Contents lists available at ScienceDirect



Journal of Physics and Chemistry of Solids

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jpcs



Homogeneously dispersed CeO₂ nanoparticles on exfoliated hexaniobate nanosheets



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Hexaniobate nanosheet Support decoration CeO₂ nanopartcles Hybrid nanosystem

ABSTRACT

Hexaniobate nanosheets derived from the parent compound $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ have been decorated with CeO_2 nanoparticles by ion exchange with aqueous cerium (IV) solution. Very homogeneous CeO_2 nanoparticle decoration of the hexaniobate sheets can be achieved by this method and the resulting composites may absorb visible light. HRTEM images show that ~3.0 nm diameter CeO_2 nanoparticles adhere to hexaniobate nanosheets that are exfoliated and then restacked prior to Ce deposition. The interfacial interaction between CeO_2 nanoparticles and nanosheets would be due to an electrostatic attraction mechanism. Raman and XRD measurements have given strong evidence that CeO_2 nanoparticles have fluorite structure. EDS, FTIR and XPS results suggest almost complete exchange of TBA⁺ and K⁺ by Ce⁴⁺. Cerium ion exchange on the acid exchange parent compound, $H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb_6O_{17}$, revealed that the extent of Ce ion exchange is much greater in case of nanosheets, which may be rationalized by the larger surface area available after exfoliation. XPS measurements show that the ratio of Ce⁴⁺/ Ce³⁺ is around 4.4, in agreement with the formation of fluorite structure (CeO₂). Thus, these CeO₂ nanoparticle/ nanosheet composites may be useful for catalytic processes.

1. Introduction

Synthesizing new functional materials with control over structure, morphology and dimensionality and tailoring them for different applications is an important goal of materials science. Bi-dimensional and onedimensional structures has been very intensively studied and are useful because of their surface area, hosting ability and particular electronic properties [1]. Along with carbon nanotubes, graphene and various organic supra-molecular tubular and planar structures, different inorganic uni- and bi-dimensional materials have been explored for their tunable properties and adequate applications. Amongst them, lamellar transition metal oxides are very intriguing because of their protonic and electronic conductivity, dielectric properties, and electronic interactions with catalytic metal nanoparticles [2]. These layered materials can be exfoliated into thinner layers with the aid of intercalation by aqueous solution of organic bases [3,4] or other adequate organic molecules [5,6] to achieve properties different from their bulk counterparts [7].

Among these oxides, $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ is unusual in that the asymmetric sheets are stacked alternately in a head-to-head and tail-to-tail fashion in the crystal structure [8]. This structural feature enables selective intercalation of two chemically distinct interlayer galleries, a property that has been exploited for photocatalysis [9] and for exfoliation to produce either bilayer flat sheets or nanoscrolls [10,11]. Very recently Hu et al. have carefully designed a partial protonation and restacking method to obtain nanoscrolls and nanosheets of $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$, both of which showed enhanced photocatalytic property, owing to their high surface area [12].

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpcs.2017.08.027 Received 19 May 2017; Received in revised form 7 August 2017; Accepted 18 August 2017 Available online 19 August 2017 0022-3697/© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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These nanoscrolls can be further processed by thermal dehydration [13] or decoration and/or functionalization with other active moeities [14, 15] such as metal and metal oxide particles owing to the thermodynamically favorable interfacial interaction energy [16]. Furthermore, these layered materials can be used as an metal ion scavengers to remove pollutants from water [17,18].

Metal ion exchange on tubular or lamellar inorganic structures by simple chemical routes has been established as an easy and useful way of generating functional hybrid materials [19–22]. For example, improving catalytic properties because of band gap engineering in case of photocatalysis [23–25], or modulating Lewis and Brønsted acidity/basicity [26] in case of heterogeneous catalysis. $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ has been exfoliated and acid exchanged in order to realize increased photocatalytic activity [27]. Additionality, partial or total metal ion exchange with Fe³⁺, Ce³⁺, Cu²⁺ and Ag⁺ can lead to enhanced photo- or heterogeneous catalysis, and the thermal treatment of these ion-exchanged products can generate composite nanostructures [28–30].

