In the highland town of Lushoto, in the Usambara Mountains of northeastern Tanzania, a market day rarely passes without local potters parading into town carrying loads of earthenware on their heads. Although those who are not regular visitors to the weekly markets in the district might claim that one pot looks just like another, to the insider each vessel bears the unmistakable imprint of its maker. “Each potter has her own hand,” explains Namsifueli Nyeki, “each potter’s village has its own style.” But even to the untrained eye, the unique pottery of Namsifueli herself (fig. 1) clearly stands out from other potters. Although her work is grounded in the long-standing pottery traditions of her ancestors, Namsifueli’s interest in experimentation, new designs, and individualized detailing lend her work (fig. 2) the distinct touch of an artist unconstrained by the limitations of mila, or cultural tradition. As such, she poses an interesting contradiction to notions of anonymity, conformity, and conservatism in African pottery. This essay therefore follows in the footsteps of important, though infrequent, studies conducted from the 1950s to 1970s on individual potters, which introduced notions of individuality and authorship in African ceramics and the names of African potters with clearly recognizable styles—specifically Voania Muba, Abatan, and Ladi Kwali—into mainstream African art history.

IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUALITY IN AFRICAN POTTERY

Albert Maesen used formal analysis to identify a group of vessels collected in the late nineteenth century for the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Central in Tervuren as the work of a single artist, a male potter called Voania from the village of Muba in the Belgian Congo. Through Maesen’s brief treatise on the artist (1951) and the museum’s promotion of his unusual figurative pots—which were highly atypical for the region—Voania Muba was quickly propelled to “master” status in the West. However, as subsequent fieldwork in Muba by Zdenka Volavka revealed, Voania made his vessels exclusively for foreign consumption and was neither known locally as a potter of significance nor celebrated among his peers and neighbors for his work (1979:59). He was essentially a “master” only in the eyes of Western viewers and collectors, by virtue of his unusual and imaginative appropriation and transformation of traditional ceramics into sculptural forms and by signing his pots in European fashion.
Robert Farris Thompson (1969) described the work of the Egbado Yoruba potter Àbátàn Odefunke Ayinke Ija of Oke-Odan in Nigeria. Specifically, Thompson examined Àbátàn’s development of various stylistic phases in the making of ritual pottery for Òyìnle, or ọwọ ọta eyinle, and the impact that Yoruba tradition and philosophy had upon her individuality and creativity. Unlike Voania Muba, Àbátàn led a prestigious life as a highly regarded potter, mud sculptor, praise poet, and dancer. Using the very subtle injection of new forms and ideas into older paradigms, Àbátàn’s pottery, according to Thompson, was clearly “embedded in culture and yet [was] autonomous” (1969:121). In Àbátàn’s case, creativity clearly was empowered by internal cultural forces that enabled her to negotiate her own artistic style and identity within acceptable boundaries of Yoruba culture.

Michael Cardew worked with the Gwari potter Ladi Kwali from Abuja in Nigeria. His autobiographical writings (1969, 1972) about the Abuja Pottery Training Centre that he helped to launch in 1952, and his work specifically with Ladi Kwali, provide an interesting case study that reveals how multiple forces can propel a potter’s eminence beyond the local context. Prior to joining Cardew at Abuja, Ladi Kwali worked within the established canon of Gwari pottery techniques and forms and was already recognized regionally as a gifted and eminent potter. Cardew was introduced to her work in 1950 while visiting the Emir of Abuja, who had “a magnificent collection of pottery” including many works by Ladi Kwali (1972:34). Despite her initial reluctance to experiment with the technologies of wheel throwing, glazes, stoneware, and kiln firing that Cardew introduced at Abuja, Ladi Kwali eventually joined the pottery group a few years later. Once there, she displayed a strong sense of creativity, innovation, and experimentation that Cardew attributed to her familiarity, as a seasoned and highly capable potter, with the medium of clay. Working in the Abuja center, Ladi Kwali adapted her own recognizable style of surface decoration—already apparent before her encounter with Cardew—to the new technical media, which resulted in a fusion of the Gwari tradition of hand-built water pots with Western technology. In this marriage between tradition and change, she created high-fired glazed stoneware inscribed with sgraffito designs of stylized animals, for which she received international recognition through Cardew’s promotion of her work in Europe and America.

