

Indigenous Pottery Embedding Worldviews in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract

This article applies a culture-sensitive approach to an exploration of three topics related to African pottery: first, the core culture that constitutes a specific worldview, second, the socio-historical contexts of clay pots whose names are associated with verbal expressions that have been anthropologically analysed and found to be pertinent to communality, and, third, selected indigenous South African pottery mentioned in local Northern Sotho and Vhavenda proverbs that convey local knowledge. Through interviewing potters and heritage practitioners and applying an emic view, I seek to contribute to a more accurate interpretation of African pottery meanings by emphasising the need for documentation processes to take into account indigenous languages in order to recognise the epistemological significance of indigenous pottery productions and their meanings in their respective cultures. I argue that the use of Western models to evaluate and understand local pottery meanings is problematic. A method needs to be developed to integrate African knowledge systems into mainstream knowledge production to address challenging aspects of theories currently used to describe and formulate pottery names and meanings.

Keywords: Venda; Northern Sotho; pottery; worldviews; proverbs; indigenous knowledge systems

Introductory Remarks

This article intends to generate new insights pertaining to specific Northern Sotho (Sesotho sa Leboa/ Leboa) and Venda pottery and to African worldviews on their own non-Western terms. The paper shows that in different local contexts the significance of clay vessels goes well beyond their function as mere pots of clay.

Conceptually, the article aims to advance the scholarly interpretation of indigenous material culture, in this case pottery, and its connection to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). To this end, a strongly reparative perspective is adopted, focusing on indigenous pottery legacies of Northern Sotho and Venda people and using their productions as elementary examples. Practically, I wish to assist scholarship by discussing current contextual data resulting from my fieldwork studies of indigenous potters in Limpopo province of South Africa. In existing colonial and anthropological studies (for example, Lawton 1967; Quin 1959; Schofield 1943; Stayt 1931) the scope appears to be limited by the dominating parochial interest of some authors in the classification of black people and their ethnicities, thus intentionally or non-intentionally assisting government planning at the time. However, in spite of their limitations, examples of Northern Sotho and Venda vessels have ended up and been preserved in public collections. Regrettably, most theoretical documentation of this historically and culturally significant pottery in public collections is largely inaccurate and often lacking.

My observations of contemporary South African material culture among the Northern Sotho and Venda people in Limpopo province show that local pottery tenets employ apparent indigenous knowledge by expressing meanings that can be linked to specific cultural meaning systems. Meanings are concepts with (universal) significance (Bidney 1953, 3). Hence, I examine the ancient cultural context of pottery meanings in two languages spoken in Limpopo, which generates an understanding of African ways of knowing (Asante 2014; Mphahlele 1962) and which clarifies, while simultaneously distinguishing between, emic and etic perspectives. According to Pike, “the etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system, and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system” (1967, 37). The concepts emic and etic are used in anthropology to examine the phonemic and phonetic systems in a particular language (Winthrop 1991, 92). Indigenous epistemological verbal expressions or proverbs and their meanings are expressed, and as it were affirmed, by aspects of pottery. The proverbs are part and parcel of the traditional knowledge of Northern Sotho and Vhavenda ethnic groups. A more contextualised, emic-based analysis of the vessels and of their occurrence in local languages provides valuable indigenous insights for academic purposes. The following underpinning questions are vital to advance an understanding of indigenous pottery in emic terms:

1. What are the shortcomings of prevailing Western premises in the interpretation of pottery traditions in current African contexts?

2. What are the traditional names of pottery vessels and their emic symbolic meanings that reflect local approaches to the spreading and confirming of local knowledge?
3. Which ethnographic practices are appropriate for the generation of an understanding of pottery in emic terms?

