

RELIGION, DEVELOPMENT, AND PALAEO-TOURISM

Fossils and Ideas of Oneness at the Cradle of
Humankind World Heritage Site

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1. Introduction

Ideas of oneness (of humanity) may sometimes come from sources other than those overtly religious. However, in large part, they can be seen to trace their ancestry to various world religions and religio-philosophical traditions that seek to emphasise the universality of the human condition and more so the human being. Given this, can there conceivably be some semblance of relationship between ideas of oneness and an example of development and palaeo or fossil sites tourism?

This article works from an anthropological perspective seen to be initially articulating from early ethnocentric positions on both religion and Africa and looks at some aspects around the attempt of decolonisation of Africa through the example of a particular development project of palaeo-tourism at the Sterkfontein Caves, situated in a geographical space designated "the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site."

A necessary corollary to any notion of decolonisation is the reclamation of dignity and humanity, here articulated as *oneness* as opposed to colonial *otherness*. The article takes as a starting point the acknowledgement that the notion of oneness or sameness has deep resonance with most major religious worldviews and works through the heuristic device of anthropology of religion and anthropology of development and looks at how tourist experiences are shaped and how such experiences may be designed to redefine the visitor's image of himself or herself as part of a larger trajectory of a common and, thus, shared or *one* prehistory. This redefinition of the visitor's sense of self in this particular context is achieved through a process of modelling the narrative around certain fossil artefacts that have been excavated in the site known as the 'Cradle' that speaks to this idea of one-ness or sameness.

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2. Anthropology of Religion

Edward Burnet Tylor, widely considered the founding figure and father of cultural anthropology, defined religion in the broadest (and simplest) academic vernacular as possible when he stated that it was a belief in supernatural beings.¹ We know, of course, that like many other terms that point to things phenomenological, it is notoriously difficult to capture definitively what exactly religion is. This is also coupled with the multidimensionality of religion as a phenomenon of lived reality that lends itself to multifarious discourses within the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, historical, feminist, etc. This means that it is not so much the dearth of alternative understandings that is the problem but rather the plethora of possible and alternate understandings of religion. From an anthropological perspective, however, as this is where I position myself, religion is approached as a scientific domain of study as anthropologists ground themselves, their observations, interpretations, and their explanations on empirically evidential and qualitatively elicited data.

Early nineteenth century anthropology and anthropologists like Tylor, Morgan, and Frazer, like many other discipline-specific scholars, were overwhelmingly dominated by theories of cultural evolutionism, and most anthropologists conveniently worked on *a priori* Cartesian assumptions that religion was either simple – that is to say, *primitive* – or modern and sophisticated.

Such a hermeneutic of world religions, rejected by later twentieth century anthropologists, was, of course, tinged with imperialistic notions of ethnocentrism. These religions were not, in any event, accorded world religion status but were rather seen as the other religions of the primitive peoples of the world. These early quasi-scholarship saw these scholars basing their analyses on third-hand accounts of missionaries and traders rather than first-hand personal and sustained (and, at times, intimate) ethnographic contact, and in some cases relationship with the religious community being studied. Their conclusions saw the *other* and religions of the *other* subsumed epistemologically (and morally) under the overarching rubric of cultural evolutionism with them concluding, in various permutations of the evolutionism premise, that the other religions were less evolved forms of their own fully evolved European selves and their European religion.

¹Edward Taylor, *Primitive Culture*, New York: J. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920, 1.

3. Anthropology of Development

Anthropology of development is a field newly animated by theories of globalization and trans-nationalism. Its genesis as a sub-discipline of anthropology can be traced to the application of anthropological perspectives to the multidisciplinary branch of development studies. In this context development refers to the social action by various agents, state and otherwise, who situate their work within the quarters of the developing countries. Again, scholarship is based on actual work in the field and such scholarship is not meant to change the status quo of any aspect of the studied population but to report and, thereafter, contribute to the discourse around what is happening in the doing of development. This contribution would at times provide the material for the actors in applied development anthropology who were positioned dually as scholars and activists. As such development anthropology would include classic works ranging from the likes of seminal thinkers such as Weber, Marx and Engels to more contemporary works on the politics of development knowledge, consumption, environment, gender, international NGO networks, the myriad world agencies such as IMF, and campaigns to change the World Bank.² Thus, in development anthropology, development is not conceived as a goal or ideal, or as a success or failure; it is rather an object of academic study.

