

| Managing Intangible Heritage at Tsodilo

by Phillip Segadika

Phillip Segadika is head of the Archaeology and Monuments Division at the Botswana National Museum. He holds a Master's degree in landscape archaeology from the University of Wales, Lampeter (United Kingdom) and is studying for a part time Ph.D. at Wits University (South Africa). He has been chairing the proceedings for developing management plans for numerous sites in Botswana, including the Tsodilo World Heritage Integrated Management Plan.

Tsodilo, the Mountain of Ancestral Spirits, was listed as Botswana's first World Heritage Site in 2001. The site is located in the North-west District of Botswana and lies within the buffer area of the Okavango Delta Ramsa site. Tsodilo is a national monument currently protected under the Monuments and Relics Act of 2001 but was first protected under the 1934 Bushman Relics Act. Rising majestically from the surrounding expanse of the Kalahari sands, Tsodilo is Botswana's second highest peak at 1,395 metres. It was declared a World Heritage Site on the basis of three criteria¹ of the cultural landscape category of the World Heritage Convention. Tsodilo is known first and foremost for its outstanding rock art, which is in an excellent state of preservation (Criterion i). Tsodilo has also witnessed settlements by successive human communities for many millennia (Criterion iii). These two factors of the outstanding rock art and the archaeological evidence of Tsodilo are well familiar to researchers. However, this article will discuss the significance of Tsodilo in the context of the third criterion (vi), which stipulates that sites may be inscribed which are directly or tangibly associated with events or living

A CONTINENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS

traditions, with ideas or with beliefs of outstanding universal significance. This article will therefore also highlight and discuss ways that the Botswana National Museum has undertaken management of the intangible heritage of Tsodilo.

The Origins of Tsodilo rock art and hills

There are two ethnic groups that make up the less than 200 inhabitants of Tsodilo. About a third are the Basarwa (the Jun/hoasi San) while the other two-thirds comprises the Hambukushu peoples. Even though the two communities live within close to a kilometre of each other, an appraisal of their skills and practices reveals important lifestyle differences, which are related to the history of the San being hunter-gatherers and the Hambukushu's sedentary pastoral and arable farming. An interview with the most senior elders of the two communities also reveals conflicting definitions of the origins of Tsodilo rock art, with the Headman Samuchao of the Hambukushu ascribing the rock art to Karunga (the Almighty) while Xuntae Xhao of the San proudly refers to the art as the heritage of the ancestors. These apparently conflicting definitions of the origins of the rock art are deeply imbedded in the underlying conflicts of landscape history in a contested terrain and a history of domination and subtle resistance between the two ethnic groups. Yet it is these two 'conflicting' definitions that have assisted the San and the Hambukushu to maintain reverence of the hills and the rock art, since both communities sincerely ascribe the origins of the art to powers beyond themselves to whom they are accountable for the rock art's preservation.

The intangible heritage of the Jun/hoasi and Hambukushu communities as it relates to the Tsodilo Hills may be simplistically divided into three main components of rituals and performances, taboos, and stories of the genesis of life and landscape. The rituals and performances are exemplified by Jun/hoasi trance dances, Hambukushu rain-making songs, poems and chants, a collection of spiritual waters and cleansing ceremonies. The taboos are demonstrated by some of the traditional common law 'dos and don'ts' that manage human conduct at and access to specific spots within the Tsodilo landscape. For instance, unnecessary and frequent visits to the hills are seen as disrespectful of their sacredness. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that rain-making sites are out of bounds to members of the local community after the rain-making ceremonies. However, perhaps the most vivid aspect of the Tsodilo site remains the stories pertaining to the 'history' of the hills and of the origins of life in Tsodilo.

From a geological perspective, Tsodilo is part of a prominent, continental-scale geological element of the earth's crust called the Pan-African system of belts, which are 800–1,500 million years old, with Tsodilo taking up the more ancient part of the range. If it were not for millions of years of erosion, Tsodilo would be part of a mountain range comparable to ranges like the Alps, Apennines and Carpathians. Tsodilo therefore represents one of a few localities where very old rocks uplifted by tectonic forces resisted many millions of years of weathering and erosion. However, the Hambukushu legend provides a more direct interpretation of the origins of the Tsodilo hills. The Hambukushu believe that the



© Botswana National Museum/Yoshihito Urano

10

10. The Tsodilo site in the Kalahari Desert, north-west Botswana, has immense symbolic and religious significance for the local communities.

