

Uncovering the Mysteries of Tsodilo Hills

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"Africa my land, land of my gods, land of my forefathers", a companion said out the poetic phrase as our eyes fixed on the Map of Africa nicely engraved on one of the rocks of Tsodilo, 'The Mountain of the gods'.

Three years ago, this cultural site situated deep in the Kgalahari Desert, northwest of Botswana and close to the Namibian border won its recognition from the World Heritage Committee as this country's only world heritage site.

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This came as a result of its outstanding value that is depicted through archaeological recordings, chronicling human activities and environmental changes spanning a period of at least 100, 000 years.

It is at the 400 sites found here that more than 5,000 tourists from all corners of the world converge annually to witness 4,500 rock paintings and carvings, most of which date between 850 AD and 1 100 AD.

According to archaeologist Jeffrey Matlapeng, the classification of Tsodilo as a world heritage site qualifies it to enjoy international recognition and accountability; site-specific management plans; new partnerships and projects; economic and social, political and ethnic empowerment and increased tourism activity.

Matlapeng says that the map was not artificially designed. It is the hand of nature that curved it through sedimentation and it has been in existence since the discovery of the Tsodilo Hills.

He says overseas scholars, scientists, and archaeologists have flown to this heritage site as doubting Thomases only to get confirmation from their sophisticated scientific instruments that indeed the map is not man-made.

Is it by coincidence or has it a meaning that this wonder of the world exists here in Botswana? Is it through instruction of the mysterious voices that history proclaims to have been speaking with ancient tribes who lived here, that the designer of the map of Africa grafted it as such?

It is Friday, May 18, 2007, the International Museum Day and Botswana has joined the international community in commemorating the day.

For Botswana, the venue is the foot of the Tsodilo Hills.

Tents are pitched all over the place to meet the needs of the flood of tourists and visitors, among them Members of Parliament (MPs) Ronald Ridge and Duncan Mlazier, the top brass of the society, tribal and church leaders, the Kungu and the Hambukushu tribes who inhabit the Tsodilo. Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture, Major General Moeng Pheto was also there to officially open the event, under the theme: Museums and Universal Heritage.

Pheto says that the theme of the day poses a great challenge for collective and collaborative efforts and responsibilities of the worldwide community together with museums in preserving the heritage of humanity. He further states that for such to be understood, the world must bear in mind the needs and expectations of the nations and the people whose heritage is being conserved.

"By the heritage of the people, we are here referring to a body of knowledge and an attitude with a holistic approach to the existence that includes the environment, the sciences, technology, the arts as well as the inherent systems of ideas and values that define the vision of the world, personal and group perceptions and ways of life."

There is a lot of drum-beating here as the Kung, descendants of the San tribe and the Hambukushu elders and children, exhibit their traditional dances in a way that reveals how once upon a time mother Africa was grounded in unpolluted culture.

After speeches, the master of ceremonies later announces that the dignitaries would be taken on a conducted tour of the place.

The first stop is the curio shop where neat artefacts, including curved bows and arrows that in olden days were used by the San when hunting, were on display.

There is also jewellery - not produced from the glitz diamonds, emerald and gold but in pebbles, beads and seeds, an exquisite beauty that reveals the inborn skill within the veins of the Botswana natives.

Matlapeng says the curio shop is the backbone of the economy of the village and a source of income for many households. Through the Ministry of Environment, Wildlife and Tourism's Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) project, communities near Tsodilo are encouraged to sell their products to the curio shop, which in turn has established markets in Europe.

The returns go to the Tsodilo Trust Fund and are used in the conservation, development and search for the museum.

Tsodilo museum displays, amongst other archaeological finds, the excavated three rock shelters, namely the White Painting, Depression Rock and the Rhino Cave. Also exhumed were the remains of 20 specularite mines and the remains of two villages Divuyu and N!oma dating back to 800AD. Pottery, metal spearheads, stone tools, glass beads and fish bones are some of the earthed discoveries that have helped archaeologists form a picture of ancient life here.

The discovery of fish bones is a sign that a lake once existed here some 10, 000 years ago, Matlapeng says.

He is also of the belief that ancient residents of Tsodilo were involved in iron trade with local communities and immigrants from Zambezi and Congo River, which, amongst other benefits, resulted in the clan's adoption of cattle and small livestock rearing around 6AD.

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Archaeologists, local communities present and late have contributed to museum exhibits on display. Tribute to them is made through their pictures and writings that are nicely displayed on the walls of the building.

From the museum, guests were introduced to the beauty of nature and the warmth of sunshine. Flora is in its diversity here amongst the plants is the famous Devil's claw (Sengaparile), whose herbal tubers are known for their medicinal properties.

There is also the Mongongo tree whose nuts that Matlapeng says have been used in local relishes for more than 9,000 years. Tsodilo Hills comprise four cliffs - the Male, Female, Child and the Grandchild.

The cliffs, or "inselbergs" as scientifically named, form a cluster covering a rectangular area of approximately 3km by 10km. The grandchild lies to the northwest of the cluster and locals avoid visiting it in belief that it is the domain of evil spirits.

The male hill is the highest point above sea level in Botswana at 1395m high.

The next stop is at panel one of the Female hill where Matlapeng shows visitors the red and white rock painting amongst which some are fading because of the harsh weather conditions of the Kgalahari Desert. We wonder how these ancient gods were capable of ascending high and painting some of their pictures.

There is also a spring under the rocks at the base of the mountain that never runs dry. It is called the Gobeku spring, a habitat for pythons that the Kungu regarded as their ancient gods. Both ancient and the present generation depended on its supply during times of drought. The rock turtle is also found there.

"Out of all the things that we saw, there is a plant that Matlapeng refused to show to the delegates.

"I am afraid that if I show you this one some of you will be tempted to steal it because it is a conserved species on which we are pinning our hope that someday it be announced as a cure for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)," he said.

According to a legend told by Xontae Xhao, the eldest surviving member of the Kungu tribe, Tsodilo Hills were once a family, which consisted of the father, mother, child and grandchild.

At one point the father and mother divorced and the mother moved away with the children.

The mother was unwilling to reconcile such that she cursed all of them, including herself, to turn into rocks. That is how the rocks inherited their names.

Today Tsodilo Hills, most revered by the tribes of the northwest, has many told mythological stories that are associated with the ancestral spirits that are believed to dwell there.

Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture deputy permanent secretary Neo Asafo Adjei urged the Tsodilo communities to conserve the heritage site for posterity.

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