

Izinkamba / Onda Yaki
Conversation Pieces



Pucker Gallery | Boston

Izinkamba /Onda Yaki

Conversation Pieces



Large Bowl with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design
3 x 9.75 x 9.75"
ON89

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
11.5 x 14.25 x 14.25"
SA134 (16za/89)

CONVERSATION PIECE: (noun)

- a painting of a group of persons in their customary surroundings
- something (such as a novel or unusual object) that stimulates conversation¹

The collections of Izinkamba and Onda Yaki have been stimulating conversation at the Pucker Gallery for 25 years. With the help of filmmaker and sociologist Mynhardt Bester, Pucker collected about 1000 objects from South Africa between 1992 and 2007, holding the first of six exhibitions in 1994. Between 1999 and 2010 Keiichi Kuno assisted Pucker in the acquisition of 1150 works from Sarayama Onta, a small mountain village in a densely forested region of Oita Prefecture on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands. The first exhibition of Onda (also spelt Onta) Yaki at the Pucker Gallery was in 2000.

Ceramics have been produced in the region of kwaZulu-Natal since the second century BCE, but the history of Izinkamba begins in the mid-nineteenth

century when they replaced tightly woven baskets as the main vessel for drinking *utshwala* (sorghum beer).² Global appreciation for these vessels has grown steadily since the last years of the Apartheid era.³ The genesis of Onda Yaki dates to 1705, when Yanase San'uemon was sent from an older pottery village in Koishiwara to settle in the area. Onda Yaki's fame spread following its "discovery" in 1927 by Yanagi Soetsu, who felt it embodied the ideals of what came to be known as *mingei* ("art of the people"). The visit by famous English potter Bernard Leach to Sarayama in 1954 further fueled the "folk craft boom".⁴ But it is really in the last 40 years that the two traditions have been transformed into iconic 'national' cultural symbols. Recognized as an "Intangible Cultural Asset" in 1970, Onda Yaki was designated as an "Intangible

Cultural Property” by the Japanese Government in 1995, the only stoneware pottery to be selected.⁵ In 2010, South Africa’s Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) worked to establish celebrated Zulu potters as “Living Human Treasures” of the country’s “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, drawing on the terminology first used in Japan.⁶ But beyond the historical co-incidence of their collection at the Pucker Gallery and their paralleled ascension into ‘intangible’ national properties in South Africa and Japan, can these two sets of objects be meaningfully related to one another?

In some respects, they seem incommensurate with one another, rooted in different production methods and artistic traditions with unequal infrastructures of support on two different continents. Indeed, coil-formed Zulu pottery has been cast in South Africa as the antithesis to the wheel-thrown traditions of Bernard Leach, referred to in the country as ‘Anglo-Orientalism’.⁷ Yet Izinkamba and Onda Yaki are able to engage in an inter-cultural dialogue. Both embody utilitarian beauty transmitted between a limited number of potters using natural materials near at hand, who leaven creative expression with the ballast of restraint and proscribed limitation to ensure the maintenance of formal integrity and the perpetuation of group identity. As such, these vessels bear considerable ideological weight; both mediate contrapuntal expectations for innovation and homeostasis, balancing the demands of an international marketplace with ideologies of tradition promulgated at moments of great societal change. That they carry these burdens and are still described as “authentic” is testament to the mastery of their creators who, despite geographical isolation, remain sensitive to the tastes of outsiders. Indeed, both Onda Yaki and Izinkamba have always been made and remade in response to changing material and political circumstances. The establishment of regional styles of Zulu beer pots is partly the product of forced relocation to tribal ‘homelands’ and migrant labor structures, and potters were encouraged to pursue traditional crafts partly because of ‘native education’



Cover:
Large Jar with Black Glaze
17 x 15.5 x 15.5"
ON932

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
14.5 x 16 x 16"
SA698 (ZZ139)

A strong visual conversation occurs between these imposing works, both of whose robust, swelling bodies taper towards the base. Their arresting alluvial corporeality is heightened by glistening black surfaces, achieved in the *ukhamba* through a combination of burnishing and a second firing, and in the large jar through a distinctive black glaze called *kuroyu*. Both depend on local resources; Zulu firings use indigenous plants such as aloe and euphorbia to provide a more consistent temperature than wood alone, and the Japanese use such substances as feldspar and iron oxide in their glazes. The austere blackness of both pots is alleviated by radiating decoration. The large jar features a dramatic passage of poured green glaze, gravity working on the trails of pigment as it drips along the tapering contours. The *ukhamba*'s curves are emphasized through the repeating triangles of incised marks arranged to alternately point upwards and downwards.

