

The effect of market changes on traditional crafters
A brief discussion of the “Vukani effect” in Zululand
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The bitter drought of 1969 forced many families to turn to the Evangelical Lutheran Mission for food parcels. When this succour reached its end, the mission implemented their second strategy – buying the local craft work and re-selling it wherever they could find markets.

In 1972, Rev. Ron Legg, Director of Inter Church Aid of the SACC, asked a dynamic Swedish priest to accept the post of Consultant in Home Craft in Zululand, serving all churches. His name was Rev Kjell Lofroth and he became known far and wide as *Umfundisi Wotshani* – the Grass Priest. Supported by his dedicated wife, Bertha, and trainer Baba Elliot Dlodla, he travelled miles in the deep rural areas on appalling roads to find and encourage crafter groups, who jointly formed the Vukani Association in 1974. (The word *Vukani* in Zulu can be translated roughly to “Let’s get going.”)

Rev Lofroth used his church contacts to sell the crafters’ work locally to visitors to Rorke’s Drift and later, Eshowe, throughout South Africa and overseas. As consultant, he helped the crafters to understand the need for consistent high standards, and the importance of knowing the needs of their market. Rev Lofroth was adamant that neither he nor Bertha ever designed items, nor did they ever do more than make suggestions and pass on requests from customers. However, they were very active in encouraging the crafters and marketing their work and this was borne out by the deterioration of the Association after the Lofroths were forced to leave in 1982 because of Bertha’s serious illness. However, by then the effects of the Vukani influence were widespread.

At the very beginning the work that was brought to the Vukani Association was absolutely functional, although impressive in terms of standard and technique. Although a long-lasting object such as a wooden pillow or walking stick, a horn snuff bottle or bead ornament could receive great care in the making and decoration, a basket or clay pot was a fragile item that received little decoration when used in the home. (*Vide* Angas’ well-known painting of King Mpande. The water basket next to him has only a few dark brown stripes as ornamentation.)

In his dissertation written in 1968, Dr J.W. Grossert states that he has listed 151 different plant materials used for basket weaving. This would have given a wide variety of styles and textures, from the fine *imisi* grass used for tiny little *iquthu*, holders of ground spices and medicines, to the big *nceba* (wild banana bark) baskets for harvesting. The different styles of weaving also would have created variety and helped to make a basket that was suitable for a particular purpose. But the weavers were now faced with a new task – making a basket that had no purpose.

Rev Lofroth encouraged all the crafters to look at their traditional knowledge when seeking ideas. The brown stripes on King Mpande’s water basket were probably caused

by dyeing the grass with the roots of the *isizimane* (*euclea natalensis* or guarri). This was the dye first introduced by the basket weavers and it found immediate popularity, particularly with the overseas market. Encouraged by this, the Lofroths and Baba Elliot suggested that the weavers consider other plant dyes. Through nearly-lost knowledge and some experimentation, other colours were introduced and today twenty different colours are produced from about fifty different plants. And it is almost impossible to buy a plain, undyed, basket.

Similarly, pottery had been a routine item, made by the housewife and possibly decorated with a pattern of lumps (*amasumpa* or warts) purely to stop the utensil from slipping out of the user's hands. Low-fired earthenware is extremely fragile and one cannot blame a housewife for turning with relief to use more durable tinware and plastic in its place. This meant, of course, that the traditional potter had lost their domestic market.

But the formation of the Vukani Association meant that there was a whole new world of buyers for an enterprising crafter. However, he or she needed ideas and they took them from the world around them. This gave rise to designs such as a repeating zigzag known as "Shaka's spears", and Angeline Masuku's use of the animals, birds and trees around her home. Although basket designs never had a specific meaning as beadwork did, beadwork patterns were often adopted and adapted to decorate both pottery and baskets. The palette of colours available through the use of plant dyes meant that more complicated patterns could be essayed, which challenged the outstanding technical ability of the weavers.

One of the most impressive aspects to a superb basket is the fact that there is no planned guideline to follow. The design may be roughly thought out beforehand but the precise dimensions and colour changes are worked out as the item progresses – yet a perfectly symmetrical and mathematically faultless pattern emerges. This is particularly true of the work of the ultimate master of Zulu basketry, the late Reuben Ndwandwe.

Traditional pottery had been laboriously made with clay that had been, dug, dried, ground, sifted and re-constituted before being coiled into a usable vessel. This was then fired twice to make it as strong and black as possible before being polished with animal fat. An ornamental pot, however, did not require the second firing as it could be polished with boot or floor polish to achieve a much greater depth of colour and a higher gloss. It was soon realised that the new markets favoured brown pots as well as black and the range of brown polishes from light tan to ox blood red gave a whole new dimension to this work as well.

Among the many Vukani crafters who emerged as international artists, two were so influential that it affected their entire areas. These two were master weaver Reuben Ndwandwe in Empembeni, near Hlabisa, and master potter Nesta Nala from Ndondondwana, near Eshowe. In each case they set such high standards of technique and design that they raised the benchmark for the crafters within a hundred kilometers of their homes. They each took on many pupils, while others simply attempted to reach their

standard. As a result, today the Eshowe area is known for its superb pottery and the Hlabisa area for its skilled basket weavers.

And this is the greatest change that has come about. Up until the nineteen-sixties, any housewife in Zululand could cut her grass and palm leaves, weave her own baskets, dig her own clay and coil her own pots. Today, craft is an industry. Weavers go to the Mona cattle market near Hlabisa and buy *ilala* fronds, *ncema* and *ikhwani* grass, and dried dye plants from the suppliers who sit in long rows waiting for their customers. There is a limited range of material because nearly everyone wants to work with the popular *ilala* palm to make shiny, colourful baskets for tourists or collectors, so why stock anything else? The potters pay neighbours with donkeys to dig the clay and haul it back to the homestead. When the pots are finished, another neighbour is paid to transport them by car to the nearest centre.

Marketing is undertaken by the crafter him or herself. Some are very good at it; Angeline Masuku travels to fairs overseas two or three times a year. Many others, with less drive, wait for the knowledgeable collectors who travel into the deep rural areas in search of nuggets. Very few become prosperous but many are able to make a modest living.

The face of craft has changed forever in Zululand because of the opening of the international market. Thanks to Rev Kjell Lofroth and his team, there are thousands of women and men who put food on to their tables today, who pay for schooling and who have the pride of self-sufficiency. The unadorned functional items of fifty years ago have morphed into exquisite collector's pieces that have made some rural crafters into household names. If the price we have paid is the loss of some diversity, it is a small exchange.

In 1991, the personal collection of Rev and Mrs Lofroth was purchased by the Vukani Collection Trust, which opened the Vukani Zulu Cultural Museum in 1994 in Eshowe. The writer is the current Curator of the museum.