My identification of these underpinning questions is informed by my interactions with senior women, potters among them, discussing pottery nomenclatures and proverbs used to express local wisdom. During this fieldwork it became clear that Western-based meanings imposed on aspects of African pottery differ from indigenous viewpoints and, when applied in local contexts, make no sense whatsoever to local people. It is crucial to find appropriate approaches that enable researchers to incorporate local cultural knowledge in their contextualisation and interpretation of Northern Sotho and Vhavenda indigenous pottery. The unquestioned, Western-oriented decontextualisation of culturally significant indigenous knowledge is irreconcilable with any attempt to reveal the socio-cultural origins and pre-colonial meanings of material culture productions (Taylor 1976, 262).

In many African cultures, age is associated with wisdom and with carrying responsibility, both in one's household and in the community at large (Hammond-Tooke 1981). A family that counts seniors among its members is considered to be a complete family. Elders may function as counsellors and guides who share their experience in order to give new generations a well-informed, responsible outlook on the future (Hammond-Tooke 1993; Mbiti 1970). In other words, elders function as depositories of knowledge. They are regularly consulted by family members of all ages. Senior women are usually the ones who take major decisions. Old people are left out of current decolonisation discourses. As older generations have extensive experience and knowledge of traditions—which are presently no longer routinely shared with younger generations (Vansina 1985, 7)—their input can still be of considerable benefit for research, providing documentation material and validation of study results.

In Africa, elders function as libraries. Their wisdom is vital for connecting the past and the present (Mbiti 1970; Vansina 1985). Interviewees expressed pleasure that their knowledge is valued. Among the participants were some elders who were not potters. Consulting with gatekeepers before undertaking research is vital for the success of any project (Bernard 2018). This condition is affirmed by the wisdom expressed in an African proverb that says, *A ri dzheni nari ri si na mmbwa*, literally translated from Tshivenda as “He who goes to hunt the buffalo must first consult the experts” (the experts being the hunting dogs). In keeping with this indigenous worldview, the participants in my fieldwork were selected randomly through referrals. The use of gatekeepers is a common practice in African fieldwork. As individual potters have authority over the pottery that is currently produced for tourist markets, in the research leading to this paper, the representative of a group of potters was considered a gatekeeper. Thus, I relied for my documentation of indigenous knowledge on

descendants of people who speak Northern Sotho and Tshivenda languages and did so in the past, and who still practise pottery-making. During my fieldwork aimed at documenting pottery, it became evident that specific pottery names are connected to local worldviews. Thereafter I interpreted relevant aspects of pottery as expressions and confirmations of local knowledge, thus advancing an understanding of the local pottery meanings discussed in this paper.

Contextual Discussion of Indigenous Pottery in Limpopo Province, South Africa

The following discussion, which positions indigenous Limpopo pottery in local contexts, is based on Scharfstein's definition of context as "that which environs the object of interest and helps by its relevance to explain it" (1989, 1). Dilley (1999), on the other hand, identifies context as an analytical device: "Context is ... a device ... by means of which anthropologists are able to reveal hidden meaning and deeper understandings, or to forward certain kinds of interpretation and particular forms of explanation" (1999, 3).

Undeterred by the availability of only a few, inadequately documented, historical examples of relevant earthenware (Laidler 1938; Loubser 1991), many researchers of pottery and their meanings have in the past focused on contextual and formal analyses, paying attention to indigenous descriptors of form, surface, material used, distribution, and nomenclatures (Lawton 1967; Quin 1959). This resulted in an oversight regarding the socio-cultural expression that defines the traditional significance of pottery.

The present study focuses specifically on theoretical understandings of indigenous knowledge and its role in the construction of meaningful pottery, as contemporary producers of art continue to conceptualise ways to interpret and express indigenous cultural meanings, particularly through the medium of pottery. Historically, domestic pottery vessels were used for storing, transporting, and preserving the products of agro-pastoral activities and for preparing and serving food. Depending on their shape and size, clay bowls, jars and pots serve various household purposes (Mönning 1967; Shaw 1974).