ALL WORKS ARE MADE OF CLAY.



Jar with Amber Glaze and Yubigaki (Finger Drawn) Design
 17.75 x 12.25 x 12.25"
 ON513

Uphiso, Zulu Beerpot
 15.25 x 14.25 x 14.25"
 SA655 (ZZ90)

acts that reinforced ethnic and cultural division.⁸ Meanwhile, production in Onda Sarayama following the resettlement of Yanase and his family was partly driven, as Andrew Maske has explained, “by the need to raise taxes for shogunal representatives, who were charged with reporting to the central government”.⁹ Relative remoteness does not negate cross-regional knowingness. That Zulu and Onda potters have periodically adapted size, form, and finish in accordance with the needs of consumers is testament to the enduring strengths of the traditions, not a slow death of purity. A standard vocabulary of shapes and sizes for each is still clearly evident. For Izinkamba, vessels are designed for the preparing, transporting, and drinking of *utshwala*: *imbiza*, *uphiso*, *iphangela*, *ukhamba* and *amanchisane*. For Onda Yaki, shapes range from large, lidded jars for pickled vegetables and fruit (*otsubo*), to water crocks (*mizugame*), ash burners (*hibachi*), and pouring vessels with small spouts (*unsuke*).

We can attune ourselves to the inter-cultural dialogue between these pottery traditions by recalling the art historical definition of “conversation

pieces”—relatively informal or intimate eighteenth-century group portraits in domestic or landscape settings. Central to the history of the “family” in Georgian Britain and a diagnostic tool for analyzing the “domestic order”, the compositions codified performances of politeness among extended familial networks and larger social groups. Kate Retford has demonstrated how they memorialized relationships and blended issues of lineage with political and commercial connections, and were rooted in deeply performative aesthetics of sociability.¹⁰ Izinkamba and Onda Yaki also express concerns with politeness and hospitality that are intimate through their rootedness in “domestic order”, and embody aesthetics of sociability that memorialize relationships through the blending of lineage and extended family connections. One defining characteristic of both Izinkamba and Onda Yaki is their transmission along familial lines of descent. In Zululand, pot making is a generational inheritance passed from mother to daughter(s); although there are some important male potters today, Izinkamba remain strongly matrilineal.¹¹ By contrast, pottery production in Sarayama is a rigidly



Uphiso, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
 10.5 x 9 x 9"
 SA724 (ZZ168)

Okinawan Yushibin (Liquor Bottle) with Green Glaze
 13.5 x 7.25 x 7.25"
 ON206

patrilineal practice; only one son per household is permitted to carry on the tradition and no potters may move in from outside, meaning that the families in the village today can trace their lineage directly to the three original founders of the Onda kiln in 1705 (alongside Yanase, the other two clans are the Sakamoto and the Kuroki). Nevertheless, women play critical roles in the production of Onda Yaki—they are responsible for the laborious preparation of the clay—and Brian Moeran has extensively studied the social organization of the community that stems from this familial structure. Despite recent changes affecting communal solidarity, the entire village is dependent on various kinds of labor co-operation (*temagaeshi*).¹² Instead of individually signing their vessels, Onda potters inscribe them with the characters for Onda, concretizing the notion that they are a “village” production. Whilst economic interdependence across extended family groups is less rigid in kwaZulu-Natal, the beer pot is a literal embodiment of the bonds that tie families into a community. These emphatically communal drinking vessels are designed to convey politeness and foster sociability among

neighboring homesteads. They are used during ceremonies promoting good neighborliness and the benefits of communal living. The different styles, which communicate important regional identities, were traditionally linked to beadwork patterns that transmitted extended kinship bonds, including marriage.