Tsodilo range was once a family. The four main outcrops that make up the Tsodilo hills are referred to locally as the ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘child’ and ‘grandchild’ hill. Male Hill is the more erect, mostly barren and highest of them all. Female Hill is the second highest of the hills, but more spread out, with the most fruit trees, tubers and edible roots and timber for crafts. Female Hill also contains the most water springs and rock paintings. Lastly, Child Hill and Grandchild Hill are the smallest of the outcrops. This naming of the Tsodilo is analogous with the naming of the Phalatswe hills among the Batswapong of east-central Botswana. In

both instances, the size of the hills provoked social and family stereotypes. However, even more curious for both the Tsodilo and Phalatswe hills is that the smallest of the three hills is not sexually categorized but retained as a child (as opposed to a boy or girl) – perhaps a deliberate choice in societies whose vernacular has very distinct gender references for male and female children. It seems that the need to define greatness in terms of male and female only becomes an issue at a particular age of maturity – an issue that needs to be explored if the intangible heritage of the local communities is to be appreciated.

A CONTINENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Tsodilo – the cradle of creation?

According to local Jun/hoasi legend Tsodilo is the place where all life began and so it is the abode of the spirit of all living creatures. Several places within the Tsodilo landscape are ‘testimony’ of this belief: the eternal water spring, the first animals and of course the art of the descendants of the first people on earth. These stories are tied to specific local archaeological features and natural geological features. They give meaning to otherwise silent features along the trail known as the Rhino Trail within the Tsodilo landscape.

The First animals

The most popular tourist trail at Tsodilo is the Rhino Trail on Female Hill. It is on this trail that there is a slippery route of quartzite boulders leading up the hill to the Nqoma Iron Age archaeological site. Local guides point out the footprints of the first animals. Archaeologically, the features are grooves, which range from 5 to 20 centimetres in length. They are barely 2 cm deep and mostly 3 cm wide. They occupy an area of about 80 metres and occur mostly in pairs or sets of four grooves where it is most slippery. Legend has it that these ‘animal hoof prints’ are those of the very first animals, which were dropped from the sky by Nyambi – ‘the perfect one’. This occurred while the Tsodilo rocks were still soft and as the animals were coming down the hills to the first water hole on earth. The reason that some of the grooves are longer is because the animals slipped as they descended. To ‘prove’ that they fell from the sky, local guides show you the locality where they were all dropped. The area is represented by indentations on the rocks ‘showing’



© Botswana National Museum

11. Tsodilo (Botswana) was visited and settled by humans, who have left rich traces of their presence in the form of outstanding rock art.

the impact of their fall. The hollow spaces are distinctly circular indentations of about 15 cm deep and on average 15 cm in diameter. Geologists would ascribe the cause of the holes to water action and erosion of less resistant parts of the rock formation. Regardless of the conflict between science and traditional interpretations, the conservation of these tangible remains is critical in that it is a medium that validates, illustrates and in some cases prolongs the lifetime of the intangible beliefs that are tied to it.

The Eternal water spring

On the south-western face of Female Hill is a popular sacred water spring, which has attracted pilgrims to Tsodilo. Those who collect the water use it for ritual cleansing by drinking and sprinkling it on their bodies and in ritual cleansing or protection of properties. This water is not only collected by members of the Tsodilo communities



© TARA/David Coulson see: <http://www.africancockart.org>

12

12. Large painting of an oryx in Tsodilo (Botswana), probably made by San hunter-gatherers.

but by hundreds of others – pilgrims and regular visitors, mostly from Botswana and Namibia, representing individuals, traditional healers or Christians.

