

Private Sector Development

Programme: Tsodilo Hills, a Future Hub of Cultural Tourism

In the fourth of a series of articles that will present the work and findings of Botswana and EU service providers, the author writes of the potential of cultural tourism in the Tsodilo area. As part of the CDE-PSDP, Dr. Kundri Boehmer-Bauer was the expert engaged in the branding and marketing of the heritage site. The exercise was undertaken in response to the aspiration of several of Botswana's goals to strengthen her economy, including the Economic Diversification Drive and the theme of the National Development Plan (NDP) 10, 2009- 2016 and will conclude in 2016.



Dr. Kundri Bohmer-Bauer

Tsodilo Hills, a site with over 4,500 rock paintings in 400 places, is situated in the far North-West of Botswana, in the Okavango Sub-District, about 35 kilometres off the Maun-Shakawe road. Due to its archaeological significance as one of the most important rock art sites in Southern Africa, it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001. Known as 'Mountains of the Gods', 'Hills of the Ancestors' and the 'Louvre of Africa', the Tsodilo area holds great potential for sustainable tourism and employment opportunities for the inhabitants of the district. The vision of various stakeholders of Tsodilo Hills for the site and its people in 2020 is: "A popular tourism destination inhabited by healthy, educated, and proud residents who thrive on the rich cultural and natural resources of Tsodilo, and guard them well".

Developing Sustainable Tourism

Much has been done during the past five years in the Tsodilo area. For example, access to the site by road has been upgraded; visitor facilities such as the entrance area and camping grounds have been improved. Now, the PSDP aims to stimulate the economy by building institutional capacities with tourism being one of the sectors earmarked

for capacitation. In the near future, the construction of two privately owned lodges is planned, and the local community is to be trained in identifying business opportunities associated with sustainable tourism.

The Stories behind Marketing

Under the auspices of the PSDP, my task is to act as a 'translator' between the social sciences and marketing in order to help with the branding and marketing of Tsodilo as an internationally recognised, high-quality, 'must see' for visitors. I worked collaboratively with Programme stakeholders such as the Department of National Museum and Monuments (DNMM), the Botswana Tourism Organisation (BTO), the Hospitality and Tourism Association of Botswana (HATAB), and the Tsodilo Community Trust (TCT).

To assist the marketing specialists with the branding and world-wide marketing of Tsodilo, the overall objective of my assignment was to conduct desk research and assess the geographical characteristics of the area, as well as the historic rock paintings. Even now, at the beginning of the study, stories connected to the rich heritage and history of Tsodilo

abound.

Tsodilo Hills as a Universe

What makes the Tsodilo Hills a vibrant archaeological site is the interaction of different groups from within and outside Botswana with the hills. The Ju/'hoansi and Hambukushu explain the rock art according to the traditions of their forefathers. Even if these were not the artists who painted them, they provided ideas according to their own world-view. Guided by Khuntae Xhao, the village chief of the Ju/'hoansi, I followed several trails. The chief not only explained the meaning of individual and entire panels of rock paintings, but also took me to caves where his ancestors spent the rainy season, and to 'the place of origin' – the place where according to the local San and Hambukushu, God sent the animals and plants down to earth. So the Tsodilo Hills are far more than hills housing rock paintings. Tsodilo seems to reflect the whole universe; it is a cosmos of its own in the middle of Southern Africa.

A Very Vibrant Archaeological Site

For thousands of years, Tsodilo has been of spiritual and cultural significance. The site holds significance for more than the Ju/'hoansi and Hambukushu and their larger communities. Many church groups, for example members

of the Z.C.C. from Botswana and abroad, come to Tsodilo to perform prayers and healing ceremonies. For their ceremonies they fetch water from the Python Well near the starting point to Cliff Trail. According to literature and the local people, a large python lives deep inside the well. In many African societies, the Python is connected with rainmaking and fertility. Tsodilo is also important for individual tourists, the bulk of whom drive to Botswana from South Africa, who want to go on a hike and/or see the rock paintings. Domestic tourists include student groups visiting Tsodilo for history lessons in context.

In Closing

Tsodilo Hills has attracted people for thousands of years and continues to do so. Hiking, admiring rock art, fulfilling religious duties, listening to history lessons, enjoying the landscape, buying necklaces from the Ju/'hoansi and baskets from the Hambukushu, doing research, or just for recreation – there are many good reasons for the young and old, for local, domestic and international tourists to visit Tsodilo. Even if this article can give only a small impression of the cultural richness of the site and its people, it clearly shows that tourism in Botswana is more than just wildlife.

With the stories about Tsodilo and the marketing that will happen in the near future, domestic and international tourists will become more aware of the cultural and historical relevance of the site. Making the Tsodilo Hills the focal tourist point in northern Ngamiland will familiarise people from all over the world with an exciting chapter of African history. But even more important is the chance to improve the lives of the people of Tsodilo through sustainable tourism. As Phillip Segadika (2010) wrote: "As it has for millennia, the spiritual, economic, and political life of the Tsodilo Hills may once again be managed of its people, by its people, and for its people."

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Dr. Kundri Boehmer-Bauer is a social anthropologist specialising in African history and in anthropology and tourism. She works as a lecturer at several universities in Germany, as a consultant for the tourism industry, and as an intercultural trainer.
