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Keynote address by Minister Derek Hanekom at the Origins of Early Sapiens Behaviour Exhibition, Iziko South African Museum

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One of the questions we most often ask ourselves is what makes us human, and when did this happen. I'm happy to be able to tell you today that we now know the answer to this existential riddle and have considerable proof to back it up.

It has taken a team of scientists, many of whom are here today, over 30 years to painstakingly excavate three very unique caves – Blombos Cave, Klasies River and Klipdrift Shelter - at the southern tip of Africa, to find that proof.

I am immensely honoured to open the Origins of Early Sapiens Behaviour Exhibition, also known as Mother Africa. And, of course, welcome home, to all of you who come from other parts of the world. This is the land of your ancestors and my ancestors. Your ancestors and my ancestors lived together, hunted together, fished together and played together in this corner of the world. They even got intimate with each other, and produced us. This exhibition will take you on a 100 000-year journey from these caves, right around the globe, to where we stand today.

When we ask the question: what makes us human, Prof Henshilwood, Prof Wurz, Dr van Niekerk and their team of expert researchers have found the simple yet powerful answer - look at our symbols. Symbols are all around us - it's what we use, wear, buy or make and that represents who we are as individuals. Symbols can be anything from tattoos to tools, clothes to hairstyles, food to jewellery. Our ancestors started using symbols for a very long time.

In fact, the discoveries at Blombos Caves tell us that symbols were used and created by modern humans as far back as 100 000 years ago. Many of you will remember the recent press coverage of the oldest known drawing, published in the prestigious journal Nature, that was called the 'very first hashtag'. This careful drawing of a red cross-hatched pattern made with an ochre crayon on a piece of silcrete is now recognised as the oldest evidence of an abstract piece of art found anywhere in the world.

As you make your way through the exhibits from these three unique caves, you'll discover more firsts, such as the world's oldest collection of abstract art, the oldest bone awls used for sewing, the oldest chemistry kit, the first containers, among the first pieces of handmade jewellery and the first evidence for the use of a bow and arrow.

The original Homo sapiens – again, that's you and me - figured out how to make fire, and over thousands of years improved their knowledge and weapons to become more efficient hunters. They learnt how to dive and swim and explore the coast for more nutritious food. The modern 'us' are here because of those multitude of incredible innovations.

These advanced skills, coupled with a pristine and bountiful land that is the southern and western Cape coasts provided the perfect conditions for human development, innovation and exploration. Recently, scientists have confirmed that some of these people travelled north from southern African, into East Africa, on into Asia and then to the rest of the world. This journey took something like 55 000 years to complete, but the end result is the undeniable knowledge that every single person alive today is related to people who lived in Africa.

Quite simply, this means that we are all related to each other. We are one group of people who originally came from southern and eastern Africa and who overcame enormous obstacles to

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become the sophisticated beings we are today.

Along with The Iziko South African Museum, Professor Henshilwood and his teams from the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Bergen, we urge you to explore this exhibition to learn about the immense role South Africa has played in the evolution of humankind. This remarkable exhibit, curated and produced by Petro Keene and Craig Foster, is the result of many years of research undertaken by scientists from South Africa and abroad. It is thus important for our museums to be trailblazers by leading in research and the creation of new knowledge so that we can continue to understand and showcase the remarkable social history heritage of our country.

In time the Origins of Early Sapiens Behaviour Exhibition will find a home in a museum in Still Bay near Blombos Cave and possibly also in a planned De Hoop Nature Reserve interpretation centre. There it will form one leg of the journey of the proposed new Cradle of Human Culture tourism hub. This hub will link our earliest human behaviours to the origins of human species at the Cradle of Humankind just northwest of Johannesburg, where we find by far the most prolific fossil evidence of our earliest ancestral roots.

Three of the archaeological sites that make up the Cradle of Human Culture in the Western Cape are Blombos Cave, Pinnacle Point on the southern Cape coast and Diepkloof Rock Shelter on the Cape West Coast. Collectively these sites have produced some of the world's earliest evidence of sophisticated material culture, and we are proud to announce that these three sites are being nominated for UNESCO World Heritage Site recognition. Klasies River will soon be added to this list.

In conclusion, it is my wish that people from all over the world - but especially all South Africans - will have the opportunity to learn about our common ancestors who originated from a handful of people who lived on our southern and western coasts, and embrace the fact that we are all part of one common species.

We now inhabit all corners of this planet, with a common destiny largely shaped by ourselves. We have squeezed many other species into extinction through habitat loss and sometimes through hunting, for pure pleasure rather than hunting for food. This is the bad side of us. The big question is: will the good side of us - the rational side - get us to do the right things to save our planet and save us from our own excesses?

That's up to us. Meanwhile, immerse yourselves in this exhibition about ourselves and how we came to be what we are today.