

Bringing Research to LIFE

Upcoming Events

Research Orientation Series

Week Three:

Overview of internal grants
(Janice Ristock and Nancy Klos)

September 22, 2011

1:00 to 2:30 p.m.

ORS Boardroom, 540 Machray Hall

September 23, 2011

12:30 to 1:30 p.m.

700 John Buhler Research Centre

Week Four:

Overview of CFI Funding
(Tracy Mobr and Gary Glavin)

September 29, 2011

1:00 to 2:30 p.m.

ORS Boardroom, 540 Machray Hall

September 30, 2011

12:30 to 1:30 p.m.

718 John Buhler Research Centre
(Note different location)

6th Annual Undergraduate Student Research Poster Competition

The 2011 competition will take place on:

Thursday, October 27, 2011
1:00 to 4:30 p.m.

Manitoba Rooms 210-224,
University Centre,
Fort Garry campus.

Forms to be submitted by
September 30, 2011, to:

Shellie Johannesson
207 Administration Building
Fort Garry Campus

To download the application form,
or for more information,
visit: <http://umanitoba.ca/research/592.htm>

Unravelling the pot

BY MELNI GHATTORA

While walking through a gift shop in Banff, Alberta, a set of dusty pots tucked away in the corner of high-sitting shelf catch Kent Fowler's eye. It's an experience he describes as one that "blew my mind." "What is this stuff doing here? How did it get here?" He remembers thinking to himself.

As he suspected, Fowler, an assistant professor of anthropology, had stumbled across ceramic pots that originate from Southern Africa, an area he is very familiar with.

He has been conducting archaeological research in South Africa since 1997, and is a specialist who studies pottery. His office shelves are lined with remarkable artifacts he has collected over the years, and when he begins the story of how these vessels took form, only then does one truly appreciate the history each pot reveals.

In December 2010, Fowler and his team wrapped up a three-year study called The Nguni Ceramics and Society Project (NCSP). The group worked in Swaziland and throughout eastern South Africa, from the Mozambique border, down to the Eastern Cape. Covering approximately 25,000 square kilometres, they worked with Swazi and Zulu potters (two branches of Nguni speaking peoples in Africa today), to observe and document the process of how ceramics pots are made within each group, and determine how long the process dates back.

"One problem particular to Southern Africa is there is one thousand years of Nguni prehistory where most of the durable artifacts, things that survived in the archaeological record, don't really have style," explains Fowler. "They are just mundane looking, and don't have decoration or anything like that. The question becomes how do you begin to identify different groups of people and how they interacted, along with other anthropological questions we want to answer, unless we actually know who's who."



Submitted Photo

Dr. Kent Fowler, assistant professor, department of anthropology, Faculty of Arts, with the assistance of a language interpreter, interviews a Swazi woman handcrafting ceramic pots in South Africa.

Fowler feels he is one step closer to understanding why archaeological cultures would have the same type of artifact style distributed over a vast area. He has determined the style of making things, such as ceramic pots, varies significantly within a culture, like the Zulu, while the things themselves may look very similar.

"Some things potters do are virtually identical, like how you shape a pot, whereas other things like decoration are highly variable," says Fowler. "What that provides for archaeologists is a way to move away from just looking at the object, and begin to try and reconstruct its history and all the decisions that went into making it."

But how do you 'see' these decisions in a vessel? The answer is that the production process must be 'unravelling'.

Observing the construction of vessels is just one part of the process. Fowler brings the collections into the lab (all the pots he has watched being made) and approaches them as would an archaeologist. He effectively reverse-engineers the process of making the pot, such as using chemical and mineralogy analyses to look at clay sources and how potters make clay recipes.

During the shaping process, "One thing we've observed is that potters will stop one-third of the way up and then let the vessel dry, and then they start again, and then stop after another third and repeat the process so that the pot doesn't collapse," says Fowler. "We can see these in an x-ray and I've looked at vessels that date back 1,800 to 700 years ago, and they have the exact same lines in the same places."

An 'aha' moment for the researcher was upon realizing what the potters do is not similar, it's identical.

"When I can go in and visit groups of potters and they fashion vessels exactly the same way. They don't know each other, they've never met each other, they are hundreds and hundreds of kilometres apart and they do things identically. It's just fascinating," shares Fowler. "That retention of knowledge and that unchanged aspect of it, that's the next phase of our project. Right now we have a baseline to figure out how far back in time this tradition goes."

To learn more about Nguni Ceramics and Society Project (NCSP), visit http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~fowlerk/Research_2.html



Photo by Kent Fowler

Amongst Zulus, only women are potters, an art form that allows these women to supplement their household income and help send their children to school.