Ce ion doping of transition metal oxides can lead to modified electronic [31] and catalytic properties [32]. CeO₂ (Ceria) is important oxide due to its applications as an active catalyst in vehicle emission systems, as a solid oxide ion conductor, as a fuel cell electrode material, as the active material in gas sensors, and as a component of high T_C-superconductors [33-37]. The catalytic properties of nanoscale ceria are enhanced by its high surface-to-volume ratio, and hybrid materials have been generated by growing CeO₂ nanoparticles in solid solutions [38]. Viana et al. have been successful in decorating titanate nanotubes with very small (3-4 nm) CeO₂ nanoparticles by a simple ion-exchange process with ammonium cerium (IV) nitrate solution, ending up with different band gap for the hybrid system and increased solar photocatalytic activity in the degradation of dyes [39]. CeO₂-titanate nanostructures have also been synthesized by hydrothermal or other methods [31-33,40-42] with useful catalytic properties [43-46]. The study of the growth of CeO₂ nanoparticles on the external walls of titanate nanotubes suggested that a simple ionic interaction is responsible for the attachment of the nanoparticles to the anionic walls of the tubes [47–51]. Other hybrid systems, like hydrous cerium oxide (HCO)-Graphene platelet composites, have been obtained by simple stirring. These materials can capture arsenate ions through bonding with OH groups on HCO, which are distributed uniformly over the graphene sheets [52]. Although there are reports on the structure and properties of bulk and nano-structured cerium niobate which can have an variety of applications [53–57], few studies have been done on cerium ion exchange of two-dimensional metal oxide nanosheets.

In this work, we have performed a simple cerium ion exchange reaction using aqueous ammonium cerium (IV) nitrate solution on exfoliated and restacked potassium hexaniobate ($R-K_4Nb_6O_{17}$) sheets. It has been found that along with the cerium ion exchange, very small CeO₂ nanoparticles form in the solution and are bonded to the hexaniobate nanosheets surface to give rise to a new homogeneous hybrid functional material. Careful microscopic (TEM, HRTEM and SEM), XRD and spectroscopic (Raman, EDS and XPS) characterizations suggest the decoration of small (\sim 3.0 nm) CeO₂ nanoparticles (fluorite structure) over hexaniobate sheets mainly by a strong electrostatic interaction between the nanoparticles (positively charged) and nanosheets (negatively charged). In addition, XPS study indicates that the CeO₂ nanoparticles have been performed with oxygen vacancies, which may be useful for catalytic processes [58].

2. Experimental section

2.1. Synthesis

1H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb₆O₁₇ preparation

The layered metal oxide $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ was synthesized by heating K_2CO_3 and Nb_2O_5 (sigma-aldrich) at 1100 °C for 24 h as described in earlier

literature [13]. The as-obtained solid (1.0 g) was then proton exchanged by mixing with 100 mL of 1.0 mol/L HNO₃ for three days and exchanging the acid solution daily. The suspension was centrifuged and the solid product was washed with deionized water and centrifuged again one more time. The powder obtained ($H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb_6O_{17}$) was then dried at 80 °C.

2Exfoliated/Restacked $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ nanosheet preparation (R- $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$)

The $H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb_6O_{17}$ (0.100 g) was stirred in 50 mL of tetra-*n*-butylammonium hydroxide (TBA⁺OH⁻, Alfa Aesar) aqueous solution (25 mmol/L) overnight or longer to complete the exfoliation reaction. The pH of the solution after exfoliation was 12 and the unexfoliated material was allowed to settle overnight. After decanting the unexfoliated sample, the material was restacked by adding the suspension dropwise into 2 M KOH (50 mL). This sample was named as R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇.

3Cerium ion exchange/decoration process.

