay sources, clay collecting practices and beliefs in Africa

## **Ukufumana olona dongwe luphucukileyo: amava omxoxi wasezilalini u-Alice Gqa Nongbeza abekwe elubala**

Xa kusenziwa iimisebenzi yobugcisa kwihlabathi esiphila kulo amagcisa omsebenzi wezandla akhetha izixhobo ezikhethekileyo ezinjengepeyinti, inki kunye okanye nodongwe ngezizathu ezikhethekileyo kuquka nokuba ingaba ezozinto zikhethelwe ukusetyenziswa ziyafumaneka na kwaye zikwimeko nakumgangatho ohambelana neenjongo zokufezekisa lomsebenzi. Abaxongi abaninzi e-Afrika bakwiphulo lokwenza iiselamixhi ngaphandle kokusetyenziswa kombane, kwaye umjikelelo ngamnye wokwenza oko uqala ngokombiwa kodongwe kwindawo zasekuhlaleni ngokweemfuno zomntu ngamnye neziye ziquke amasiko nezithethe ezidala nezaziwayo kulondawo. Iindlela abanye abaxongi abafumana ngayo udongwe labo ikhethekile kwaye bajonga iinto ezithile ekucingelwa ukuba zinefuthe ekuphuhliseni izinto eziqulathwe kolodongwe ziyajongwa, ingakumbi nokunxulumene nokwaziwayo ngomsebenzi womxongi waseMpuma Kapa u-Alice Gqa Nongbeza, wakwilali yase-Nkonxeni [31°37'59.66"S, 29°23'22.26"E], kwisithili sase-Tombo kufutshane nedolophu yaseJonisi. Iizigqibo eziye zithathwe ngabaxongi xa bekhangelela, beqokelela nasekusebenziseni iizinto eziqulathwe lolodongwe luluhlaza zithathelwa ingqalelo khona ukuze kwaziwe ngcono ixinto ezithile eziye zibenefuthe ekombiweni kodongwe ngendlela ekhethekileyo. Ngoko ke, ngendlela yokuthethela phakathi kweendlela ezisetyenziswa ngumxongi othile, kwakunye nohlalutyo lodliwano ndlebe kwakunye neziganeko ezithe zaqatshelwa, iinjongo zeliphapha kubeka elubala nokuzama ukuqonda ukuba ingaba kwenzeka njani, phakathi kwezinye iizinto, ukuba zithi zikhona iindawo ezikufutshane zokomba udongwe nomzi ka-Nongbeza ziyeshelwe kukhethwe indawo ekude nekunzima ukuba kufikelelwe kuyo nevelisa udongwe oluthile nolulungele indlela yakhe engaqhelekanga yokubeka olodongwe luluhlaza emlilweni ngokwenza njalo evelisa iimbiza ezilungele ukusetyenziswa iimihla yonke nolonwabo.

**Amagama amakaqatshelwe:** Alice Gqa Nongbeza, iiselamixhi, indawo apho kufumaneka khona udongwe, iindlela zokukha okanye ukuqokelela udongwe e-Afrika

The actual chemical composition of Nongebeza's clay (Steele, Ekosse & Jumbam: 2010) as well as some of the main aspects of her ceramics practices and body of work have been considered in previous papers focussed on rural ceramics praxis in the Port St Johns region of the Eastern Cape (Steele 2007, 2009, 2012). Now, with her recent passing away on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2012, it seems appropriate for me to further acknowledge her as a powerful visual arts ceramics practitioner (figure 1) by looking more closely at the matter of how she came to find and extract her clay.

It is useful to lead into discussing her experiences and practices by looking briefly at those of some potters elsewhere in Africa in order to have a frame of reference for contextualisation purposes. Silvia Forni (2007: 44), for example, has observed in Cameroon, at a village called Babessi, that the whole cycle of clay collection, shaping, and then firing is conceptualised as specifically procreational. Thus, right at the outset of each creative cycle potters thought of the "site where the [raw] clay is collected ... [as being] equated to ... an inner room, the most private and sacred core ... where offspring are conceived". Notions foregrounding correlation between clay pits and an inner sanctum refer directly to such sources of clay as being a "place of great potential where material necessary for the production of pots -and, metaphorically, of people- is found".



Figure 1

Alice Gqa Nongebeza 2006; and vessel created in 2011 (photographs: the author).

There are, at Babessi, no gender or age restrictions on who may collect clay, so help is often enlisted from children or grandchildren. But there are some limitations, including that "pregnant and menstruating women should avoid" the clay pits because forces there "could be harmful to their reproductive ability". Forni (2001: 100), has also concluded that, at Babessi, a site from which clay is to be extracted "is considered to be highly ... endowed with great spiritual force", which she also witnessed being placated with invocations and offerings of salt even on a normal clay collecting excursion, whereafter "digging" was done "very carefully and in silence".

