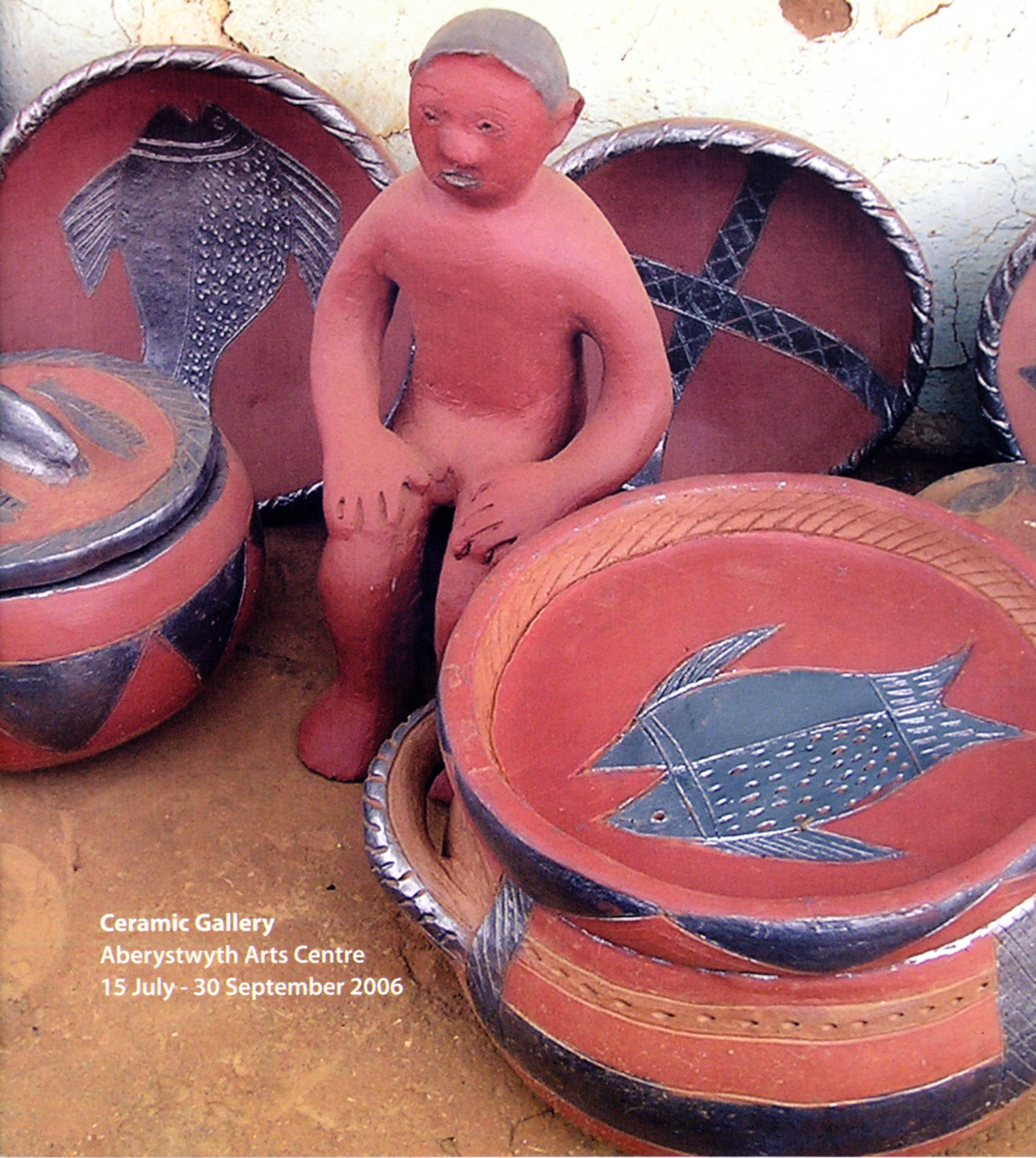


Sankofa

Ceramic Tales from Africa



Ceramic Gallery
Aberystwyth Arts Centre
15 July - 30 September 2006



Sankofa, Ceramic Tales from Africa

The research

Based on field trips mainly undertaken 2005-6 to Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana and South Africa by Moira Vincentelli, the exhibition explores how contemporary ceramics in Africa are adapting and responding to new situations. The research was a collaboration with Manchester Museum where the exhibition was originally shown. It was supported with funding from the British Academy.