Cerium ion-exchange/decoration reaction was carried out with R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ nanosheets and H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb₆O₁₇ samples by suspending 100 mg of each sample separately in 100 mL of 0.05 mol/L aqueous solutions of (NH₄)₂Ce(NO₃)₆ (sigma-aldrich). The suspensions had initial pH equal to 4 and they were stirred with the aid of a magnetic stirrer for 24 h at room temperature (at about 25 °C). The solid product was isolated by centrifugation at 3500 rpm, and it was washed several times with deionized water, until the final supernatant pH reach 7 (the initial pH was 4). Washing removes remaining soluble ions such as TBA⁺, K⁺, OH⁻, Ce^{4+} , NH_4 ⁺ and NO_3^- . The solid product was then vacuum-dried to obtain the Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets (from R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇) and the Ce-H₄Nb₆O₁₇ plates (from H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb₆O₁₇). Both of them have a yellow coloration due to cerium incorporation (visible light absorption). However, as shown in Fig. S1, the yellow color of Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets is much more intense (Fig. S1(a)) than the Ce-H₄Nb₆O₁₇ plates (Fig. S1(b)), see supplementary information), probably due to the higher extent of cerium ion exchange onto the exfoliated sheet than onto the unexfoliated plates.

2.2. Characterizations

Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy was recorded using an attenuated total reflectance (ATR) setup in a Vertex 70 spectrometer (Bruker company). A total of 64 scans and a resolution of 4 cm⁻¹ were used for obtaining spectra with good signal-to-noise ratios. The range used was $600-4000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$.

Raman spectroscopy experiments were performed on a confocal Raman spectrometer, Bruker Senterra, with a $50 \times$ objective and 785 nm laser as the excitation source. Low laser power density was used in order to avoid sample overheating. A spectral resolution of 3 cm⁻¹ was used and the range employed was 80–1050 cm⁻¹. Also, Raman spectroscopy was performed using a Renishaw inVia confocal micro-Raman spectrometer in the wavenumber range (100-3200 cm⁻¹) with a 100× objective of confocal microscope and 514 nm laser as the excitation source; the spectral resolution was 2 cm⁻¹.

X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) patterns were obtained with a Shimadzu XRD6000 diffractometer using Cu K α ($\lambda=1.5406$ Å) radiation operating at 30 mA and 40 kV. A scan rate of 1° min $^{-1}$ was used and the 20 range was 5–70°.

Scanning electron micrographs (SEM) were collected using a FEI Quanta FEG250 microscope. Elemental (qualitative) analysis by energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) was performed using an EDAX Apollo X probe attached to the SEM. The powdered samples were dispersed onto carbon tape placed on the SEM sample holder.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were obtained using a JEOL-JEM-2010F microscope operating at 200 keV. The samples were prepared by the dropping of an aqueous suspension of sample powder onto a holey carbon-coated copper grid and letting the water evaporate at room temperature.

XPS spectra were collected on a VSW HA-100 spherical analyzer instrument using MgK α radiation (hv = 1253.6 eV). High-resolution spectra were measured with a constant analyzer pass energy of 44 eV, which produced a full width at half-maximum (FWHM) line of 1.6 eV for the Au(4f_{7/2}) peak. The calibration of the binding energy and the corrections of the energy shift as a result of the steady-state charging effect were accomplished by assuming that the C 1s line is centered at 284.6 eV.

Zeta potential measurements (10 times for each sample) were performed in the aqueous suspensions of the samples, using a Malvern -Zetasizer nanoZS - instrument.

3. Results and discussion

The Raman spectra of R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets and cerium-exchanged Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets are shown in the lower and upper traces of Fig. 1 (a) respectively. Apparently, the addition of the Ce⁴⁺ ions to the hexaniobate sheets does not substantially alter the Nb-O stretching vibrations and lattice modes of the hexaniobate sheets, as the Raman spectra do not show any significant change. However, some changes could be highlighted, first, the typical vibrational mode of CeO₂ crystalline phases at 460 cm⁻¹ appears in the Raman spectrum of Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇. Thus, this result suggests that CeO₂ nanoparticles are grown over the hexaniobate sheets and are likely to have the fluorite structure, belonging to *Fm3m* space group which has a Raman active T_{2g} (assigned in Fig. 1(a)) mode at around 460 cm⁻¹. Second, vibrational modes of the hexaniobate sheets around 200 cm⁻¹ (lattice mode) and 890 cm⁻¹ (Nb - O terminal stretching mode of highly distorted NbO₆ octahedra) have undergone a slight blue-shift after Ce⁴⁺ ion exchange, because of the change in Nb - O