These case studies of three artists from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century call attention to the importance of understanding the internal and external cultural forces that influence a potter’s individuality and creativity and her identification as a great artist. In examining the work of Namifueli Nyeki and the development of her reputation as an accomplished and celebrated potter—constructed within and outside of her local context—I will focus on the personal, professional, cultural, and historical processes that have helped to distinguish her sense of individuality as a potter and as a person.

**NAMISIFUELI NYEKI:**
**A PARE POTTER IN THE USAMBARA MOUNTAINS**

In 1997, during one of my visits to a local market in Lushoto District (fig. 3), I was fascinated by a group of women who drove some of the hardest bargains for their earthenware. These were the potters of Kileti, whose work was locally considered to be the best. Of all the Kileti potters, the name of Namisifueli Nyeki evoked the highest regard; she was celebrated as the most accomplished and innovative potter in the Usambara Mountains. For Namisifueli and her potting neighbors from Kileti, selling their vessels in the main market town of Lushoto meant a four-hour trek carrying a heavy load of pots along narrow pathways that weave up and down the valleys and peaks of this mountainous terrain. The trek had its price, both for the potters who regularly walked to Lushoto to sell their wares and for the patrons, who consequently paid more for their pots.

When I first met Namisifueli in Kileti, I was immediately pulled in by her distinctive pottery and her gracious personality. Over the course of the following week I observed this charismatic woman perform her daily tasks and backbreaking pottery chores with seeming ease and constant joy. “I love my work, which is why some other potters are jealous of me. They do not enjoy pottery as I do,” she explained. 4 We discussed personal and professional histories; exchanged stories about motherhood, religious beliefs, and interpersonal relationships; and, of course, I received some welcome advice on my own feeble potting attempts. Quick to smile, laugh, and joke, she welcomed a continual onslaught of visiting neighbors and children into her compound, offering them generous cups of tea and sweet cakes, bananas from her grove, or the occasional orange or mango. Her little grandson, who followed her every step and never wandered more than a few feet away, was her constant companion, quietly and intently watching her hands as they molded one pot after another. Namisifueli claimed, with a mischievous flash in her eyes, that he too would become a potter one day despite traditional gender prohibitions. My first week working with Namisifueli sparked the beginning of a friendship with this sanguine woman. Throughout my research on Shambaa healing arts in the Usambara Mountains from October 1997 to May 1998, I spent many hours with Namisifueli learning what compelled her to stretch the canons of tradition to an extent that no other local potter had dared.5
Namsifueli, who was about forty-seven years old when I met her, was born and raised in Kileti. Like most villages in the Usambara Mountains (fig. 4), Kileti is built along the sides and ridges of the peaks. It is about 7000 feet (2134m) above sea level and is surrounded by cultivated fields of maize, beans, cassava, and potatoes accented by contrasting patches of lush natural rain forests, dispersed rows of fruit trees, and bare granite boulders. Kileti differs significantly from most villages in Lushoto District in that it forms an enclave of families whose ancestors migrated from the neighboring Pare Mountains from about the mid-eighteenth century until two to three generations ago. Although the contemporary lifestyle of most Pare peoples now living in the Usambara Mountains is relatively indistinguishable from the Shambaa peoples, the dominant ethnic group in these mountains, the residents of Kileti have retained their distinct identity by speaking Kipare, the original language of their forebears, and by continuing to practice Pare pottery traditions. For many generations, Kileti has set itself apart from other farming communities in the Usambaras as the potting village par excellence and although a few Shambaa villages have potting compounds, Shambaa potters claim that they learned the trade from Pare potters who had brought the knowledge with them from the mountains just west of the Usambaras.

Namsifueli told me that she had been a potter for as long as she could remember. She lived in a small compound comprising two beautifully molded mud houses, also the work of her hands, flanked by a lush vegetable garden and fruit trees. Nearby fields, which she purchased with income from her pottery, provided her extended family with land for subsistence farming. Typical of potters in Kileti, Namsifueli worked with the help of younger female family members in her own compound using the open courtyard in front of her house as a primary work space (fig. 5) and a narrow wind-protected area behind her house to fire the pots (fig. 6). At the time of my research, Namsifueli had hopes that her success would soon enable her to construct a covered structure where she and other Kileti potters could work during the rainy season.