The exhibition design

Gwenllian Ashley and Stuart Evans, of Ceredigion Museum have acted as consultants for the display in the Aberystwyth exhibition. The layout is intended to convey the travel and collecting activity that was central to the research. Alongside the ceramics, we have included images, colours and objects to suggest the creative way that materials are used and often re-cycled in many parts of Africa today.



The exhibition name

Sankofa is a word from the Twi language of West Africa that suggests the idea of 'learning from the past to move forward to the future'. The concept is represented by a mythic bird arching its neck backwards often with an egg in its mouth. This popular symbol can be seen in metalwork, or as a printed image on textiles and even in ceramic form as in Case 1

Noria Mbaso, Figure, 2005, Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa

From the 1980s Noria Mbaso was recognised as a powerful sculptor in clay and first became known for her figures, often painted in bright enamel paint. Unusual for a woman, she has also taken up wood carving. She can work up to life size in both wood and unfired or fired clay. (Case 1)

Old technologies and new designs in Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa

Venda was one of the homelands in South Africa during the Apartheid period. Consequently, it maintained a strong connection with older cultural beliefs. The crafts of carving for men and pottery for women have been important culturally and commercially. Both craft forms display high skills and an innovative approach. (Case 2)

Venda pottery is easily identified by its use of contrasting geometric designs using graphite (grey) and burnished red slip. Commercial gloss paint in red and white was frequently used from the mid 20th century but currently the fashion seems to be for a more 'natural' look. Even the varnished pot with the heart motif is quite muted in colour. The fish motif is a more recent element. Ester Neseangne's abstract fish design is particularly successful in the way it combines the fish into the abstract design. Large vessels in the form of female figures are popular. Sometimes these are bare-breasted African women but Fadorah Sello Ramdoko has created a much more buttoned-up form, like a Victorian lady or perhaps it is Sunday best for a new South African.



Ghana - Fesi Pottery, Kpandu, Ghana

Animal models are popular in many parts of Africa and often represent a useful commercial form popular as small gifts and for sale to tourists. At Fesi Pottery in Kpandu, Ghana women have been making models of animals since at least the early 20th century. Also in the display are some examples of recycled tin oil lamps and bright plastic bowls, materials that often replace earlier uses of ceramics. (Case 3)



Ghana – New designs at Fesi Pottery,

For generations the women in Kpandu have produced beautiful black pottery and are especially well known for their modelled animals – chickens, tortoises, goats and birds. The bread-and-butter market for water pots and cooking pots has declined sharply in recent years so they are keen to develop new designs. Sebalda Nkueyeyutsu makes handsome black bowls. Nii Noi Dowona who trained in Rural Arts and Industry in Kumasi is helping to produce new

designs acting as a conduit between the urban markets and the rural women (see Case 18). One of the most successful changes they have made is the introduction of a stronger clay. Ideally, they would like to fire at a higher temperature and a major investment was the building of a wood-fired kiln. Kilns have to cool down slowly and it is impossible to take the hot pots from the kiln to the sawdust to turn them black so the women much prefer their traditional bonfire method. This issue is still to be resolved. (Case 4 and Case 18)



Ghana – urban potteries

Urban potteries in Ghana use wheel and kiln technology but often avoid the expense of a second firing and decorate with paint rather than glaze to produce decorative pottery for the home market. (Case 5)

Ghana - Grater bowls

The grater bowl is probably the most widely used pottery utensil in Ghana and is marketed in both rural and urban contexts. The inner surface of the bowl is scored to create ridges used for raw or cooked vegetables.

Rukiya Adjetey from Teshie has a little roadside stall where she sells the bowls and other cooking items. Her customers prefer the brown

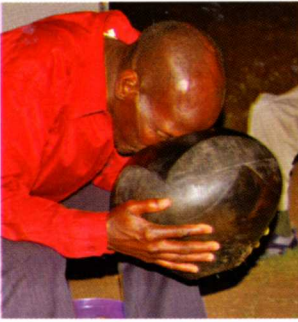
terracotta bowls for grating and the black ones for serving soup. She took me to visit her neighbours who were market traders and fish smokers while they were eating their soup and fufu, the traditional staple of Ghana, out of the black bowls.