Fig. 1. (a) Raman spectra of R-K₄Nb₄O₁₇ sheets and Ce-K₄Nb₄O₁₇ sheets, taken with 785 nm laser, Ce-K₄Nb₄O₁₇ sheets shows the CeO₂ related peak at around 460 cm⁻¹. (b) XRD pattern of R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets and Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets showing the main CeO₂ (fluorite structure) crystalline planes.

bond energy when Ce^{4+} is substituted for K^+ , and the intensity of the bands near 386 cm⁻¹ and 645 cm⁻¹ (Nb - O vibrations of slightly distorted octahedra) decrease the intensity with Ce⁴⁺ ion intercalation [59] The Raman spectra of unexfoliated H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb₆O₁₇ plates and Ce-H₄Nb₆O₁₇ plates are shown in the lower and upper traces of supplementary Fig. S2(a) (see supplementary information), respectively. Also, no significant changes are found in these spectra, and no characteristic peaks of CeO₂ are observed, probably due to the lower extent of Ce⁴⁺ ion exchange. ATR-FTIR spectra of R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets and Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets are shown in the lower and upper traces, respectively, of Fig. S3. ATR-FTIR spectra of the samples show similar characteristics in the Nb-O stretching region between 1000 and 700 cm⁻¹. The band located at 877 cm⁻¹ is ascribed to the stretching vibration of Nb-O terminal groups; the broadening of the band and the shift to lower energy derive from a decrease in the number of terminal ligands owing to their gradual Ce ion exchange. The asymmetric Nb-O-Nb stretching vibration is found near 795 cm⁻¹. Both spectra show a strong and broad band at around 3300 cm^{-1} (Fig. S3), which is attributed to the O-H stretching mode of hydroxyl groups and structural/adsorbed water. The intensity of the water and surface-hydroxyl bands is decreased as Ce⁴⁺ intercalation. This can be interpreted in terms of the formation of CeO₂ on the surface of hexaniobate sheets, which involves an ionic linkage with the negatively charged surface of sheets, thereby displacing protons and decreasing the intensity of the O-H bands. A similar result was found in case of Ce4+ ion-exchange of titanate nanotubes [51]. The presence of TBA⁺ ions is characterized by bands around 2800-3000 cm⁻¹ assigned to C-H stretching, and at around 1470 and 1380 cm⁻¹, which are attributable to the bending and deformation modes of the CH₂ group, respectively [60]. Also, it can be seen a decrease of the intensity, probably, due to partial substitution of TBA⁺ by Ce⁴⁺.

The X-ray powder diffraction patterns of R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets and Ce- $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ sheets are shown in the lower and upper traces of Fig. 1 (b), respectively. Broad, low intensity diffraction peaks are observed for both samples, consistent with the lack of long range order in the scrolled and exfoliated nanosheets. A broad peak at around 8.4° is related to the basal spacing (040) of hexaniobate sheets and broad peaks at around 24° and 17.5° can be indexed as planes (2 0 0) and (0 0 2) of hexaniobate sheets [10,61]. After Ce⁴⁺ exchange, the XRD pattern remains essentially the same suggesting retention of the lamellar structure although the peak around 8.4° broadens with Ce⁴⁺ incorporation. Similar phenomena have previously been observed with Rh deposition onto hexaniobate sheets [14]. However, after Ce⁴⁺ exchange, new shoulder-like peaks at 33°, 48° and 58° (20) appear, which can be assigned to the (200), (220) and (311) diffraction planes of the fluorite CeO2 structure respectively, as reported previously [47] and further confirmed by TEM analysis. In addition, in the diffractogram of the Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sample it can be observed that the relative intensity of different peaks is changed and peaks are broader and more asymmetric if compared to diffractogram of raw material. This behavior could be related to the changes in environment due to the ion exchange of Ce⁴⁺ and/or CeO₂ nanoparticle deposition. A similar phenomenon has been observed in the case of titanate nanotubes [39]. The broadening and asymmetry of the hexaniobate diffraction peaks after Ce⁴⁺ deposition suggests a disordered chemical environment due to the ion-exchange. The average size of CeO2 nanoparticles can be estimated from XRD peak analysis using the Scherrer equation. Only the (311) diffraction peak was used in the calculation, as it is most prominent. The average particle size was found to be 3.5 nm. The XRD diffraction patterns of unexfoliated H_{2.9}K_{1.9}Nb₆O₁₇ plates and Ce-H₄Nb₆O₁₇ plates are shown in the lower and upper traces of Fig. S2(b) respectively. They show practically no difference from one another, which can be attributed to the fact that the amount of Ce⁴⁺ exchange is quite small and the changes are not so prominent due to the bulk-nature of the sample.