Namsifueli’s training began when she was a small child watching her mother mold a formless mass of raw earth into a refined vessel. As she grew older, she helped her mother with basic pottery’s chores such as fetching tools and water; excavating, cleaning, pounding, and preparing clay; collecting firewood; and stoking the open-air fire. Her formal training as a potter began at around the age of eight, at which time she received directed guidance on the form, function, technology, and aesthetics of pottery according to Pare cultural standards. As Namsifueli noted, “quality and craftsmanship is important. Shape, smoothness, the pot’s ability to stand on its own without tipping over, the form which should be a perfect circle, the proper firing—all are important in making good pots.” Since childhood, she has made pots almost every day of her life.

Namsifueli’s typical work cycle took about one week, beginning with the collection of clay from a nearby hill where other potters also extracted clay, and the preparation of the raw materials (fig. 7). The forming of vessels took her anywhere between ten minutes to a few days, depending on whether she was making simple, undecorated cooking or lidded serving vessels (fig. 8) or large decoratively incised tripod water and storage pots (fig. 9). On the average she made about ten medium-sized pots per day, usually beginning around 8 AM with pounding and preparing that day’s supply of clay. After a week of making pots, Namsifueli would walk to the Lushoto market, pots balanced on her head, oft en accompanied and aided by younger female family members. Her wares usually sold out within just a few hours (fig. 10). Unlike many other Kileti potters, who took their pottery to the various weekday and weekend markets throughout the West Usambaras, Namsifueli attended only the Lushoto Sunday market, the largest in the district.
COSMOLOGY AND THE CULTURAL CONTROL OF POTTERY PRODUCTION

On any given day in the dry months, one can stroll along the dirt paths of Kileti and see women and girls in front of their homes pounding clay, forming vessels, chopping wood, or firing pots. In Kileti, I was struck by the conspicuous absence of men, who spent long hours farming fields that were often located kilometers away in order to provide their families with staple foods. During the dry season, most Kileti households are financially dependent on the potters, who provide their families with cash income from the proceeds of their lucrative profession. During the wet seasons, however, massive rainfall and high humidity pose significant challenges to the potters’ rate of production, which forces the women to rely more heavily on the limited agricultural activities of their husbands.

Today, as in the past, ceramic production is closely associated with cosmologies of human genesis in northeastern Tanzania. Pottery often serves as a metaphor for the womb, the vessel from which life emerges. According to Pare and Shambaa creation myths, Kiumbe, whose name is derived from the verb kuumba (’to create, to form, to mold pottery’), created azaumba human life from clay udongo in the same manner that the potter molds her pots. Kiumbe is regarded as the Creator God who provides for all their needs. The ancestors are seen as representatives of Kiumbe, who can act as intermediaries between the supernatural world and the world of the living (Thompson 1999:53–6, Kimambo and Omari 1972:113, Karasek and Eichhorn 1923–24:39). With the help of traditional healers and diviners, sacred ceramic vessels therefore can embody ancestor spirits or harness their transformative powers.

Due to the connection between pottery, the Creator God Kiumbe, and the formation of human life in a woman’s body, Pare and Shambaa religious, social, and cultural tenets, called mila, dictate that the pottery profession belongs to the women’s
domain. Until the past few decades, various pot-making pro-
cesses demanded the performance of rituals and prayers known
only to the potting families, who passed this knowledge down
from mother to daughter. Despite cultural transformations since
the imposition of colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century,
women still preside over the potter’s profession in the Usambara
Mountains; however, the ritual practices that once accompanied
the various tasks of pot-making have been relaxed or abandoned
except by the most elderly women of the potting families.14 Men
are still discouraged from participating in pot-making and it con-
tinues to be a strongly held belief that a man’s presence while
pots are being made can cause him personal misfortune, such as
sterility, as well as breakage of the pots during firing. Neverthe-
less, young men are now allowed to help in some of the more
rigorous tasks, such as excavating clay from underground depos-
its or carrying the heavy sacks of raw material back to the village.
When I asked some of the young Kileti men who helped the pot-
ters in these undesirable tasks if they ever wanted to make pots,
they laughed at the notion, shaking their heads, and emphati-
cally expressing their wish to hang on to their manhood just a
little while longer! Hence, female potters such Namsifueli con-
tinue to dominate the profession and the market.

