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THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE VENDA PRODUCE POTS

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SUMMARY

Today the people of Venda can be found in the Northern Transvaal in the previous areas for Black people after they have initially moved from Central Africa to Zimbabwe.

They learned the art of pottery from the Lemba, and make use of specific methods namely the working up of clay and the coil method. It can however happen that they sometimes combine these two methods. They will decorate the pots by engraving it and colouring it with graphite and red stone before the baking process. Unfortunately they have given up their traditional decorating methods and are beginning to concentrate on more modern methods for commercial purposes.

SAMEVATTING

Die Venda word vandag in Noord-Transvaal in Bantoegebiede aangetref, nadat hulle vanuit Sentraal Afrika na Zimbabwe oorspronklik verhuis het. Hulle het die pottebakkerskuns van die Lemba geleer.

Hulle maak van twee spesifieke metodes nl. die optrek metode en die wors metode gebruik. Dit kan egter ook somtyds gebeur dat hulle hierdie metodes kombineer. Hulle sal hulle potte versier deur insnydings en kleur met grafiek en rooi klip, voor die bak proses. Hulle het ongelukkig hul tradisionele versiermetodes laat vaar en begin konsentreer op meer moderne metodes vir komersiële doeleindes.

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INTRODUCTION:

Pottery as an art has been practised since earliest times. One reads about the Egyptians practising the art and the Greeks mastering it. It was of the utmost importance for man to help with the preservation of food and other substances.

Because pots are still being made today it is taken for granted and not much attention has been paid to the culture of South African pottery. Some people claim however that this art has been practised since as early as the Neolithic era.

Others assume the art has developed accidentally. Neolithic man could have used clay on the insides of baskets to make them watertight or an accidental fire could have burnt the baskets and they could have seen the effect of fire on clay. (Boas, 4 p259)

Ralph L Beals and Harry Hoijer (1b|263) are of the opinion that the origin of pottery can be traced to the origin of agriculture. At first people did not practise agriculture because Paleolithic man was nomadic. He didn't stay in one place for long enough to produce pottery and it couldn't be transported easily.

Thus it is obvious that agriculture established a more stationary lifestyle and that pottery was the result.

In the case of the people of Venda this art is still being practised today although they haven't mastered it yet. It is an art form they learned from the Lemba, who do not practise it as they find it to be below them.

The people of Venda strongly believe that the clay belongs to the Lemba people and that they have to ask permission of the Lemba clay spirits to use it.

Today pottery is of commercial and economical importance to both the Venda and the Lemba people. The Lemba people still cling to their traditional methods and uses to a

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certain extent. Their dyes are still very traditional and they are skeptical to use modern dyes used by white people. On the other hand the Venda people are happily prepared to use modern dyes or paints.

CHAPTER 1**1. METHODOLOGY**

Due to the fact that not much information was available on the topic, my research was limited to a study of sources. I also made use of my lecturers' knowledge. My research is particularly based on the process of manufacturing Venda pottery. Other aspects studied by me are the obtainment of clay, production, forming, baking and decoration of pots.

I also looked at several photos, slides and sketches of pots and the sequence of production.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

How do the Venda people go about to produce pots?

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CHAPTER 2

1. PRELIMINARY STUDIES

a. Venda

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be found in the Soutpansberg district of
they still reside in areas for black people. The
nate changeable and the vegetation sub-tropical
to two parts. The northern part is arid and sandy
nfall is low and there are only a few rivers. The
nfall, the vegetation is lush and there is plenty of
om October to November (vd Lith ; bl. 15)
ople is still not very clear but it is generally
s a group from the Great Lakes of Central Africa
in the vicinity of the Lemba. They settled for a
ood that was named Zimbabwe. Through this the
se contact with the commercial practices of the
r livestock as a source of wealth and they were
use of pests they had to revert to agriculture. They
goats, pigs, poultry, dogs and cats (vd Lith ; bl. 21

ne Venda also believes in a Supreme Being,
iding to them he is the creator and origin of
ture and shows himself in the form of a meteor

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(shooting star). He also plays an important role in the life of every individual (vd Lith ; bl. 33, 34)

Death for the Venda is only a transitional stage in which the captain plays a critical role because he is the mediator between his tribe and the ancestral spirits. He must ensure that the tribe is sure of good rainfall and a good harvest. He keeps up good relations with the ancestral spirits (Ibid).

The captain is already considered as holy on earth because he has to fulfill the same role after death.

b. Lemba.

The Lemba is also found in the Northern Transvaal and can be recognized by their delicate features (vd Lith ; bl. 36 - 38).

The Lemba often gathers to pray. They sometimes divide their prayers into different parts namely prayers of joy, prayers about illness and death. They attach great value to the numeral seven and the moon plays an important part in their customs (Ibid)

They are divided into different family groups with a chief or captain at the head of each group. He is responsible for religious ceremonies and initiation schools.

Today many of the different tribes and especially the Venda consider the Lemba to be merchants and artisans rather than farmers or shepherds.

