

Looking at History from the Top Corner of a Sacred Valley

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Honourable Kenetswe Mosenogi: MEC for Arts, Culture and Recreation, North-West Province

Dr Gloria Serobe, Chancellor of the Tshwane University of Technology

Mr Ivan Ka-Mbonane: Chairperson TUT Council

Mr Pakiso Motau: TUT Council member

Mr Vincent Carruthers and Prof Jane Carruthers joint authors of *The heritage Treasures of TOPPIESHOEK*

Mr André Wedepohl and Mr Mike Benn from the Magaliesberg Association for Culture and Heritage

Ms Belinda Cooper: Manager, of the UNESCO Magaliesberg Biosphere Reserve

Mr Takalani Nemaungani: Chief Director for the Astronomy Portfolio of the DSI.

Ms Jessica Glendinning: Policy Officer for Culture & Media at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Representatives from Boyden Observatory at UoFS

Colleagues at TUT, labour representatives, TUT students and members of the TUT SRC structures, ladies and gentlemen.

In this, our twentieth anniversary, the Tshwane University of Technology recognizes our immense privilege at being the institution that stands at the meeting point of ancient African history, archaeology and planetary science, here in this place we call our own – Toppieshoek. We are proud to be home and host to both the ground-breaking Broederstroom Archaeological site and what used to be called the Southern Station of the Leiden University Observatory. As an institution of higher learning, which prides itself as a University in which future ready graduates are made, we, together with our industry partners are determined to use technology to shape the future of work, right here at Toppieshoek.

Transferred to Pretoria Technical College – which was later renamed Technikon Pretoria – around 1978 - Toppieshoek has become one of the veritable heritages, not only of the Tshwane University of Technology but a heritage of all the descendants of Kgosi Mokgale wa Mokgale, Kgosi ya Bapo ba Mogkale, the one after whom the entire area of Magaliesberg was named. Through Toppieshoek, we share in the heritage of the descendants of Mzilikazi ka Mashobane - a heritage for all the people of South Africa.

We have a particular interest in the confluence of ancient human history, biodiversity and the other sciences that are implicit in the history of Toppieshoek, Broederstroom, Hartebeespoort dam and the greater Magaliesberg region.

While the archaeologists, the astronomers and the historians are well within their rights to speculate about why the iron age settlers from the North decided to settle here two

thousand years ago, we would like to believe that they settled here because of the stunning beauty of this place, where river, mountains and blue sky embrace. The fact that the place was teeming with antelope of the hartebeest type, gave them a clue that their goats and their cattle would like the place too. Seeing how the leaping waters of the Crocodile and the Magalies rivers danced mid-air, the iron age settlers from the North realised that they and their animals would never go thirsty in this place.

And so, beneath the protective perimeter wall created by the Magalies mountain range, they settled. Protected by the wall of the mountains of rock, they were safe from the unruly whirlwinds and the marauding bands of nomads who traversed the countryside in those days. And so, beneath the regal Magalies mountains, they farmed and they mined iron ore, they smelted it and forged it into tools and weapons. In this sacred valley, they sung songs, they danced dances, they multiplied, they fought wars, they lived and they died; here, in this place. This was several dozen centuries before Diago Cão set foot on the Namibian shore, before Bartolomeus Dias navigated around the Southern tip of the African continent, and long before Vasco da Gama had to be chased out of Mozambique.

And so, here we are today, looking at history, from the top corner of these sacred grounds.

There is a notion that is sometimes employed frivolously, thoughtlessly, meaninglessly and sometimes dangerously. I am referring to the notion of “ancestral land”. Now; this place, this habitat, this valley, this is *the* South African ancestral land, in the original sense of the notion.

While we may have almost killed off the antelope that lent its name to the Hartbeespoort dam; while we have allowed the one hundred year old Hartbeespoort Dam to degenerate and deteriorate; and while we may have, by our acts of omission and commission, caused the rivers to die and the mountains to cry; as we stand here today, we can still sense, see, taste, hear and touch what our iron age ancestors from the North saw, heard and felt.

Indeed, I would like to suggest that, if we listened with our hearts, across space and time, we might be able to hear the bellowing cattle, the bleating goats and the cackling chicken that belonged to our ancestors who settled here.

