

Imitating heritage tourism: a virtual tour in Sekhukhuneland, South Africa

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panel 1: Tourism in Africa

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Abstract

Tourism in South Africa has experienced rapid growth since the end of Apartheid. With all eyes set on the expected massive influx of visitors to the World Championship Football in 2010, many South Africans are eager to tap their share of tourist revenue. Game Parks remain the biggest attraction, but other initiatives attempt to capture a trickle from the ever increasing inflow of tourists. Among the relatively new tourism sectors figure township tours and heritage tourism, both sectors with a potential to involve not only tour operators, but local residents as well.

Heritage tourism has become booming business in South Africa. Large numbers of tourists flock to Shaka Land, the battlefields of Natal, the Voortrekker Monument, the Hector Pietersen Memorial in Soweto, the township house of Nelson and Winnie Mandela in Orlando or Lesedi Cultural Village near Pretoria. However, the business of tourism is also a mirage: ordinary South Africans see pots of gold at the end of the rainbow, but have little understanding of what will attract tourists. What to do if there is no game park anywhere near, and local historical imagery is not as colourful as the archetypical Zulu warrior or the staunch Boer commando? Many South African municipalities sport elaborate websites, hoping to attract tourists. What exactly is identified as 'heritage' and how are these sites and stories portrayed in the context of the tourist industry? This presentation explores the virtual heritage tour on the website of the Fetakgomo municipality in Sekhukhuneland and compares the virtual tour with the (attempted) real live experience.

Sekhukhuneland: from obscurity to Google

I first came to Sekhukhuneland in 1990, in the context of my research on youth movements involved in resistance against Apartheid.¹ Sekhukhuneland is an impoverished rural area in Limpopo Province, some 200 km northeast of Pretoria. Formerly part of the Lebowa Bantustan, it now is part of the administrative district Greater Sekhukhune, which has its district offices in the town of Groblersdal. In 1990, it was quite difficult to find any current information on Sekhukhuneland at all. The BaPedi of Sekhukhuneland have a long and interesting history of resistance against Afrikaner and British encroachments in the 19th century and against the imposition of Bantustan rule in the 1950s. Historians have recorded these struggles, as well as the fractious politics of the BaPedi rulers, while Afrikaner ethnographers have described their customs and material

¹ Ineke van Kessel, *'Beyond our Wildest Dreams': the United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa*. Charlottesville/London: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

culture.² But when I first set off to Sekhukhuneland in August 1990, I had almost no information on the current state of the area.

These days, a Google search for Sekhukhune comes up with some 53.500 hits, including the website of the Greater Sekhukhune District.³ To my utter surprise, this website invites the visitor for a tourist experience in Sekhukhune, notably in the region where I previously conducted my research. Sekhukhune District is subdivided into five new municipalities: my research area falls within the Fetakgomo Local Municipality, which has its offices in the village of Apel. Previously, in the days of Bantustan rule, the chiefs were responsible for local government in rural parts of the Bantustans. Fetakgomo's municipal website proclaims the area as a "land of legends and myths and of ancient civilizations that visitors find fascinating". The website promises visits to a traditional village, a game reserve, a spring inhabited by water spirits, an echo stone turning summer into winter, traditional dancing, Gods' foot print, the heritage site at Tjate (where the BaPedi fought their battles with Boers and Brits) and "mountains full of wild animals, reptiles of all sorts and songs of birds filled with the happiness of the day."

In my recollections, I heard and saw a much greater variety of birds in Johannesburg than in Sekhukhune, while –apart from scorpions- I never spotted a wild animal. Sekhukhune, an impoverished, arid and dusty landscape sheltered by the rather barren Leolo mountains, is described as the land of milk and honey.

"It is rich with cultural heritage and an abundance of wildlife and nature-based tourism opportunities, indeed a treasure chest waiting to be discovered".

