

# Investigating the impact of world heritage site tourism on the intangible heritage of a community: Tsodilo Hills World Heritage site, Botswana

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# Investigating the impact of World Heritage site tourism on the intangible heritage of a community: Tsodilo Hills World Heritage site, Botswana

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## ABSTRACT

In places that are not World Heritage sites, communities produce material culture continuously as a form of interaction between themselves and their environments. In the Okavango Delta region, crafts are a good example of such material culture. Today, the concept of 'World Heritage' is led by socio-economic needs – through tourism - rather than socio-cultural interactions. In this process, the indigenous systems of knowledge that create intangible heritage are modified, usually in a negative way, and this affects the social networks that sustain the practices of craft production. The results of research projects conducted in June-August 2003 and June-July 2007 are used to illuminate this discussion. The paper concludes that while in the developing world, giving a site World Heritage status is likely to encourage tourism, the impact on the resident community's intangible heritage must be considered and safeguarded.

## Introduction

This paper uses craft production by communities at Tsodilo Hills World Heritage site in Botswana (hereafter TH-WHS) as a case study to examine the potential impact of tourism on world heritage sites. The underlying hypothesis is that changes in the values associated with the production of material culture have an impact on

communities' systems of indigenous knowledge and bring about a degree of change in their socio-cultural practices and in the networks within communities. This article shows that, over time, the quantity of craftwork produced changes, as do the ways in which craft items are used, illustrating changes in the application of traditional knowledge and skills within Tsodilo

communities' socio-cultural networks of production, consumption and interaction.

In TH-WHS, crafts are a dominant form of material culture. Various craft items were used in the past for wedding gifts, bride price currency and initiation ornaments, to mention but a few usages. See Table 3. Currently however, crafts are produced for money in the Okavango Delta (Moepeng 2006). Consequently, this change from traditional to economic production impacts on those craft skills that rely on established systems of indigenous knowledge and intellectual expertise accumulated over many years.

In current heritage management practices, a new challenge facing intangible heritage manifests itself through changes in the ways communities perceive and value the things they make. Tourism is the catalyst. As producers of material culture, the socio-cultural and psycho-social values (intangible heritage) a community attaches to the items it makes determine the sustainability of that aspect of their intangible heritage. For instance, research findings in Tsodilo illustrate that while in the past necklaces were produced to be worn by young brides during their marriage ceremonies, and used as bride price, currently they are produced solely for sale to tourists. See Tables 2 and 3.

## Crafts and heritage tourism among Tsodilo communities

The Tsodilo Hills are located in the Ngamiland district of Botswana, 250 kilometres from Maun, the tourism capital

of northern Botswana. It is approximately 50 kilometres west of the wildlife sanctuaries of the Okavango Delta. See Figure 2. The Tsodilo Hills are a major geological landmark in Botswana, comprising four quartzite hills, traditionally known as *mosadi* (female), *monna* (male), *ngwana* (child) and *ngwana-wa-ngwana* (grandchild). These rock formations are covered with over 4,500 paintings on 400 rock panels, and many carvings are concentrated on the site's three main hills, or *inselbergs* – making this one of the highest concentrations of rock art in the world. As with all World Heritage sites, the inscription of Tsodilo followed the bureaucratic procedure of assessment against pre-defined criteria; the report of the 25th session of the World Heritage Committee describes how Tsodilo fitted criteria (i), (iii) and (vi) of the *World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO 2001).

The Tsodilo outcrops have immense symbolic and religious significance for the people who continue to live in the area today (Keitumetse et al 2007).

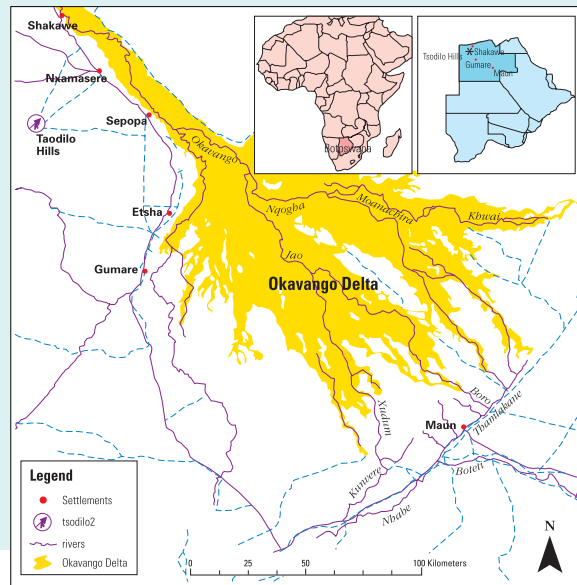
## Research and findings

An investigative questionnaire was designed with some questions focusing on the amount of craftwork produced by the local communities at Tsodilo before and after the settlement became a World Heritage site. Another set of questions focused on the quantity and purpose of the craftwork produced today. The focus on quantity was used to make a qualitative analysis of the changes in cultural values which represent the impact tourism has had on the communities. Follow-up questions and



**Figure 1**  
The decorative motifs are based on plants and animals.  
(c)Keitumetse 2007

**Figure 2**  
The location of the Tsodilo Hills world heritage site in Botswana.  
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conversations were also undertaken in order to collect more information from key respondents, and from non-respondents. The questions, both qualitative and quantitative, were designed to show the degree of change in the volume of production which will in turn indicate what changes take place in the knowledge and skills used in craft production over time at the TH-WHS.