A FUSION OF TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Namsifueli’s steady output of quality earthenware earned her
constant business by the district’s most discriminate buyers, the
local women who still cooked over dried-mud stoves and hearths
and kept drinking water in large, spherical, terracotta storage
jars. Unlike other potters who clustered together at one corner
of the Lushoto market, Namsifueli occupied a vending space all
to herself at the opposite end of the market, which at that time
only she could afford. There women of all ages frequently, and
at times repeatedly, sought her out, handling her pots for a half
hour or more, discussing with great enthusiasm each vessel’s
symmetry, the thinness of its walls, and the pleasing color of the
fired clay. Randomly flicking the pot’s surface with their fingers,
the customers listened for the appropriate “ping” sound that emanated from the vessel, ensuring that it was not cracked. “A
well-fired pot makes a particular sound when tapped,” Namsifue-
eli explained. “If it does not, the pot is no good.”15 After intense
scrutiny of the pot’s structural and aesthetic integrity, the buyers
finally walked away with their purchases, proud owners of Namsi-
fuli’s traditionally formed cooking, water, or storage vessels.

However, Namsifueli was also locally recognized for her
unusually decorative tripod water and storage vessels, which
were quite unlike the plain, round-bottomed vessels that typify
the traditional pottery of this area. Eventually Namsifueli added
the signature feature of a ringed or tripod base to some of her
smaller traditional ceramic wares, recognizing that her for-
eign and wealthier clientele did not cook on dried-mud stoves
but used her pottery to serve food at the table or as decorations
around their homes and gardens. In time, these smaller tripod
vessels also became popular with Namsifueli’s Shambaa and Pare
customers, who began to use them for multiple purposes around
their own households.

Due to the higher prices that Namsifueli was able to command
for her large, decorative tripod water and storage pots, local
business owners, foreign workers or researchers, expatriats,
and vacationing urbanites were usually the only patrons who could
afford them.16 Although her earnings were significantly higher
on these larger vessels, she took them to market only reluctantly,
as their large size prohibited her from carrying the standard-
sized cooking vessels for which she had a constant demand.

When I first met Namsifueli, she preferred to make larger pots
only on commission. At that time she was sometimes able to
keep her unsold pots at a friend’s house in Lushoto, but toward
the end of my stay in the Usambaras, she secured a storage space
in the small store behind her vending spot at the Lushoto mar-
ket where she could keep an inventory of her larger tripod ves-
sels. This proved to be a lucrative move, as the store owner could
then sell these pots for her during the midweek market. Nam-
sifueli was the only potter at that time to adopt this manner of
doing business. In speaking with other local potters, who were
always quick to praise Namsifueli’s pottery, many of them were
envious of her business in specialty wares, but also suspicious of
her unusual practices. At the time I was there, not a single pot-
ter showed interest in making anything but traditional pottery
forms, including Namsifueli’s youngest daughter.

In watching Namsifueli at work, the rapid and rhythmic
actions of her pot-making divulged her years of experience, her
hands giving the body, neck, and mouth of each vessel its own
distinct character—a rarity in a profession where conformity
went largely unchallenged. Each of Namsifueli’s vessels had a
unique character to its design and incised or applied decorations
(fig. 11). I asked her whether she had learned the designs and
decorations from her mother. “No,” she replied, “my mother had
made pots just like other Kileti potters; they had no designs on
them. I see these designs in my head and in the plants that grow
in these mountains. They are my own designs; I am the only one
who makes them.”17 A walk through the local rain forests, with
their diverse species of ferns, long-leafed dragon tree (Dracaena
usambarensis), and strangler fig (Ficus thonningii), revealed the
inspiration she derived from the environment for her incised
designs. “I have many designs,” she noted. “They do not
have any special meaning; I just do them for beauty. Besides, the
pots sell better if they have designs on them.”18 Aided by the ser-
dendity of the wood-firing process, each of Namsifueli’s vessels,
like those of other local potters, also had its own color and flash
markings. Adding to the individuality of her work, she scrubbed
each freshly fired and smoldering vessel with a bundle of leaves
(fig. 12) using her “secret” recipe, which lent the pots a mahog-
any luster. These subtleties made Namsifueli’s vessels distinctly
recognizable as the products of her hands.