This text is obviously inspired by a romanticized imagery of game parks and heritage. If that is not persuasive enough, the website also borrows from the adventure industry with a promise of a 4x4 driving show in the basin of the Olifants river:

"Great for your relaxation and entertainment. Boredom becomes a thing of the past. One may even forget to go back home".

Not that I have ever been bored in Sekhukhuneland: there is always lots of interesting stories about past and present, rumours and gossip. But after some dozen visits over a 15 year period, I do not recall any traditional villages as for example in Venda or KwaZulu, little picturesque dancing and drumming and no tourist facilities at all.

Booking without tourist bubble

I hasten to take up the invitation at the bottom of the website.

² D.R. Hunt, An account of the Bapedi, *Bantu Studies*, December 1931; C.V Bothma, "The Political structure of the Pedi of Sekhukhuneland", *African Studies* 35, nos 3-24 (1976), pp. 177-205; Peter Delius, *The Land belongs to us*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983; Peter Delius, *A Lion amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996; H.O. Mönnig, *The Pedi*, Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1988

³ www.sekhukhune.gov.za

“ We invite you to explore some of these places and suggest that you do so with Kodikodi, a trained guide who will explain the significance and history of them to you.

Our people, the custodian of this wonderful legacy, are warm and hospitable and look forward to sharing the abundance of their municipality with you.

Whether you are an international or a local tourist, we in Fetakgomo extend an invitation to you to pay a visit. The beauty and the diversity of culture that our municipality has to offer will overwhelm you.”

The e-mail I sent off to book my heritage tour immediately bounces with a message that this address is non-existing. After arrival in Johannesburg, I phone Fetakgomo municipality and ask for Kodikodi. I am told that he has long left the municipality and that the only person who can possibly handle my request is on leave. I am becoming ever more determined to see the wonders of Sekhukhune and not about to give up. There is no ‘tourist bubble’ in Sekhukhune, no intermediary service that can help fulfill my wishes.⁴ Fortunately, the region is to some extent familiar ground.

After arrival in Apel, I tell my host family about these new adventures that I want to explore. Although my hosts are locally well-connected, they never heard anything about tourism trips in their area, not had they ever seen any tourists. My hosts kindly take me to the brand new offices of Fetakgomo municipality and introduce me to some officials who can possibly be of help.

The arrival of a real life tourist who wants to book the advertised heritage tour causes considerable consternation. Like a hot potato, I get shifted around between various officials who have no clue how to handle this unexpected situation. While waiting in the hall for my next appointment, I hear solemn hymns in Afrikaans. Following the sounds I find a television installed in the entrance hall, showing the life broadcast on SABC of the late president P.W. Botha’s funeral in George. It is utterly unreal: president Thabo Mbeki is seated on the front row of the church in George. But hardly anybody else in Fetakgomo municipality pays any attention to the funeral of the former president under whose rule Sekhukhuneland in the 1980s became a hotbed of resistance.

At one point, I am introduced to mayor Coleman Marota. Without any introductory niceties, mayor Marota launches a diatribe about imperialism and the plundering of Africa’s mineral resources by the whites. “Never trust a white person. They only come here to steal from us”. I am somewhat taken aback: this is not quite the red carpet promised by Fetakgomo’s website to welcome tourists. When the mayor has run out of the steam, I cautiously make inquiries about the development plans and the tourist potential of Fetakgomo. Still agitated, mayor Marota states that Fetakgomo offers a unique tourist package: “The history of the BaPedi is as rich as the history of Zulus”. I assure him of my interest in BaPedi heritage and explain my desire to book this unique package. However I attempt to express my sincere wish to learn more about local history

⁴ Walter van Beek, “Approaching African tourism: paradigms and paradoxes”

and heritage, the mayor is not about to relent. The arrival of the manager of the newly opened shopping center however makes clear that mayor Marota has other priorities.