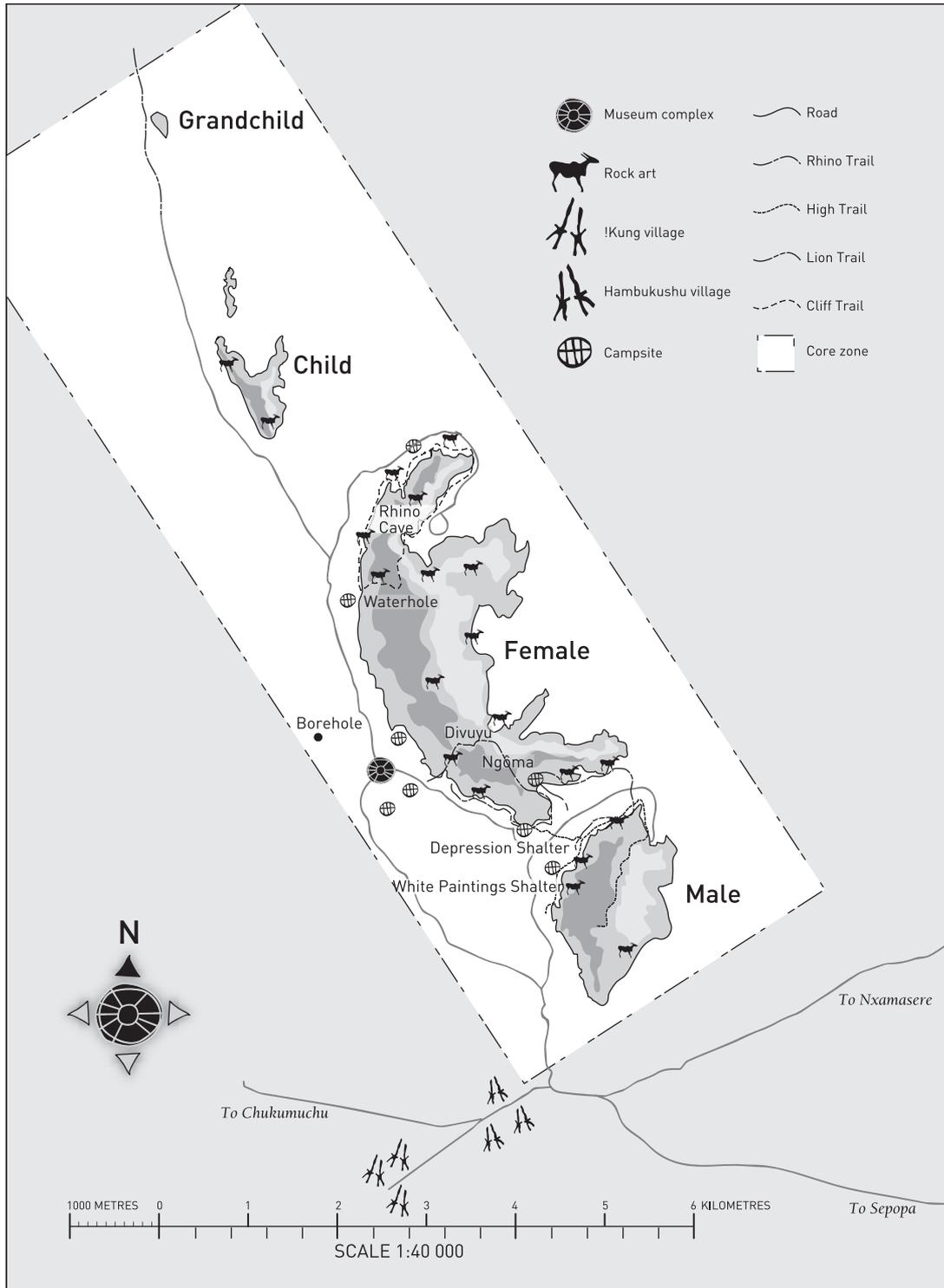
Managing intangible heritage at Tsodilo

The justification for consideration of Tsodilo under Criterion vi of the cultural landscapes category of the World Heritage List was very clear: ‘Traditions speak of Tsodilo as being the home of all creatures, more particularly home to the spirits of every animal, bird, insect and plant that has been created. Though exact interpretation and dating of the rock art is uncertain, the art itself testifies to the long tradition of the place as a spiritual site, a tradition continued today in the practices of the Jun/hoasi and in fact through visits by those we would term in Western parlance as pilgrims, often

travelling some distance’.² However, both the nomination dossier and the management plan dating from 1994,³ while making detailed recommendations for the preservation of the rock art, failed to make clear recommendations of how intangible heritage may be monitored or managed. The ICOMOS evaluation team also either failed to note this dossier and management plan limitations with regard to intangible heritage, or perhaps their silence was an acknowledgement of the difficulties of monitoring and managing intangible heritage.