In the Usambaras, as in the neighboring mountain ranges of
northeastern Tanzania including the Pare Mountains and Mt.
Kilianjaro, cultural tenets (mila) discourage potters from mov-
ing beyond long-established standards of aesthetics, technology,
and form. This is so much the case that most pots I saw for sale
at local markets (fig. 13) largely resembled those that have been
found in archaeological and historical contexts (fig. 14).19 In
Namsifueli’s case, however, a reinterpretation of these cultural
codes provided her with the opportunity to serve her family and
community in a strikingly innovative fashion. She did this by
adapting her own pottery skills and knowledge to the cultural
Intriguing reinventions of all. Although she contended that she made such pieces for European residents who drank wine, the vessel was similar to an old ceramic jar I had seen in the Roehl Collection at the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin (fig. 16). The museum's vessel was a Shambaa medicine container (nkhoba), which had been collected in the Usambara Mountains in 1906. Like Namsifueli's wine jar, it was decorated with incised dots and a ring of nodules around its belly. The neck was wrapped with raffia twine and the mouth stuffed with a stopper made from bundled goat hide. In many ways, it is similar to the nkhoba used by healers today (fig. 17). A figurative medicine container in the Fuchs Collection at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig had been collected in the Usambara Mountains in 1905, and like the jar in Berlin, it too was decorated with applied nodules on the surface of the vessel's body. The application of nodules on figurative and nonfigurative vessels can be seen on a number of similar containers from northeastern Tanzania in other museum and private collections (fig. 18). According to my Tanzanian sources, these traditionally signify a vessel that has a medical purpose.

Changes she has experienced in her lifetime. These include the impact of colonial rule and the development of a more Westernized life-style in the region since independence; widespread religious conversion to Christianity and Islam, which prohibit indigenous ritual practices; foreign-run development programs in health, forestry, and agriculture; and, in the past decade, an ever-increasing influx of backpackers and ecotourists to the region. All of these factors contributed to the diverse population, resident or nonresident, to which Namsifueli catered through her work. In this manner, she stood alone in her village by being both a guardian of the older Pare potting traditions and an emissary for modernization and innovation.

Namsifueli's willingness to experiment also led her to accept special requests for European-style pottery such as teacups and saucers, large shallow fruit bowls, casseroles, salad bowls, and jars for drinks such as wine or juice. The source of inspiration for these forms could be seen among the imported tableware and cooking ware at the local markets. During one of my visits to Namsifueli's compound, I noticed a very distinctive jar that was decorated with incised dots and raised nodules across its shoulder and that stood, on a tripod base, much like her other nontraditional vessels (fig. 15). Though she called it a “wine” jar, it soon became apparent to me that it was in fact one of her most intriguing reinventions of all. Although she contended that she made such pieces for European residents who drank wine, the vessel was similar to an old ceramic jar I had seen in the Roehl Collection at the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin (fig. 16). The museum's vessel was a Shambaa medicine container (nkhoba), which had been collected in the Usambara Mountains in 1906. Like Namsifueli's wine jar, it was decorated with incised dots and a ring of nodules around its belly. The neck was wrapped with raffia twine and the mouth stuffed with a stopper made from bundled goat hide. In many ways, it is similar to the nkhoba used by healers today (fig. 17). A figurative medicine container in the Fuchs Collection at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig had been collected in the Pare Mountains in 1905, and like the jar in Berlin, it too was decorated with applied nodules on the surface of the vessel's body. The application of nodules on figurative and nonfigurative vessels can be seen on a number of similar containers from northeastern Tanzania in other museum and private collections (fig. 18). According to my Tanzanian sources, these traditionally signify a vessel that has a medical purpose. The basic form of these historic ceramic containers—and of Namsifueli's wine jar—echoes the form of the more common medicine gourds, which continue to be used by healers today throughout northeastern Tanzania (fig. 19).
Three types of vessels in Namsufueli’s courtyard reveal the diversity of her pottery forms, including a freshly formed handled and lidded pot (left), a tripod jar, which she calls a “wine jar” with nodules (center), and a tripod cooking vessel turned flower pot (right). Kilifi, Lushoto District, Tanzania, 1997.

Shambaa medicine jar (nkhsba)
Terracotta, hide, and raffia; 11cm x 8cm (4 1/3“ x 3“)
Roehl Collection, collected in 1906
Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin III E 12460ab
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE VÖLKERKUNDE MUSEUM, BERLIN
Namsufueli Nyeki’s contemporary “wine jars” resemble in form and decoration this historic Shambaa medicine jar (nkhsba).