Now I am handed over to Robert, an engaging young man. I am told that Robert is the webmaster, and therefore in a position to help me. Robert brings me to his office and promises that he will show me the website. But I have already seen the website. Now I want to see the real thing: I want to visit the sights described on the website. Robert is flabbergasted. He repeats incredulously: “You want to see the real thing???”. Without further ado, he hastens to deliver me back to Garrison, the public relations official of the municipality. Garrison produces a colourful leaflet with more or less the same content as the website. In addition to the wonders of the website, the leaflet promises overnight accommodation:

“Those who may need overnight accommodation after feasting their eyes and minds on the beautiful tapestry of breathtaking sites of this cultural seat of Sekhukhuneland, can enjoy a well deserved rest in Potlake and the Municipal Guest House, which meets world standards. (...) Be with us when you wake up to shower our beautiful municipality. The red carpet is there for you.”

I nod enthusiastically: yes, that is precisely what I want, and of course I am willing to pay the expenses. All of a sudden, after a new series of consultations, Garrison promises that I can make the tour if I come back on Friday, and bring my own car. On Friday morning I am welcomed by Jackson Lesufi, the official responsible for economic development, which includes tourism. His newly appointed right-hand, Silence, will accompany me to God’s footprint, the Potlake game reserve, and - since I insist- King Sekhukhune’s statue on the Tjate battlefield. More is not possible in a one-day trip, and this turns out to be correct. However, before we can leave, we have to stop at the nearby Spar supermarket because there we hope to find a woman who can provide directions to God’s footstep.

After these consultations, we drive over a mountain pass to the other side of the Leolo mountain range. When we reach the end of the road, we are in Ga Maisela India. Silence - named Silence because he did not scream at his birth- asks around for directions, but most villagers shake their head. At long last, a woman accompanies us to the chief, an elderly man in worn overalls. Chief Maime Maesela is quite enamoured with the visit by a municipal official and a real life white tourist. For him, this is obviously evidence confirming the tourist potential of his heritage site.

The chief immediately agrees to show us his heritage site. We drive towards the edge of the village, from where we walk along a goat trail, crossing an arid and very hot plain towards a formation of rocks. On the way, the chief points to black spots on the rocks, saying that these are the footprints of panthers and leopards. After some climbing over the burning hot rocks, we see a hollow space in the rock, the size of a human foot. This is the print of God’s left foot; his right foot has landed at some considerable distance. Chief Maesela emphasizes that he has not invented anything and is not showing off local folklore. The footprints had been discovered around 2000; a mr Tladi from the

Sekhukhune College of Education identified the steps as Gods footsteps, because he could see it was not a human footprint.

The chief uses the opportunity to complain to Silence that the municipality has neglected to build a fence around this site, to prevent vandalism. Once there is a fence, the tourist potential of Modimo's footprint can be developed. At the entrance, tickets and refreshments will be sold. The revenue will be administered by a community trust, to be used for community development. The chief obviously is well versed in development speak; Silence remarks approvingly that this is a modern chief. Silence is not quite sure whether God's footprint is mentioned in the Integrated Development Plan. If so, it is indeed feasible that the municipality can provide fencing. The scheme would require dozens of kilometers of fencing and it does not become quite clear why the 'footprints' would become a target for vandalism. However, these questions do not concern the chief. Chief Maesela is adamant that there can be no development without fencing.

After taking our leave from the chief, we head for Potlake Nature Reserve, situated on the main road from Polokwane to Burgersfort. The establishment of this Nature Reserve dates back to 1975, when the Ucar Mining Group and the local traditional authority agreed to set 2.800 ha of bushveld and mountains apart as a Nature Reserve. Potlake does not have the 'Big Five' but does boast some ten species of game, including giraffe, gemsbuck, kudu, impala, ostrich, waterbuck, red hartebeest and sable antelope. According to the Fetakgomo website, here we tourists can enjoy out well-deserved rest, with world class comfort. It is a very hot and thirsty November afternoon when we arrive at the entrance gate. We are referred to the manager in the information centre who is most willing to please, after he has woken up. In the information centre, we are shown around stuffed animals in a landscaped setting behind glass windows – apparently a popular outing for school classes. The manager also takes us on a brief car trip to see some of the animals. But when we ask to see the accommodation, he explains that apart from a camping and caravan site, the Nature Park had no accommodation for visitors. Some refreshments perhaps? A family-size bottle of Coca Cola is the only item available.