A literature survey is key to the critical appraisal of historiographical texts (Van Warmelo 1946) about South African indigenous pottery and vessel traditions. It is of vital importance to take account of local discourses about, and assumptions related to, older as well as contemporary pottery-making traditions, their different production contexts and the underlying causes of these differences. Mbiti (1990, x) writes that

it would be wrong to imagine that everything traditional has been changed or forgotten so much that no traces of it are to be found. If anything, the changes are generally on the surface, affecting the material side of life, and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of thinking pattern, language content, mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in situations of need.

Recent publications (Motsamayi 2018) point to a growing tendency to connect the study of pottery produced in Limpopo province with an investigation of local knowledge systems. The recent increase in academic research in developments in indigenous pottery-making is especially striking when set against the background of decennia of neglect in Limpopo province of heritage objects, their production and their meanings in the context of local worldviews. Academic research into the material cultures indicate a considerable increase in interest.

Northern Sotho pottery vessels were sourced from Blouberg Local Municipality, whereas Venda pottery was sourced from Thulamela Local Municipality. In view of the fact that the languages spoken by the Vhavanḁa and the Northern Sotho have been found to be historically linked and thus related (Loubser 1991, 146; Schoettler 1971, 1), it is of great interest that pots today produced by these groups have features in common and that there is a substantial connection between the meanings expressed in Northern Sotho and Vhavanḁa pottery, confirming common aspects of their worldviews as evidenced also in their respective bodies of proverbs.

In the past all “Bantu pottery,” as the production of black potters was referred to, was regarded as primitive and static (Brown 1978; Schofield 1943). This perception is countered by the information I gathered in interviews with potters and from accounts of indigenous local knowledge. So-called Bantu pottery was obviously not taken seriously and not thoroughly studied, as anything to do with indigenous knowledge was in cultural and religious academic discourse qualified as merely representing a “belief,” especially in colonial times and in the apartheid era (Van Rooy 1978, 18; Van Warmelo 1974, 319). To a degree, such notions are being reviewed in present-day postcolonial discourse and different worldviews are taken into account. Van Warmelo (1974, 319), who was an apartheid government ethnologist, notes that the Bantu worldview is “a system of beliefs” connected with African culture. Gyekye (1997, 235) is of the opinion that “African culture should be the basis of development in the modern world [M]odernization should proceed by building on Africa’s cultural traditions [T]he resources of tradition should be harnessed to the modern goals, methods, and processes of development, and ... the traditional ... be integrated with the modern.”

My fieldwork research demonstrates that in Limpopo province pottery production is not just a matter of making functional objects, but aims to simultaneously communicate meanings related to the producers’ worldview, which is perceived as essential to their artistry, and this is evidenced through the nomenclature of pottery invented by potters to connect with their daily activities. Pottery production conveys messages carrying meanings that the makers and the group to which they belong are aware of. These meanings are part of a framework that represents the group’s perception of the world they live in (Taylor 1976, 256). Studying pottery from this point of view requires a specific focus on African cultures and belief systems. Asante (2014, 2) notes that “Afrocentricity seeks to examine every aspect of the subject place of Africans in historical, literary, architectural, ethical, philosophical, economic, and political

life.” This is worth considering as it is relevant to contemporary discourses dealing with African knowledge production and the creation of meanings. There continues to be a lack of scholarship on indigenous pottery creation from local perspectives.

While the interest in studying indigenous pottery has recently become more pronounced in academic research (Arnold 2018; Huffman 2007), it remains problematic that much of African recorded heritage, including indigenous pottery and the importance of worldviews associated with art, has been largely ignored in the past. Thus, indigenous language and pottery meanings are related in the context of indigenous taxonomy.

