

NESTA NALA  
Empress of the Tugela

By Stanley Hermans

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A dynamic juxtaposition of urban and rural; ancient and modern; traditional and contemporary, and, self and other, suggests one understanding of South African culture: cumulative calls and responses that echo richly with timbre of the deepest respect for a common humanity. This coheres and preserves what is most special about the South African spirit. Without it we are lost, at best, prosaic, at worst. Without this we become like any other bland consumerist society. Traditional culture is driven by necessity, with a sublime taste and style of enduring cachet beyond the fickle fashionability of modern consumerism. Production values to the highest levels of excellence resonate from its most sophisticated political economy, refined through more generations than there are Fords, Fiats or Guggenheims.

With dignity, humility and chic aplomb Nesta Nala, a timeless beauty, literally digs a living, and a life, out of the earth with her bare hands. With resilient and endless creativity she sculpts this clay into vessels of great beauty and exquisite form using only natural materials. La Nala lives in rustic elegance in the Tugela Valley, to the north in South Africa, about three hours outside Durban, one of South Africa's three major urban centers together with Johannesburg and Cape Town.

"The area of Oyaya in Inkhanyezi, deep in the Thukela(Tugela) Valley near Middeldrift is arid, unyielding and economically depressed. Perhaps it is this remote and uncompromising environment that has led to the characterization of Nesta Nala as a conservative traditionalist untainted by the corroding effects of Westernism. Yet closer inspection reveals Nala to be a remarkable and resourceful artist, who has negotiated the boundaries of environment, technology and culture with deft skill and artistic vision."

Ian Garrett(IG)

Nala possesses and projects such a power of spiritual equilibrium, and depth of quiet passion, that the soul soars, and windows in the mind fling open in her presence. To get to where lives, works and disports, you have to journey, in the mind body and soul, from where you are in the known and the familiar, into the fetchingly surreal. The character forming road to Oyaya jolts the head into disarray.

Nobody who goes there can remain unaffected. Our driver begins this journey as a typical middle-class Indian male chauvinist from Durban, his perceptions of Zulu women colored darkly by his fully internalized experience of Apartheid era South African race and gender relations. Hglenge, our translator, and Thembi Nala, our guide, are sitting behind him and me. They converse in animated Zulu and he turns up the volume on the radio without asking them if they'd mind. They seem invisible to him. As we journey he is struck by the landscape, and moved by the hardship and dignity of those who dwell there. One we get to the kraal(\*1) he is awed by the tableau of independent, self-empowered Zulu women, on land that they own.

He has, by his own admission, never seen such a thing, and on the way back he accords the translator and guide every politeness and respect. The dulcet chord of a common

humanity has been plucked, and he learns their names, and asks them if they'd mind if he were to turn the music up ever so slightly. They ignore him and continue chatting, much to my amusement.

In the fullest view of the imagination picture this sprawling place, with kraals dotted organically and microscopically in and amongst the hills, at various tilts and angles. Imagine it as twirling slowly through history-then populate this with the movement of many small communities, slowly, like mercury dispersing and reconvening on a curved surface, the dissonance of episodic invasion and implosion traumatizing the smooth flow of it. Nesta Nala and her world have moved through, in and amongst this ever-changing viscosity of the history of our time and place. "Around 1550 Malandela, a chief with a small following, settled at the foot of Amandawe Hill on the southern banks of the Umhlathuze River(where in relation to the Tugela?) just before it enters the Nkwaleni Valley. He had two sons, Qwabe and Zulu, who, according to oral tradition, constantly squabbled with one another, and so Malandela sent Qwabe to live along the lower reaches of the river, somewhere near present-day Empangeni, and Zulu was sent north to settle in the region of the White Umfolozi River. In due course, both brothers consolidated their followings into separate clans, and both paid separate tribute(ukukhonaz) to the Mthetwa chief, who was the most powerful in the region."

"Around 1787, Sezangakhona, the young chief of the Zulu(which derived its name from one of Malandela's quarrelsome sons), fathered a son out of wedlock, Shaka. After serving a number of years in Dingiswayo's army, where he excelled as a military tactician and officer, Shaka became the Zulu chief on his father's death. At that time the Zulu were a small group of possibly 1 500 people...over a period of twelve years Shaka transformed his small chiefdom into the mighty Zulu nation...In 1828 Shaka was assassinated by his half brothers, Dingane and Mhlagana."