The beaded bowl was purchased from a big roadside pottery trader in Accra. It shows how commercial traders are looking at ways of adapting the grater into something more decorative, perhaps saleable to the outsider. There is also a recycled metal version of the grater, bought at Kumasi. (Case 6)

Beer pots and fine craft in KwaZulu Natal

The ukhamba, or round-bottomed beer pot is the only kind of pottery to be seen among the woven mats, meat, animal skins and second-hand clothes at the rural market at Nongoma, KwaZulu Natal. Maize or millet beer is the traditional drink of Zulu-speaking people in South Africa and the pottery used to brew it and serve it is an important sign of cultural identity. The drinking vessels are required for all special occasions. (Case 7 – 10)



Why Magwaza drinking at his sister's Umemulo ceremony, Dec. 2005, photo Perril

As a young potter in the 1970s Nesta Nala (1940-2005) began to add new forms such as milk jugs and floral decoration to her repertoire, but after contact with archaeologists working in the Tugela Valley where she lived, she began to re-examine older decorative motifs. She refined the beer pot into a thin-walled elegant smoke-black vessel and directed her work increasingly towards the urban craft galleries and a specialist collectors market. (Case 8)

A number of her daughters have followed in her footsteps each one developing in different ways - Jabu Nala in scale and refined decoration; (Case 9) Thembi Nala by applying figures illustrating scenes of Zulu life including, recently, the theme of the 'Aids Funeral'. (Case 7 left)

As Nesta Nala's reputation spread she attracted young makers who came to find out more about her work and techniques. Ian Garrett wrote an MA thesis on her and his spectacular burnished vessels, although quite unique, retain a powerful debt to her example. (Case 7 right)

South Africa (left)

Andile Dyalvane is one of the rising new stars in South African ceramics. He trained at Gugulethu Township College, Cape Town, through the Pottery Workshop, Muizenberg and Port Elizabeth Teknikon where he gained his diploma in 2002. In 2004 he had a sell-out exhibition at

Museum. Although he uses modern technologies of electric kilns, stoneware clay and moulding, he is currently exploring ways to create work that makes reference to traditional forms such as the meat plate of Zulu origin or wooden milk pails. His ceramics have a wonderful sense of colour and surface pattern and he decorates the underside of vessels as carefully as the upper part. (Case 8)

Berber Pottery

Across North Africa there is a very distinct division between the way pottery is made by men and by women. Among Berber peoples, who can be found from Tunisia in the East to Morocco in the west, pottery is generally a female craft. Pots are hand built (not thrown on a wheel) and are usually fired in an open fire. The work is decorated with abstract linear designs that are closely linked to the identity of particular groups or villages.

Fatima Eirifi lives in a mountain village in Morocco and still makes functional pottery for her own use and for sale. With the introduction of cooking on calor gas she has developed a ceramic form to adapt the canister for cooking.



Only a few miles south, in the tourist and pilgrimage centre of Moulay Idriss, Al Aloui

Beb Taleb is the third generation of potters in his family. He uses a potters wheel and fires in a kiln but his more refined pottery uses Berber-style designs as a decorative feature. His work sells mainly to pilgrims and tourists as souvenirs and house decoration. (Case 11)



Berber Pottery -Tunisia

Sabiha Ayari is one of the leading potters in the area around Segnane in Northern Tunisia. She preserves a Berber tradition of making pottery, traditionally a female activity. The bold abstract patterns of Berber decoration are to be found in pottery, weaving and interior decoration. Although she still makes some functional pottery, such as double steamers for couscous and bread baking plates, the lucrative market is now the urban and tourist market. Sabiha makes figurines, animal models and a whole range of plates and bowls decorated with lively designs of birds and fish. (Case 12)

The Tagine as Moroccan icon

The Moroccan national dish is the tagine, a delicious slow-cooked stew of spicy meat or vegetables often with a hint of sweetness from dried fruit. It is cooked in an earthenware pot with a distinctive conical lid. This iconic form has become a symbol of Morocco which is widely adapted to other forms of tableware such as serving dishes and condiment sets for salt, pepper, spices or olives. (Case 13)

Old styles and new designs in Morocco

Morocco's buoyant ceramic industry is based on small-scale workshops rather than factory production. Clustered together, the huge wood-fired kilns are kept to the edge of towns and Fez, Marrakesh, Meknes and Sale all have vibrant potter's quarters. The largest production is at Safi which exports pottery across the world. Largely based on the Islamic tradition of brightly coloured, hand-painted tin-glazed wares, new designs and styles are also welcomed. Ceramic is adorned with elegant metalwork and new techniques are invented. Tadelakt is adapted from a polished wall plaster technique used in Marrakech. The vibrant oranges, greens and yellows lend a touch of Moroccan style to a modern interior. Boutounes Touria of Safi has recently introduced a way of decorating plates with henna using a fine syringe to apply the designs more usually seen on women's hands and feet.