Theoretical Underpinning: African Worldviews as Ways of Knowing

As a theoretical framework for my study of indigenous knowledge and Northern Sotho and Vhavenda pottery made in Limpopo province, I relied on potters’ viewpoints and a body of existing literature on emic worldviews, combined with an intense study of indigenous knowledge systems and their representation in aspects of pottery production. There are ethno-archaeologists who have documented pottery based on ethnographic analogy, applying what could be defined as an emic view (Fowler 2006; Gosselain 1992). In my opinion, a Western viewpoint used as the only approach is not appropriate for generating an understanding of African pottery. The study of “worldviews as pragmatic ways of knowing” (Peek 1991, 14) is of the essence as it creates access to indigenous ways of knowing from an African perspective. Evidently there is currently no theory that includes an awareness of the meanings of African pottery based on African viewpoints and that African people can relate to, except in classification of pottery by archeologists.

In attempts to understand African pottery by appreciating implied meanings, a postcolonial theory is contested for its limitations (Walsh and Mignolo 2018). In its interpretation of African pottery, it does not go back far enough in the precolonial era to come up with clear conclusions. In this context, identifying worldviews and indigenous knowledge provides keys, not only for an understanding of local pottery, but also for the decolonisation of what, under influence of the colonisers, was perceived as the only valid form of knowledge (Schutte 1999). Hence, African pottery traditions need to be understood from indigenous dynamic perspectives based on worldviews as collective ways of knowing.

One key consideration upon which my theoretical framework rests is the necessity to deconstruct Western-oriented ways of knowing or the limiting vision that has in the past determined so-called historical meanings of indigenous pottery. Emerging calls for epistemic decolonisation (Motsamayi 2018; Wa Thiong’o 1992), so as to accommodate indigenous African knowledge systems, have created fertile ground for debating the continuing significance of these systems and their perceived meanings in the present South Africa (Makgoba 1997). The concept of a worldview has come to signify the core of cultural beliefs in association with ways of knowing that should be examined so that the content of beliefs and their attached traditions can be understood and kept

alive. This implies that the current perceptions of aspects of pottery and indigenous ways of knowing from Western perspectives need to be scrutinised. This can be achieved through the examination of interconnected views of knowledge, incorporating emic socio-cultural, contextual information on pottery, rather than a continuation along the lines of ineffective Western colonial etic perspectives (Winthrop 1991, 93).

Addressing the lack of emic-oriented information on meanings of pottery may help to deconstruct the long-standing, incorrect Western notions of the so-called static nature of “native South African pottery” (Nilant 1963), preferably by stressing the roles of indigenous beliefs, values, and attitudes as generated by worldviews. My argument is informed by well-established philosophical and anthropological studies that explore innovative ideas about the nature of ways of knowing (as outlined in, for example, Montague 1925; Taylor 1976), focusing especially on how indigenous epistemologies are linked to worldviews held by people from Limpopo.

Consequently, I emphasise the interconnectedness of indigenous African knowledge systems, specifically the pottery traditions of Northern Sotho and Venda people, and how these relate in their association with local potters’ worldviews and the resulting ways of knowing. Indigenous epistemological expressions and meanings are in essential ways connected with local pottery and with indigenous sayings and proverbs. Anthropologists use the concept of a shared worldview to understand the relationship between philosophical epistemic concepts and normative cultural practices in specific social settings (De Sardan 2015; Hammond-Tooke 1993). Thus, when it comes to understanding culture, many elements of a group’s epistemic worldview turn out to be pervasive and enduring cultural themes that are commonly known to, and widely shared by, people who belong to the same culture (Horton 1967, 155; Rooy 1978, 18). Therefore, it is crucial to probe into the question of how indigenous discourse and epistemic assumptions about the world relate to both ways of knowing and the maintenance of pottery traditions through word of mouth.