4. Religion, Development, and Palaeo-tourism?

Africa (and the African) was seen in the early one-dimensional development analysis of being in need of development. Likewise, early scholarship on anthropology of religion saw the African as possessing a primitive and backward religion and being in need of saving. Africa and the African identity, thus, come to be constructed in a particular way in the colonial discourse as the other in need of some kind of messianic intervention and rescue.

Recent discourses around Africa and African identities seek to divest of these earlier colonial constructions and to actively engage with local understandings and constructions of identity. This identity is, in turn, assimilated into the heritage and tourism vernacular of the country. This is because heritage sites together with museums and interpretive centres are

²Marc Edelman and Angelique Haugerud, eds., *The Anthropology of Development and Globalisation: From Classical Political Economy to Neo-Liberalism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, 5-7.

narrativized spaces that showcase indigenous or local history to the local public and, perhaps more importantly, the international public. One such space is the interpretive site or visitor centre of Maropeng Complex in the Cradle of Humankind Heritage Site.

The Cradle of Humankind comprises of about forty fossil sites, of which 13 have been excavated to date. Sterkfontein Caves, owned by the University of Witwatersrand, is the most well known and fossil rich cave thus far. About forty percent of the world's hominid fossils – 'hominids' being an archaeological term for fossil human ancestors – have been found in the greater space of the Cradle. Maropeng is part of a massive development project that was envisaged as bearing a wider poverty alleviation initiative as well as a tourism development venture.

Maropeng is explained as being the product of a public and private partnership of the Gauteng government and the University of the Witwatersrand with Maropeng a' Africa Leisure (Pty) Ltd. We are told that the Gauteng government has invested 163 million rands in Maropeng's development. We are also told in the government newsletter that "Maropeng will create at least 1200 permanent jobs and serve as an important catalyst to further boost tourism-linked employment in the area." The communication continues that the "development of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site as a world-class tourism destination has begun to transform what was previously one of Gauteng's poorest and economically depressed areas into one of the most promising areas in the province."³

5. Architectural Design

In terms of the architectural exigencies Maropeng is a Tumulus-shaped building designed to look like an ancient burial mound. The form is meant to represent the ancestors who now lie buried in African land. An article in the local newspaper tells us that the significance of the Tumulus is also to pay homage to the spirituality of burials by past societies in the area.⁴

A Tumulus is a mound of earth and stones raised over a grave. Tumuli are also known as barrows or burial mounds and can be found throughout the world. Thus, the architectural idiom is not exclusively

³Lucille Davies, "Maropeng Brings Fossils to Life" and "New Look Sterkfontein Puts Life into Fossils" at <http://www.org.za>

⁴Lucille Davies, "Maropeng Brings Fossils to Life" and "New Look Sterkfontein Puts Life into Fossils" at <http://www.joburg.org.za>.

African. However, just as the structure attempts to achieve architectural symbiosis between an ancient-looking façade and modern rear, a symbiosis of ideas is achieved by working in an ancient, yet universally found architectural expression while ascribing to it what Marschall and Kearney, in reference to other buildings, refer to as African relevance, in claiming that the structure symbolizes *all those in the past who have been buried in Africa*.⁵ In African traditional religions, worship and respect are offered to the ancestral beings and, thus, the belief in the ancestors (in a spiritual as well as material sense, as in the artefacts, the bones!) becomes part of the visitor's worldview. There is perhaps an interesting inversion of sorts here. The colonial past saw a certain religious worldview being foisted on the African, whereas here the international tourist is (especially) made aware of the value and import of the indigenous African worldview of ancestors and homage to the ancestors.

