



# Tshatshingo Pothole: A Sacred Vha-Venda Place with Cultural Barriers to Tourism Development in South Africa

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## Abstract

The Vha-Venda peoples of South Africa have sacred places like many other traditional cultures. Sacred sites are places for communicating with spirits, observing nature and performing rituals that harbor deep cultural meanings to society. This paper is about Tshatshingo Pothole which occurs in a geologically deep gorge along the Tshirovha River. It is a gigantic whirlpool approximately 15m in diameters. There are three other giant sinkholes in the same location. The Pothole is of significant heritage to the Vha-Venda people in general and particularly to the Makani clan. By rights traditionally bestowed on the Makani clan, they have become the sole custodians of the Tshatshingo Pothole. The Makani chief, as the 'owner' of the site, is the ultimate decision maker regarding any aspects related to the use or proposed developments around the Pothole. The articles methodology included a desktop research, interviews of the key informants, the informal exchange of views by stakeholders and the capturing of the Tshatshingo Pothole landscape through digital images as well as several sites visits. The article established that Tshatshingo Pothole is a sacred place with definite potential as a tourism destination. However, fully blown tourism development is unlikely to take place because of the prevailing deep cultural conservatism of the Vha-Venda people. Nevertheless, it was exposed that a possible development trajectory at Tshatshingo Pothole may take place with the approval of and needed permission of the Makani chief. However, such developments should be culturally acceptable and sited at a suitable distance from the Pothole.

**Keywords:** Sacred Site, Tshatshingo Pothole, Heritage, Cultural Barriers, Tourism Development

## Introduction

Sacred sites are places within the landscape that have a special meaning or significance. Hills, rocks, waterholes, trees, plains, lakes, billabongs and other natural features can be sacred sites. In coastal and sea areas, sacred sites may include features which lie both and above the water. In Australia, sacred sites derive their status from being associated with particular aspects of Aboriginal social and cultural tradition. Aboriginal sacred sites are recognized and protected as an integral part of the Northern Territory's and Australia's cultural heritage, under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory, Act 1976)*, (Land Rights Act) and the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act (Sacred Sites Act, 1989)*.

Aboriginal sacred sites are areas or places in the Australian landscape of significant meaning within the context of the localized indigenous belief system, known as The Dreaming, which has its origins in Dreamtime (Sacred Sites Act, 1989). Sites sacred to Aboriginal people are part of Australia's cultural heritage, connecting the land with the cultural values, spiritual beliefs and kin-based relationships of the local people. The Aboriginal population of Australia comprises many tribes and nations, each with their own sacred places, animal totems and other items in the geographic area known as their 'country'. Hills, rocks, waterholes, trees, plains and other natural features may be sacred sites. In coastal and sea areas, sacred sites may include some features which lie both above and below water.



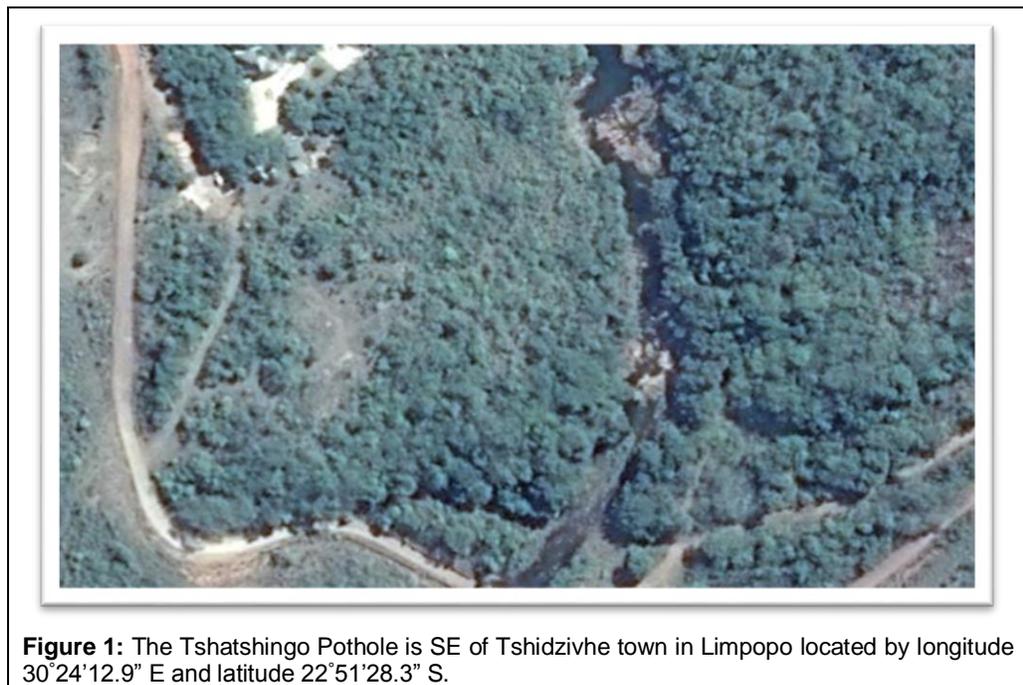
**Plate 1:** Baiame Cave, Milbrodale, New South Wales (Source: Corp Website, 2014)