Women of the Lemba tribe today will travel kilometres on foot to sell their wares rather than only exchanging their wares for products like grain, poultry or beer as in the past (Ibid).

There is however not much information available about their origin.

CHAPTER 3

1. GATHERING OF CLAY

Gathering of clay by the Venda and the Lemba.

All kinds of clay contain a certain amount of water and the amount determines the flexibility and structure of the clay. If clay consists of smaller crystals rather than bigger crystals it will be more flexible. Thus the ability of clay to become hard and inflexible when it is dried depends on the form of the crystals (vd Lith ; bl. 108).

If you add water to clay it moves in between the crystals and acts as a lubricant. But because of natural evaporation during the process of drying, the lubricant disappears and the crystals come into contact with each other. The clay particles move closer to each other and the end result is that the object shrinks.

The clay that is used to manufacture pots is found all over Venda. A clay hole (molundo) is usually near the home of a potter. It can also happen that a potter will walk a distance of several kilometres to look for clay.

She will keep the locality of the clay hole a secret. Because of this she is alone when she goes out to fetch clay but doesn't have the exclusive right to the hole.

The "molundo" can usually be found in ditches that were washed open by rain or at the foot of a mountain or in crevasses. Potters prefer dry clay because it is easier to transport and process (vd Lith ; bl. 109 - 111)

The Venda asks permission of the Lemba clay spirits to use the clay by throwing clay sticks in front or at the "molundo" and saying: "Clay spirits of Lemba I take the clay, I bake the pots." They believe that if permission is not asked from the clay

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spirits the sides of the pots will fall in or the pots will crack during the baking process (VD Lith ; bl. 108)

By asking permission they create a "good relationship" with the clay spirits. The dry sticks ensure that the pots will bake well and are formed well.

2. MANUFACTURING OF POTS

a. Techniques:

The technique to manufacture pots is very simple. The only difference between the Lemba and the Venda is that the Lemba's technique is far more advanced because the Venda have only recently started pottery.

Preparations play an important part in the manufacturing of pots. The clay that has been stored in a clay pot or a bag is taken out and put on a corrugated iron sheet and carried to the grinding stone with some water to be prepared. The water is placed on the left side of the grinding stone. The idea is to knead or punch the clay so that it is easy to work with (vd Lith ; bl. 113)

After she has finished this task the potter puts the clay on the corrugated-iron sheet again to take it to the place where she will form the pot.

b. The method of working up the clay to form it

The potter kneads more or less three-quarters of the punched clay until it has the form of a chicken egg that has been halved. She will support the clay with her left hand and use the fingers of her right hand to dig out the clay towards her left hand (vd Lith ; bl. 124).

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The potsherd will move in a circle until the ball of clay has been hollowed out, and the rough clay furrows on the inside has been smoothed by the right hand. A pot is used to scrape the sides and smoothen them (Ibid)

She holds the pod in her hand with four fingers on the top and the thumb on the hollow part of the pot. She uses the sharp side or edge of the pot to scrape the surface of the clay. Thus the excess clay is removed until the sides are smooth, inside and out (Ibid).

The potter keeps her hand against the side that is being finished to assure the correct thickness. The pot takes form and as soon as she reaches shoulder height she will stop the method of working upwards and out and start to finish the sides.

c. Coil method

The potter takes a piece of clay that was put aside and rolls it until it forms an even sausage.

She takes one side of the roll in her left hand, and uses the thumb and index finger of her right hand to press the clay roll firmly onto the inside of the upper part of the unfinished pot to let the wall thicken and overlap (Ibid).

The potter will repeat the process until the wall has been thickened right around the pot. Thus the shoulder of the pot is strengthened and material is provided to complete the pot.

The pot is used again to smooth over the thickened part and to work the clay upwards.

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The pot is bent to the inside from the shoulder upward to give it a globular shape (Ibid).

As soon as the pot has reached the right thickness, height and curve, the process is stopped. The uneven ends are pinched off and the walls are smoothed inside and out. The pot is used to cut out an opening. The rest of the clay is used to form a smaller sausage that is used to form the lip of the pot (vd Lith ; bl. 125).

By placing a wet goat skin over the opening and spinning the pot around with the right pressure on the inside the potter can give the lip of the pot a neat round form and remove excess clay.

A long thorn is used to decorate the pot. The pot is placed on a ring of grass on the ground to ensure that the walls are supported firmly while it is being decorated. A horizontal line is drawn directly under the lip right around the wet clay pot (Ibid).

Then a little bit of wet (watery) clay is put inside the pot and it is stored in a store hut until the next day. This manufacturing process has taken her 15 to 20 minutes (Ibid).

The following day the pot is removed from the potsherd and placed upside down on her lap. Then she uses a pebble stone to scrape the surface of the pot as well as the bottom (Ibid).

The bottom of the pot is still tapered and the potter will use a flat stone to hit the bottom until it is flat. She will either work in the clay or remove it to flatten the bottom.