Medicine gourds (nkhsba), such as this example which belongs to the local healer Tate Habibu, suggest the skeuomorphic nature of the ceramic medicine containers that echo the basic form of a gourd. Lushoto District, Tanzania, 1997.

The Art Institute of Chicago’s exhibition “From Hearth to Altar: African Ceramics from the Keith Achepohl Collection” featured figurative and nonfigurative ceramic containers from northeastern Tanzania, such as this example. Called nkhsba, these sacred containers once held medicinal substances as well as spirit powers that could be used to promote healing during traditional medicine practices (uhanga). PHOTO: ROBERT LIFSON, DEPT. OF GRAPHIC DESIGN, PHOTOGRAPHIC, AND COMMUNICATION SERVICES, ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

Tate Habibu, a traditional healer in Lushoto District, dances with an nkhsba during a medicine dance. Lushoto District, Tanzania, 1997.

Today, healers in the Usambara Mountains invoke ancestral and spiritual powers into ceramic vessels located in family and village shrines through incantations, song, and the addition of medicinal and symbolic materials, which transform secular pottery into sacred pottery. Lushoto District, Tanzania, 1998.
Tate Habibu, an elderly healer in the Usambaras, noted that in earlier times, the Pare potters of Namsifueli’s village supplied healers such as himself with specially made sacred vessels, including noduled medicine containers and terracotta figurines that embodied spirit powers called *mphepo or jeni*. The Pare potters of Kileti with whom I spoke confirmed that this was indeed the case in earlier generations, but that the healers now make their own medicine containers mostly using gourds, shells, and horns or, less commonly, sun-dried clay figurines, which also seemed to be the case during my research there in the late 1990s. Historically, such figurative and nonfigurative ceramic containers were especially made to embody the presence and the therapeutic and protective powers of the Supreme Being Sheuta (now more commonly called Mu’ungu), the Creator God Kiumble, and countless ancestor and nature spirits. In more recent times when circumstances dictated the use of ceramics, such as in sacred sites and shrines (fig. 20), healers usually purchased everyday cooking vessels from local potters who sold their wares at the markets. The healers then invoked the transformational spirit powers into the vessels through incantations, song, and the addition of medicinal and symbolic materials. Today, ceramics—whether figurative or nonfigurative—are used only peripherally, if at all, in traditional medicine (*ughanga*) in the Usambaras.

On one particular occasion, when Tate Habibu was visiting my house in the village of Maghamba, he was fascinated by one of Namsifueli’s wine jars (fig. 21), which I had purchased and placed on the mantelpiece. On a later occasion, when he was visiting again, Namsifueli happened to stop by, which she often did on her walk to or from Lushoto. Tate Habibu greeted her with great honor and respect by using an elaborate set of greetings and praises in a manner I had not seen before between potters and healers. Later he explained to me that he knew of her reputation as a great potter and recognized her as the woman who had created the noduled vessels, which he called *nkhoba*—instead of the more generic term *nyungu* that Namsifueli used—and which he had purchased in the past for his own *ughanga*. Namsifueli seemed unaware that Tate Habibu was a healer and that he used her pottery for such purposes. She did not probe further into the issue of his use of her vessels in *ughanga* and he respectfully refrained from elaborating on how he knew of her jars or what he did with them. Despite the historic use of this type of vessel as medicine container, Namsifueli had converted the form into a secular container. When I asked her about the healing vessel form from which the jar had originated, Namsifueli claimed no knowledge of its earlier sacred significance because, as she stated, she had converted to Christianity “long ago.” Nevertheless, she remembered seeing and learning from her mother how to form these vessels as a child and at the time of my research she was the only potter who still made noduled pots.

Despite Namsifueli’s changes to the original form of the noduled jar—namely the addition of the tripod supports and the occasional incised floral decoration—Tate Habibu was thrilled at the opportunity to be able to purchase these vessels from her. According to the healer, the jars needed only to be activated with the right medicinal substances and incantations because the original form of the historic ritual vessel was sufficiently intact. Although Namsifueli’s jars resembled the historic medicine containers in basic form (especially the incorporation of the nodules), the addition of a tripod base and its transformation into a purely secular vessel appear to have been exclusively initiated by this extraordinary and very devout Christian woman.