Sometimes sacred sites are obvious, such as at the ochre deposits, Baiame Cave rock art galleries (Plate 1) exist as spectacular natural features. The main figure depicted in the picture is believed to be Baiame (the Father of All) the most important ancestor of the Aboriginal people (Wonnarua Aboriginal Nation, 2014). In other instances, sacred sites may be unremarkable to an outside observer, and can range in size from a single stone or plant, to an entire mountain range (Sacred Site Act, 1989).

The Dreaming is a term used to refer collectively to Aboriginal religious beliefs. These beliefs endeavor to explain the questions of ultimate human reality, including the origins of humans and animals. The Dreaming is an ongoing phenomenon, incorporating the past, the present and the future. Aboriginal people believe that the Spirits who initially inhabited the land were their ancestors and their identity is derived from the Spirits from whom they descended. Particular tribes have their own totem, which is an animal often native to their tribe's territory (Aboriginal Land Right; Northern Territory Act, 1967). Their traditional way of life is based on their relationship with the land, which they believe to be their origin, sustenance and ultimate destiny. They believe it is their duty to look after the land and take only what is needed. The beliefs of the Dreaming are diverse and various, depending on one's tribe, gender, location and totem (Sacred Sites Act, 1989).

In the Venda region, which is located in the northern part of Limpopo province in South Africa, Sacred Natural Sites are termed *Zwifho* (Ref). The *Zwifho* are places of ecological, cultural and spiritual significance, which include forests, waterfalls, caves, mountains and springs - where the ancestors reside. They form an interconnected network of potent places, which reach deep into the Earth and into the cosmos. They enable *Mupo* (all of Creation) to regenerate and maintain her dynamic equilibrium. It is the elder women of the Venda communities, the *Makhadzi*, who are responsible for the required rituals and ceremonies, which each custodian clan needs to carry out for maintaining the potency of the *Zwifho*, and thereby for the well-being of all life. After years of colonization and encroachment of the culture from the western world onto the ways of life and culture of the *Makhadzi*, they have become increasingly marginalized and silenced and their traditional role as advisors to the chiefs, as keepers of the indigenous seeds and custodians of the *Zwifho*, have been undermined. However, they are now finding their voice once again and have been joined by elder men and chiefs of Venda, and have formed *Dzomo la Mupo*, "to protect Nature in all her forms, and especially indigenous forests ... [and] to protect and preserve sacred natural sites in Venda" (Makaulule, 2013).

Tourism, plantations and development projects have been the main threats to the sacred sites and forests in Venda. The region is now faced with large-scale coal mining projects that threaten to destroy some of Venda's sacred sites and forests. These projects will require amounts of water (both surface and groundwater) and threaten to dry the rivers. Currently, the *Dzomo la Mupo* is working to register and protect its *Zwifho*, to recognize the network of sacred sites as No-Go zones for mining or other destructive activities (Makaulule, 2013).



Tshatshingo Pothole which occurs in a geologically deep gorge along the Tshirovha River, is a gigantic whirlpool approximately 15m in diameters. There are three other giant sinkholes in the same location. The Pothole is of significant heritage to the Vha-Venda people in general and particularly to the Makani clan. By rights traditionally bestowed on the Makani clan, they have

become the sole custodians of the Tshatshingo Pothole. The Makani chief, as the owner' of the site, is the ultimate decision maker regarding any aspects related to the use or proposed developments projects around the Pothole. It is believed that this pothole was being used for ritual purposes and also as a dumping place for people who were against the chief of the village.

As a sacred site, the Tshatshingo Pothole can be a place of interest to tourists from all over the world, however, the fact that it is culturally owned is a barrier to development as a tourism destination. The objective of this paper is to highlight the cultural barriers that might obstruct the development of Tshatshingo Pothole into a renowned tourist site, and to examine how these cultural barriers can be overcome so as to enable the development the pothole into safe and accessible tourism attraction. This study is important because even though the area is not developed, there are currently a large number of tourists who come to visit the place. There are also many other sacred places around the area that are being developed into tourism attractions.