Sandra Klopper(SK)

This marks the beginning of the end of the Zulu empire: Soon the Boers arrived to escape the English down in the Cape. Dingane meets his Waterloo at Blood River, and what's left of him is vanquished by his half-brother Mpande-Dingane and a small residual of the party faithful try to flee to Swaziland, but are hunted down and killed before they can get there-Mpande takes the throne, becoming the longest reigning monarch in Zulu history. It is Mpande who secures the north of the Tugela valley for the Zulu, keeping the colonial south at bay with cunning and diplomacy.

Thus it is that Nesta is born into modernity with the traditional ways challenged by ever-increasing efforts to emasculate Zulu society, at it's lowest ebb since Shaka's heyday. "With the advent of Union in 1910 and white control over the whole of South Africa, white absolute power was entrenched and the Zulu king's hope of attaining state recognition became increasingly remote. The status of Cetshwayo's son, Dinuzulu, and his grandson, Solomon, was reduced to that of ordinary chief, charged with little more than control over a small area of what had once been the Zulu kingdom. It was only in the 1950's that Nationalist (Apartheid) government appointed King Cetshwayo's great-grandson, Cyprian, as paramount chief of the Zulu."

SK

As we near Nesta's kraal silken-haired goats of various ages are to be seen gamboling in the shade of isolated, individual trees-a lone donkey carries in the middle of nowhere-

sometimes it has to carry water from the river, or clay from the hills. People live off the land, and have done so through time-there is an aspect of wear and tear to it. In summer it is clothed in the lush and green. In winter, unadorned, it is hard, barren and dusty with evidence of serious erosion. The earth falls away steeply to one side of the road and we peer down at citizens washing themselves and the laundry in pools of water. Everything seems far away from everything else in this operatic landscape of dramatic hills set against an open sky, high above sea level. There are two clinics serving a far-flung community-in order to be anywhere, it is far away from everything else. You have to go to the clinic on foot, it doesn't come to you. Along the side of the road healthy looking children wheel emaciated peers in wheelbarrows.

Thembi describes the epic trudge to and from school. Crocodiles sun themselves lazily on rocks in the Tugela. The area is renowned for an unusually high incidence of twins, reflected in the folklore and stories of the place. High on a hill, a rock formation in the shape of a house inspires a story about a giant and a set of twins-a rectangular 'door' through the 'house' directs a biblical ray of sunlight over the tousled foothills below-it is a story that cannot be written-it can only be told, the rich allegory of it much illuminated by the sun pouring through the hole in the house on the hill. If the land is the story, it's ownership and occupation might supply the plot. Nesta uses the land to narrate-the celestial pots take her story through time and space, since they are much sought after amongst collectors, galleries and museums across the world.

In this place, fecund with exotic history and Byzantine intrigue, Nesta Nala reigns over an empire of the most fragile and beguiling beauty. Her kraal is the size of a large upper middle class suburban plot, in the round. She receives us in a formal lounge, in the round. The afternoon light plays gently over her regal floral ensemble and turban, modern boutique clobber worn with the grace and style of traditional dress. The walls are a bright pink. A three piece lounge suite in oak and brown velvet, with matching coffee table, seems strangely at home in this setting, very, very far away from the nearest department store. A bed and closet define the other part of this rondavel as bedroom space. The floor is covered with parquet effect linoleum.

Nesta and Hglenge speak Zulu in their lower registers. Nesta's brisk and assertive mezzo intones deep, mellifluous vowels punctuated by tongue and palate staccato: "It all started when Sipiwe, my mother, married into the Nala family-she was originally from Inkhandla(#spelling)-she moved here as a second wife(to whom?)-her older half-sister, married to the same husband, was taught by the mother of the husband-Sepiwe then learnt from this older half-sister, the first wife of her husband. Sepiwe didn't meet the mother of her husband because she had already passed away when she married into the Nalas. I was born in this area in 1940, and started making pots when I was twelve."