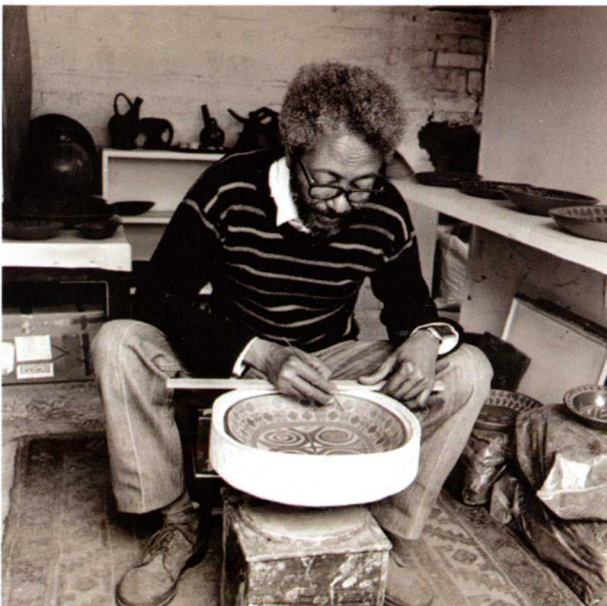
The showrooms of Art Naji, Fez are like an Aladdin's cave, every wall, table and shelf is covered with beautifully hand-painted pottery. This major ceramic enterprise on the outskirts of Fez exports all over the world. Currently seventeen members of the family work in the business as well as 20



apprentices and many more specialised artisans. The huge kilns are fired with olive stones. They make tiles for zillij, a special type of mosaic work used for fountains and architectural decoration, blue and white china and tin-glazed earthenware in the distinctive greens, yellows and turquoise. The work all seems to be quite traditional but within that new designs are always being introduced. For example, the large plate with leaf designs is a revival of a design from the 1930s, itself much influenced by the work of William Morris. (Case 14-15)

Siddig El'Nigoumi (1931-1996)

The coffee pot sitting in its circular base is one of the most characteristic domestic objects in any Sudanese household. Siddig el'Nigoumi never forgot those coffee pots of his homeland. He came to England first in 1954 to study ceramics at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, returned to teach in Sudan, but eventually settled in England in 1967. His work is a lively combination of African ceramic techniques, Arabic calligraphy and modern Western imagery. The silky surface of burnished clay, sometimes darkened by smoking, is elegantly decorated with finely engraved lines and witty forms. He marked all his pots with a scorpion signature. (Case 16)



Case 17

Helga Gamboa

Helga Gamboa is Angolan but has lived in Bristol for 13 years where she trained in ceramics.

Her work explores issues of lost identity and troubled history, for since independence from Portugal (1975) Angola has had many years of civil war.

Helga Gamboa uses techniques of hand-building and burnishing in part derived from anthropological photographs and descriptions of women potters in Kwanyama in northern Angola in the 1930s. These studies were made by two

British women in the

1930s. She combines the 'African' technique with

white tin glaze referencing Portuguese ceramic traditions, also part of her Angolan colonial heritage. The photographic imagery of children and war remind us of the sad consequences of the prolonged civil war.

In 2004 Helga Gamboa returned to Angola and travelled cross-country many hundreds of miles to find Kwanyama. In spite of the decades of strife, the villages are still there and the women still make pots for everyday use and for special ceremonies.



Images on the back page from top left to bottom right are:

Giuliana Pomeyie forming a pot, Ghana; Fatima Eirifi, Morocco; recycled ceramic drum as straw holder, Tunisia; Andile Dyalvane, South Africa; Boutunes Touria painting pottery with henna, Morocco; Nesta Nala pots, South Africa; Comfort Afuenyo, Ghana; Ian Garrett, South Africa.



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Moira Vincentelli

**A CD Rom with catalogue and video is available from The Manchester Museum 0161 275 2635
price: £5 plus £1 p+p.**