



THE TOURIST GUIDES' ROLE IN SAFEGUARDING THE TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF SOUTH AFRICA

by

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Introduction

Deputy Minister of Tourism, Tokozile Xasa; Programme Director; honoured guests; ladies and gentlemen; comrades and friends it gives me great pleasure to address you all at this auspicious occasion. Thank you very much for the invitations to address you today. As the National Heritage Council we value the close working relationship we have with the Department of Tourism and appreciate the very good work the Ministry and Department are doing in promoting heritage and cultural tourism. This two-day event is a very good example of the innovative work being done.

Successful heritage and cultural tourism requires that all the role players and decision makers across the full spectrum of activities involved work together in

a coordinated and integrated fashion. I have long felt that cultural and heritage tourism are not achieving their full potential in addressing the challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment. This is not a negative reflection on the Department of Tourism, but rather a comment on the state of the heritage industry. This occasion provides a good opportunity to re-examine some of the issues involved.

The topic of my address is 'The Tourist Guides' Role in Safeguarding the Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage of South Africa.' In addressing my self to this, I will

- briefly outline the role and mandate of the National Heritage Council (NHC)
- define the concept of heritage
- explain why conserving our tangible and intangible heritage is vitally important, and then
- turn to the role you as tourist guides can play.

Mandate of the NHC

The National Heritage Council is a public entity responsible for preservation of the country's heritage. Since our establishment in 2004, we have managed to place heritage as a priority for nation building and national identity. The important areas that the NHC focuses on are:

- Policy development for the sector to meet its transformation goals.
- Public awareness and education.
- Knowledge production in heritage subjects that were previously neglected,

- Making funding available to projects that place heritage as a socio-economic resource.

Overall, the NHC plays an important advocacy and coordinating role on heritage matters in South Africa.

What do we mean by the terms tangible and intangible heritage?

The NHC mandate covers both the tangible and intangible heritage of the Nation. What do we mean by tangible and intangible heritage? It is important that we are all on the same wavelength when we use these terms.

The following definition of heritage was arrived at after an exhaustive consultation process:

“Heritage is what is preserved from the past as the living collective memory of a people not only to inform the present about the past but also to equip successive generations to fashion their future. It is what creates a sense of identity and assures rootedness and continuity, so that what is brought out by dynamism of culture is not changed for its own sake, but it is a result of people’s conscious choice to create a better life.”

This encompasses both the tangible and intangible heritage. The important point I wish to emphasise that ‘history’ and ‘heritage’ are not the same thing. Our heritage is what we chose to emphasise in our past because of the important role this can play for present and future generations.

Tangible heritage generally refers to those physical aspects our heritage that can be seen and touched (artefacts, monuments, memorials, archaeological sites, rock art, shipwrecks, fossil sites, graves, remains of great places and so on).

Intangible heritage refers to those elements of our Nation's heritage that are also sometimes called 'living heritage' and include customs, traditions, languages, cultural practices, rituals and indigenous knowledge systems.

Why is the conservation of our heritage important?

As the NHC, we are motivated by the belief that the promotion and conservation of both intangible and tangible heritage promotes social cohesion and national identity; and can stimulate economic development and job creation – especially in rural areas.

This directly addresses the triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment we face as a Nation. As a country we are doing quite well on using heritage in promoting social cohesion and nation building, but we all need to concentrate more on stimulating economic development through heritage and cultural tourism. This is where you all come in.

That is why the discussion we are having here is so important. We view the Department of Tourism and tourism role players like yourselves as key strategic partners in the conservation of our Nation's heritage. I have been very favourably impressed with the enthusiasm and energy we see in the Department and the good working relationship we have established. The Department and the NHC have a good track record of working together on a range of issues including the declaration of world heritage sites (like the Cradle of Humankind where we are at the moment) and the establishment and promotion of the National Liberation Heritage Route.

There are many different role players in whole chain that encompasses the management and conservation of our heritage in South Africa. All have contributions to make. There is something of a continuum involved, which stretches from the identification of heritage, research, protection and conservation to promotion. This continuum involves all three spheres of government.

The issue of legal protection and conservation of heritage is critically important. There are many instances across the country where key players are not fulfilling their functions satisfactorily in this regard. I am not going to go into details, but in the media and in my recent book *Critical Conversations About Heritage. Popularising Contemporary Heritage Issues* I have drawn attention to numerous cases where buildings and sites have been allowed to fall into ruin through sheer inactivity by the relevant institutions and important heritage sites are vandalised. Indeed, far too little emphasis has been placed by local authorities and some provincial heritage role agencies on conservation of heritage. There is still a lot of transformation needed in the sector, both in the types of heritage identified and in the interpretations attached to these.

