For well over a thousand years women have excavated salt along the banks of the Klein Letaba River

WORDS AND PICTURES Sue Derwent

Sacred SOUTINI
spring resorts or spas, forever destroying an age-old technology and way of life. This left Baleni, now a Natural Heritage Site, the only one of its kind in the country.

We hiked into the dry mopani veld towards the last salt harvesting site of its kind in the country. After a pleasant walk of some twenty minutes, we came to a large, open clearing, in the centre of which was a vlei of rushes. Cows grazed all around it, and by western standards it looked a bit like a rather muddy, overgrown waterhole, but the locals consider it a sacred place, surrounded by myth and legend.

We took off our shoes and picked our way across the mud and broken reeds to the centre of the marshy vlei. Just a short way in and the black mud began to get warm beneath our feet and by the time we reached the eye of the hot spring, the water was by any account seriously hot. Large, rather sinister-looking bubbles burped from just beneath the surface of the water, and we bent to wash our arms and faces in this steamy mineral water, which for centuries has been revered for its healing properties by local people, in particular the Izangoma or traditional healers.

Back on solid ground, shoes back on, we trekked off into the mopani forest along a narrow game path and were enjoying the odd shy antelope and the many birds when our three young guides Fani, Tshifthwe and Patience stopped us. Fani headed off, calling out loudly to the women at the salt site, and quite possibly to the ancestors down at the fire pits, warning them that we were on our way. Tshifthwe then led us just off the path to an old leadwood tree. This was where women had to stop and place sticks, perhaps a few grains of maize or even a coin on
Making a new salt filter out of the surrounding indigenous trees and river clay.

Tshighiwa shows us how the ancestors must be informed at the sacred leadwood tree, before approaching the salt mine.

Salty soil and riversand is mixed as part of filtering the salt from the soil.

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a broken pottery shard at the foot of the dry old tree, as custom dictates.

However, before we could head down to where they were 'making' salt, we were alerted to some rules. "There is a sacred language spoken here, so you may not name things of nature by their names," said our guide. "Do not say 'rock' or point to a large rock. You may look away and call it a carpet." There was a list of items we could not refer to directly.

"It's a tradition from our grandparents," said Patience. "We use a sacred language because this is the way of our ancestors and they protect this as a sacred place. Our grandparents tell us this is the way, and we do it this way. We do not always have to ask questions or understand everything that is sacred."

Normally, we would have also been required to take off our shoes before heading down the narrow dusty path, but one look at us outsiders who obviously had no understanding of these ancient customs and we were waved on down the smoky, riverbank. Only four women were working that day. Each was busy at what looked like a large nest but was a rather sophisticated natural filter system constructed on a raised frame of mopani branches. The filter itself was made from branches and leaves of the mopani and other indigenous trees, lined with clay from the river and left to dry. These filters apparently last for up to four years.

Maria Khubani Ngobeni explained that they only made salt during the dry winter months. No harvesting of salt took place during the wet summer season because the river rises and the salt is too difficult to extract. Emelina Mholongo walked us down to the riverbank where she scraped salty soil from the ground. She took it up to the site, along with an equal amount of clean riversand that she mixed together and placed in the nest/filter, and filled it with water. Clear water filtered through the nest into a bucket, but it was seriously salty. Once filtration was complete, the water was poured into a large pan and boiled over an open fire to evaporate the water, leaving a beautifully grainy salt, of a colour much like blonde beach sand.

The reputation of this salt among locals, as well as traditional healers from as far afield as Zimbabwe, has remained unaltered through the centuries. The mineral content and healing qualities are highly regarded, and it is saltier and tastier than conventional store-bought salt.

Traditionally, only women work at this sacred site, although three men accompanied us that day. Obviously, rules have been set aside for visitors. The salt gatherers laughed when I brought up this topic of men. "No," they said with a chuckle, "men are allowed. But this is considered women's work. It is hard. It is not for men. If they want to work, they can. But they don't!"
Later, I am informed by a cantankerous Phazima Mabundza, a revered elder with vast knowledge of this salt, that this was not the case in the past. She berated Tshiphiwe and Patience for wearing long pants at the site, and for allowing us to wear shoes. She became so grumpy with them that she whipped off her top and continued ranting with her large pendulous breasts bared. My friend Andy Coetzee looked across at me, alarmed, and the two young guides dropped their heads in shame. They eventually translated: apparently, this is the way women should harvest salt. This is the right way!

Startled, we wondered if we should continue, but she settled down, mumbling about the young people who didn’t know any proper rules or customs. She said that in the old days, when things were done properly, women were not allowed to harvest salt when they were menstruating, nor if they had had sex the night before. They had to be pure. She went on to tell stories of the many people who, over the years, had come to a sticky end because they had not honoured the traditions of the salt.

I must have looked sceptical, because Patience and Tshiphiwe turned to us with large eyes, nodding their heads. They explained that a man was recently at the salt site. They weren’t sure of his transgression but said he had subsequently caught aight somehow and was still in hospital fighting for his life.

On the other hand, people who honour the salt and use it wisely, have been known to live a long, healthy and prosperous life. What can I say? I came home with a five-litre bucket of it.

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African Ivory Route 015 781 0690