Fig. 2(a) presents a scanning electron image of $R-K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ sheets. This image clearly shows the sheet-like morphology with a small amount of scroll-like structures. Meanwhile, The samples were washed in order to lower the amount of organic cations and other superficial ions. This



Fig. 2. SEM micrographs of (a) R-K₄Nb₄O₁₇ sheets and (b), (c) of Ce-K₄Nb₄O₁₇ sheets. (d) Higher magnification SEM image of Ce-K₄Nb₄O₁₇ sheets which shows scroll-like structures.

procedure decreases the solution ionic strength and under these conditions the formation of hexaniobate tubes is not favorable [61]. On the other hand, in Fig. 2(b) and (c), sheet-as well as scroll-like structures derived from Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets can be clearly observed. Fig. 2(d) shows a high resolution image of Ce-K4Nb6O17 sheets with clear view of nano-scrolls. It is evident that the sheet-like hexaniobate structures are being rolled up when subjected to Ce⁴⁺ ion exchange. This can be explained in the terms of change density of Ce⁴⁺. With smaller size and high charge density, when one Ce⁴⁺ ion replaces four H⁺ ions, the flat hexaniobate sheet with surface negative charges due to surface O-H groups rolls up in order to avoid the charge repulsion and larger amounts of nanoscrolls are formed. Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) analyses were also performed along with SEM in order to infer about the chemical composition of the R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ after Ce⁴⁺ ion exchange as shown in Table 1. However, EDS measurements have not determined the exact Ce content of the exchanged phase. It shows a very efficient ion-exchange as all K⁺ ions have been replaced by Ce⁴⁺ ions. Furthermore, the Ce/Nb ratio is much higher than the K/Nb ratio after the ion exchange because the Ce signal also comes from the CeO₂ nanoparticles, which decorate the nanotubes. To confirm and elucidate these results, transmission electron microscopy was performed on all the samples.

Fig. 3(a) shows a low-magnification TEM image of $R-K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ nanosheets which reveals the thin sheet-like structures with occasional needle-like formation indicating a tubular morphology. The dimensions of these tubes matches with previous reports [15], and some of them consist of two tubes joined together in a parallel orientation, which suggests that the tubes are formed by scrolling of the opposite edges of one hexaniobate sheet. Thus, they are hexaniobate sheets containing

Table 1

Elemental composition from EDS mapping analysis of $R\text{-}K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ and $\text{Ce-}K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ sheets.

Element	Sample					
	$R-K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ sheets (atomic percentage)	Ce-K ₄ Nb ₆ O ₁₇ sheets (atomic percentage)				
0	69.5	67.2				
Nb	20.1	21.3				
K	9.4	0.0				
Ce	0.0	11.4				