"Craft traditions have existed for centuries in rural societies. Before the colonisation of Africa, parents played a key educational role by transmitting folklore and crafts to the young. Herd-boys learnt from the veld about fauna and flora, and how to subsist within the natural environment. Whilst guarding cattle, the herd-boys plaited braids from indigenous grasses. Strict social codes were observed in the production of craft-work: men worked in wood and certain grass articles such as basketry, whereas clay and bead articles were the domain of women.

"Clay pots are made for domestic use, mainly as containers of sour milk and beer.

The task...is an arduous one: clay must be fetched from far distances and transported

home. It is dried, ground to a fine powder, impurities removed, mixed with water, and only then can a pot be made. Pots are constructed from rolled coils of clay, without the use of a pottery wheel. A ball of clay is flattened to form the base of the pot. It is then placed on a circular grass tube (inkhata). This facilitates the turning of the base as coils are added until the required size is reached. The finished shape is scraped and burnished smooth, and when semi-dry, designs are added such as incised patterns or raised pellets (amasumpa). Dry pots are fired in pits and the most common fuel is cow dung, wood and dried aloe leaves. Fired pots are usually blackened by smoking them and are then finished off with animal fat to render them waterproof. The beer ceremony still forms an important part of Zulu life. Beer (utshwala) is brewed from millet in large pots (imbiza), and is often used to appease ancestors. The beer is served in a large pot (ukhamba), and transported in a flared necked vessel (uphiso), to prevent spillage. If a guest is offered beer in a very small container (umancishane) it means that very little beer remains or that the guest is not welcome. Beer pots are not only used in rural areas, at all townships near large cities, and even at large urban stations beerpots are offered for sale.”

Jannie Van Heerden(JVH)

A quietly dazzling array of finished pots are placed most aesthetically in the middle of another rondavel with fetchingly distressed pale blue walls. The floor is of a light terra cotta clay. The browns, blacks and umbers of the pots glow incandescently in the soft light coming in through the door and window. About six women in layered patterned skirts and expressively twirled turbans are polishing pots with animal fat and a shoe brush. Through the rectangular door it looks like a Vermeer painting in the round.

The photographer’s rectangular view is greatly vexed-she remarks under her breath, “Everything is round, dammit.” Geometric is the shape of the modern view, and television sets, camera’s and such, tools of the post-modern mega-media, reflect a mostly urban and consumerist gaze-the roundness of things in Nesta’s world seem to suspend rather than embroil her in the here and now.

“The process begins when she gathers clay from the mountainside, combining red and dark clays. The clay is ground to a fine powder and mixed with water until it the right consistency. She then wedges the clay and the task of fashioning the ceramic vessels begins. It is at this point that she decides on the shape and size of the pot suggested by the color, quantity and texture of the clay she’s prepared. Her working method and process is entirely intuitive. First the disc-like base of the pot is flattened from a lump of clay. She adds coils of increasing lengths, building up the walls of the pot and pinching them into position until the pot reaches its intended size and shape. Great care is taken to ensure that the walls are symmetrical and thin, smoothing them on the inside and the outside with pieces of calabash or stone. The pots are dried in the sun for 7 days before being fired in a dry aloe and wood pit fire. In the firing process the pots are burnished to a mottled, leather brown, and remain in the embers until the fire burns itself out.”

Rhoda Levinsohn (RL)

As the pot nears completion, before it’s first firing, the form of it suggests which way the decorative narrative will go. The mouth of the pot is a consequence of it’s form-the line of it might be at odds with how the pot sits in space, upon the often counter-pointed line

of the base. The ellipse of patterned design, applied after the form is resolved, in a feat of cunning corrective design, does much to balance these swirling rhythms in the round. The consequence is that while the finished decorated pot might come across all serene and balanced, this repose is achieved through a harmony of opposites, a most authoritative metaphor for cultural diversity if ever there was one.