Where mention was made of the resources at Tsodilo, the ICOMOS evaluation shies away from explicitly acknowledging the contribution of the preservation of the rock art to local communities’ veneration of the hills. Rather ICOMOS noted: ‘Three basic long-term facts

A CONTINENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS



13. Land use and traditional naming of the Tsodilo Hills, Botswana.

contribute to Tsodilo's outstanding state of preservation: its remoteness, its low population density and the high degree of resistance to erosion of its quartzite rock'. This rather western attitude to heritage management was limited in that it failed to directly link the preservation of the art to the local communities. However, the Botswana National Museum strongly believes that the factors of remoteness, low population density and resistance of the quartz to erosion, while being essential, are inadequate without the central factor of the spiritual reverence of the hills and the art by the local communities. In fact, the aspect of remoteness and low population density may be considered very peripheral, in that the local people of Tsodilo live only a few metres from the hills and have traversed the hill area without undue restriction for hundreds of years. If their reverence of the hills was non-existent, the Tsodilo art would have the same graffiti that appear elsewhere, since it takes only a few or one individual to cause harm to rock art.

Indeed it is not entirely surprising that monitoring and management mechanisms for intangible heritage have not been as well represented. To begin with, intangible heritage cannot be considered as a lone factor for World Heritage nomination under the 1972 Convention because the World Heritage Committee 'considers that these criteria should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria'. Therefore since it is often 'icing on the cake', the factors for monitoring intangible heritage have not been given as much emphasis as factors for the conservation and preservation of tangible heritage. Perhaps this will lead to greater debate resulting in increased monitoring under the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The 1994 plan was the first major and organized approach to Tsodilo in modern management terms. It was an 'in-house' management plan based on discussions among National Museum staff at Tsodilo and in Gaborone, the capital city. The main purpose of the plan was to make a feasibility plan for the development of the site (infrastructure, trails development, land use by residents, conservation needs for the heritage, tourism control) and to make recommendations for an enhanced management of Tsodilo. Therefore, the 1994 management plan focused on 'conservation needs of the heritage and facilities for tourists'. One of the recommendations of the plan derived from an acknowledgement of the limited studies on the ethnology of the local people and focused on the oral history of the communities. The study of their lifestyles was to be included in a research programme for Tsodilo.

Since 1994 most of the interventions and research have thus focused on the rock art and archaeology of Tsodilo. There have been at least ten excavations, an extensive baseline survey of the rock art (1994), rock-art conservation workshops for staff (2001), training-guide seminars for local community guides (2005, 2006), development of an interim management plan (2004), and an integrated management plan (2005). A systematic monitoring programme for the rock art has been implemented and an officer is currently undergoing training abroad in rock-art conservation.

Tsodilo has a unique opportunity in that several of its intangible heritage components are tied to known physical features in the landscape. In 2002, research was undertaken by the present author to identify the exact location of the areas in

A CONTINENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS

the landscape to which stories or intangible heritage are tied. One of the results has shown that guides were increasingly avoiding communicating on, and guiding tourists to, intangible components of the site, assuming that tourists are only interested in the rock art. The aim of the research was to help revive the use of on-site intangible heritage especially among the guides. Through this project about eight locales were identified as areas with intangible heritage within the landscape. They ranged from rock-art-related stories to interpretations of geological formations and grooves. These stories and aspects of intangible heritage will form part of a booklet for the local community and for tourists entitled *World Heritage in Young Hands Project*. Another project has been proposed for putting these stories on to audiovisual media.