It is quite significant that Namsifueli is a Christian, particularly a Seventh Day Adventist, who strongly supports the separation of church and state and promotes religious liberty—principles that stand in direct opposition to the Muslim doctrine supported by her Kileti neighbors. As such, she neither condoned nor condemned *ughanga*, although she usually avoided any direct association with it. Perhaps without realizing it, Namsifueli had contributed to the continuation of a form of *ughanga* that by all accounts during the late 1990s was quickly disappearing. Namsifueli, unperturbed by its former role as a sacred medicine container (*nkhoba*), readily converted the jar’s medicinal use and symbolic meaning into everyday household ware. As a practicing *mganga*, Tate Habibu reverted her secular wine jars back into sacred *ughanga*. If it were not for Namsifueli’s innovative reinvention of these “wine jars,” this might not have been possible. It is interesting to note, however, that shortly before I left the Usambara Mountains in mid 1998, I was told that a local church was using one of Namsifueli’s wine jars to contain the “blood of Christ”—adding yet another (though as yet unconfirmed) layer to the history of these jars.

But why do this potter’s ceramics differ so significantly from those of her neighbors in Kileti? In time I realized that Namsifueli’s strong and autonomous personality was the driving force behind her work’s originality, which conspicuously stood out in an environment where deviations from cultural standards were viewed with suspicion and disapproval. At the time of my research in 1997–98, Namsifueli was the only potter in Kileti who made nontraditional earthenware in addition to the standard cooking ware and was the only Christian in the Muslim village of Kileti—two factors that set her apart from the rest of this potting community. Namsifueli is the mother of four children, but by personal choice she has remained unmarried and self-sufficient, an unusual status in a culture where women are customarily dependent on a husband or male relative.
patriarchal community, few women had either the choice or the luxury to lead independent lives, as their social roles focused on caring for the needs of their husbands, children, and extended families. A fiercely independent woman, Namsifueli purposely stayed a single mother, which was made financially possible through her potting profession.

Namsifueli seemed comfortable with the idea of self-reliance as an unmarried woman living in a community where mila, or tradition, still mattered and she has tried to instill this same sense of self-confidence in her three daughters. She taught her daughters pot-making not only because it is their family’s heritage but, as she emphasized, so that “they will always be able to earn a living on their own ... independent of a man.” The financial freedom Namsifueli derived from her work as an innovative and accomplished potter enabled her to buy large tracts of farmland for her children and to provide them with educations “so that pot-making can be a choice rather than a mandate.” Here too, Namsifueli challenged her family and local culture by providing her children with alternatives she did not have as a young woman. While her youngest daughter chose to stay in the village and continue her family’s heritage as a potter, Namsifueli’s other daughters and son had moved to cities, where one daughter worked as a potter and the others in the international economy.

Namsifueli was very aware of her unconventional mind-set, yet she did not fear the judgment, envy, and suspicion of her neighbors and peers regarding the unusual choices she made as a woman and a potter. This, she said, is reflected in her work, which goes beyond the bounds of mila without altogether separating from them. By making traditional Pare pottery and teaching the profession to her daughters and grandchildren, Namsifueli contributed to the continuation of her local culture and family heritage. While meeting the scrutinizing demands of her local patrons for traditional ceramic wares (Fig. 22) she also introduced new forms of pottery into a local market challenged by the rising popularity of imported plastic, aluminum, and enamelware and the ever-increasing presence of a more diversified population.

Locally and nationally Namsifueli has served as an ambassador of continuity and change as a potter and artist. She now holds pottery workshops in Kileti through the Lushoto Cultural Tourism Programme, which was established in the mid 1990s, to teach traditional pottery skills to tourists and urban visitors, thereby providing them with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the traditional art of pottery. Her intense engagement with outreach led her to be invited to the Nyerere Cultural Centre Nyumba ya Sanaa (House of Arts) in Dar es Salaam in 2002 for one week as an artist-in-residence, during which she became the first woman to be given the Tanzania Culture Trust Fund Zeze Award in Fine Arts and Crafts. Until then, this prestigious award was reserved for male senior artists, writers, and academics. Awarding it to her was a sign of recognition for her individual contributions to the development of Tanzania’s national heritage through her enthusiasm and perseverance in almost single-handedly expanding the genres of pottery in the Usambaras Mountains. Receiving this award was yet another testament to Namsifueli’s extraordinary status within and outside of her local culture as a woman, a potter, and an artist.