Furthermore, Olivier Gosselain and Alexandre Livingstone Smith (2005: 40, referring also to Gosselain 1999) have concurred that in Africa "selection and exploitation of clay sources" are often "surrounded by ... rituals and taboos" that methodically forbid particular people from sites where clay is dug. These authors suggest that circumstances may arise when it is recommended that "men are excluded, uninitiated people, members of other social groups than the potters" and indeed other persons such as "little boys or girls, pregnant women, menstruating women, twins, [and] warriors", depending on ontological beliefs and other circumstances.

Gosselain & Livingstone Smith (2005: 40, referring to Arua & Oyeoko 1982; Frank 1998; Herbich & Dietler 1991; Lawton 1967) also noted that certain prohibitions may exist regarding undertaking of particular activities “on the eve of extraction, [and/or] during the trip to gather clay or at the site” and that such prohibitions would be likely to include activities such as that of “having sexual intercourse, talking, singing, swearing, urinating, manipulating certain objects, [and] eating particular food”. Furthermore, these authors have also confirmed that “rituals and sacrifices may also be performed at the extraction site”, thereby consolidating an impression that clay collection in particular parts of sub-Saharan Africa is an intensely focused activity aimed at choosing and digging a best batch of clay as a starting point in a precarious series of creative activities wherein things can go wrong at many different stages. Such carefully concentrated “human symbolic activity” resonates with points made by Bert Olivier (2008: 32), with reference to Lacan (1977) and Derrida (2003), which drew my attention to the use of practices and “a web of words” in order to “repair” or “restore” composure on occasions of trauma, and to give reassurance when outcomes are unpredictable.

Gosselain (1999: 209) has pointed out that taboos and prohibitions have evolved around clay extraction because “outcomes [usually] remain uncertain” and consequently to “breach a taboo” could result, for example, in scenarios such as that “clay suddenly disappears, it loses its workability, or it becomes unexploitable”. Gosselain & Livingstone Smith (2005: 40, referring also to Sall 2001; then Herbich & Dietler 1991) thus note that, despite extreme variance in conventions and customs governing ways of going about extracting clay, “these practices aim at preserving the quality and availability of clay ... [and] the lifespan of individual sources”, adding that sites are usually only rarely abandoned prior to having been completely worked out.

It thus seems likely that close to as many potters and places for collecting clay as there are, so indeed will there be variance in attitudes and procedures, depending at least to some extent on idiosyncratic temperament combined with learned preferences as well as individually discovered techniques. Yet there seems, surprisingly, to be only a handful of written observations made about contemporary southern African potters and their clay finding and collection strategies, and associated beliefs.

Juliet Armstrong (1998: 42) has noted that the “potters of the Magwaza family jointly collect clay from two different sites ... [then] each potter is responsible for the grinding and mixing of her own clay”. Elizabeth Perrill (2008: 19) has reported that amongst these potters, who live in the Mpabalana district north of the Tugela River in KwaZulu-Natal, “information about clay sources is passed down generation-to-generation, woman-to-woman [and that] potters utilise between two and five clay sources and then dig, grind, sieve, and mix the clay [with water] into the proper consistencies for various vessels”. Similar sourcing and preparation procedures have been related by Eastern Cape potters Debora Nomathamsanqa Ntloya and Nontwazana Dunjana, respectively of Qhaka and Esikhululweni villages near Port St Johns.

Furthermore, Dieter Reusch (1998: 19-20), in researches focussed on ceramics praxis of Mabaso potters of the Msinga district between the Mooi and Buffalo tributaries of the Tugela River in KwaZulu-Natal, found that raw clay was widely conceptualised as one of the “fruits of the soil”, the “earth being a ... female entity and ... provider of nourishment for the people”. Mabaso potters also indicated to Reusch that they thought of raw clay and the earth in general as a “place closely identified with ancestors”. Such close identifications have, according to Perrill (2007: 21), led some potters such as Azolina Mncube Ngema of the Nongoma area in KwaZulu-Natal, to find a new clay source in a “dream [after which she] followed instructions of that vision and began digging from that new area”.

Likewise, in the Eastern Cape, Alice Gqa Nongebeza, has articulated and foregrounded an inherently metaphysical link to her clay extraction site on account of having discovered it in a dream and thereafter found elements from the dream physically present at the exact spot the following day. During interviews conducted in 2005 and 2006 (Interviews 001 of 14<sup>th</sup> January 2005: 4-4; and 003 of 27<sup>th</sup> April 2006: 2-3) she related that as a young adult she had been suffering many firing losses when using the techniques and clay shown to her by neighbours who had initially taught her. One night her maternal grandmother -who had not been a potter- appeared in a dream and beckoned her to follow in order to find a new clay source, on a steep slope near a specific tree.