The Role of the Tsodilo Site Museum

The Tsodilo Site Museum, which was officially opened in 2000, has two permanent exhibitions called *Tsodilo* and *My Tsodilo*. The first exhibition is a celebration of the physical landscape, geology, archaeology and rock art of Tsodilo. It presents archaeological and ethnographic artefacts of Tsodilo and the region. The purpose of the second exhibition is to present the experiences of people who have interacted with Tsodilo. It is composed of twenty-five interviewees with quotes from the local community, tourists and researchers. Selected Hambukushu and Jun/hoasi stories and experiences are displayed together with those of the researchers. The Tsodilo Site Museum, as an interpretation centre, is therefore a reflection of and a meeting place for the local community, scientists and consumers – the tourists. By reflecting the local interpretations and featuring

pictures of the ordinary people of Tsodilo, the museum becomes a space that allows the local community to appropriate its culture. The Tsodilo Site Museum, the only other national museum in the country, receives an annual allocation for a National visual and performing arts festival. The festival entails community celebration of the intangible heritage at Tsodilo through poetry, drama, traditional dances, stories, visits and interpretation of the sacred sites, promotion of local crafts through exhibitions and visual-arts competitions. It is expected that this visual and performing art festival will go a long way in the promotion of community ownership, participation, revival, and transfer of knowledge and significance, especially to the younger generation.

The monitoring mechanisms for intangible heritage must also take into account developments that may manifest themselves physically as vandalism. At Tsodilo, with a full-time missionary stationed at the village and a significant growth of the Zion Christian Church sect, there is now a growing number of Christian converts. This may be interpreted as a potential ‘threat’ to the cosmology that has conserved the Tsodilo rock paintings for centuries. An experience elsewhere in the country shows that some overzealous Christian devotees have vandalized a highly respected cave shrine of Kobokwe by inscribing on this protected national monument graffiti that reads ‘Jesus is Coming’. Tsodilo has had a similar experience: someone has removed the ‘s’ from the word ‘Gods’ at the main gate, which now dedicates Tsodilo to ‘God’ instead of the ‘Gods’. However, this seemingly minute vandalism is a sure sign of protest to be watched out for, because its next manifestation may well extend to the rock art. The

question is also whether we are witnessing a shift of power from a heritage site that was largely protected and adored by traditionalists to one that is now increasingly becoming dominated by non-traditionalists and Christian worshippers. Cultures are dynamic and shifts in belief systems are complex. To adapt to changes is thus a true challenge for heritage managers. On the same note, however, it remains a key element that the management interventions of World Heritage Sites with intangible values should be geared towards community empowerment and respect of indigenous belief systems on which the conservation of monuments and sites lie.

Strengthening community benefits and monitoring social impact

The 1994 District Development Plan listed Tsodilo as the poorest in the district, registering the largest percentage of people dependent on government handouts. Since 2001 the Botswana National Museum has contributed immensely towards optimizing community benefits at Tsodilo. Twelve members of staff have been employed at Tsodilo, ten of whom are from Tsodilo, working as field assistants, gatekeepers, groundsmen and cleaners. Fifteen other members of the community work as part-time independent community guides, while twenty others work as craft producers or vendors. Apart from these, the National Museum periodically employs casual labourers for various assignments such as trail or campsite clearances. For a community of 200 people who live within an extended family system, the exploitation of Tsodilo for community benefit has been impressive. This should significantly improve with the implementation of the new 2005 Integrated

Management Plan, which will see the implementation of several community initiatives, started in the buffer areas of the site.

With all these programmes and activities on the preservation of intangible heritage, an emerging question is how World Heritage Status and management interventions have impacted on intangible heritage at Tsodilo. Since 2001, annual visits to Tsodilo have increased from 2,301 to over 10,000 in 2005. This increase has been attributed to several factors including the popularity of the site, and easy access owing to gravelling of the formerly sandy road. How has this increase affected community ownership and perceptions towards intangible heritage? What about the effect of other developments made by the National Museum, such as the erection of the fence, installation of telephone towers and the construction of the museum and staff buildings right at the foot of the hills? Even more challenging, how has the relocation of the Jun/hoasi San from the foot of the hills, as well as the relocation of the Hambukushu arable farms near the hills, affected the people's attachment to the hills? This is an even more challenging issue. The premise here is that there is a need to identify and make an inventory of aspects of intangible heritage, for monitoring purposes, before the submission of a natural site to the World Heritage List under Criterion vi. In the case where community participation is diminishing as a result of the nomination, it should be considered as degradation, and the site should be declared an endangered world heritage site.