“Her work is based on the shapes of her favorite spherical ukhumba and umancishane, and necked uphiso forms-these forms suggest generosity, stability and harmony, in keeping with customary notions of Zulu hospitality. The decoration of Nala’s vessels reveals several layers of meaning...in the mid-eighties Nala began to introduce figurative imagery seldom seen on conventional beer-wares. These included motifs derived from playing cards, fish, shields and houses-she also included a wide variety of raised, incised, impressed and imprinted textures. These are often used in unusual or even spectacular combinations as if to draw attention to her sheer technical and inventive brilliance.”

IG

Referring to a splendid spherical pot she explains that it is a male pot, since the triangular forms face downward. Since it is a male pot, it is used by women, of the royal families only-the female pot has its triangular forms pointing assertively to the heavens, and is used by the royal males. Acclaimed storyteller, Gcina Mhlope explains: “We look at each other and ‘sinthenenana amanzi’, or ‘we pour water for each other’, as in when the one is thirsty, the other quenches that thirst-when I am thirsty, you quench my thirst.”

These classical vessels are the physical evidence of a proud and richly articulate cultural continuity, unbroken for more than three generations, and already safely handed onto the next. Apart from their great worth and significance as art objects, these vessels are the result of a traditional pedagogy, and a creative political economy that is refined to the highest production values. Each finished pot goes out into the world proclaiming an obvious excellence of design and execution. Nesta recollects her being taught:

“This I remember very clearly because as a child at that time I was the only child asked to collect the clay, to fetch the water and the wood-so I learnt a lot of the basics from my mother-that’s how we started. Then the elders would draw the pattern onto the surface of a pot very lightly, and I would be instructed to deepen the lines-I did go to school, but only after I was twelve years old, at thirteen. I wasn’t told what the design meant-it was only when I realized that I too had become a maker of pots that I began to ask-these designs were inspired by beadwork and things we saw in nature. I have taught my daughters in the same way.”

Mark-making on the early pots of her daughters are tentative and derivative-Nala’s mark-making is bold and assertive, with discreet design innovations that ‘update’ the traditional to meet the modern gaze half-way. For example, a traditional pattern is set in an area of finely chaotic texture, perhaps symbolizing the anarchy of the modern world-it suggests a capacity in the traditional forms to ‘soothe’ the shocks of the new. There is no mention of the Nala men, a curious omission in a traditionally patriarchal society. Perhaps, it is suggested, this is no longer the case, and hitherto, that it is the Zulu woman who has become the effective custodian of the legacies of that culture’s traditions, values and mores.

In conversation, Nala seems quietly conflicted about her position in modernity. On the

one hand she seems genuinely content with where she is, yet she dreams about going out into a broader world. She displays reserve in what she might hope for. She explains that she'd been born in this place, over sixty- two years ago. In that time she's had seven children, six girls and a son. The people who live there change, she implies, but very little changes around them. What has changed is that she now has to go further into the hills to fetch clay-whereas before she could walk there, she now needs transport to get there. For now she is happy with the dialogue she has established with a broader world-people come to visit, and she listens to the radio-sometimes she receives post. She seems quite happy to have much of it go over the top of her turban.

“Nala has passed the family tradition on to three of her daughters, Jabu, Thembi and Zanele, who have established individual styles of their own that reflect the increasingly multi-cultural experiences of their generation. Jabu Nala, the eldest, now works independently of her mother in Johannesburg (Thembi lives in Durban, while Jabu forms a vital part of Nala incorporated, living and working with Nesta in Oyaya). Thembi's work include vessels decorated with intricately sculpted figurative motifs in relief and words in raised lettering-Zanele uses three-dimensionally sculpted motifs of a tortoise, frog, snake, crocodile and flower-this is reminiscent of the work of Venda artist Rebecca Matibe whose work she greatly admires.”

IG

She has also trained seven other families in the surrounding areas to make and market pots. This is how they make a living. Clive Sitholi, today one of KZN's foremost young sculptors, learnt from Nesta. Having started out in the city as a clothes designer, Nala's influence on Sithole redirected his creativity into a unique synergy of a modern vision expressed through a traditional form. In this way traditional iconography is preserved, refreshed and passed down from one generation to the next, responding to the callings of individual creativity, the imagination, nature and other craft forms, like bead and wood work. This is precisely what keeps a culture alive, vital and forward-looking.