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The pot is now finished and she will put it away again in her store hut so that it can dry out in the air to be baked later (vd Lith ; bl. 126).

3. HOW POTS ARE DECORATED

a. Application of dyes or pigments

Different types of dyes are used namely Phomo (granite) that gives decorations a black colour and Luvhundi (red stone) that gives a red colour. They also use modern paints used by white people, which give them lots of colours (vd Lith ; 128).

Phomo and Luvhundi are applied before the pots are baked. Phomo can be applied in two ways. If it is kept in pieces it easily gives off colour and the potter rubs the surface of the pot with it to get a black colour. Secondly it can be mixed with water to make a paste that is applied with the index finger (Ibid).

Luvhundi is also mixed with water to form a paste that is applied with the index finger. As soon as these two dyes have been applied and dried it is rubbed in with a pebble and then the pots are baked (Ibid).

The most popular colours of the white people are red, blue, green black and white and are specifically used by the Venda tribe (Ibid).

The outlines of the decorations are still applied in the traditional manner on wet clay but the paint is applied after the pots have been baked (Ibid).

b. Decorating methods

When pots are decorated different lines, levels and bands are used. Lines are applied in five specific ways.

- The starting line that is used first is a horizontal line just above the shoulder of the pot.
- The shoulder line that is applied secondly is a horizontal line just underneath the shoulder of the pot and forms a band with the starting line around the pot.
- The ground line – a horizontal line – goes around the pot and forms the basis of the decorating level. This line is drawn just above the starting line but can also fall together with the shoulder line if there isn't a separate ground line.
- The level line - also a horizontal line- goes around the pot below the lip and forms the top line of the decoration level. This can also be left out.
- The A, B and C lines are all horizontal lines underneath the shoulder line and are drawn to form additional bands around the pot. The A line falls just below the shoulder line with lines B and C following (vd Lith ; bl. 148).

The decorating level is the area between the bottom line and the level line on which decorative motives are introduced.

The starting line and shoulder line from the shoulder band. A, B and C bands are formed under the shoulder band and the separating band lies between the starting line and ground line and separates the decorating level from the shoulder band (Ibid).

4. DRYING OF OBJECTS

Objects that have been finished are usually placed in a store or sleep hut to dry out. Several reasons stop them from drying pots in the kitchen. There is not enough space and pots can easily be pushed over and broken. In winter the kitchen is used for storing and fires are being made which cause the pots to turn black or break because of the heat.

5. PROCESS OF BAKING POTS

The place where pots are baked is usually just outside the village. It is a hollow place about 1,5 m in width and a few centimetres deep. The potter will go to prepare the hollow for the baking process as soon as she has made enough pots according to her standards (vd Lith ; bl. 132).

She uses a branch to sweep the hollow clean and lines the area with pebbles of 3 to 4 cm in diameter. The pebbles are covered with dry sticks.

After this she takes the biggest pots first and arranges them with the openings diagonally pointing upwards and out so that the pots support each other in the middle. The smaller pots are packed in the same way and then the rest (Ibid).

She covers the pots with dry wood. Grass is placed on top of the wood. Grass is also placed alongside the pots until they are completely covered. Then she puts wood on the grass to prevent it from being blown away.

She will wait for the fire (that can reach a temperature of 700°C) to cease burning.

She will use a stick to scratch open the pots and will take them out by inserting the stick into the openings of the pots and lifting them out. The bigger pots are rolled out because they are too heavy to lift (Ibid).

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As soon as the pots have cooled off they are taken back to the village to be rinsed and "hangula-ed"

a. Hangula-practices

The term "hangula" means to incorporate or test or try out. Pots are "hangula-ed" to make sure they are strong and if a pot breaks or cracks all the other pots will be re-baked. This will prove that the pot will function properly.

The Venda won't buy pots from the Lemba if they haven't been "hangula-ed" because they believe firmly the porridge of the Lemba will poison them and it will sometimes happen that the Venda will "hangula" their own pots (vd Lith ; bl. 134 - 139).

A few examples of how pots are "hangula-ed"

- Cooking pots and pots for beer are "hangula-ed" by boiling leftover mealie shells soaked in water in the pot.
- Pots that will be used for water are just filled with water and left for 15 minutes
- Pots for flour are filled with beer porridge or mfumbo-porridge and left for only 10 minutes (Ibid).

If all the pots have been "hangula-ed" in this way they are ready to be sold.

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CONCLUSION

The art of pottery as practised by the Venda is carried out according to plan. A lot of attention is given to the correct forming, decorating and baking of pots. The coil method is obviously the favourite method. The decorations are applied symmetrically and according to plan. It is also obvious that they use more graphite than red stone.

It seems that they have not mastered the art yet like the Lemba. However, a lot of effort goes into the pots.

It is unfortunate that they are quite prepared to renounce their traditional methods for the sake of commercial purposes.

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APPENDIX

Refer to vd Lith ; A.A. 1960 : Die Keramiek van die Venda ; Appendix 8 en 9