

THE VENDA BOATS IN THE MUSEUM

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The two wooden boats that are currently on display in the Anthropology Hall were acquired by A.C. Hoffman, director of the National Museum from 1951 to 1969. In 1952 he wrote a paper on the boats which was printed by the Museum. This overview of his paper shows that independent ethnographic research corroborates his findings.

The two boats were made by a Venda man who lived halfway between the southern Soutpansberg districts of Tshivhase and Tshakhuma. The area is known for its marula trees, *Sclerocarya caffra*, therefore it is not surprising that these trees provided the material for the construction of the boats. Two kinds of boats are displayed in the Museum: a dug-out and a boat made from bark.

slightly wider than the dug-out. Both ends of the bark are bent upwards and fastened to the sides by means of wooden pegs, wire and nails. The boat-builder prevented the sides from collapsing by arranging three sticks transversely.



A boat made out of bark.

Local Venda used 4 m long barge-poles to propel such boats across the Luvuvhu River. They also used the poles to ward off crocodiles. The momentum of the boats was impeded not only by their square shape, but also by gaping holes in their sides. Mud from the riverbanks was used to seal the holes. Despite these drawbacks Hoffman claimed that each boat transported four people with relative ease.

Hoffman's description of the boats is one of few for African cultures south of the Limpopo River. Mudau (1940) independently collected a vernacular account of Venda people who used similar boats in the remote past. The traditions of the Dau Venda at Tshakhuma recall those days when "... the rivers were still large, and the Mbetzi and Lembethu (both are Venda-speaking groups) knew how to make canoes of the bark of the *Mufula* (Marula) in which they sailed ...".

It is difficult to establish the antiquity of boat-building by archaeological means because wood is unlikely to survive the harsh climatic conditions of the northern Transvaal.



The dug-out canoe.

The dug-out is about 2 m long and $\frac{3}{4}$ m wide. The Venda man carved it from a tree trunk with a small iron hand-axe, a task that took him nine months to complete. Both ends of the trunk were opened and had to be subsequently closed with pieces of wood.

The bark boat is also about 2 m long, but is

Archaeological and historical sources nevertheless support the claims of the Mbedzi and Lembethu boat-builders that they have inhabited the Soutpansberg for at least five centuries (Loubser in prep.). Historical documents (e.g. Beuster 1879) and archaeological excavations also show that the Venda produced iron locally, and were therefore able to make the necessary tools for carving the boats.

Evidence for boat-building among the black people of Southern Africa is not limited to the Venda alone. According to Bryant (1949) the Zulu people must once have had dug-outs because their language has the word "umkumbi" or "dug-out-trough", a term that Zulus still use for modern boats.

Hoffman wrote that the so-called "boats" depicted in Bushman (San) rock paintings are smaller than the Venda boats, and suggested that the paintings could depict Zulu crafts. He supports this suggestion by stating that there is no independent ethnographic or historical evidence that the San ever used boats. Unfortunately, there is also no ethnohistorical

information about Zulu boats.

Whatever the case may be, recent research on San rock art suggests that while the paintings may look like boats to the European viewer, they could actually depict something else. This is likely because San sometimes painted animals, especially eland, in association with similar boat-like shapes. In other words, our first impressions of other people's cultures are often misleading. Only detailed research into their particular histories and beliefs may yield clues as to what they actually did. Hoffman has shown that it is indeed important that we consider the specific cultures under scrutiny — in order to retrieve information as to the past practices of the people.



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SNUIFDOSIE VERDWYN UIT FRESHFORD-HUISMUSEUM



Gedurende die Desember/Januarie-vakansieseisoen is hierdie koper-snuifdosie, met die voorletters J.G. daarop gegraveer, uit Freshford-Huismuseum gesteel. Alhoewel die kommersiële waarde van die artikel gering is, is dit vir Freshford-Huismuseum van groot kultuurhistoriese waarde, aangesien dit aan die Harrison-familie behoort het. Indien u meer lig op die saak kan werp kom asseblief met die Nasionale Museum in Bloemfontein in aanraking.