

The role of cultural and heritage education at *Bakoni Malapa* Open Air Museum: demonstrations of cultural practices and craftwork techniques

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ABSTRACT

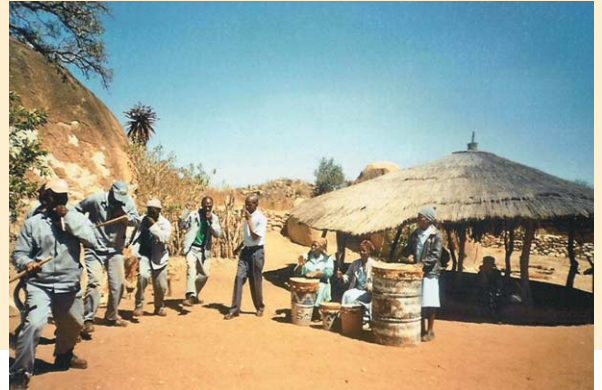
Open air museums are of vital importance in preserving and safeguarding culture and intangible heritage. This paper explores how *Bakoni Malapa* Open Air Museum preserves the culture of the *Bakoni* people by showcasing their cultural heritage and educating visitors about it. Although various methods are used to preserve the culture of the *Bakoni* people, this paper's analyses are based on just two of the museum's main activities in connection with intangible heritage – putting on demonstrations of traditional cultural practices and demonstrating craft techniques. We also discuss what other cultures around the globe can learn from the way *Bakoni* cultural heritage is presented at *Bakoni Malapa*.

Introduction

The museum industry plays a significant role in preserving the cultures of different societies (Gore, 2004; Uzzell, 1998). South Africa, like other developing countries, established museums to preserve the culture of societies by safeguarding their tangible and intangible heritage for the benefit of present and future generations. For that reason, there are approximately 300 museums in South Africa including ones dealing with agriculture, geology, military affairs, archaeology, arts, mining, and natural history (*South Africa Arts and Culture Yearbook 2006/2007*). *Bakoni Malapa* Open Air Museum was established in 1985 by the erstwhile apartheid regime in

order to preserve the cultural heritage of the *Bakoni* people (Jordaan, 1992). *Malapa* means 'homesteads'. The *Bakoni* are a sub-group of the Northern *Sotho* speaking people who were living in the Lebowa homeland when the museum was established. The homeland system was designed by the apartheid government to keep the vast majority of blacks away from the lands occupied by the white minority in South Africa (Beinart, 1994). During the apartheid regime, the *Bakoni Malapa* Museum was mostly visited by international tourists and members of the white minority in South Africa. It has been suggested that the white minority who visited the museum wanted to know more about different black cultures in order to be

Figure 1
Cultural demonstrators performing a traditional dance at the museum. Source: Musinguzi 2007



able to manipulate their members more effectively.

On the other hand, the museum had only a limited number of black visitors from the area because the majority of the local people resented the apartheid government for taking their land and forcing them into so-called 'homelands' where living conditions were extremely poor (Jeffrey *et al.* 1977). Therefore, *Bakoni Malapa* did not impress the local community when it was founded. However, the demise of the apartheid regime and the establishment of a non-racial government in 1994 led to the formation of the Department of Arts and Culture. In addition, other arts and culture organisations were created - the National Heritage Council, the South African Heritage Resources Agency, the National Arts Council of South Africa and the South African Geographical Names Council (South Africa Arts and Culture Yearbook, 2006/2007). The emphasis the Department of Arts and Culture and the various other organisations placed on traditional cultures probably helped local communities to recognise the importance of cultural institutions in their society. Nowadays, cultural institutions like *Bakoni Malapa* Museum are considered vital in preserving cultural heritage and in educating the local black community about it, and it is envisaged that such cultural education will be passed on to the younger generation so they, too, can understand the significance of their intangible heritage. *Bakoni Malapa* Open Air Museum would have no role to play in educating the *Bakoni* people about their cultural heritage if it did not preserve their intangible heritage (in the form of demonstrations of cultural practices and traditional craft making techniques). The presence of the museum is determined by the intangible heritage it showcases and safeguards. In turn, the safeguarding of their intangible

heritage is possible because the museum now provides an appropriate environment for regular demonstrations of cultural practices and the making of traditional craftwork.

