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Transparent Lu_3NbO_7 bodies prepared by reactive spark plasma sintering and their optical and mechanical properties

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Abstract

Transparent lutetium niobate (Lu_3NbO_7) bodies were prepared by reactive spark plasma sintering using Lu_2O_3 and Nb_2O_5 powders. Fully dense Lu_3NbO_7 bodies with density greater than 99.5% of the theoretical were obtained at 1300–1650 °C. The grains steadily grew from 0.1 to 0.6 μm with increasing sintering temperature from 1200 to 1450 °C and significant grain growth from 2.2 to 9.2 μm occurred at 1550–1650 °C. The Lu_3NbO_7 body sintered at 1450 °C showed the highest transmittance of 63% at 550 nm after heat treatment at 850 °C in air for 6 h. Fully dense, submicron-size transparent Lu_3NbO_7 exhibited Vickers hardness of ~13.0 GPa and indentation fracture toughness of 1.0 MPa $m^{1/2}$.
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1. Introduction

Rare earth niobates (RE_3NbO_7) with fluorite structure have attracted considerable interest as functional materials because of their anomalous magnetic properties and mixed ionic conductivity [1–5]. Among rare earth elements, Lu has the smallest ionic radius (97.7 pm for eight-fold coordinated Lu^{3+}) next to Sc [6], and thus Lu_3NbO_7 can preserve the $Fm\bar{3}m$ symmetry in the fluorite structure [5]. Its cubic structure is well suited for isotropic optical media. Because of the high atomic number of Lu ($Z_{Lu}=71$), Lu compounds exhibit high stopping power against high-energy beams and can be promising scintillation materials. However, no study has been conducted on the preparation of either single crystal or polycrystalline transparent Lu_3NbO_7 due to its high melting point (~2300 K) [7], whereas the heat capacity [8] and refined structural parameters [5] of Lu_3NbO_7 powder have been reported.

Spark plasma sintering (SPS) is a versatile technique for obtaining a fully dense body of a material with high melting point [9]. The short holding time and relatively low sintering temperature of SPS favour the fabrication of fine-grained, highly transparent polycrystalline bodies [10–13]. We have recently prepared a transparent Lu_3NbO_7 body by SPS using calcined powder of Lu_3NbO_7 [14]. Because there is no readily available commercial source of Lu_3NbO_7 powder, reactive sintering is the most convenient route to prepare a transparent body. However, reactive sintering has often caused insufficient reaction or subsequent grain growth during sintering, which results in opacity. Therefore, the reactive sintering process should be optimized for the preparation of a highly transparent, fully dense, fine-grained body.

In the present study, the transparent Lu_3NbO_7 bodies were prepared by reactive SPS of Lu_2O_3 and Nb_2O_5 powders. The effect of sintering and heat-treatment temperature on the microstructure, optical and mechanical properties of the Lu_3NbO_7 bodies were investigated.

2. Experimental procedure

Lu_2O_3 (Shin-Etsu Rare Earth, Tokyo, Japan; 99.99% purity) and Nb_2O_5 (Wako Pure Chemical, Tokyo, Japan; 99.9% purity) commercial powders were used as starting materials. These powders were stoichiometrically mixed (Lu:Nb=3:1) and ball milled using zirconia balls in

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ethanol for 12 h. Then, the milled slurry was dried at 60 °C for 24 h and passed through a 200 mesh sieve. The obtained powder was poured into a graphite die with a diameter of 10 mm and sintered by SPS (SPS-210LX, Fuji Electric Industrial, Japan) in vacuum. Details of the sintering profile have been reported elsewhere. The sintering temperature increased from room temperature to 600 °C in 300 s and to 1200–1650 °C at 0.17 °C s^{-1}. The temperature was maintained for 5 min at 1000 °C and for 45 min at 1200–1650 °C. A pressure of 10 MPa was preloaded below 1000 °C and increased to 100 MPa above 1000 °C. The specimen was heat treated at 750–1250 °C in air for 6 h. The sintered body was mirror polished on both sides using diamond slurry (1 μm). The final thickness of the specimen was approximately 1 mm. The polished surface was thermally etched at 100–200 °C below the sintering temperature in air for 1 h to measure the grain size.