Furthermore, the Tumulus as stated is designed to look like an ancient burial mound from the front and a modern structure from the rear. The rear exterior itself is constructed of steel, glass and concrete. The marriage of the ancient and universal in the form of the mound roots us in the past, while modern materials and functionality place us squarely in the present. Along with the earthen mound, these serve as covert pointers to our shared common origins in the past and our evolution to the present. Or, in reverse, they suggest how our civilized present can be traced back to the rooted mound in Africa. Again, it is a reversal of the colonial worldview that placed Europe as the height of the civilized world and Africa as the dark continent of heathens with no true god.

Heritage sites are, after all, "narrativised spaces"⁶ and places of consumption and, as such, they will be consumed at different levels by different categories of tourists.⁷ Consumption presupposes a consumable, which, in this instance, is provided by the particular representations in the interpretive centre. Furthermore, interpretation is a communication process designed to reveal specifically constructed meanings and relationships. Thus, the design, both inside and out, is meant to facilitate us, the visitors,

⁵S. Marschall and B. Kearney, *Opportunities for Relevance: Architecture in the New South Africa*, Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2000, 78.

⁶D. Phillips, "Narrativised Spaces: The Functions of Story in Theme Parks," in D. Crouch, ed., *Leisure/Tourism Geographies*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 91-108.

⁷B. Graham, G. J. Ashworth, and J. E. Tunbridge, *Geography of Heritage*, London: Arnold Publishers, 2000, 20.

discovering our relationship to our collective shared history, our so-called *real* roots and our sameness.

The website puts it thus: "From the moment the visitor arrives at the car park the journey of discovery starts."⁸ Indeed, the sustained refrain of the website is entrenched in the slogan of "Discover Yourself." The official website explains that the name Maropeng means "returning to the place of origin," in the indigenous Setswana language. The narrative continues: "Maropeng has been chosen as the name of the new visitors centre at the Cradle of Humankind to remind us that the ancestors of all humans, wherever they may live today, originally, came from Africa. When visiting the Cradle of Humankind, people are actually 'returning to their place of origin'."⁹

6. The Logo and Narrative as Representation

The logo is said to be an artistic depiction of this place of common origin. The narrative in the webpage and pamphlet of Maropeng explains the interpretation embedded in the logo itself, stating that the depiction of the world denotes the universal significance of the Cradle of Humankind, the location of Maropeng. We are told that it is the ancestral home to all people, no matter what colour, culture, or creed they are. The various executive members of Maropeng Management, in various press releases, have echoed these sentiments, speaking of the Cradle of Humankind as if it were a kind of bequest to the living. Here, again, Africa emerges as being antithetical to the colonial dark continent and is rather the continent that dawned life to the rest of the world.

The logo of the foot in Africa stepping beyond Africa is explained as denoting humankind's origin as a species. We are told that our hominid ancestors moved out of Africa northwards, and spread across the globe, while continuing to evolve. It is told in evocative language: "Long, long ago, millions of moons back ... Africa gave birth in her steamy jungles and great rift valleys and along her pristine coastlines to humankind. You and I, and all our ancestors, can trace back our bloodlines to our common ancestry in the heat, dust and beauty of this great continent."¹⁰ The

⁸The Maropeng Official Visitor centre at <http://www.maropeng.co.za>

⁹Pamphlet published by the marketing wing of Maropeng itself, *a-Africa* Maropeng, explaining the significance of the Maropeng logo and given as part of media pack to researchers and the media.