In anthropology, identifying worldviews as ways of knowing highlights local emic epistemologies that situate specific proverbs within the contexts where they are used and give meaning to pottery, thus contributing to an understanding of their indigenous nature and local significance. Hammond-Tooke (1993, 106) defines proverbs as “pithy statements of folk wisdom, ranging from truisms to profound insights.” Importantly, these interpretations are grounded in indigenous-sensitive ethnography and do not, based on a philosophical perception, offer a single Western view of “truth” or “fact.” Seen in this light, ways of knowing are processes through which society constructs knowledge and the means of interpreting it (Peek 1991, 113). In the context of this paper, ways of knowing are methods of acquiring specific Northern Sotho and Venda African knowledge. According to Montague (1925, 31), in philosophy “methodology may be subdivided into (1) logic and (2) epistemology, which respectively deal with ways of attaining and with ways of interpreting knowledge.” In the African context, I focus on epistemology, which is the theory of knowledge and a

branch of philosophy to which various meanings are ascribed and that is highly contested (Montague 1925, 32).

In this section I emphasise developments in the formulation of indigenous methods of creating meanings in local languages related to “worldviews as pragmatic ways of knowing” (Peek 1991, 14) and expressed in pottery. To this end, I situate the traditional setting of pottery productions in their culture-specific contexts to promote an understanding of how they are used to convey meanings to communities and how they relate to discourse concerning Limpopo pottery and thus are relevant to the epistemic nature of indigenous material culture and of knowledge more generally.

Using African Worldviews to Unearth African Pottery Philosophy

In the African context, philosophical (i.e. epistemic) thought and worldview are a core part of indigenous belief systems. Hence, the ethnographer who examines Northern Sotho and Venda traditions must consider these in emic terms. Hammond-Tooke (1981, xiii) opines: “What seems to distinguish worldview knowledge from other knowledge is that it is theory-laden; it is special knowledge. It purports to explain or interpret, and this is frequently done by making use of symbols.” Such philosophical and epistemic issues, while rather abstract, can be (and are) communicated effectively through language and in proverbs that often withstand the impact of colonisation. Shaw (1974, 116) indicates that African pottery is made by women. As custodians of their craft, senior women potters accumulate culture-specific experience and witness historical events that provide them with the authority to guide new generations in rural areas in the expression, verbally and through pottery production, of cultural values and indigenous worldviews. Their cultural knowledge and experience enable these women to share and expand on indigenous theories of worldview, giving them the means to secure a grounding for my study of indigenous ways of knowing.

Western anthropologists have tended to study pottery in the Limpopo region by focusing primarily on its functional role in various societies and on ways in which pottery production advances cultural reproduction (Quin 1959; Stayt 1931). For an exploration of Limpopo material culture with the aim of promoting indigenous discourse, a deeper theoretical understanding of local pottery production may give rise to new insights into Northern Sotho and Venda traditions including worldviews. Such insights would be based on local experience rather than on Western conceptions. Pottery productions, in different local contexts and in association with languages, carry meanings that go far beyond their utilitarian roles, and thus communication is one of their functions. The significance of the pottery is not only located in the meanings conveyed by the visual aspects of pots, but also determined by the messages and information that are implicit in their production and of importance to potters and their communities. Thus, a prerequisite for an evaluation of the cultural importance of any indigenous pottery production is an appreciation of its original emic meanings attained through worldview analysis.

An analysis of pottery and vernacular expressions constitutes an important part of any anthropological study of shared worldviews. Worldviews, in turn, are connected to material practices in specific societies as part of their lived experience (Geertz 1973; Hammond-Tooke 1974). Many elements of a group's epistemic worldview consist in pervasive and enduring cultural themes commonly known and widely shared by people who belong to the same culture (Horton 1967).

Indigenous pottery discourse and epistemic assumptions about the world are thus related to indigenous pottery as well as to the maintenance of cultural traditions (Shaw 1974). Although a few documented examples of such identified connections are available, most current studies are conspicuously lacking in an understanding of pertinent worldviews and of ways of knowing adopted by indigenous rural communities who continue to give expression to shared philosophies in their pottery, thus highlighting local emic epistemologies. Against this background, the present study correlates the names of specific types of pottery with long-standing proverbial expressions that refer to the names of the pots in question and that transmit more emic socio-cultural information than is usually appreciated from a Western colonial perspective. At the same time, I articulate how potters involved in my research understand Northern Sotho and Venda epistemes and worldviews, exposing as well as challenging the adverse colonial experience and how these perceptions have been normalised in traditional etic-oriented colonial studies (Theal 1882).