The importance of Tsodilo's intangible heritage will be given impetus by the 2003 decision of the World Heritage Committee to recognize

A CONTINENT OF ACHIEVEMENTS

intangible heritage in its own right. However, practically, this calls for commitment by state parties, whose sites are listed in Criterion vi, to review their management systems to ensure that the intangible heritage is appropriately managed. Drawing from the fairly successful but impromptu interventions on the management of intangible heritage at Tsodilo, it has been concluded that it is necessary to employ all existing effective methods to document and design adequate monitoring mechanisms, and to strengthen the factors that assist the preservation of intangible heritage. Through such ethnological management systems and monitoring tools, managers will be able to rectify the apparent bias towards 'tangible' heritage. It has been illustrated here that in some cases the conservation of some tangible heritage is critical in that it is a medium that presumably validates, illustrates, and in some cases prolongs, the lifetime of the intangible heritage tied to it. However, on the whole, the monitoring of intangible heritage will not be without problems for World Heritage and other sites. International heritage experts and ICOMOS representatives are thus encouraged to be attuned to and to acknowledge world-views that directly contribute towards the conservation of sites such as Tsodilo.

| BIBLIOGRAPHY

- D. Bambaru, Tangible and Intangible, *The Obligation to Desire and to Remember*, 2002 (2003 ICOMOS website reprint).
- A. S. Campbell, Tsodilo Management Plan. *Scheme for Implementation*. Gaborone, Government Printer, 1994.
- Government of Botswana. *Community Based Natural Resource Management*. Gaborone, Government Printer, 2000.

Government of Botswana. *Monuments and Relics, Act*. No. 12, 2001. Gaborone, Government Printer, 2001.

Mosweu Kabo. *Tsodilo Participatory Rural Appraisal (P.R.A.) Project*. Commissioned by the Trust for Okavango Cultural and Development Initiatives. TOCADI Publications, 2002.

Jean-Louis Luxen. *The Intangible Dimension of Monuments and Sites with Reference to the UNESCO World Heritage List*. 2000 (2003 ICOMOS website reprint).

R. Mechtild, Enhancing Global Heritage Conservation: Links between the Tangible and the Intangible. *World Heritage* No. 32, 2003, pp. 64–7.

D. Munjeri, Intangible Heritage in Africa: Could it be Much Ado About Nothing? *ICOMOS Newsletter* 2000–03 (ICOMOS website reprint).

National Museum, Tsodilo, Mountain of Gods, World Heritage Nomination Dossier. Gaborone, Government Printer (unpublished).

P. Segadika, Why Tsodilo is a World Heritage Site. Paper presented at the 2002 Tsodilo Rock Art Conservation Management Workshop, Tsodilo, Botswana.

P. Segadika, *Notes for the Proposed Management Plan Review*. (In press.)

P. Segadika, Developing Monuments and the Challenges of Partnership with Communities in Botswana. The Case of Tsodilo Hills, Botswana. Paper presented at the Integrated Territorial and Urban Conservation 2002, ICCROM, Rome, Italy.

UNESCO. Evaluations of Cultural Properties, Twenty-fifth Ordinary Session (25–30 June 2001). Paris, UNESCO (WHC-2001/conf.205/inf.4).

| NOTES

1. For a list of criteria, see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1021/>.
2. UNESCO. Evaluations of Cultural Properties, Twenty-fifth Ordinary Session (25–30 June 2001). Paris, UNESCO (WHC-2001/conf.205/inf.4).
3. A. S. Campbell, Tsodilo Management Plan, Scheme for Implementation. Gaborone, Government Printer, 1994.

Copyright of *Museum International* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.