The visitors registration reveals that Potlake Nature Reserve receives an average of three visitors a week, plus the occasional school class from local schools. Staff members vividly remember the exotic appearance of the only foreign tourist who ever came to Potlake: a Spaniard on a bicycle! Clearly, the tourist potential of Potlake is very limited, with Kruger Park and many other game parks only some 100 km further to the east.

Next, we head for Sekhukhune's most important heritage site, Tjate, the site where the BaPedi warriors in 1878 valiantly fought the British regiments. The local chief is not at home, and his wife admits to not knowing anything about history and statues. However, it is quite easy to locate the statue of King Sekhukhune. Not because the statue towers above the battlefield, but because of the huge fence that is easily spotted from a distance, long before we actually see the modest bronze statue behind the bars.

A plaque on the socle reveals that the statue of King Sekhukhune I (1814-1882) has been unveiled on 16 September 2004. In spite of the massive fence, a local grouping of ‘concerned citizens’ attempted to blow up the statue, using spent explosives from the stocks of the nearby platinum mines, in protest against the backlog in the delivery of water and electricity to Tjate. Damage is limited to the cement socle, but since the incident two guards have been stationed with the statue. The guards emphasize that more and stronger fencing is needed. There is no guide available, and the guards, who speak Sepedi only, tell a complicated long story about the dynasty of Pedi rulers and their heroic wars against the enemy. Who was ‘the enemy’?. The guards shrug and point to the plaque, where the enemy is identified as ‘colonialists and imperialists’. Silence finds all of this too complicated to translate. He says that the guards need to be work shopped so that they will be able to function as guides as well. At Tjate, there are also dreams about fences and gates, refreshments and entrance tickets, in other words *community development*.

Or, in the words of the 2025 development strategy of Greater Sekhukhune District:

The vision of the proposed project is to create a major tourism anchor project and cultural icon in the district based on the formidable contribution of King Sekhukhune to the formation of an African empire. (...) The tourism potential of Tjate could be compared with the Natal Battlefields, Thulamela and perhaps Mapungubwe to the North. Shakaland, which is also in a remote area, enjoys international support based on the fact that people can interact and participate in cultural events, and experience the lifestyle of local people”.⁵

Emulating the Zulu experience

In the olden days, the BaPedi indeed once ruled a substantial empire stretching to the Vaal river. The present acting paramount chief, KK Sekhukhune, likes to remind his visitors that his ancestors were as powerful as the Zulu kings and that they fought valiant battles against Boers and Brits. For the paramount chief, this history serves as a justification for his claim that he, as a descendent of the formidable BaPedi kings, is entitled to the same royal salary and substantial benefits. that the post-apartheid state has accorded to the Zulu king Goodwill Zwelethini. However, the largesse bestowed on Zwelethini has a different rationale: when Gatsha Buthelezi, then prime minister of the KwaZulu Bantustan, attempted to undermine the negotiations for a democratic South African constitution by threatening secession, the negotiators bought the compliance of traditionalist Zulus with the offer of tempting privileges for the Zulu royalty.