Potters' Worldviews and Cultural Interpretations of Limpopo Province Pottery

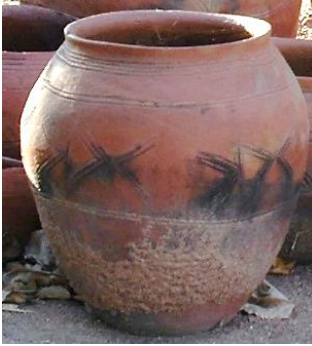
African potters are known as organic scientists within their communities with a sophisticated knowledge of producing functional pottery that involves gathering materials, identifying specific soils for making pottery, decorating techniques, firing and cooling pottery (Fowler 2006; Lawton 1967). The scientific understanding and the philosophical nature of potters, however, were never seriously considered in contemporary pottery discourses. As a result, there is a lack of knowledge of indigenous meanings and verbal expressions and, thus, of specific ideological premises of Limpopo pottery. This exacerbates the problem of building a concrete foundation for further emic analyses that may promote an understanding of the elaboration of traditional meanings evidently expressed in certain categories of pottery and rooted in Limpopo worldviews.

The limiting influence of Western ideological premises on the standing of indigenous pottery as perceived by pottery researchers is the cause of various developments that have negatively impacted vernacular cultural expressions in particular areas and that continue to inform pottery production and other forms of creativity. Taylor (1976, 256) concurs that "[p]hilosophical customs are part of the covert culture and must be transmitted verbally." In the African context, philosophical epistemic considerations and worldviews are central to indigenous belief systems and ways of knowing (Grimshaw 2001, 97; Hammond-Tooke 1981, 7; Motsamayi 2018, 68). Therefore, the

ethnographer examining African material and verbal customs should approach and understand these on their own emic terms (Asante 2014, 8; Gyekye 1997, 41; Mphahlele 1962, 53).

Below I present examples of selected indigenous pottery that are pertinent to emic perspectives on, and various discourses associated with, pottery traditions rooted in aspects of local socio-cultural significance and that continue to shape and reflect verbal forms of discourse and epistemology. It is in this regard essential to, first, look at an explicit indigenous discourse and the non-discursive assumptions expressed in older pottery traditions, and second, to associate processes of creating meaning in pottery productions with local, or even cross-cultural, proverbs and nouns that allude to pottery vessels.

Table 1: Northern Sotho pottery and ontology

		
Figure 1: Artist: Mma Masimone Ramone. <i>Nkgo</i>. Northern Sotho ovoid storage vessel. 2014. Blouberg Local Municipality. Measurements: rim 26 cm, height 34 cm, width 29 cm, base 23 cm. (Photograph by author 2014).	Figure 2: Artist: Mma Masimone Ramone. <i>Pitša</i>. Northern Sotho cooking. 2014. Blouberg Local Municipality. Measurements: rim 27 cm, height 26 cm, width 28 cm. (Photograph by author 2014).	Figure 3: Artist: Mma Masimone Ramone. <i>Pitšeng</i>. Northern Sotho cooking pot. 2014. Blouberg Local Municipality. Measurements: rim 14 cm, height 23 cm, width 24 cm. (Photograph by author 2014).

Example: *Sesotho sa Lebowa* (Northern Sotho) proverbial expressions associated with specific types of pottery, whereby all italicised nouns refer to the specific pottery ontology of vessels shown above and indicated by figures. Figure 1: *Nkgo* (noun class 9), large pot for storing beer or water. Figure 2: *Pitša* (noun class 9), pot with a wide opening for cooking meal. Figure 3: *Pitšeng* (locative noun class 9), translates to “into the pot.”