In this dream Nongebeza knelt down next to the tree and watched as her grandmother moved the soil aside, then dug deeper and removed some clay, which was made into two balls and left there as a marker. Nongebeza was instructed to return the following day with three white beads to place at that spot in order to say thank you to the earth and ancestors. On the following day she asked someone to accompany her and followed the pathways traversed in the dream and found the site, identifiable by the imprints of her knees, as well as the two balls of clay. She related that she then actively engaged with a mystic process of acknowledging and thanking her ancestors for “showing” that place, and thereby also made herself known and acceptable to the site and surroundings by placing the three white beads, of the type usually worn by Mpondo women around the neck, in the manner prescribed in her dream.

Nongebeza’s recounting of these events makes it sound simple, but, in actual fact the site is located in an adjoining area known as Mbutho, and is approximately 5.2 kilometres away by foot, in a setting unlikely to have been discovered in any other way. This clay source is situated on a precipitous slope in sub-tropical jungle, far away from existing homesteads or agricultural activities. It “can only be accessed after leaving a very narrow and winding gravel roadway to follow an extremely steeply descending purpose made pathway that weaves through dense indigenous forest and undergrowth for approximately 40 metres” (Steele *et al* 2010: 35). All clay must be carried back up the slope in small quantities, then to the homestead by whatever means.

This clay seam, below a topping of soil, is made up of two components, the lower part being known as sabhunge, which is a slightly stonier component that gets added in at about a 50/50 ratio to give the final clay body tooth and good workability characteristics. This combination also allows Nongebeza to pursue her unique firing practice of placing items to be fired into an already blazing bonfire. Nongebeza expressed on many occasions that despite distance and difficult access she would not use any other clay source because it was fit for purpose and she believed that this is the “clay that God has mixed for me” (Interview 007 of 28<sup>th</sup> April 2006: 2, as well as Interview 008 of 12<sup>th</sup> May 2006: 20; Steele *et al* 2010: 35).

In discussion with her regarding appropriate behaviour when working at the clay site there were two main recommendations that emerged, namely, that conduct should be relatively quiet and decorous, and that if the snake of the clay seam was to show itself, then it should be respected as if it were an ancestor which had come out for a visit, thereby connecting such a snake to cosmological ideas about fertility and life rather than fear and death. Nongebeza also said that if it was seen it could be gently moved, or covered up again with soil, or digging could be recommenced in a slightly altered place, so as not to disturb it. When asked specifically whether there were any other “rules” for fetching clay she assured me, with disarming pragmatism, that one can go at any time and get clay with anybody who will help (Interview 016 of 6<sup>th</sup> March 2006: 2; and Fieldnotes of 7<sup>th</sup> March 2008; 2: 89).

Nongebeza's uncomplicated attitude was clearly evident on many occasions, including that I -a male outsider who grew up somewhere else, despite that I am a potter- was always made to feel welcome during all stages of clay collection. There has also usually been a plethora of both male and female children and adults in all stages of life accompanying such expeditions and helping in one way or another, and no known misfortunes have befallen anyone while clearing and working in the heart of that dense indigenous jungle in order to get to the clay seam and collect as much as was required. I also noted that there appeared to be no prohibitions regarding appropriate timing because during my various visits over the past decades we have gone and dug clay at many different times of day, and even at night on one occasion. We had started out quite late in the afternoon, and darkness fell before we were finished. I was delighted when she invited us to stay for supper, and then she promptly took out her cellphone and phoned home to make the necessary arrangements, thereby reminding me that this was just another working day for Nongebeza, even though I felt very much in awe of the occasion and surroundings.

Finally, I think it is also important to observe that her use of that clay seam has resulted in minimal environmental disruption. Even though the act of opening up the earth and removing clay requires digging that significantly altered that particular spot at a specific point in time, almost all traces of previous clay extraction activities are naturally removed within a few months because the sub-tropical undergrowth rapidly returns. Thus only a very careful look reveals a sort of indentation in the mountainside along the contour that has been followed by Nongebeza as she collected clay for the past five decades or more from that site shown to her in a dream.

It is fascinating that, despite disarming pragmatism and absence of obvious clay collection taboos, Nongebeza was clearly not interested in several clay seams that I have seen that were easily accessible and closer to her home partly because, in her cosmology, this particular clay source was the one allocated to her family by her ancestors and God. Such a position chimes with an overall sense of respect for clay as natural resource expressed by some other rurally based potters, as well as with elaborately constructed clay collection rituals practiced by some potters in West Africa. Such attitudes integrate "technical ... fields [with] social and symbolic ones" (Gosselain & Livingstone Smith 2005: 40). Out of this emerges the idea that in certain sectors it is believed that attitudes and ritual practices may influence the chemical properties of raw materials in such a way as to improve chances of successful visual arts outcomes, which is an idea that might be interesting to pursue further in due course.

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