**Plate 2:** Looking into the Tshatshingo pothole. The giant whirlpool measures about 15m in diameter, located at longitude 30°24'12.9" and latitude 22°51'28.3".

## Heritage/Cultural Tourism Development

Cultural tourism forms part of heritage tourism, which is distinct since visitors from outside the host community are motivated by interest in historical, artistic, or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region, group or institution (Silberberg, 1995). While Fyall and Garrod (1998) define heritage tourism as an economic activity that makes use of socio-cultural assets to attract visitors. Hollinshead (1988) asserts that local traditions and community heritage can serve as attractions and that heritage tourism embraces folkloric traditions, arts and crafts, ethnic history, social customs, and cultural celebrations. Poria et al (2001) define heritage tourism more narrowly as “a phenomenon based on visitors’ motivations and perceptions rather than on specific site attributes”. Zeppal and Hall (1991) also emphasize motivation, and view heritage tourism, as



“based on nostalgia for the past and the desire to experience diverse cultural landscapes and forms”. A wide range of government owned cultural attractions and private owned cultural attractions are available for tourists in most destinations. South Africa also has many cultural attractions in some of the destinations. Some of the attractions are government owned and some are private owned. Cultural attractions include heritage tours, heritage art galleries, museums, visitor/cultural centers, heritage trails, heritage theme parks and sacred places. For the purpose of this paper, the Tshatshingo Pothole is a private cultural attraction owned by the Makani clan who are the custodians of the Pothole.

In terms of demand, heritage tourism is representative of many contemporary visitors' desire to directly experience and consume diverse past and present cultural landscapes, performances, foods, handicrafts, and participatory activities. On the supply side, heritage tourism is widely considered as a tool for economic development of communities and is often actively promoted by local governments and private businesses. The lack of effective tourism planning that include market appeal, economic factors and conservation policy assessments is evident in the way cultural heritage places are managed around the world. Cultural destination such as Tshatshingo Pothole require commodification to enhance the visitor experience and actualizing the tourism potential. Since the pothole is a giant sinkhole, it is difficult for the tourists to see pothole because of the deep gorge landscape and slippery rock pathways to the site. Development of a foot-bridge across the pothole would be the best option because tourists would be able to see the pothole from a distance. However, according to the Makani the custodians of the Pothole, the development of the Pothole should only happen few kilometers from the Pothole since this pothole is still being used as a ritual place for the clan.

### **Cultural barriers to Tourism Development**

Cultural barriers to tourism development include cultural differences between tourist areas and low awareness of the host communities towards the needs and demands of tourists. On the other hand, unawareness of tourists to the culture of the host community causes many problems and is a major obstacle to the development of tourism (WTO, 2000). Often times in different places, the inhabitants of a place or a community have unpleasant and negative perceptions of the tourism industry either due to ignorance or because they see some behaviors from the tourists that is unfamiliar to them because there are cultural differences between hosts and tourists. In some cases jobs related to the tourism industry are considered low for local people and the natives are not willing to work in these jobs. In the case of Tshatshingo pothole the local community members are even afraid to talk about the pothole because it is believed to be a sacred place for traditional rituals.

In the Vha-Venda culture, a sacred place is known to be a very eerie and respected place and even talking about it might be considered a taboo in some circles. This makes the local community members unwilling and reluctant to give information to tourists or even to other people who are willing to assist with the development of the pothole. This is then a major barrier for development; because if the host community is not willing to take part in tourism development, they will not be interested in assisting the tourists with things like providing directions to the pothole, and also, by not giving any other required information. Another barrier to the development of the pothole is that the host community is not aware of the economic potential of the Tshatshingo pothole and the possible jobs opportunities in an area where there is poverty. The community is not aware of the fact that by developing the Pothole they can alleviate poverty and bring in better infrastructure such as tar roads, electricity provision, health facilities, running tap water, network poles etc. Sacred sites around the world are sources of economic alleviation to local communities and boost



the economies of the countries. In the following section, the barriers (challenges) faced are briefly highlighted.