Density was measured by Archimedes method in distilled water. Phase identification was accomplished by X-ray diffraction (XRD; RAD-2C, Rigaku, Japan). The thermally etched and fracture surfaces were observed using a field emission scanning electron microscope (FE-SEM, JSM-7500F, JEOL, Japan) and a scanning electron microscope (SEM; S-3100H, Hitachi, Japan). The average grain size was determined from the linear intercept length using a statistical factor of 1.56 and counting at least 250 grains [15]. The in-line transmittance in the wavelength range of 200–800 nm was measured with a spectrophotometer (UV-3101PC, Shimadzu, Japan). Vickers hardness (H_V) and fracture toughness (K_{IC}) were measured by a hardness tester (HM-221, Mitutoyo, Japan) at room temperature. K_{IC} was calculated by the following equation, $K_{IC}=0.073P\times c^{-1.5}$, using an applied load (P) of 0.98 N and the half crack length (c) that formed at the corners of the indentation.

3. Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows the XRD patterns of the Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at 1200–1650 °C. The XRD patterns can be indexed as cubic defect fluorite Lu_3NbO_7 (space group: $Fm\bar{3}m$; $a=0.5179$ nm; ICSD# 24–6385) [5]. In the cubic-defect fluorite structure, the Lu^{3+} and Nb^{5+} cations, and O^{2-} anions statistically occupy the 4*a* and 8*c* sites, respectively. No secondary phase was observed in all specimens. The XRD peaks slightly broadened at 1200 °C (Fig. 1(a)). The peaks were sharp but with shoulders at lower angles (Fig. 1(b) and (c)). These shoulders at lower angles have often been observed in distorted defect fluorite structures, such as fully or partially stabilised ZrO_2 [16]. The Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at high temperature could have the defective structure.

Fig. 2 shows the thermally etched surfaces of the Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at 1200–1650 °C. Pores were observed in the Lu_3NbO_7 body sintered at 1200 °C (Fig. 2(a)) and the specimen became fully dense having a uniform microstructure at 1400 and 1450 °C (Fig. 2(b) and (c)). Significant grain growth was observed at 1650 °C (Fig. 2(d)). Fig. 3 shows the fracture surfaces of the Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at 1200–1550 °C. A porous and not well-sintered microstructure was observed at 1200 °C (Fig. 3(a)). At 1400–1450 °C, pores were rarely observed, and the fracture mode was mainly transgranular (Fig. 3(b)–(d)). The fracture mode became intergranular at 1550 °C (Fig. 3(d)).

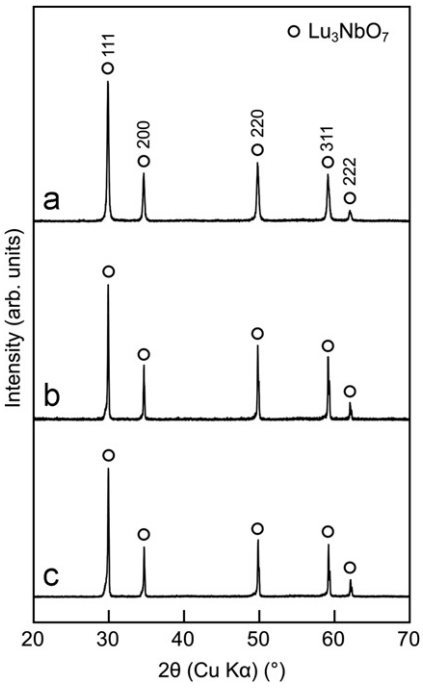

Fig. 1. XRD patterns of Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at various temperatures: 1200 °C (a), 1450 °C (b) and 1650 °C (c).

Fig. 4 shows the effect of sintering temperature on the relative density and average grain size of the Lu_3NbO_7 bodies. The relative density was 81.7% of the theoretical density at 1200 °C, which agrees with the porous microstructure (Fig. 3(a). Fully dense Lu_3NbO_7 (greater than 99.5% of the theoretical density) was obtained at 1300–1650 °C. The grain size steadily increased from 0.1 to 0.6 μm with increasing sintering temperature from 1200 to 1450 °C. Significant grain growth occurred at 1650 °C, and the average grain size reached 9.2 μm.

The as-sintered body had a black colour due to the reducing atmosphere during SPS. Fig. 5 displays optical micrographs of Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at 1450 °C after heat treating at 750–1250 °C in air for 6 h. At 800 °C, the Lu_3NbO_7 body had a black part inside the specimen (Fig. 5(a)). The heat-treated Lu_3NbO_7 body at 850 °C became transparent and colourless (Fig. 5(b)). The Lu_3NbO_7 bodies were transparent but partially frosted at 950 °C and 1050 °C (Fig. 5(c) and (d)).

Fig. 6 shows the effect of the heat-treatment temperature on the transmittance spectra of the Lu_3NbO_7 bodies sintered at 1450 °C. The transmittance was low at the heat treatment temperature of 750 °C because the colour remained after the heat treatment (curve a in Fig. 6). At heat-treatment

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