The Zulu appeal to the tourist –domestic and overseas- is due largely to their former British arch foes. The British (including Anglophone white South Africans) produced an overwhelming array of books, movies, newspaper stories and other memorabilia to popularize the stories of the Battle of Isandhlwana (which the Zulus won) and the subsequent campaigns resulting in ultimate victory for the British. The

⁵ Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2025 Development Strategy, synthesis report of the research, pp. 36-40.

production of these works is still continuing. Some movies attracted large audiences and are still regularly televised – including one film with Gatsha Buthelezi starring as Shaka Zulu. The battlefields of Natal saw the first defeat of the imperial British army on African soil. The British came ill-prepared as they had seriously underestimated the military strength and the determination of their opponents. To make defeat less humiliating, the Zulu warriors from then on were naturally portrayed as formidable fighters. With typical British nostalgia, every now and then the Zulu impies and the British redcoats assemble on the green hills of Natal for a rerun of the famous battles. The Natal battlefields are a popular item on the heritage tours in Natal. But in contrast to Sekhukhune, in Natal there is something to be seen: the old hospital at Rorke's Drift has been converted into a museum, burial monuments mark the battlefields. At Bloedrivier (Ncome), Afrikaner nationalists have constructed a weird lager of bronze Boer wagons to commemorate the 1838 battle of Bloedrivier, the fountain of Afrikaner nationalist mythology. Apart from the battles between Zulus and Voortrekkers and between Zulus and British, there is a third category of battlefields from the Anglo-Boer war. Like the Afrikaners and the British, Zulu traditionalists likewise enjoy basking in their erstwhile glory and are willing to oblige in schemes of heritage tourism.

The battlefields of Natal evoke a colourful imagery: there is an abundance of visual representations that has prepared the tourist for a visit to the actual sites, even if there is not that much to be seen. More recent battles are less suitable for heritage tourism: the hills around Pietermaritzburg, where Inkatha youth and UDF-aligned youth enacted their bloody confrontations in the 1980s, do not figure on the program.

In contrast, the BaPedi do not benefit from this massive public relations machinery that has rendered international fame to the Natal battlefields. And although the BaPedi are proud of their long history of struggle against foreign invaders and imposters, very few are able to tell even the basic outline of this history. Silence, in spite of his university degree, told me that King Sekhukhune I had been arrested by the Lebowa government (the Bantustan imposed in the 1950s under National Party rule).

Most importantly however: the 'battlefields' niche of heritage tourism has already been taken up by the Natal battlefields. In spite of the BaPedi ambitions, there seems to be no space for yet another 'battlefields heritage' enterprise : the story is not known among overseas tourists, it does not appeal to nostalgic sentiments among domestic tourists and it is not near any major tourist route. At best, it can become a destination for school excursions.

Somewhat below the fenced statue is a modest tombstone in honour of the Scottish regiment that in 1878 fought here with their Swazi allies against King Sekhukhune's troops. This tombstone was placed many decades ago. There are no fences, but nobody ever vandalized it. At some distance, ANC symbols have been painted on the rocks, but the memorial itself had never been damaged, in spite of the nearby football field which everyday attracts dozens of youngsters.

At Tjate my heritage tour ended. Silence requested to be dropped near his home village, and I drove back to Apel. Thanks to my host family, my accommodation in Sekhukhune has never been a problem.

I have immensely enjoyed my heritage tour in Sekhukhuneland, but for most aspirant heritage tourists, this ‘feast for the eyes and the minds’ will probably remain a virtual adventure on the website. Although tourism was seen by all whom I met on that day as an economic activity with income generating potential for local communities, nobody at any of the sites asked me for money.

What does it all mean?

There is more to this virtual adventure than the fantasies of webmaster Robert only. The economic potential of tourism figures in all the Integrated Development Plans, Scenarios for 2025 and other policy plans produced by Sekhukhune District and its municipalities. The attractions are generally summarized as natural beauty, cultural secrets and ‘age-old traditions and lifestyles’. However, in a country like South Africa with its plethora of well-developed, easily accessible and well-advertised tourist destinations, Sekhukhune faces lots of competition. I must add however that other proposed tourism developments seem more realistic, such as the development of the Loskop dam and the new De Hoop dam as family resorts catering for domestic tourism

An obsession with fencing and gates

All over South Africa, gates and fences are omnipresent. Gates, fences – sometimes with high voltage wires- , walls spiked with nails or broken bottles are of course part and parcel of protective measures against crime, as are the gated communities of Johannesburg and Pretoria. But apart from the security aspect, there is also an aspect of status: see for example the Parliamentary Village in Polokwane (formerly Pietersburg). This provincial capital is not known as a hotbed of crime. Yet, the elected representatives of the people of Limpopo are housed all together in a heavily guarded gated village, accessible to outsiders only on invitation. Security is a vital ingredient of status: the omnipresent bodyguards, armoured cars, gates and fences serve to keep a symbolic distance between VIPs and ordinary souls.

