

## THE STORY OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LESHIBA CENTRE FOR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

The beautiful natural environment of the Soutpansberg where Leshiba is situated, is matched only by the richness of the culture and heritage of the people of the area who are predominantly Venda. This combination is something special and it is imperative that this rich tradition is preserved and promoted for the benefit of its local people and South Africa as a whole.

This was the catalyst for deciding to establish a Centre for Indigenous Knowledge, which forms part of the Rosmarin family's social responsibility commitment in the area.

The Rosmarin Family was initially exposed to one of these indigenous skills, being the remarkable talent of a group of Venda artists, all of whom practice a unique form of large-scale woodcarving. A leading example being Noria Mabasa who is internationally acclaimed and whose work as well as other Venda artists, can be found at the Sandton Convention Centre.

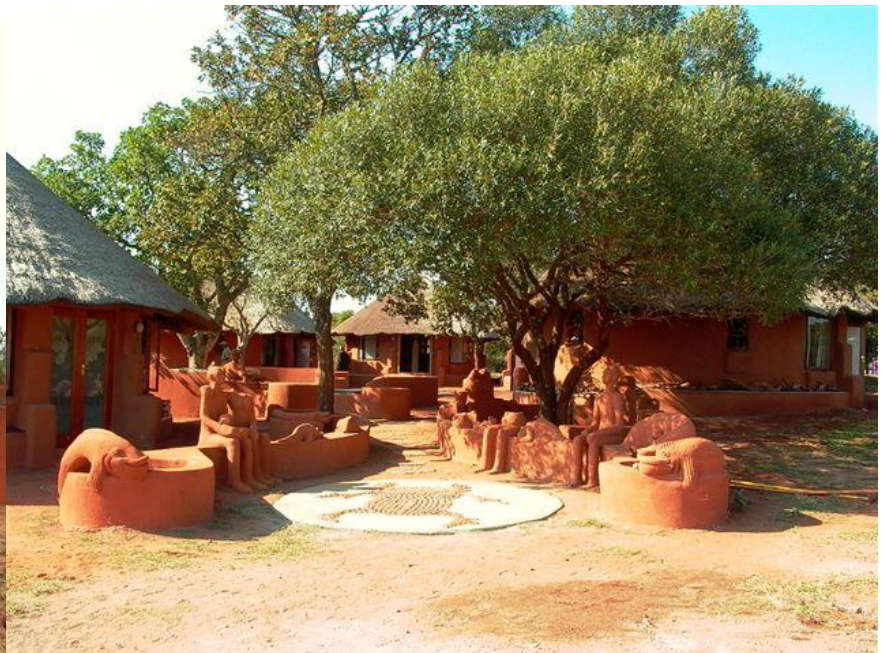


**Paul Thavhana working on his Great Serpent during the De Beers funded programme. The completed sculpture has since been purchased by the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.**

The project was started with a series of pilot workshops funded by a R300 000 grant from the De Beers Fund which was aimed at preserving this unique talent. The courses comprised a six-week training period where about 10 young aspiring wood-carvers were trained by five well-known Venda artists at one of Leshiba's Bushcamp's that was made available for this purpose.

The Leshiba Venda Arts and Culture Trust (in the process of being renamed The Leshiba Community Development Trust) was registered to manage this project. It has four Trustees which include Chief Kutama of the Kutama Local Community, Erdmann Kutama from the Department of Education, Priscilla Ramabulana and John Rosmarin.

The Irish Government fortuitously came forward with a 40 000 Euro grant as a contribution towards the building of a new facility to which John Rosmarin contributed a further R200 000. Importantly, it was built using the principles of sustainable development and indigenous knowledge. Phase 1 of the Centre was completed early in 2005 – See photos below – and the first skills training course for 15 Venda students was completed in August 2005.



A number of projects have subsequently been run through grants made available by the Government's MAPP SETA skills training programme. The French Government has also funded a successful textile course.

The arts and crafts course formed the foundation for broadening the scope of the programme to include a much wider range of IKS. In particular, the field of sustainable development and permaculture as well as research in traditional healing and medicinal plants is now being promoted at the Centre.

This latter area of interest led to contact being made with CSIR, which resulted in a collaboration agreement being signed between the Bio-Prospecting Unit of CSIR and the Trust. The collaboration will be aimed at establishing a research, training and development programme in the field of medicinal and aromatic plants. (The CSIR has made a major breakthrough in this regard with their commercialising of a plant that the San Bushmen have been using for centuries to suppress appetite. This is now being marketed in pill form internationally.)

The CSIR together with the Department of Science and Technology have recently established a new business and factory complex for the Hi Hanyile community near Giyani. This factory manufactures a candle which contains a unique mosquito repellent based on the local indigenous knowledge of the local people. This product as well as the aforementioned diet suppressant is to be marketed both in SA and internationally.

The Soutpansberg is said to have the greatest bio-diversity environment in South Africa and Leshiba is therefore an ideal location to establish this unique venture. The Trust aims to establish a similar 'Community/Private/Public' partnership for this project. In order to expose this concept to the many local communities in the area, the Trust together with Afristar (a non-profit organization managed by Nicholas Heinemann) promoted an Expo on 'Sustainable Development' in 2007 at the nearby Schoemansdal. This was funded by a R350 000 grant from a Unit established by the European Union as well as a grant of about R50 000 each from Rio Tinto and John Rosmarin.

To date, the Trust has raised about R4,5 million for projects that have been aimed at benefiting the various local communities in the area. (A recent grant of just under R1,5m from the Lottery is to be used for the establishment of skills training in perma-culture.

In summary, the Trust's mission is to ensure the integration of the cultural heritage of the area with appropriate technologies that can then be applied to contribute towards socio-economic upliftment of local communities in the Vhembe District. The programme focuses on 'Sustainable Development' by understanding and utilising 'indigenous knowledge systems' combined with 'appropriate technology'.

#### **The specific aims of the programme are:**

To facilitate training programmes to educate and empower local people with traditional knowledge, to utilise their natural resource base for sustainable economic upliftment.

Develop research capacity in the field of Indigenous Knowledge in the local sub-region.

To develop, design and secure funding for community based poverty elimination programmes in the broader Makhado area.

To utilise Leshiba Wilderness as a resource base to understand and explore the potential contribution of indigenous knowledge to local development and nation building.