Ironically, water is the most expensive overhead at R2,50 for a 25 litre container to be transported to her kraal from the Tugela river- Recently installed water-pumps are few and far between. The aloe leaves used to fire the pots are in increasingly short supply the closer to the kraal you get-increasingly, longer distances have to be covered to source fresh supplies of aloe leaf, and clay. Harvested aloe does not grow back.

In conversation, Nala is anxious that the economy of her creativity is understood and respected. It takes more than three days to make a pot from start to finish - she describes each pot as a miracle; she conceives of each pot afresh and anew; she's emphatic that she never copies herself. It often occurs that a pot is damaged in the firing processes, and many hours of work are lost.

“Little has been recorded of Nala's work prior to the 1970's, but early examples decorated with incised floral designs can be seen in the Vukani collection housed in the Old Post Office in Eshowe. Nala's mother, Sipiwe, produced work for local domestic use that had sometimes been collected by outside patrons. The relative paucity of decoration on these vessels and bold style of workmanship clearly distinguish her works

from those of her better known daughter and granddaughters. Sipiwe specialized in the ukhamba and umancishane forms and decorated them with either incised lines or raised pellets...her work suggests an output that adheres mostly to the conservative values of domestic consumption. In 1976(as South African youth in the cities rose in resistance to apartheid), Nesta made contact with the Vukani Association. Vukani had started in 1972 under the guidance of a Rev. Lofroth and aimed to promote Zulu craftwork and provide a regular income for craftworkers through its outlet in Eshowe”

IG

It is at Vukani that Nesta encountered her first inspiration and influence-all she remembers is that the pot was by a lady from Thwasani and that it had a profound effect on her. In 1983 Nala met archeologist Leonard van Schalkwyck who was excavating the Ndongdweni sites at Mamba and Wozi near Nala’s home. Van Schalkwyck showed Nala iron-age shards from the site and commissioned her to replicate some of the forms for him-the raised cords with impressed indentations that appear on many of Nala’s current works can be traced to the probable influence of these shards.

At roughly the same time Nala began personally to take her work to Durban. She would hire a while taxi at considerable financial outlay in order to transport the pieces to the African Art Center. Although the market for her work was not large, requiring long hours of hard work for little financial reward, Nala’s work slowly began to attract attention.”

IG

In the early 80’s, parallel to assertions of resistance to Apartheid in South Africa’s urban centers, Nala began to sign her works-this equated them with artworks by named Western artists and clearly established their value as collector’s items.

## CONCLUSION

As an iconic contemporary artist with a global audience and market Nesta Nala works the grain of urban/rural, traditional/modern tensions and contradictions to triumphant effect. A new road to where she lives is being built on the seemingly never never. It snakes along impotently like a huge question mark over government’s pace of delivery of basic services and infrastructure to the rural poor, and their will, and commitment to getting it right. There is no apparent communication between the technology of tractors, and people of the area who fill in pot holes with sand, for a small fee from road-users, whom they flag down for this informal toll. It is only after I’d waved back to them cheerfully that Hglenge put me straight, tiredly. The tractors are part of an idea that has yet to be realized effectively, the pot-hole fillers are part of a reality sustaining its present form effectively-they seem to pass each other by. The road to Oyaya remains perilous, though navigable-it gets you there. The new road has yet to be built.

Herein is reflected an epic stand-off between the traditional and the modern, a moment that is pregnant with possibility for new, unique synergies between ancient and modern, traditional and contemporary, self and other. This offers a society a brilliant opportunity to complete itself. The outcome depends entirely on how South Africa, and the world, negotiates an increasingly diverse global landscape, and the perilous terrain of modern identity.

\*1-Kraal- extended homestead-“Kin forms the basis of Zulu traditional life, which is

centered on the umuzi (extended homestead). Until quite recently, the umuzi consisted of the headman (umnumzane), with his wives and children, his younger brothers with their wives and families, and, in many cases, married sons as well. With urbanization and the break-up of past social structures, the umuzi has become smaller and smaller, often including only one man and his wife (or wives) and children. Traditionally the extended homestead was a self-contained economic unit in which a complete life could be led.”

SK