Most of the respondents (83.9%) were female, while 16.1% were male. The respondents were from two ethnic groups commonly known as the *Hambukushu* and *Ju/Hoansi* (San) and a small percentage were members of the *Yei* people who had intermarried with other groups outside the Tsodilo settlement. See Figure 3.

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	5	16.1	16.1	16.1
Female	26	83.9	83.9	100.0
Total	31	100.0	100.0	

**Table 1**  
The gender of interviewed and observed respondents

*Hambukushu* women traditionally produce baskets within the TH-WHS. However, due to the amount of time that has to be invested in making a basket and in collecting the raw materials, most women have gone over to making jewellery in the form of necklaces; a practice traditionally associated with the *Basarwa/Bushmen* women. This is because necklaces can be produced easily and quickly in large quantities to sell to the tourists; other crafts, such as baskets, take much

longer to make. The change in craft specialisation demonstrates the point we made earlier about communities being the key to the sustainability of their own culture. In this particular case, the communities' economic values transcend the value they place on their cultural heritage.

Our research findings also show evidence of some relatively new attitudes to craft production at the Tsodilo site. See Table 2. It shows that a significant number of respondents produce crafts solely for sale, with no respondents producing solely for traditional or cultural purposes as was the case in the past. The activities surrounding craft production processes have therefore evolved in ways that affect the authenticity and integrity of the indigenous systems of knowledge that inform craft production (intangible heritage).

Respondents' uses of crafts	Baskets	Bows & arrows	Necklaces	Woodwork	Total
1. Entirely to be sold for income	2	2	10	0	14
2. To be sold and used for traditional purposes	2	0	7	3	12
3. Entirely for traditional purposes	0	0	3	0	0

**Table 2**  
Uses for craft items at the time of research

Items/Crafts	Traditional use(s)
Bags	- storage for valuables - storage for harvested fruits - storage of items when travelling
Baskets	- food storage - decoration of the house - food storage and to be sold
Woodwork	- used as kitchen utensils e.g. wooden spoons - for house decoration
Necklaces	- worn by young women during menstrual initiation ceremony - worn by a bride during wedding ceremony - worn by women to accessorize their clothes - used as part of bride price
Bows & arrows	- for hunting and gathering

**Table 3**  
Uses for craft items in the past

The dominant factor influencing trends in craft production at the Tsodilo settlements is the generation of income from tourists. See Tables 2 and 3. Very few respondents produced craftwork for both sale and traditional purposes. Craft makers in Tsodilo therefore now produce material culture to address their socio-economic needs rather than their socio-cultural ones.

Table 4 shows that 51.6% of community members learnt craft making skills in the traditional way – from their mothers and grandmothers. The way people learn a skill demonstrates the dynamics of craft production, and consequently explains some of the challenges faced by indigenous heritage and the expertise attached to it.

Acquisition of skill	Frequency	Percent
Traditionally	16	51.6
Workshops	5	16.1
Self-taught	10	32.3
Total	31	100.0

**Table 4**  
Methods of acquiring the skills of craft production

Although Table 4 indicates that most craft makers learnt to produce crafts in the traditional way, on the extreme end of the spectrum there are a growing

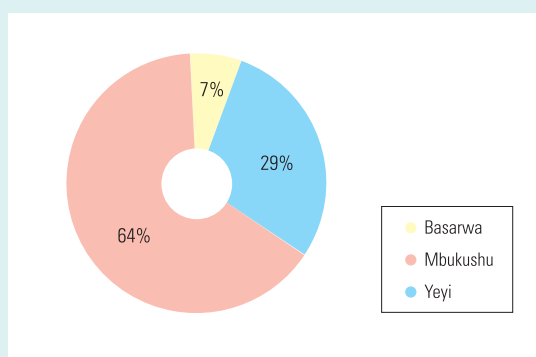
number of people who have learnt craft skills purely to make money, as is illustrated by the following extracts from interviews:

*I recently learned how to produce necklaces from friends so I could have something to sell too at the craft shop as tourists see them as part of our culture.* (Female, craft worker, 19)

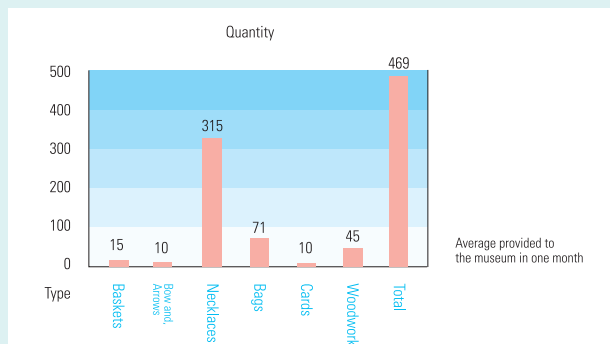
*Craft making is important to us because it is a way for us to make money from tourists who come to see the rock art. We can then buy one or two things for our children.* (Female, craft worker, 30)

Currently however, community members learn by observing friends (32%) and, more radically, through workshops conducted by NGOs (16%). These two new methods of acquiring skills indicate a transition from systems based on traditional and indigenous knowledge (intangible heritage) to systems outside the socio-cultural context - which in turn shows that the way of life of the resident community is changing.