The hearth is both the center of domestic sanctuary, where cultures around the world venerate ancestors and perform fire rituals, and the place to greet guests. It is the meeting point of public and private rituals of communication. Conversation piece paintings typically hung above fireplaces, presenting a scene of polite hospitality while contributing to the actual sociability taking place in the room and inviting visitors to participate in the “conversation”. Matthew Craske explains that, “conversation portraits recreated the correct ritual of welcome...such paintings are a highly literal expression of politeness”.¹³ The locus of production for fired ceramics is also in a sense a ‘hearth’; the communal Onda village structure is made manifest in the co-operatively fired climbing kiln (*noborigama*) where the chamber rotations are



Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
6.75 x 9 x 8.5"
SA635 (ZZ28)

Small Sake Flask
4.5 x 2.5 x 2.5"
ON907

Small Sake Flask
4 x 2.25 x 2.25"
ON900

Small Sake Flask
4 x 2.25 x 2.25"
ON905

equally distributed among the households.¹⁴ Rituals of sharing space and resources in an ancient fire practice is embedded in the manufacture of the pottery as a result, linking private household to public sociability and structuring the participation of each generation of potters. In this relief, the shared climbing kiln is a “highly literal expression of politeness” too. Correct codes for public and private rituals of communication around a hearth are equally important for Izinkamba. Although the firing takes place in shallow pits downhill from the homestead to keep away heat and smoke, the veneration of ancestors in a domestic sanctuary lies behind the blackened surfaces of the vessels. Beer pots are fired twice (*ukufusa*) not to strengthen the vessel but to achieve the shiny blackness believed to honor the ancestors (*amadlosi*) who prefer cool, dark places. As Juliette Armstrong has put it, they “serve as a welcoming beacon for the ancestors who are being called to protect the living descendants”.¹⁵ *Utshwala* is offered in smaller versions of beer pots called *umvakwembiza* to the deceased at the sacred *umsamo* area at the back of the home whilst the praised names of ancestors are recited.¹⁶

In his analysis of ‘conversation piece’ paintings, Craske notes that dressing mantels over the hearth with arrangements of ceramic vessels helped determine whether the depicted owners conveyed taste and rectitude in their domestic sanctuary or

succumbed to the dangers of modish trivia and ostentatious consumption.¹⁷ Today, Onda Yaki and Izinkamba help define hearths in homes very different from those in Onda Sarayama and Zululand, as displaced transcultural objects reflecting tastes in ceramic appreciation globally. The production of the two traditions is carefully passed down from one generation to another, but the vessels themselves move along different chains of inheritance that are part of the ‘social life of objects’ once they enter international marketplaces and become family heirlooms. The codes of politeness and hospitality they embody can be passed down as well if we listen to their cross-cultural communication carefully. Rituals of sociability linking family structures with wider communities can still be performed through them, even if the codes of exchange have shifted dramatically, and the pots are still a welcoming stage for polite conversations between guests and hosts.

Jonathan Shirland is Assistant Professor of Art at Bridgewater State College, Massachusetts and Visual Arts Director of Violence Transformed. He received his PhD in Art History from University College London, and has taught at University College London, the University of York, and Lasell College in Newton. He was also the Curator of Public Programs and Adult Learning at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.



Elongated Jar with Green and White Drip Glaze
17.75 x 6.75 x 6.75"
ON106

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
10 x 11.5 x 10.5"
SA437 (P32)

¹ Merriam-webster.com.

² See Frank Jolles, 'The Origins of the Twentieth Century Zulu Beer Vessel Styles', *Southern African Humanities*, vol. 17, December 2005, 101-151.

³ For a brief summary of the global evolution of appreciation for Zulu pottery, see Jonathan Shirland, *Nourishment, Hospitality, Conveyance: Works of Art by the People of Southern Africa*, Boston: Pucker Gallery 2013, 3-11. See also Elizabeth Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, Noordhoek: South Africa, *Print Matters*, 2012.