### **Tourism market barriers**

Tourism market barriers such as income levels, fuel costs, job security, seasonal factors, travel motives and communication can also prevent the development of cultural tourism destination because if the target market cannot afford to travel to this cultural destination, the destination will not function. Communication is a key to a destination because one needs to be able to communicate with the host community at a cultural destination. Most of market factors are out of control in tourist destinations and the ability of these sites to attract tourists in the long term requires planning and flexibility. Therefore, to develop a suitable strategy some comprehensive research of the market situation is needed (Skaran, 2001).

### **Educational barriers**

Educational barriers and lack of skilled manpower, and lack of interest by the authorities and policy makers in tourism industry is yet another challenge. Since the industry is relatively young in developing countries, there is a shortage of the required professional manpower. Furthermore training centers to train required manpower are limited or do not even exist.

### **Infrastructure barriers**

The infrastructural barrier is considered to be another major barrier in development including lack of, or poor transport vehicles for passengers, poor intercity roads, a lack of shopping centers, substandard residential facilities, power, water and telecommunications, sanitation and hygiene networks issues in tourism areas (News Staff of Tourism Week, 1998). Thus, tourism development requires a coherent and efficient management, which identifies barriers and is able to run developed strategies to drive it to sustainability.

### **Limitations at the operational level**

Implementation of participatory development approaches in cultural destination is likely to meet obstacles usually associated with the operational procedures of the task. Some of these obstacles include centralization of public administration of tourism development, lack of co-ordination between involved parties and lack of information made available to the local people of the tourist destination.

### **Centralization of public administration of Tourism**

Formulation and implementation of any kind of community participation approach requires decentralization of the political, administrative and financial powers of central government to local government at least to some extent. However, as the UN (1981:15) noted, in many developing countries planning is a highly centralised activity. The planning and organization has been established at national level and is under the direct management of a national chief political executive. The election of this is individual is to restrict the influence of community-level groups on the planning process, and implementing of plans. Under these circumstances, centralisation is popular for participation in planning. It has increased the vertical distance between planners and the broad mass of the population.



### **Lack of co-ordination**

The lack of co-ordination and cohesion within the highly fragmented tourism industry is a well-known problem to tourism professionals (Jamal & Getz, 1995:186). It is obvious that no one business or government establishment can operate in isolation' (Gunn, 1988:272). Thus, development of co-ordination mechanisms among the formal bodies, between the public and the private sector, and among private enterprises is essential for the highly fragmented tourism industry (Inskeep, 1991). However, it is often the case in cultural tourism destinations that the planning process is a very fragmented one, authority being concerned with the impetus for development, while others are expected to manage the impact of the development (Jenkins, 1982:241). In many tourist destinations in developing countries such as Turkey (Tosun, 1998c), Thailand (Elliott, 1983), Kenya (Dieke, 1991) and Bali (Jenkins, 1982), this may be a missing ingredient in the tourism development process. In this regard, it is argued that tourism projects did not benefit from a full coordination between local and tourism planners (Jenkins, 1982) owing to the fact that there is a traditional powerful bureaucracy which dominates legislative and operational processes. Any approaches which are in conflict with this unnecessary traditional bureaucracy, are not acceptable to the powerful bureaucrats. Particularly, this traditional bureaucracy is an obstacle to establishing co-ordination and co-operation between and among the various stakeholders. Moreover, there is also immense bureaucratic jealousy's among official authorities. For example, the custodians of cultural attractions/ sacred places may not tolerate any bureaucratic department trespassing on what it regards as 'their territory'. Ultimately, this may create a lack of co-ordination amongst agencies (Tosun, 1998) and is not helpful.

### **Lack of Information**

On the other hand, decision-makers may not have up-dated information about socio-economic structures of local communities in tourist destinations due to the fact that gathering such data requires continuous research that is not possible in the absence of financial resources and expertise. The implication of the above argument may be that greater awareness and interest among members of local communities could be achieved if meaningful and comprehensible information contained in reports and plans is disseminated. Thus, for the purpose of achieving better tourism development through community participation, information about the site is critical.

### **Lack of expertise and trained Manpower**

It is contended that although community participation seems to be highly desirable, few developing countries have sufficient experience in this area. There is a lack of qualified personnel and the working attitudes of professionals who have been trained in traditional planning techniques do not necessarily involve community participation, and have scant idea of how to incorporate it into their planning (Desai, 1995). This is particularly true for the tourism industry in developing countries, since tourism has recently been recognized as a highly professional area in the developing countries. That is to say, owing to its relatively short history in the economies of these countries, as Inskeep (1988) has stated, the services of tourism planners for projects in both the public and private sectors are currently in demand in developing countries that still lack expertise in tourism planning even though they may have qualified urban and regional planners.