- a) *Go inweša ka nkgo* (idiomatic; refers to Figure 1). Literal translation: letting it drink directly from a large storage clay pot. In an indigenous context this means one is advised to check the facts for oneself.
- b) *Nama namakgapeletšwa e phuma pitša* (refers to Figure 2). Literal translation: the meat that is forced into the cooking pot breaks the pot. In an indigenous context this is a caution against forcing oneself into an undesirable situation without contemplating possible negative consequences.
- c) *Pitša ya maano ga e apeiwe gabedi* (refers to Figure 2). Literal translation: a pot contains wisdom that cannot be cooked twice. In an indigenous context this means a cheeky person cannot fool all the people all the time.
- d) *Yaboela pitšeng e aswa* (refers to Figure 3). Literal translation: if it (meat) returns into the cooking pot, it will burn. In indigenous context this is a warning against returning to a situation, found to be unbearable before, as the result could be disastrous.

Table 2: Examples of Vhavenda pottery and ontology

		
Figure 4: Artist: Vho-Nyamukamađi Makungo. <i>Khali</i>. Uncooked Venda cooking pot. 2014. Thulamela Local Municipality. Measurements: rim 23 cm, height 25 cm, width 27 cm, base 18 cm. (Photograph by author 2014).	Figure 5: Artist: Vho-Nyamukamađi Makungo. <i>Khali</i>. Venda used pot for cooking meal. 2014. Thulamela Local Municipality. Measurements: rim 24 cm, height 26 cm, width 27,5 cm, base 16,5 cm. (Photograph by author 2014).	Figure 6: Artist: Vho-Nyamukamađi Makungo. <i>Tshidudu</i>. Venda small pot for cooking relish. 2014. Thulamela Local Municipality. Measurements: rim 21 cm, height 23 cm, width 23,5 cm. (Photograph by author 2014).

These spherical clay vessels for cooking all have wide uncovered openings with rolled rims on the mouth and incised motifs on the shoulder. As opposed to Northern Sotho pottery, Venda cooking pots have rolled rims which are, as apparent from the above table, not everted.

Example: related proverbs and idiomatic expressions (*Mirero*) associated with pottery ontologies in Tshivenda language. Figure 4: *khali* (noun class 9), pot for cooking staple food. Figure 5: *khali* (noun class 9), used pot for cooking staple food. Figure 6: *tshidudu* (noun class 9), smaller vessel used for cooking meat and vegetables.

- a) *Nama Khombetshedzwa I phula khali* (refers to Figure 4). Literal translation: the meat that is forced into the cooking pot breaks the pot. In an indigenous context it is a caution to a person not to force him- or herself into an undesirable situation without contemplating consequences that might be negative. This saying is similar in meaning to the *Sesotho sa Lebowa* proverb (b).
- b) *Khali yo bikaho i fhira yau shululelwa* (refers to Figure 5). Literal translation: a cooked pot is more valuable than a pot which has not cooked. In indigenous context: an account from an eyewitness of an event is more reliable than that of a person who was not there when the event unfolded. Thus, it is advisable to seek first-hand information from a good source rather than trust unreliable sources.
- c) *Tibu ndi khali, tsha mbiluniya munwe atshi tibulwi* (refers to Figure 5). Literal translation: you can lift the lid of a pot to see what is inside, but what is inside a person's heart can only be known by the person him- or herself. In an indigenous context this means what is apparent from a person's appearance does not reflect his or her feelings or character; the truth resides in the person.
- d) *U kokota tshidudu (U dzhia zwa mme)* (refers to Figure 6). Idiomatic expression. Literal translation: to squeeze leftovers by hand into a small pot. In an indigenous context this refers to inheriting aspects from the mother's side of the family. The expression has negative connotations for the person to whom it is applied.