⁴ See Andrew Maske, *The Ceramic Art of Onda*, Boston: Pucker Gallery 2000, 1-3.

⁵ See Brian Moeran, 'Folk Art Pottery as Cultural Resource', 3.

⁶ See Elizabeth Perrill, 'Burnishing History: The Legacies of Maria Martinez and Nesta Nala in Dialogue: Part 1: An Historian's Perspective', *The Journal of Modern Craft*, vol. 8:3, November 2015, 263-286.

⁷ See Perrill, *Burnishing History*, 266-267.

⁸ See Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 16-17.

⁹ Andrew Maske, *The Ceramic Art of Onda*, Boston: Pucker Gallery 2000, 1.

¹⁰ Kate Retford, *The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in 18th Century Britain*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017, 93. Juliet Armstrong has observed that younger women often deferred the making of pots to their mothers even when they formed and decorated them. They announced that it was their mother's pottery and collected money for them under her name. See Juliet Armstrong, 'The Nala Dynasty: the relevance and importance of these utshwala vessels', *All Fired Up: Conversations between Storerooms and Classrooms*, Durban: Durban Art Gallery, 77.

¹² Brian Moeran, 'Japanese Ceramics and the Discourse of "Tradition"', *Journal of Design History*, vol.3:4 1990, 217.

¹³ Matthew Craske, 'Conversations and Chimneypieces: the imagery of the hearth in eighteenth-century English family portraiture', *British Art Studies*, Issue 2, 2016, 25.

¹⁴ The conventional term used in connection with ceramic production is of course "kiln", but it is significant that the etymology of this word has been traced back to the Latin for "kitchen", "cooking-stove" and "burning place".

¹⁵ Juliet Armstrong, 'The Nala Dynasty: the relevance and importance of these utshwala vessels', *All Fired Up: Conversations between Storerooms and Classrooms*, Durban: Durban Art Gallery, 73.

¹⁶ Perrill, *Zulu Pottery*, 7.

¹⁷ Craske, *Conversations and Chimneypieces*, 30. He explains that the coining of the word "knickknack" in the mid-eighteenth century is connected to the onomatopoeic sound of the quarry of excessive consumption knocking together on the mantelpiece.



Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
11.5 x 13 x 13.5"
SA676 (ZZ116)

**Wide-Mouthed Jar with Hakeme (Brushed Slip)
and Yubigaki (Finger Drawn) Design**
11.5 x 11.5 x 11.5"
ON738



Large Dish with Amber Glaze
4.5 x 24.75 x 24.75"
ON1146



Large Jar with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design and Splashed Glazing
23.5 x 15 x 15"
ON868



Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
12 x 14.25 x 14.25"
SA286 (A-135)

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
10 x 11.25 x 11.25"
SA628 (zz8)



Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
11 x 13.5 x 13"
SA814



Elongated Jar with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design
17 x 11.5 x 11.5"
ON930

These two vessels adhere to the leavening of innovation that the established boundaries of the two traditions marshal, while exemplifying the creative expression inherent in their most well-known designs. Both are tactile patterns that revolve around the vessels in twirling elegant motions. The spiky pyramidal *amasumpa* in its thrusting zig-zag pattern on the shoulder of the *ukhamba* is rhythmically animated and belies the laborious process used to pinch or carve out each ‘wart’ by hand. The drama of their convex topography is only fully realized from above. The

tobikanna or “blade skip design” of the Onda jar is a dazzling spiral pattern that utilizes a very different rhythmic speed. The vessel is coated in a white clay, then a thin flat blade called a *kanna* is pressed against it while the jar is spun on the kick-wheel; the quality of the resulting concave patterns depends on the skill of the potter in adjusting the speed of the wheel and the pressure of the blade in the few seconds it takes to spin the vessel around. Despite the differences in their production, both designs balance control with playfulness, and repetition with variation in every mark.



