

What came first – the rocks or the paintings?

“What came first – the rocks or the paintings?” This question posed by Xuntae Xhao, the most senior elder of the group of San at the foot of the Tsodilo Hills, challenges our western intellect. The question provoked a lively discussion by the whole group of San producing a complex answer, evincing more than one truth. But all truths can coexist here.

This is the report from a workshop at the Tsodilo Hills in northwestern Botswana, an outstanding rock art locus, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001. Three individuals of the African Archaeology Unit of the University of Cologne, and active members of the Heinrich-Barth-Institut, supported by a student from the University of Namibia, History Department, came to Tsodilo Hills in April 2006 with one aim: to build a bridge from science to people whom themselves are professionally occupied with rock art, namely site-specific tourist guides.

The training workshop lasted four days culminating in a certificate for the 28 participants. The workshop’s goal was to develop professionalism while paying particularly close attention to local knowledge.

The training embraced archaeology, rock art, communication skills, preservation and protection of sites all of which related closely to regional peculiarities and was adapted to the abilities of the participants. Teaching took place in English and Setswana for which translation had to be provided since not all participants had full mastery of English. Xuntae Xhao, for example, who so brightly posed the opening question, has never visited a school and can neither write nor read. This is also true of Gakenaope Sarefo, an elderly member of Hambukushu community who has been living near the Tsodilos for many years. Both hardly speak a word of English. They are representatives of the two main ethnic groups living here: the original inhabitants of the area the !Kung San, who used to be hunter-gatherers and the Hambukushu, agriculturalists and herders who moved into the area from Angola in the mid 19th century. All are bitterly impoverished and although living near the tourist premises they have to share their scanty income from the poorly developed tourism. This is not easy since this resource is very limited. For the moment a shaky equilibrium exists between the two groups, which is mainly dependant on the wise and charismatic leaders, their elders.



Splitting up in small working groups is a productive tool during the workshop

For all the participants in the training it was their first experience of this kind. Their customers are usually educated, well-informed tourists with an abstract interest in history and culture, so the participants’ most ardent needs soon became obvious. They showed enormous interest in not only the factual knowledge but also in learning interpersonal, and communication skills.

The archaeological part of the training particularly fascinated the participants due to its experimental demonstration: They witnessed the production of stone tools and learned to understand the remnants lying about on an archaeological site. However it proved to be a more difficult task to convey the common, “natural” western concept of chronology. In a perception of time where “all past is equally past” values other than relative age count. This was a didactic challenge.

A particularly lively atmosphere developed during the lesson on rock art. Here the curiosity of the participants was greatly stimulated. One at a time they had the chance to ask questions that had busied them for a long time and to clarify some mistaken ideas. The guides frequently have to face visitors who, though only have a superficial knowledge, show little respect to them. So it was important to give the guides a short overview of the rock art all over southern Africa. They studied the most important sites on large-scale pictures and even had a chance to get a notion of the art of the Australian aboriginals.

Another focus of the workshop was communication training. The local guides have to take a lot of responsibility for the visitors to their sites. Accepting and fulfilling the “office” of a leader was enacted in role-play activities. Each participant was offered the possibility to work on his or her personal strength and self esteem. The model of an “ideal guide” and an “ideal tour” was elaborated.

The entire training profited from the direct and passionate support by the director of the Botswana National Museum, the authority in charge. The



A demonstration of stone tool knapping boosts the understanding for the formation of archaeological sites



An essential part of the training: demonstrating the guiding skills on-site

museum invested a lot of money and effort. A lorry brought tents, chairs and tables from Gaborone, some 1500 km away and three cooks who served freshly slaughtered goats provided the catering. The director of the museum did not miss any of the training and she even sometimes jumped in as a co-trainer, pinning down an issue with a creative intervention.

There was a lot of learning, singing, praying and in the end even dancing. Honorable gentlemen and politicians from the district capital Shakawe were invited and participated in the feast on the closing evening. On this occasion it was firmly promised that the 30 km long road to Tsodilo would soon be tarred. This political promise was a direct consequence of the attention that Tsodilo received from press and TV reporting on the workshop. Next year a further workshop is planned.

So what did come first, the rocks or the paintings? One answer that surfaced in Tsodilo was: the rocks and the art came into being simultaneously. God cared for the rocks and the ancestors created the art.

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