¹⁰Pamphlet published by the marketing wing of Maropeng itself, *a-Africa* Maropeng, explaining the meaning of the Maropeng logo.

narrative of the logo draws from sound palaeo-anthropological theories. Indeed, it carries a quotation from Phillip Tobias, the world-renowned palaeo-anatomist of the University of Witwatersrand: "In our quest to get nearer to the truth of how humans evolved, there is no part of the world that has yielded more secrets than the dozen or more fossil-bearing caves in the Cradle of Humankind."¹¹

Marschall¹² states: "every new political order forms a group identity through a process of selective remembering ... usable pasts." In the case of Sterkfontein, it is a prehistoric usable past drawn selectively from science. The logo is, thus, not national wishful thinking or artistic license but based on sound scientific theory. The "politics of representation"¹³ show that the narrative that wraps around this, however, is clothed in emotively rich language that celebrates this scientific theory as a socio-political vindication of Africa as the original birthplace.

7. Palaeo-Heritage, Identity, and Oneness

In an article on forging national identity, Marschall talks of the construction of a compelling foundation myth. She asserts that the foundation myth traces the roots and defines the birth of a new nation, and gives us the framework into which events and artifacts may be embedded.

In any society, certain memories are valued, because they are linked to that society's present sense of identity or a new identity it intends to foster. Through institutionalized remembrance we want to ensure that selected individual or collective memories are incorporated into cultural memory.¹⁴ Here, though, it is not so much a myth but a scientific construct that is appropriated. Acceptance and appropriation of the Out-of-Africa Model for human evolution returns the African people to what is understood by some to be their place as pivotal actors in the saga of evolution and the culmination in humanity.

¹¹Phillip Tobias quoted in the official Maropeng pamphlet; it is taken from Professor Tobias address to world leaders and environmental experts, Thabo Mbeki, Koffi Annan, and Jane Goodall at Sterkfontein Caves in 2005.

¹²Sabine Marschall, "Making Money with Memories: The Fusion of Heritage, Tourism and Identity Formation in South Africa," *Historia* 50, 2 (2005), 19.

¹³Graham. Ashworth, and Tunbridge, *Geography of Heritage*, 30.

¹⁴Sabine Marschall, "Forging National Identity: Institutionalizing Foundation Myths through Monuments," *SA Journal of Cultural History* 19, 1 (2005), 19-20.

This is the thrust of the address entitled “Africa’s Roots of Humanity and Civilization,” given in 2000 for Africa Commemoration Day, by Runoko Rashidi, where he asserts that his paper is designed to help reconnect and refocus the history of the African. “That Other African.” This is not the stereotypical African savage, but the African that first peopled the earth, and gave birth to or significantly influenced the world’s oldest and most magnificent civilizations. This is the African that first entered Asia, Europe, Australia, the South Pacific, and the early Americas not as slave, but as master. We now know, based on recent scientific studies of DNA, that modern humanity, originated in Africa, that Black people are the world’s original people, and that all modern humans can ultimately trace their ancestral roots back to Africa. If not for the primordial migrations of early African people, humanity would have remained physically Africoid, and the rest of the world outside of the African continent absent of human life.¹⁵

Embedded in this speech by a writer-historian of sorts, are a multitude of negations. There is a vehement negation of the African as other, as the native, as the barbarian, as the uncivilized, and as the primitive and in need of help and saving. Many of these fallacies have themselves been perpetrated and perpetuated by early nineteenth century colonial anthropologists and, unfortunately, they continue to be perpetrated by a fossilized development discourse.

Compounded with this denial of African as inferior other are certain reclamations, that of the greatest antiquity, African as original, as civilized, and as authoring humanity everywhere through his prehistoric migrations. This claim to prehistory continues in the words of Rob King, the CEO of Maropeng a’ Africa, who asserts that the development “is not only part of our national pride, but of the world,” claiming that the centre’s logo “denotes the universal relevance of the Cradle of Humankind as the ancestral home to all, no matter what colour, culture or creed.”¹⁶

Brand manager for Maropeng, Chrissi Dunk states: “Maropeng at the Cradle of Humankind is not only part of our national pride...;” the rest of that sentence is an echo of the Rob King citation, except that she adds: “after all we share 99% of our DNA.”¹⁷ From a source seemingly incongruous with religion, it presents again the notion of overwhelming

¹⁵<http://www.cwo.coml-lucomi/Runoko.html>

¹⁶<http://www.southafrica.info/pls/procs/iac>

¹⁷<http://www.discoveryouself.co.za/sterkfontein/source/content/media>

sameness. Cultural anthropology as a social science with rigorous methodological praxis does not gloss over or essentialise that one percent difference. Cultural diversity and particular cultural patterns are recognized, and cultural relativism is acknowledged. The notion of same rather than different is, however, what is more often than not the emphasised motif in world religions. Often, it is the mantra taken up by world leaders in their appeal for peace.

