Interview with Prof. Cornelius Holtorf, University of Linnaeus, Sweden

In 2016 a well respected Professor of archaeology from Sweden visited the Botswana National Museum to hold heritage conversations as the nation prepares to embark on an unprecedented development of heritage sites, interpretation centres, markers and site museums. The Zebras Voice caught up with him in an exclusive reminiscence on the visit.

Sun City is designed with a particular audience and their values in mind. (Pic: C.Holtorf)

**ZV. First kindly tell us who is Cornelius Holtorf.**

Well, I work as Professor of Archaeology at Linnaeus University and Director of the Graduate School in Contract Archaeology in Sweden. I read prehistoric archaeology, social anthropology and physical anthropology in Germany, England and Wales. I also hold a UNESCO chair on heritage futures. My special fields of interest are heritage studies and museum education. Most recently my interest covers especially the subject of heritage futures.

**ZV. We understand that in 2016 you visited Botswana for the first time and went through some of the heritage sites in Botswana. What did you do while you were here?**

I spent two weeks in Botswana, during July and August 2016. My visit was hosted by the Botswana National Museum, represented by Director Gaogakwe Phorano, and by Phillip Segadika, Head of the Division of Archaeology and Monuments.

The visit included brief site visits to Three Chiefs Monument, Ntsweng excavations, Masieng Footprints, Nyungwe site, Caungula Liberation Heritage border crossing point, Lesoma Monument, Old Kachikau remains, Kavimba Gateway trees and...
Savuti rock paintings as well as sightseeing in the Gaborone and Kasane areas.

I also took part in a seminar "Towards a story-line development - a seminar on the proposed Ntsweng site museum" held in Molepolole on 29 July 2016. On that occasion I presented a talk titled "Interpreting our heritage: telling stories that matter." Later, I gave a second presentation on "Interpreting our heritage: issues of authenticity" at the Botswana National Museum.

ZV. During one of the presentations in Gaborone and Molepolole you mentioned the concept of the ‘audience Museum’. What is an ‘audience’ museum?

Traditionally, public archaeology has aimed at teaching people about the value of archaeological heritage. This paradigm involves public education, outreach, and instruction in various ways.

Since about the 1990s, public archaeology has been based on the insight that values of archaeological sites are ascribed by people. Consequently, now people take center place in determining values. These values are not restricted to academic ones but include, among others, pedagogical, psychological, aesthetic, experiential, economic, political, existential, and spiritual values. A major aim of presentation has become to touch people through heritage, facilitated by relevant experts who can enhance processes of public engagement and participation of various audiences.

Putting visitors first in all work aimed at presenting archaeological and heritage sites to a wider audience involves not only to know the audience(s) one works for but also to take their interests and values into account in planning visitor experiences and to encourage professional story-telling and service-mindedness in all interactions occurring with visitors.

Story-telling is an important way of making sense of the historic environment by making it meaningful to a given audience. A good story never loses sight of the big picture represented by its overall plot; it is relevant throughout to its audience; and it directly speaks to and involves the audience in some way, ideally with people becoming characters themselves.

I agree with Freeman Tilden who argued that "the story is the thing". In other words, the key to success does not lie in the character of the site and all its parts, but in the overall story told about the site and the extent to which the story touches and provokes the visitors so that it becomes meaningful to them.

I think that we need to change our focus towards considering not only the site itself, its historic significance and any archaeological findings, but also the site's contemporary meanings to the intended audience. The term 'site museum' puts the main focus on the site itself, whereas the term 'audience museum' puts our focus on the audience; that is what we need to do and why I like this term.

ZV. How would the audience museum idea relate to the presentation of heritage sites in Botswana?

At the site of the proposed Ntsweng Site Museum in Molepolole, it was clear that this was an important and interesting site. But although the project was initially to be funded through a National Economy Stimulus Programme (now NDP XI) and intended to attract visitors, at the time of my visit it did not become very clear which audience was intended to visit the museum and which story they might be told.

The authenticity of the site is one of location and beyond question. But that does not mean that any museum built would be meaningful to large numbers of visitors. This was the occasion during my trip when I first suggested that the use of the term ‘audience museum’ instead of ‘site museum’ might be able to change the focus towards considering not only the site, its historic significance and any archaeological findings, but also its contemporary meaning to the intended audience.

One story that could touch - and indeed provoke - visitors and their values might take its origin in the vandalism that evidently took part at the cemetery reflecting different perceptions in the community of the significance of the graves and possibly the way the cemetery is (or should be) valued, managed and conserved. To some extent, this site appears to be contentious. I wondered what exactly lie behind the vandalism we observed and whether there is something to be learned here for visitors about the politics of commemoration and the meaning of history in contemporary Botswana society.

Vandalism at Ntsweng. (Pic: C.Holtorf)
The way in which the project already involves the local community is exemplary and should pave the way to create a story that reflects not only the past but also some of the local community's values and concerns in relation to that past.

ZV. Before coming to Botswana you visited Sun City in Rustenburg, South Africa. What would an archaeologist like you find interesting about Sun City?

Sun City represents certain stereotypical notions of the past. They are academically incorrect and probably politically problematic too. But they are interesting for a professional archaeologist like me insofar as they represent popular notions of the past to which even the professionals' work has to relate. Sun City may not be a museum but it is an attraction that is good at telling a story to its customers and it is designed with a particular audience and their values in mind.

ZV. What are some of your lasting impressions about your Botswana visit?

I have not been a lot to African countries. One important impression, besides the very many friendly and helpful people we met, was the high degree to which the colonial legacy is still very palpable in public life. Botswana had a distinct British flavor which I had not expected quite like that. Another impression was that your shopping malls and cinemas are probably even more Americanized than the ones we have in Sweden. As tourists, we were most impressed by the wildlife in Kasane. My children still talk about the baby elephants crossing the Chobe river at sun-set!

ZV. Lastly, you are well known for being a prolific writer and a well sought after international public speaker. How many books have you written so far and which one would you recommend for heritage managers in Botswana?

Much of my current and past work is accessible via my personal homepage at http://web.comhem.se/cornelius/ - quite a bit is available in open access. None of my work deals specifically with Botswana so what I would recommend to my colleagues in your country would depend on their specific professional responsibilities and interests. Having said that, our work on Heritage Futures ought to be relevant to heritage managers around the world!

ZV. Do you have anything else to say?

Loads! I hope to be back in Botswana at some point.

Elephants crossing the Chobe at sunset. (Pic: C.Holtorf)