

# An historical account of iron smelting in the Lowveld, South Africa

Duncan Miller, Maanda Mulaudzi and David Killick

*ABSTRACT: In 1930 Mrs E D Giesekke, the wife of a missionary, published an account of indigenous charcoal manufacture, iron mining, smelting and smithing in the Lowveld region of northern South Africa. Despite earlier mention of iron and copper working in the area around Phalaborwa by European travellers and explorers, Mrs Giesekke's account is the only known detailed description of the smelting process and rituals associated with it. This paper is an annotated translation of Mrs Giesekke's account from the original German, including a translation of one of the smelters' songs recorded by her. This complements recently completed archaeometallurgical analyses of smelting debris from the Phalaborwa area.*

## Introduction

Iron production in the Lowveld, South Africa (Fig 1), has been dated to two periods spanning the past 1000 years (Miller, Killick and van der Merwe in press). In the late 19th century several European explorers mentioned smelting activity in the Lowveld region around Phalaborwa, but did not describe the activity in any detail. In the early 20th century, Mrs E D Giesekke, the wife of a local missionary, published an account of the oral history of local smelting in German, with her own translation of one of the songs sung by the smelters (Giesekke 1930). Mrs Giesekke has not received the historical recognition that her husband and other male missionaries have enjoyed, and her intellectual work has often been viewed as merely a supporting role to her husband. Yet from entries in some ethnographies (eg Van Warmelo 1940, 4), it is clear that she was a researcher in her own right.

Ermuthe Dorothea Giesekke was born Schwellnus in 1884 in Venda at Tshakhuma, the second and one of the more important mission stations of the Berlin Mission Society (BMS) in the area. The first BMS missionaries, led by C Beuster, had arrived here in late 1872. Her

father, the Rev. E Schwellnus, had arrived two years later in early 1874 and started the Tshakhuma mission station, destined to become a major educational centre as well. When she was born, colonial rule had yet to be imposed in the area. According to family recollections, she apparently acquired fluency in Tshivenda before mastering German. In 1894, after years of early home schooling, she went back to Germany for part of her education and returned home with an equivalent of a high school diploma. Plans to pursue a career in nursing were interrupted by the illness of her mother whom she had to look after, forcing her to abandon her training after a year at Elim Hospital in the area. In 1906 she married a BMS missionary, the Rev. Ludwig Giesekke, who had been a schoolmate of her brothers in Germany. She had five children, three daughters and two sons. One of these daughters later married the well-known government ethnologist, Dr N J van Warmelo, who published a series of ethnologies on Vhavenda, among others, in the 1930s and beyond. She wrote *Ndededzi*, a reader for the various grades of elementary school. As part of this work, she collected materials related to Tshivenda culture and language. Dr van Warmelo and other anthropologists interested in the Venda area relied extensively on her knowledge. She was also involved