The identification, management and conservation of heritage sites are vital links in the heritage chain. Before we market heritage to domestic and foreign tourists we need to ensure there is something there for them to see or experience. And we need to ensure that we do so in ways that does not damage, distort or otherwise harm the heritage site or practice. If we do not place sufficient emphasis on conservation of heritage we run the risk of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

As the NHC we are coming to the realisation that the heritage sector in South Africa is unfortunately still too fragmented and insufficiently coordinated. The original role envisaged for the NHC was to coordinate the entire heritage sector in a much more muscular fashion. Unfortunately, the manner in which the legislation was enacted did not give the NHC sufficient legislative teeth to coordinate the heritage sector other than through moral suasion and lobbying. So the fragmentation of efforts in the heritage management chain remains one of the challenges in South Africa.

The Role of Tourist Guides

As tour guides you are members of a very important profession. I really appreciate the opportunity to be with you here today. In a very real sense you are all ambassadors for our country. The interaction you have with tourists, your attitudes and behaviours, the knowledge you impart, is what determines the perception visitors have of our country. That is a huge responsibility.

But in dealing with our heritage there are additional responsibilities that you carry as tour guides. These include the following:

- *Ethical and moral obligations.* In portraying both our intangible and tangible heritage you have moral and ethical obligations not to sensationalise, not to distort and not to trivialise our heritage. You also have a responsibility to ensure that the interpretation or narrative you transmit to tourists is accurate, fair and respectful of the culture or heritage involved. It should also reflect the latest research. We all know that apartheid and colonialism distorted and marginalised our history. It is painful to still see some tourism websites carrying old out-dated interpretations of our heritage and history.

- *Conservation of tangible heritage.* You also have a significant role to play in heritage conservation. With regards to our tangible heritage you need to ensure you are familiar with, and comply with, the provisions of legislation like the South African Heritage Resources Act. For example, you need to ensure you do not disturb or deface heritage sites, do not allow the removal of material from sites, do not touch or spray water on rock art and so on. In this regard you have a double role. You should refrain from any actions, which negatively affect the long-term conservation of heritage sites. But equally importantly, you need to educate your domestic and foreign tourists on the applicable conservation principles. We all need to discourage people desecrating battle sites with metal detectors, damaging and defacing rock art and other archaeological sites, removing fossils and so on.
- *Conservation of intangible heritage.* As tour guides you have an equally important role to play in respect of intangible heritage. Intangible heritage depends on those who practice it to be passed on to future generations. You need to ensure that you fully understand whatever ritual or custom you are explaining to tourists. You need to do so with the necessary respect to those who practice the custom and convey this respect to your audience so that they too will respect and appreciate it.
- *Education.* You are not simply passive transmitters of interesting information. You also have a responsibility to educate people about our heritage, to transmit knowledge that will ensure this heritage is not lost or forgotten.

These, in my view, are all important roles you as tour guides have in safeguarding our tangible and intangible heritage.

From what I have said I am sure you now realise that I do not see tour guides as passive transmitters of information about our heritage to third parties. Rather, you have a more important role of portraying our nation through its tangible and intangible cultural heritage and of ensuring this heritage is conserved for future generations.

Conclusion

In concluding, I want to emphasise the bigger picture of what you do. Since 1994 this government has done a lot to improve the lives of all South Africans. As you drive around the country today, you cannot fail to see the extent to which electricity, water and sanitation have been provided; the new clinics, schools and hospitals; the upgraded roads and bridges; and the thousands and thousands of houses that have been built. The extensive social security safety net that has been put in place has ensured that millions of South Africans at least have the means to sustain themselves. Of course there are challenges in the reach and quality of services, and we need to redouble our efforts to improve service delivery. We also need to strike a delicate balance between devoting State resources to social services and using those resources to stimulate economic development and promote entrepreneurship.

It is unfortunate that those who would criticise government have very short and selective memories. They forget the poverty and inequality caused by more than three centuries of land seizure and of deliberate underdevelopment to force people onto the labour market.

As the NHC we fully support the Department of Tourism's efforts to promote cultural and heritage tourism. If the heritage sector does its work of heritage management effectively and if all of you do your work as tour guides properly,

we will stimulate the growth of cultural and heritage tourism even more and thereby contribute to the reduction of poverty and inequality and the creation of employment. Thus you all have a very noble mission. Please undertake it in a responsible manner that ensures the tangible and intangible heritage you promote is conserved for our children and our children's children.