In the context of the present study, the importance of these and other proverbs lies in their potential to clarify an emic understanding of associated pottery meanings and to support the effective analysis of pottery productions. Many proverbial and related expressions are reflected in indigenous pottery productions and are used to communicate insights that belong to traditional knowledge, with the aim of guiding, warning and even rebuking recipients when deemed necessary. For example, when old people feel close to dying, they may call upon family members to gather around them. They will then utter last words containing proverbs. Messages transmitted through proverbs function after the elder's death as guiding stars for family members. Similarly, pottery productions carry meanings based on the wisdom of proverbs and related phrases, some of which are alike across cultures. The person who states such fairly common proverbs in which pottery is mentioned tends to be aware that he or she is

offering lessons for life. African societies are no different from other groups of humans in that philosophical and/or mythological explanations are developed for the natural world and humanity's connections to it (Mieder 1994).

The above arguments are supported by philosophical enquiry and studies of worldviews (outlined in, for example, Asante 2014; Hammond-Tooke 1981) that generate new insights regarding pottery (Motsamayi 2018, 68) as well as how indigenous epistemologies are linked to African worldviews (Mbiti 1990; Mudimbe 1994), specifically in the Limpopo context. It is such emic approaches that enable members of societies to communicate, understand how their traditions apply in different situations, and conceive of the nature of their existence (Acton 1953, 3). In the post-apartheid Limpopo context, epistemic perceptions and worldviews continue to be part of traditional belief systems. Hence, the study of indigenous pottery productions requires that ethnographers seriously take account, in emic terms, of culture-specific insights and verbal expressions in order to grasp the profoundly meaningful roles of pottery in the producers' societies.

It is evident that Northern Sotho and Vhavenda pottery productions are not only artefacts but fulfil major roles in their communities. Pottery serves in the African context, for example, as a memory of the past and a reflection of the present. Vessels contain information of functional value for members of communities, which is also transmitted verbally in proverbs. This form of group-expression is realised in various aspects of pottery-making that convey messages addressed to the communities in which they are produced and where the potters live. The above section presenting proverbs entails a more specific detailing of what selected Limpopo province worldviews and ontologies consist in.

Conclusions

The article accentuates the need for a more pertinent interpretation of indigenous knowledge systems and leads to a greater awareness of the historical significance of the pottery productions under consideration, underlining the importance of meanings as is affirmed by local proverbs and language expressions. I critically engage with tenacious Eurocentric epistemologies on pottery in the context of colonial interpretations. I argue for an alternative perspective and formulate indigenous discourse as concerned with ways of knowing, thereby opening up possibilities for a deeper indigenous-based theoretical understanding of, and knowledge about, Northern Sotho and Vhavenda pottery traditions and their meanings. Pottery production and proverbial wisdom thus both preserve and inculcate local knowledge and protect traditional pottery for the sake of future generations.

I have attempted to generate an understanding of the concept of worldview as concerned with local ways of knowing and as both clarifying, and distinguishing between, emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives on Northern Sotho and Vhavenda pottery production. I have contextualised emic-based analyses of the pottery in question and of

related local discourse and languages, which will be of interest for indigenous communities as well as for pottery researchers. My understanding of indigenous knowledge and epistemes, identified in this article and based on my fieldwork and interaction with potters and their associates, can advance the integration of indigenous theories of worldviews pertinent to Northern Sotho and Vhavanḁa cultures into Western discourses and further the study of South African indigenous pottery.

My proposed method concerning local ways of knowing does not claim to produce an objective outside (etic) account of the shared worldview of the Northern Sotho and Venḁa people. Instead, I identify and rely on Northern Sotho and Venḁa versions of worldviews as ways of knowing and I situate these versions in the contexts in which they produce practical use for, as well as important meanings in, pottery in Limpopo province. I hope this paper will contribute to the updating of existing information and ignite new insights in theoretical and cultural knowledge pertaining to Limpopo pottery traditions. From my perspective, supported by my research findings, traditional pottery is not simply a matter of making an object, but rather it is involved in the transparent processing of knowledge.

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