An open air museum is defined as *a number of buildings placed in an area set aside...these buildings are shown as they were in the past* (UNESCO, 1958:25). In South Africa, open air museums include the *Tsonga Kraal*, the *South Sotho* Museum, the *Ndebele* Museum, *Kliptown*, and the *Bakoni Malapa* Museum (South Africa Arts and Culture Yearbook, 2006/2007). In all these museums, demonstrations of cultural practices and craftwork play a significant role in reminding people of their cultural background. This study uses the UNESCO (2003) definition of intangible heritage to identify what can be classified as intangible heritage at *Bakoni Malapa* Museum. Intangible heritage is *...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces ... of a society* (UNESCO, 2003:2). According to that definition, the demonstrations of cultural activities and craft making at the museum are forms of intangible heritage. Although the museum also has tangible artefacts, this study only explores the role of cultural and craft demonstrations at *Bakoni Malapa* Museum in post-apartheid South Africa.

Preserving the cultural heritage of the *Bakoni* people

The high rate of destruction of cultural heritage in the world (Niknami, 2005; Ruijgrok, 2006) has been attributed to modernisation (Woods, 2009; UNESCO, 2003), which means that 'borrowed' lifestyles are often preferred to a

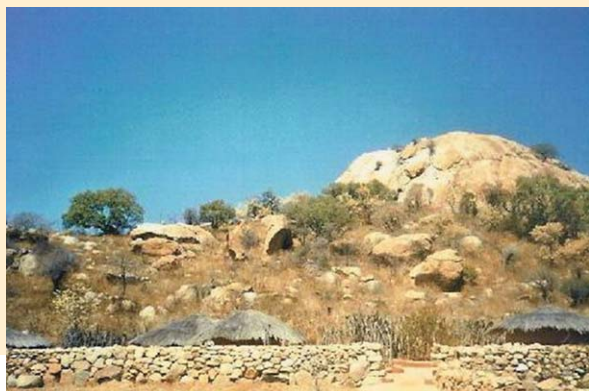


Figure 2
A view of some of the traditional homesteads of the *Bakoni* people. Source: Musinguzi (2007)

society's traditional cultural heritage. As a consequence, cultural attributes such as dress codes, music, customs and lifestyles that were considered meaningful by previous generations are gradually replaced by foreign imports. Therefore, preserving cultural heritage and teaching people about it is socially very important (Salazar and Marques, 2005). *Bakoni* society preserves and showcases its intangible heritage at *Bakoni Malapa* Museum in the form of cultural and craft making demonstrations.

In this paper, 'cultural demonstrations' mean traditional activities performed by museum workers to educate visitors (both local and international) about the culture of the *Bakoni* people. The main examples are the performance of traditional dances such as the *Dinaka* for men, who play pipes, and the *Mmapadi* by women who play drums and small wind instruments (but not the pipes) and demonstrations of traditional dress. During the performance of traditional dances, visitors are taught about gender specialisation among the *Bakoni* people. For example, men blow metal pipes and dance while the women beat drums of different sizes (Musinguzi, 2007) (Figure 1). The *Bakoni* people, like the *Basotho*, attach great importance to their attire (Martie, 2007). Their traditional dress code dictated that men and women should dress differently. The women wore two items of dress - front and back aprons - while the men only wore one, the loincloth (Jordaan, 1992). The attire for *Bakoni* men is akin to that of the *San* people at Kagga Kamma Cultural Village in the Cederberg Mountains, South Africa (Goudie *et al.* 1999) and it is generally believed that these two groups once lived in the same geographical region, possibly in central Africa.

Gender specialisation among the *Bakoni* people

signified respect for both genders; the mixing of gender roles was regarded as disrespectful. This cultural belief is something the *Bakoni* people still think is important and worth preserving for future generations. One of the demonstrators at the museum explained that gender specialisation is gradually dying out in modern society and this is divisive, families argue and the elder generation thinks the young are behaving disrespectfully – so, clearly, there are benefits when the younger generation is educated about the traditional roles of gender amongst the *Bakoni*.

Education at the museum

According to the ICOM 2004 definition of a museum, museums are expected to play an important role in educating societies about the intangible heritage they preserve. In the case of *Bakoni Malapa* Museum, education is offered to both adults and children, ensuring that it is a place where visitors can all learn something. Education for the adults involves explaining to them at length about the origins of the museum and its operation in the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. There are also tours around the museum's traditional homesteads (Figure 2) where there are demonstrations showing the old *Bakoni* way of life. The museum sees children as 'building blocks' for a future society that will be culturally sensitive and responsive (Jillian, 1996) and therefore it teaches school children about its origins too, but in a simpler way than it teaches adults. This is because children are unlikely to pay attention to long stories. In order to keep them interested, the museum gives them shortened versions of the stories and also engages them in hands-on activities such as making crafts and local

food, and smearing the homesteads' floors with cow dung – a traditional way of controlling dust and parasites. By engaging in such activities, children from local communities learn about the origins of their own cultural identity, while those from different societies ... *develop an understanding and an appreciation of other cultures* (Jillian, 1996:37).