curled opposite edges. Also, it could be inferred that the neutralization of excess of negative charges on exfoliated samples favors sheet curling [13, 61]. Fig. 3(b) shows the clear sheet-like morphology as the HRTEM image shown in Fig. 3(c) reveals the crystalline nature of the sheet with two lattice parameters at around 0.31 nm and 0.36 nm. Fig. 3(d) shows a low-magnification, large-area image of Ce-K4Nb6O17 (from R-K4Nb6O17) with a mixture of exfoliated nanosheets and nanoscrolls. Fig. 3(e) and (f) show the presence of nanoscrolls, while Fig. 3(g) shows a sheet-like morphology, and all of them are homogeneously decorated with very small nanoparticles. Fig. 3(h) and (i) show images containing higher resolution images of these nanoparticles, and an HRTEM image of these particles is shown in Fig. 3(j). Nanoparticles have a *d*-spacing of 0.31 nm which is indexed to the (111) plane of CeO_2 with the fluorite structure as suggested by the XRD analysis. In Fig. 3(k) a histogram of average particle size analysis is shown and an average diameter of the CeO2 nanoparticles at around 3.4 nm is found (0.7 nm of standard deviation). Thus, the physical dimensions of the CeO₂ nanoparticles are in very good agreement with XRD linewidth results. The TEM and HRTEM images of H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb₆O₁₇ plates and Ce-H₄Nb₆O₁₇ plates are shown in Fig. S4. Fig. S4(a) and (b) reveals the thick plate-like morphology of $H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb_6O_{17}$ sample with lattice parameter of 0.41 nm (Fig. S4(c)). After the Ce⁴⁺ ion exchange the plate-like morphology is retained as seen in Fig. S4(d), but these plates also present CeO₂ nanoparticles homogeneously dispersed on their surface (Fig. S4 (e, f, g)). The HRTEM images (Fig. S4(h) and(i)) are indicanting nanoparticles with d-spacing of 0.31 nm which can be indexed to the (111) plane of fluorite-structure of CeO₂. In Fig. S4(j), a histogram of average particle size shows that the average diameter of the CeO2 nanoparticles is 2.8 nm (0.4 nm of standard deviation).

XPS measurements were performed to check the sample stoichiometry and determine the cerium oxidation state. Fig. 4(a) shows survey spectra, which indicate that there is a significant amount of Ce on the R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ nanosheets, probably covering the sheet surface, in comparison with the lower relative amount of the other elements. The complete ion exchange of the K⁺ ion by Ce⁴⁺ ions due to the drastic decrease of the K2p peaks. Integration of peaks in the XPS spectra enabled the determination of the surface concentrations of the elements, as shown in Table 2 [62].

Fig. 4(b) shows the Nb3d spectra for R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ and Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇



Fig. 3. TEM images of $R-K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ sheets (a) low magnification, (encircled area shows the presence of tube or scroll like structures); (b) high magnification and (c) HRTEM images of Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets in (d) low magnification and (e)–(i) high magnification; In (e) and (f) the tube or scroll type of structures can be located on the edge of the sheets; In (g), (h) and (i) it could clearly see the CeO₂ nanoparticles; (j) shows the average diameter distribution of the particles with average size of ~3.4 nm; (k) shows the HRTEM of the sample, with d spacing of (111) plane CeO₂ particle as 0.31 nm.

sheets. Spectral fitting indicates two chemically different Nb environments with a binding energy difference of 2.8 eV, as reported in the literature [63-65]. In addition, the fitting parameters indicate a spinorbit splitting between the $Nb3d_{5/2}$ and the $Nb3d_{3/2}$ peaks of 3.1 eV for R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ nanosheets and of 2.6 eV for Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ nanosheets. The results are in good agreement with standard samples and the resolution of the equipment. Fig. 4(c) exhibits the O1s spectra for the R-K4Nb6O17 and Ce-K4Nb6O17 sheets. The spectra were fit to two peaks separated by 1.8 eV (R-K4Nb6O17) and 1.9 eV (Ce-K4Nb6O17). The origin of the second O1s peak (at around 530 eV) is not clear, but, it could be associated with vacancies in ceria or surface hydroxyl groups on the nanosheets [62]. Because the second peak appears even in the sample without Ce, it is reasonable to conclude that the second hypothesis is more likely. Fig. 4(d) shows the Ce 3d spectrum for the Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheet sample. The fitting results indicate five sets of spin-orbit doublets. The peak of Ce $3d_{5/2}$ is line *u* and the peak of Ce $3d_{3/2}$ is the line *v*. The origin of each one of these peaks has widely studied in literature [66,67]. Lines u_0, u_1, v_0 and v_1 correspond to Ce³⁺, whereas lines u, u_2, u_3, v, v_2 and v_3 correspond to Ce⁴⁺. In order to estimate the oxidation state of Ce, the method of Romeo et al. can be applied [66]. The concentration of Ce^{3+} can be calculated using the Ce 3d fitting parameters, applying Equation (1).

$$%Ce^{3+} = \frac{\nu_0 + \nu_1 + u_0 + u_1}{\nu_0 + \nu + \nu_1 + \nu_2 + \nu_3 + u_0 + u + u_1 + u_2 + u_3}$$
(1)

The results indicates a concentration of ${\sim}19\%$ Ce^{3+} and 81% Ce^{4+} on the surface of the Ce-K_4Nb_6O_{17} sheets.