Research findings further show a gradual trend towards the mass production of crafts for tourism rather than production for the traditional purposes and activities outlined in Table 3. Figure 4 quantifies the approximate volume of craftwork received from respondents by the site museum staff, which is evidence of mass production when compared to Table 2. The change illustrates changes in the way that communities perceive and value material culture, a process that is motivated by informal tourism development on the site.



**Figure 3**  
The ethnic groups of the respondents



**Figure 4**  
The average quantity of crafts received at the Tsodilo site museum from the respondents. Note the inclusion of cards as a new development

## Discussion: the desperate indigene and the nostalgic tourist: their impact on intangible heritage

World Heritage status accords heritage sites in developing countries international recognition and publicity, and that attracts international visitors and tourists. However, tourism often triggers changes in traditional patterns of demand and supply, and in the process affects the indigenous knowledge systems and processes (intangible heritage) that sustain traditional production. As the TH-WHS findings indicate, in the past the production of necklaces was motivated by socio-cultural needs, while today the same production is motivated by economic needs addressed through informal tourism activities on the site.

Material culture, or tangible heritage, is often viewed by communities as a medium that expresses their cultural 'footprint' as well as representing their cultural heritage, and this is communicated and expressed to visitors through crafts. Conversely, for visitors, tourism can be a special form of 'play' involving travel, or 'getting away from it all' (Graburn 1989: 22-23). It can also be interpreted by visitors as ... *a metaphysical search for completeness* (Meethan 2001: 90) as often remote indigenous landscapes and people are viewed as ... *attractive mysteries, promises of spirituality* [just as] *Aboriginal people have become the foci of promotion and marketing in Australia* (Whittaker 1999: 34). Therefore, hosts often feel compelled to meet visitors' needs by mass producing versions of their material culture. In such cases, the authentic cultural experience that the tourist is seeking is likely to be destroyed or blurred by the host community. The loss of cultural authenticity is aggravated by an

observed relationship that ... tourists are less likely to borrow from their hosts than their hosts are from them ... (Crick 1999: 18). That this relationship makes tourism a form of acculturation is further perpetuated by the observation that ... *the majority of indigenous people will never travel abroad because they lack the funds, so their impression of Western culture is also flawed* (Keefe 1995: 43) – with the result that the on-site communities fail to comprehend that the mass production of their material culture contradicts the key principles of eco-tourism – as well as those of the eco-tourist who is interested in environmental and cultural integrity. The resident community's perception of what tourists really want to buy has implications for the sustainability of their intangible heritage which can be 'perishable' (Misiura 2006). Case studies that document the potential impact of heritage site tourism on local perceptions of heritage need to be undertaken alongside the promotion of World Heritage sites if we are to aim for sustainable growth in the development of heritage tourism.

## Conclusion

Earlier research on the Tsodilo settlement has shown that World Heritage site status is designated in communities' cultural landscapes (Keitumetse et al 2007) and brings with it a culture of interaction that did not exist there before (Keitumetse 2005). However, there is a very limited amount of research that investigates the potential impact that the World Heritage designation has on other forms of heritage on sites. The relatively recent adoption of the UNESCO 2003 *Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage* provides a basic framework for research in this

direction, where management options for safeguarding intangible elements of heritage in World Heritage sites can be investigated. This paper shows that communities at Tsodilo have reacted to World Heritage designation by transforming their traditional systems and processes of producing material culture to take advantage of the new opportunities their status has brought. This has had a negative effect on elements of their intangible heritage. This paper illustrates this by showing how the quantity, and form, of the crafts produced has changed over time, as well as how the end use of those products has altered. See Tables 2 and 3. The conclusion is that the designation of the Tsodilo Hills as a World Heritage site has had a negative impact on the intangible heritage of the area. The increased number of tourists has transformed local craft production from a socio-cultural activity to an economic one. The traditional systems of knowledge and skill that act as regulatory mechanisms sustaining the integrity of intangible heritage have been damaged. The mass production of material culture inhibits the sustainability of indigenous systems. Tourism as a medium of expression for cultural heritage is sustainable only where it represents a

*... means of achieving a satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence ... a set of capacities that allows groups, communities ... to define their futures in an integrated manner.*  
(<http://portal.unesco.org/culture>).

The conservation of the intangible heritage values associated with the production of material culture within a community enhances residents' sense of belonging to a group, as well as inspiring the community to take responsibility for the conservation of heritage as a whole. 🇳🇦

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