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Notes


2 My use of the term “tradition” throughout this essay relates to the notions inherent in the concept of mila in the Usambara Mountains. The term mila is used broadly to refer to that which is inherited from one’s culture and family, specifically the rights and responsibilities of long-standing practices, ideologies, or narratives.
However, the idea of *nilo* does not exclude the possibility of innovation and change, as it is clearly understood that the "traditions" of a culture or family can adapt in response to unpredictable circumstances of life.

3. The paradigm of researching individual artists in non-Western art was set forth in a series of lectures given by the king, Mbegha, who is said to have unified feuding clans sometime in the mid-eighteenth century of the culture hero and first king of the Usambara Mountains often relate back to the arrival in the vicinity around the mid 1990s. The Usambaras Mountains are home to a fair number of families of mixed colonial heritage (mostly Shambaa and German or British descent) who still own land and property in the district. These families live a more modernized lifestyle than most other local Shamba peoples.

21. For security purposes, this healer's actual name has been changed and prefixed by the generic address *mrungu wa gu mili* (father) used for senior men.

8. Archaeological research has shown that the kind of pottery practiced today in the Pare Mountains arrived there from the West around 100–200 AD at the latest and then spread to the Usambara Mountains around 200–300 AD (Ehret 1998:184–9).

9. Given that I have not been back to Kili since June 1998, I use the past tense in speaking about Namisufi’s work and life, which may have changed since then.


11. The dry seasons in the Usambara Mountains include the months of February and June through October, while the wet seasons last from March through May and November through January.

12. This is generally true among Bantu-speaking cultures, to which the Pare and Shamba belong.

13. Karasek, a German farmer who resided in the Usambara Mountains from 1905–1908, noted that Kiumbe was conceived of on the same level as the ancestors (Karasek and Eichhorn1923–1924:39). As my Shamba sources explained, Kiumbe was the first human being, hence also the first ancestor. Omari notes that the Pare peoples in the Pare Mountains regard Kiumbe as the Supreme Being (1970:83).

14. Women who marry into potting families can learn the profession; however, potters claim that it usually takes them a lifetime to master the trade.


16. Since the Kili potters had to pay local landowners for clay excavated from their property and the large pots consumed a whole bag of clay, it was more costly—and more time-consuming—for them to make the larger water pots.


18. Ibid.

19. See Ehret (1998) and Odner (1971a and 1971b) for archaeological studies of the region.

20. The Usambara Mountains are home to a fair number of families of mixed colonial heritage (mostly Shamba and German or British descent) who still own land and property in the district. These families live a more modernized lifestyle than most other local Shamba peoples.

21. For security purposes, this healer’s actual name has been changed and prefixed by the generic address *mrungu wa gu mili* (father) used for senior men.

22. The term *mphelo* is the older Bantu-based term for spirits. The word *jeni* is adapted from the Arabic word *djinn* and is used more commonly today. In the Pare Mountains, these clay figurines are also called *mrungu wa gu*. (see Omari 1970:257–68). Tate Habibu’s spirit house once contained such clay figurines but they were stolen when European art dealers were in the vicinity around the mid 1990s.

23. Many healers in the Pare and Usambara Mountains with whom I worked in 1996–98 claimed that the knowledge to make and ritualistically activate these clay figurines, which was extremely dangerous if handled improperly, was no longer being passed down. Consequently, they were seldom made or used anymore. This might explain why over the past decade or so, these ceramic figurines have been entering into the European and American art market in significant numbers, unfortunately, some having been stolen out of village or compound shrines (see previous note).

24. See Thompson 1999 for an in-depth study of the use of arts in Shamba healing, including a chapter on terracotta spirit containers in northeastern Tanzania.

25. It is important to note here that the term *nkho* was usually reserved for sacred medicine containers, particularly medicine gourds, which are used in traditional healing. Despite Tate Habibu’s reference to Namisufi’s work as an nkho, the potter used on the generic term for secular vessels, *nyangwe*. Nevertheless, she was, of course, familiar with the local medicine gourds (*nkho*), which were a major component of medicine dances (*mphungwa*) that were open to the public.


27. Since Namisufi owned more land than she or her family could farm, she leased out parcels to local farmers. This provided her with the supplemental income she would otherwise have relied upon during the rainy season if she had a husband doing the farming, like other potters in Kili.


29. Ibid.

References cited