In order to give insights about interaction mechanism between

niobate nanosheets and CeO2 nanoparticles, Zeta potential measurements were also carried out for R-K4Nb6O17 nanosheets, Ce-K4Nb6O17 nanosheets and (NH₄)₂Ce(NO₃)₆) solutions, showing average values of -56 mV, -12.3 mV and +11.8 mV, respectively. It was already demonstrated that Ce⁴⁺ ions can be hydrolyzed to CeO₂ colloidal nanoparticles (size of approximatively 3 nm) even in acid conditions (pH \sim 0.5) [49,51]. Thus, the previously formed CeO₂ nanoparticles could attach to the hexaniobate nanosheets, where they are strongly anchored by a simple electrostatic interaction. This fact could also explain the small size and narrow distribution of nanoparticles on hexaniobate nanosheets, as it was demonstrated in a similar system recently published [51], and also by the zeta potential measurements. Although there are other mechanisms proposed in the literature for the interaction between nanoparticles and niobate support such as covalent bonding [16], in the present case it is believed that the electrostatic interaction is the main mechanism since the CeO2 nanoparticles were already previously formed and coexisting with Ce⁴⁺ ion in solution, before of the support addition (see experimental section).

4. Conclusion

In summary, efficient Ce⁴⁺ ion exchange has been carried out with exfoliated and restacked K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets, replacing almost all K⁺ ions by Ce⁴⁺ ions. The ion exchange process does not destroy the basic morphology of the hexaniobate nanosheets, but incorporates some amount of scroll-like structures, the probable reason for this fact is the charge neutralization by Ce⁴⁺. The pristine hexaniobate nanosheets not only underwent ion exchange and scrolling but also were uniformly



Fig. 4. a) XPS spectra of i) R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ and ii) Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets, b) High resolution XPS Nb3d spectra of i) R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ and ii) Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets, c) High resolution XPS O1s spectra of i) R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ and ii) Ce-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets, c) High resolution XPS Ce2p spectrum of the R-K₄Nb₆O₁₇ sheets.

Table 2

Elemental	$\operatorname{composition}$	from	XPS	spectra	elemental	analysis	of	$R\text{-}K_4Nb_6O_{17}$	and	Ce
K ₄ Nb ₆ O ₁₇	sheets.									

Element	Sample						
	R-K4Nb6O17 sheets (atomic percentage)	Ce-K4Nb6O17 sheets (atomic percentage)					
0	74.2	66.7					
Nb	23.6	22.6					
K	2.2	0.4					
Ce	0.0	10.3					

decorated by 3.0 nm diameter CeO₂ nanoparticles. XRD and TEM studies reveal that the CeO₂ nanoparticles are crystalline with the fluorite structure. The interfacial interaction between nanoparticles and support would be due to an electrostatic attraction mechanism. Similar ion exchange process occurs with proton-exchanged $H_{2.9}K_{1.1}Nb_6O_{17}$ plates, but the extent of the exchange is not high, probably due to the lower available surface area of the plates. Thus, exfoliation of lamellar $K_4Nb_6O_{17}$ and Ce ion exchange/CeO₂ deposition can lead to the formation of new hybrid inorganic material that has good prospects for applications in catalysis and related fields.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge Prof. Richard Landers from Gleb Wataghin Physics Institute (UNICAMP-Brazil) for XPS measurements. M.E.S. and T.E.M. acknowledge support of this research by the National Science Foundation under grant DMR-1306938. B.C.V. acknowledge support from CNPq Grants 305632/2016-7, 400397/2014-5 and 209430/2013-3. B.C.V. and O.P.F. are grateful to support from CAPES-PROCAD 2013 Grant 183995.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx. doi.org/10.1016/j.jpcs.2017.08.027.

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