Thabo Mbeki, the President of South Africa, formally opened the Maropeng centre just as he had at the Sterkfontein Caves a few years before. He stated that the Cradle could be compared to a massive 47 hectare library of archaeological and palaeontological information with Maropeng offering an abundant reference section.¹⁸

Tasked to write a foreword to the Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind, Mbeki asserts in much more muscular words: The book is itself an important contribution to the understanding of human evolution and emphasizes the centrality of South Africa and other countries on the African continent in unravelling the important subject of our origins.... We are able to proclaim that humanity emerged in the highlands and savannas of the vast African continent.¹⁹ Mbeki, later, in the same foreword, goes on to say that it is these innovations and inventions (such as use of fire) evident in the Cradle of Humankind, that have allowed "humanity to colonize the entire world, and develop a variety of civilizations at different points in our history."²⁰ He ascribes essentially African origins to all the great ancient civilizations.

There is an interesting inversion of the word 'colonize' here, used perhaps in a more scientific idiom, as when a species makes a home in a new place. However, its use is in striking juxtaposition with the use of 'colonize' to refer to an act of dominance and control, such as when one people lays claim to and takes possession of a place away from weaker categories of people – especially since African peoples have lived a long history of slavery and oppression.

Mbeki continues that despite these essential contributions to humanity Africa today remains poor and underdeveloped as a "result of a

¹⁸<http://www.discoveryouself.co.za/sterkfontein/source/content/media>

¹⁹Brett Hilton-Barber and Lee Berger, *The Official Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind*, Gauteng, South Africa: Struik, 2004, 4.

²⁰Hilton-Barber and Berger, *The Official Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind*, 5.

brutal slave trade and subsequent colonial and neo-colonial plunder." He continues: "Accordingly, as Africans, we must overcome the debilitating effects of an unjust past that sought to inculcate the notion that black people are by nature inferior [and we] ... should help Africans realize that, having given birth to humanity, we must reverse the effects of ... dehumanization that have characterized our recent past."²¹

He ends by proclaiming his hope that "our [the government's] investment in the Cradle of Humankind ... will give the people of the world an opportunity to better understand their own origin, evolution and development into sophisticated modern human beings."²² This emerges as a clear exercise in a sort of re-inheritance by those written out of history, with a claim now to prehistory, and reminds us that heritage is also a political resource.²³

Of course, the earlier rejection of Africa and the African (and even African fossil heritage)²⁴ has been entrenched as deep intellectual superiority over the 'other' that has expressed itself in the violence of the rejection and exclusivistic denial of that other. Perhaps one of Mbeki's motives for making the whole world African in origin was to counterbalance such a history of rejection. In the new narrative representations for the artifacts, the African or native is no longer the marginalized other of the imperialistic ethnologist. In an interesting twist, the 'other' has written himself into the telling as the privileged one, and sees himself as being able to abandon the need to define himself as different in favour of subsuming all others into the same humanity. All colonial dualisms are eschewed in a bid for an oneness in a common past or heritage. Graham and others assert that the concept of a common heritage of humanity has universal appeal and serves to reinforce the ideals of human equality and common destiny, a forward-looking future.²⁵ In this

²¹Hilton-Barber and Berger, *The Official Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind*, 5.

²²Hilton-Barber and Berger, *The Official Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind*, 6.

²³Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge, *Geography of Heritage*, 18.