Listen carefully, and you will hear the noise of metal being smelted and forged in the iron age mining factory of our ancestors. Hear the women sing as they till the soil and plant the crops, listen to their chants as they make pots and weave baskets. Imagine our ancestral artisans, constructing exquisite homes, building graves to die for – pun intended.

Fast-forward from the first few centuries to the early 1970s, and here, we meet a different type of ‘ancestor’. I am talking about the “slender dark-haired Hollander” (Carruthers and Carruthers p.11) called Arnout van Genderen. He was an archaeologist, from the University of Leiden. In 1971, van Genderen discovered the ancient village, which was built right here where we are, in Toppieshoek, two thousand years ago. Two years later – 1973 - he started excavating. Van Genderen was soon joined by Thomas Huffman, Reviel Mason - archaeology professors at WITS. Mason’s team of excavators included, amongst others his wife Jean, Robbie Steel, Lewis Matiyela and Tom Mabane. These are the scholarly and intellectual

ancestors whose pioneering work unearthed what Vincent and Jane Carruthers, have dubbed “the heritage treasures of Toppieshoek” in their book by the same title.

The other dimension of our Toppieshoek heritage is the Leiden University Observatory, a pioneer and leader in the study of variable and binary stars. And so, we add to our list of scholarly ancestors, the names of Robert Innes director of the Union Observatory in Johannesburg who together with Willem de Sitter director of Leiden University Observatory, crafted a cooperative research agreement. In terms of this agreement, astronomers from both entities could share facilities. Thanks to this collaboration, we have since inherited a number of old and old-fashioned Leiden telescopes, now lying derelict and unused.

If the Leiden telescopes in our midst could speak, we would be spellbound. Franklin-Adams telescope would speak to us about its indomitable creator, the Scotsman Franklin Adams, who was a pioneer amongst astronomers of his day. The Franklin-Adams telescope would enthral us with pictures and stories of the Sky Survey “the second and by far the most accurate photographic chart of the entire sky ever produced at that time” (Carruthers p. 46). The Franklin-Adams telescope would tell intriguing tales about a visitor, who, after 75 years of absence, returned to earth in 1910– that visitor is called Halley’s Comet. The telescope would also speak about the Proxima Centauri, one of the closest stars to the sun. But the Light Collector’s Telescope, which briefly graced our shores, would not be outdone. It would not allow the Franklin Adams Telescope to have the last word. This telescope too, has a few juicy stories to tell about its sojourn in Hartbeespoort dam.

So here we are, looking at history from the top corner of this sacred valley. Here we are, surrounded by ancestors from the early centuries up to the 1950s, 1970s, 80s and 90s. Here we are, surrounded by artefacts from a thousand years ago, a mountain-range from a billion years ago, a dam from a hundred years ago – a dam under which a dozen other historic villages may be buried. Here we are surrounded by derelict telescopes! And here we are, gathered in this valley where, two thousand years ago, livelihoods were earned, culture was invented, community was built, and bitter wars were fought, too many wars.

I am elated that the blue plague to be unveiled today is not in remembrance of either a war or a war hero. We have too many of those. I am glad that today, we are commemorating the confluence of historical studies, archaeological studies, astronomy, heritage studies and biodiversity.

The small size of Vincent and Jane Carruthers’s book – *The heritage Treasures of TOPPIESHOEK* - belies the profundity of its contents. To conclude their book, Jane and Vincent Carruthers suggest ways in which TUT may utilise the treasures of Toppieshoek. Among others they suggest that:

- our engineering, physics and mathematics students may wish to experiment with restoration of telescopes
- our ICT students may use computer science to bring the iron age communities, back to life.
- there is a wealth of opportunities in nature conservation, biodiversity and environmental studies.

To conclude let me return to the notion of “heritage treasures” contained in the title of the book of Vincent and Jane. In his 1988 bestseller - *The Alchemist* - celebrated Brazilian novelist, Paulo Coelho, tells the story of a boy called Santiago. One day, the boy dreams about a treasure and is given hints, glimpses and clues about the location where the treasure is to be found. And so, he followed his dream. Following every lead, noting every sign, taking in every lesson and every experience, he travels halfway around the world, in search of the treasures of his dreams. Only to find much later, that the treasures he dreamed of were located right in his backyard.

Toppieshoek is the treasure located in our own backyard. From this place, we will keep moving TUT from good to great, in every way, at every level.

We are determined not merely to look at history from the vantage point of Toppieshoek, but from this top corner of these sacred grounds, we shall continue to make history.