

Talking about the Real Thing: Authenticity and the Politics of Authentication at Freedom Park South Africa

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Since its inception, Freedom Park, South Africa's most ambitious state-sponsored post-apartheid heritage project, has had to contend with challenges to its legitimacy posed in the guise of questions about authenticity. As the nation's newest, premier heritage venture, the stakes in securing the legitimacy of the institution are significantly raised. With the 2011 completion date looming ever nearer, concerns about the public's perception of the Park's cultural, historical and spiritual authenticity seem to be re-emerging among employees. This has resulted in the generation of strong discursive efforts at propping and reinforcing a particular, polished image of the Park that sought to counter the real, material imperfections visitors and other stakeholders had highlighted. Drawing on Birgit Meyer's (2009) concept of the politics of authentication, where authenticity is viewed not as an essence "but a quality that is produced in cultural forms", in this paper I engage with the question of how Freedom Park seeks to convey and sustain a sense of legitimacy as it attempts to secure an aura of authenticity under circumstances of public scrutiny. Grounded in 5 month's of extensive ethnographic fieldwork amongst Park employees, visitors and tour-guides, specifically, this paper discusses three tropes Park officials claim the project's legitimacy is premised upon, namely; proper adherence to public consultative processes; the use of Indigenous Knowledge Systems to guide heritage practise; and the expert knowledge offered by conventional and organic intellectuals. Following a critical analysis of the strength of these claims through juxtaposition with public criticism, I reflect on the Park's attempts at conjuring up a sense of legitimacy in light of the notion of the politics of authentication and the pursuit of authenticity on the part of heritage institutions more broadly.