²⁴For an excellent and elaborate discussion of the events around the rejection of the fossil found in Africa, see P. V. Tobias, Q. Wang, and J. L. Cormack, "The Establishment of Palaeo-Anthropology in South Africa and China: With Special Reference to the Remarkably Similar Roles of Raymond A. Dart and Davidson Black," *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa* 56, 1 (2001), 1-9.

²⁵Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge, *Geography of Heritage*, 236.

context, it is common or same descent and same origins that are reinforced.

Colonialism and scholarship entrenched in colonial methodologies have created a discontinuity²⁶ and render nonexistent the recording of the history of the marginalised categories of people. Throwing off the image of the native as inferior accompanies moves towards re-inserting the histories of those who had previously been ignored and deleted from history. In Jacob Zuma's (former president of South Africa) address at the National Heritage Council Civil Society Conference, he referred to the death of apartheid, itself a mode of colonialism and the birth of democracy in South Africa in 1994. He states: "... We had to introduce the history and experience of the Black majority into the archives and heritage architecture of our country. We had to reverse the legacy of apartheid, which had rendered Black people almost non-existent in the cultural institutions and symbols of our country."²⁷

This transforming of identities of separateness and otherness fostered by various colonial mechanisms and introduction of the history and experience of the African majority into the archives and heritage architecture of the country necessitate an archetypal narrative of ones origin, which can either be drawn from the past or newly constructed. Though we have a genealogy of early humankind, the heroes are the famous fossils found at this site and nicknamed Taung Child, Mrs. Ples, and Little Foot. They have become the equivalent of epic heroes, whose discovery offers vindication to the supporters of the Out-of-Africa theory of human beginnings. Their discovery has also allowed for the further growth of a discourse around a newly constructed African identity that attempts to throw off the shackles of the category of other, by replacing it with the idea of oneness, sameness, and common origin.

The website of Maropeng presents Mrs. Ples and Little Foot with a history that coalesces with our present. They are the fossil conduits that help in re-claiming the past of oneness. Although more scientific descriptions of these *australopithecine* fossil finds are made in the Sterkfontein website windows, the Maropeng or the interpretive centre windows present these hominids as characters that all of us can relate to.

²⁶C. Kruger and M. van Heerden, "The Voortrekker Monument Heritage Site: A New Statement of Significance," *Historia* 50, 2 (2005), 237-260.

²⁷<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/zuma/2005/jz0312.html>

Each short description culminates by endorsing the idea of humankind's birth in Africa.

8. Conclusion

It is perhaps peculiar to refer to notions of religion at a palaeo-archaeological site that necessarily provides evidences of humankind's evolution as a species. Sterkfontein and Maropeng are touted as the premier archaeological and interpretive sites in the country. Here there is no reference or recourse to a god or creator as such. However, it is still a country that has for its National Anthem "*inkosi sikelele* Africa," which means "God bless Africa!" Whatever the views might be of various scientists who work at the excavation sites, of the various premiers and politicians, Thabo Mbeki included, and some of the architects involved in the designing of the centre, there is no conflict in accepting both the tenets of their respective religions as well as the theory of evolution. A close examination of their media releases and interviews shows that they appear to be more preoccupied with proclaiming the emerging status and heritage of Africa as original home to all the people of the world rather than attempting to reconcile Darwinian evolution and religious beliefs.

In the final analysis, heritage, in the context of the development project of Sterkfontein, is sold and consumed at multiple levels and through several vehicles, including both the "Sterkfontein" archaeological site and "Maropeng" interpretive site. At the latter, the narratives and architectural designs are inextricably entwined with defining a new African self, rooted in the shared common past and the birth of humanity. The visit to the Cradle is robustly touted as a return to our common roots of being one and the same. Palaeo-anthropological discoveries and theories are appropriated and pressed into the service of affirming an African identity for the world at large, with Africa declared as the home of the world's ancestors. The various representations constructed by the architects, curators, media, politicians, and others at the interpretive site of Maropeng is, thus, an unlikely but excellent candidate for an illustration of the religious notions of sameness and oneness.