Imbisa, Zulu Brewing Vessel
20.25 x 20.5 x 20.25"
SA211 (19zcp/126)



Water Lily Bowl with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design and Poured Amber Glaze
9 x 16.5 x 17"
ON393



Water Lily Bowl with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design
10 x 23 x 23"
ON915



Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
12.5 x 16 x 16"
SA2



Uphiso, Zulu Beerpot
13 x 12.5 x 12"
SA197 (19zcp/24)



Large Bowl with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design
7 x 11 x 11"
ON981



Set of Dishes with Nuka (Tanba Rice Husk) Glaze
1 x 7.75 x 7.75" each
ON1127-ON1132



Water Lily Bowl with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design and Poured Amber Glaze
9.75 x 16.75 x 16.75"
ON910



Uphiso, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
15.25 x 14.5 x 14"
SA940

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
11.5 x 15.25 x 15.25"
SA50 (1J)



Planter with Tobikanna (Blade Skip) Design
15 x 21.5 x 21.5"
ON780



Large Dish with Hakeme (Brushed Slip) Green Glaze and Yubigaki (Finger Drawn) Design
3.5 x 16.25 x 16.25"
ON742



Uphiso, Zulu Beerpot
14 x 13.5 x 13.25"
SA195 (19zcp/12)

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
9.5 x 10.25 x 10.25"
SA680 (ZZ121)



Set of Dishes with Lines Around the Rim
1.5 x 9.5 x 9.5" each
ON541-ON545



Wide-Mouthed Jar with Two-Color Poured Glazes
 20 x 15.5 x 15.5"
 ON966

Jar with Poured Green Glaze over White Ground
 13.5 x 9.5 x 9.5"
 ON867



Uphiso, Zulu Beerpot
 15.25 x 13 x 12.75"
 SA1

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
 7.5 x 9.5 x 9.5"
 SA465 (P81)

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot, Amasumpa technique
 10.5 x 12.5 x 12.5"
 SA89 (14zcp-81)



Bowl with Yubigaki (Finger Drawn) Design in White Slip
4.25 x 9.25 x 9.25"
ON878

Bowl with Yubigaki (Finger Drawn) Design in White Slip
4.25 x 9.25 x 9.25"
ON877



Chazuki (Tea/Rice/Porridge) Bowl with Hakeme (Brushed Slip) Design
3 x 6 x 6"
ON1046

White Condiment Container
2.5 x 3 x 3"
ON344

Jar with White Slip
3.75 x 3.25 x 3.25"
ON686

Elizabeth Perrill has explained that KwaZulu-Natal potters utilize up to five different clays from diverse sources for a single piece, changing the formula depending on the type of pot. The sources and mixtures are often family secrets; clay is dug by hand from riverbanks and hillsides and must be dried, grounded, sifted and kneaded before being combined with 'grog' and then aged to even out the moisture content. In Onda Sarayama, the clay is dug up communally twice a year from the surrounding

hills and then crushed by famous wooden seesaw pounders called *kara-usu*, powered by the Hanatsuki river running through the center of the village. Onda Sarayama is the only place in Japan where these pounders have remained in constant use. The harvesting, pounding, elutriating and drying of the clay uses water pools, clay troughs and clay drying kilns and takes about a month to complete. This slow, rhythmic method naturally manages the amount of clay produced each year.

PUCKER

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GALLERY

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10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

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Credits

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Izinkamba /Onda Yaki Conversation Pieces

DATES: 8 February through 29 March 2020

OPENING RECEPTION: 8 February 2020, 3:00 PM to 6:00 PM

The public is invited to attend.



Elongated Jar with Poured Amber Glaze
16 x 11 x 11"
ON931

Jar with Amber Glaze
17.5 x 12 x 12"
ON864



Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
9.75 x 9.5 x 9.5"
SA866 (P73)

**Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot,
Amasumpa technique**
10.75 x 13 x 13"
SA200 (19zcp/51)

Ukhamba, Zulu Beerpot
10.5 x 11.5 x 11"
SA529 (PR50)

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