### **Lack of appropriate legal system**

Participatory tourism development strategies may bring unorganized groups into the policy-making process. Creating opportunities for those who are poorly organized, may not negate the



influence of the interest groups already active in tourist development. Thus, a legal structure which can defend community interests and ensure a community's participatory right in tourism development may be needed. However, legal structures in many developing countries do not encourage local people to participate in their local areas; rather the legislative structure puts a distance between grassroots and formal authorities, and it is difficult to understand how it is operated from a lay person's point of view. In this context, it is argued with special references to India that, participatory attempts are not elective and efficient owing to the lack of enabling environment. The legal structure does not encourage education of communities about their rights and how they can establish organizations to promote their interests. Moreover, such organizations must get government approval. This requires a level of literacy, that the poor clearly lack (Mathur, 1995).

### **Relatively high cost of community participation**

Community participation requires considerable time, money and skills to organize and sustain participation (Paul, 1987). That is to say, &it is more time consuming and may lead to conflicting objectives amongst the local aims' (WTO, 1994:10) since it may raise expectations in the community, which may not be easy to meet. On the other hand, as Murphy (1985) noted, elective management of tourism industry requires day-to-day and season-to-season operational decisions. It may not be possible to ask community to participate in these day-to-day decisions. Therefore, this time consuming and complex process of participatory development strategy may lead to delay in decision-making, which may burden the developers with high loan interest (Fogg, 1981). This may also disappoint those who expect a quick return from investment. Moreover, public bodies may not want to spend their limited financial resources on organizing community participation when the benefits appears to be only relatively long term.

### **Chiefs as the custodians of the Sacred Sites**

The traditional custodians of the sacred sites in an area are the tribal elders. "Sacred sites give meaning to the natural landscape. They anchor values and kin-based relationships in the land. Custodians of sacred sites are concerned for the safety of all people, and the protection of sacred sites is integral to ensuring the well-being of the country and the wider community. These sites are, or were, used for many sacred traditions and customs. Sites used for male activities, such as initiation ceremonies, may be forbidden to women; sites used for female activities, such as giving birth, may be forbidden to men. For example according to Aboriginal law of custodians of sacred sites allow a site to be damaged, other Aboriginal people will hold them responsible. This can lead to revenge or sanctions with Aboriginal society and the community. It can also lead to recrimination against non-Aboriginal people who damage such places. In the case of Tshatshingo pothole, the Makani clan are the custodians of the sacred site. It is they who are the clan that perform rituals there. If there is anyone in the sacred site, they are expected to be made aware thereof and also required to grant permission.

Members of the public may seek permission to visit the site by requesting access from the Makani chief. The chief may grant them permission to visit the sacred site or he may not. If the chief grants permission he will also provide advice as to where sacred sites are likely to be risky if visitors were to go without more detailed information being first sought. The chief also provides visitors with a guide who will take them to sacred site. When they go to obtain permission they need to bring along a 'Mufaro' token of appreciation to the chief because without this 'Mufaro' the chief will not open the gate for them. It is also considered highly disrespectful to arrive without a 'Mufaro'.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

Historic sacred places are valuable community assets. They help to encourage spiritual growth, provide a focal point for the community, and are an economic attractor due to tourism. A cross-cultural perspective shows the variety of experiences, behaviors, and identities that create sacred places. This perspective helps to identify some of the challenges planners face trying to preserve these important community assets. Appreciating the social and cultural barriers around the Tshatshingo pothole and in consultation with the Makani Chief, the following are the proposed models that could be utilised to overcome the cultural barriers and enable development of the Tshatshingo pothole area into a pristine tourism destination which is sustainable.

- The area needs a comprehensive plan for cultural tourism development. This requires an interaction with powers of cultural heritage and the custodians of the geoheritage sites. The community should be enlightened about the benefits of geotourism.
- The area being in proximity to the route to the Kruger National Park (KNP), aggressive marketing and availability of information about the heritage destinations should be availed to tourist planning to visit KNP through the internet and social media. Hard copies of brochures for the site should also be made.
- Education and empowerment of the local into an effective man-power to manage the geosite is essential.
- In terms of infrastructure development, there is already an entertainment center, the Muswubi Entertainment Centre next to the Tshatshingo Pothole. A good untarred road passes about 1km from the pothole. These facilities solve the accommodation problems and access to the area.
- To overcome other obstacles like decision-making and prioritize the destination for economic and cultural benefits for the community, it should be reemphasized that the Chief of the Makani clan is the most important link to achieve this.

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