Contemporary culture is often regarded as superior to traditional cultures and this causes conflict, yet it is evident that contemporary culture is really anchored in tradition. Indeed, without traditional culture there would be no contemporary culture. Therefore, it is traditional culture – the 'mother' of contemporary culture – that should be seen as superior. For example, this conflict can be seen in attitudes to craftwork (Follad, 2006). Another example of contemporary culture conflicting with tradition can be seen in Nigeria, among the *Igbo* people, where indigenous knowledge is displaced by western education. As a result, there is ... *the loss of or limited access to indigenous knowledge* (Abidogun, 2007:33). *Education, community interactions* ... and the sharing of cultural demonstrations may have a transformative effect and enable people who see themselves as ... *other/foreign* to be able to *identify* [themselves] *without fear or apprehension* (Lowen, undated). Also:

Connecting to others, from within our own cultural background expanding out to those less familiar is essential to inhabit a world where we live at ease within our global communities. An opportunity to

enter into the cultural space of others dissolves the defensiveness of fear of the "other" and enables a sense of security and the happiness of connection, understanding and even celebration of sharing a larger human landscape. (Lowen, undated)

Thus, cultural education, demonstrations and other forms of interaction developed to introduce the culture of one particular group can help the visitor towards a deeper and more profound understanding of other cultural groups and reduce his/her sense that they are 'other'.

Craft demonstrations are another important aspect of cultural heritage education at *Bakoni Malapa* Open Air Museum. They show the artistry and skill of the *Bakoni* people and the way they used natural materials to produce different types of items. This is another aspect of intangible heritage that is preserved and demonstrated at *Bakoni Malapa*. The crafts demonstrated include, among others, making hide paintings, calabashes, sleeping mats, wood carvings, winnowing baskets (Figure 3), necklaces, walking sticks, wooden porridge plates and spoons. Such craft items are produced and sold to visitors as souvenirs of their experience at the museum. The importance of being able to buy crafts at a tourist destination is described by the World Tourism Organisation thus:

... handicraft taken home from an enjoyable holiday has [the] continuing power to evoke wonderful



Figure 3
Bakoni craftwork on display in the museum
Source: Musinguzi (2007)


memories, and indeed to arouse the interest of others who see it and to encourage them to visit the destination. (World Tourism Organisation, 2006:1)

This implies that crafts can be vital marketing tools for tourist destinations.

Although crafts play a significant role in tourism and also at the museum, it is important to note that producing craftwork suitable for both cultural and tourist consumption poses a challenge for today's cultural craftsmen. The challenge is inevitable because the craftwork produced for tourists is normally of a different standard to that produced for traditional cultural purposes. Traditionally, most *Bakoni* craft items (such as baskets and clay pots) were large because they were produced for communal, not individual, use; thus, the size and weight of certain craft items have a cultural significance. On the other hand, tourists prefer items that are small, designed for individual use – and that fit in their suitcases or travel bags (Musinguzi, 2007). The above scenario may be described as a conflict between tradition and contemporary cultures. However, *Bakoni Malapa* Museum, as an institution committed to safeguarding intangible heritage, has not yielded to foreign demands for small crafts that are convenient for travellers. Making crafts specifically to please tourists leads to a loss of authenticity (Follad, 2006) which is why *Bakoni Malapa* does not produce crafts or perform demonstrations simply to please the tourists. Therefore, the size and the weight of craft items made at the *Bakoni Malapa* Museum follow the traditional forms. The museum values the need to preserve intangible heritage above all other considerations.

Conclusion

Demonstrations of aspects of *Bakoni* culture show how their roots and identity differ from those of other peoples. Craft items remind visitors of traditional *Bakoni* artistry and skills. This intangible heritage gives the *Bakoni* a sense of their place in the northern part of South Africa that should not be lost. Due to the importance of cultural heritage in the tourism sector, this study recommends that other South African cultural traditions should be demonstrated and preserved in the same way as *Bakoni* culture is demonstrated and preserved at the *Bakoni Malapa* Open Air Museum. This could be achieved by establishing other open air museums for different

cultural communities. It is, however, important to guard against modifying traditional culture to suit tourists, because the unrestricted use of culture for profit through tourism can lead to the loss of valuable knowledge about cultural heritage (George, 1973). However, demonstrations of cultural practices and of traditional craft making techniques also mean that cultures can be seen in a global context. 

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