While crime is no doubt a serious concern, many gates and fences serve the purpose of status rather than security. Fences and gates come with middle class status. In the middle class sections of Soweto, more and more houses are heavily fenced. While Sowetans have good reasons for their security concerns, burglaries are not a widespread phenomenon in Apel and other Sekhukhune villages. Yet, fences and gates are proliferating here as well, along with lawns with water sprinklers, a worrying sight in an area that is faced with acute water shortages.

The obsession with fencing as a sign of progress and modernity is particularly ironic in view of Sekhukhune’s history of resistance against fencing when it was imposed by the National Party government in the 1950s. In the 1950s, fences were associated with the National Party’s policies of *betterment* in the Native Reserves: in order to halt the ongoing process of environmental degradation as a consequence of overgrazing, the

authorities imposed unpopular measures such as cattle culling, dipping and fencing. Cutting down the poles of the fences was part of the resistance tactics of the 1950s.

The 2025 Development Strategy of Greater Sekhukhune District has a grandiose vision of entrance gates to the District, as one of the proposed five anchor projects. From these three entrance gates, tourists will be guided to routes with local attractions, ‘and by so doing increase the length of stay and total expenditure in the area’. Here, the inspiration is drawn from famous international icons.

“The entrance gates proposal is a new and unique tourism concept in South Africa although there are similarities with the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (Germany) and the Arc de Triomphe in Paris (France)”.

It is not clear which historical feats will be commemorated by the gates to Sekhukhune District, but the planners do acknowledge that “the business model for the gates could be reconsidered” as “the anticipated revenue stream from the gate proposal is insufficient to cover the capital requirement”.⁶

Tourism is perceived as an economic activity with a job-creation potential, although planners acknowledge that the employment potential is less than in the mining and agricultural sector in the province and in Sekhukhune District. Yet, the job creation potential is predicted in minute detail. Thus, the entrance gates should yield 135 jobs in the construction phase and 60 jobs in the operational phase. The employment potential of Tjate heritage is more modestly predicted as 26 jobs in the construction phase and 11 jobs in the operational phase.

The prospect of lucrative employment has also lured dozens of young people in Sekhukhune to ‘tourism courses’ provided by the infamous fly-by-night colleges: private institutions that dupe young people and their parents into paying large amounts of money for a worthless diploma. In the visitors’ register of the Umsobumvo Youth Advisory centre in Apel, a number of young jobseekers noted under their academic qualifications that they possessed a diploma in tourism studies. It seems unlikely that they will soon find employment in Sekhukhune District.

Yet, celebrating the prospects of tourism has become a fixed ritual, as can be seen in the latest budget speech (2007) by mayor Dickson Masemola of Greater Sekhukhune District:

All our siblings in African countries and Diaspora should know that from the rocky escarpment of Leolo Mountains to the higher Plateau of Eensaam lies a rich history bequeathed to us by our forebears. We call every visitor and traveler to our district to come, witness and enjoy the natural beauty of Sekhukhune. As they display beauty and grandeur rarely seen by the human eye. These and other natural attractions will remain unrivalled for generations to come. Our hills and mountains are the

⁶ Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2025 Development Strategy, synthesis report of the research, pp. 35-40.

hiding places of our best kept cultural secrets and heritage. They provided our ancestors with refuge and protection during the fierce wars of resistance and anticolonial struggles.

Our forests and valleys still serve as a crucible of culture we forge our common identity and our African ness, in line with the well cherished and age-old ways and cultural traditions of our living dead.