Guide Nelson Maphaha, operating from Fundudzi Camp, is a wealth of cultural knowledge.

Limpopo's Lake Fundudzi is one of three sites shrouded in mystery and legend, simultaneously incomprehensible and irresistible to the visitor. By Melissa Siebert

Sacred WATERS

Lake Fundudzi and its sister sacred sites – Thathe Vondo Forest and Phiphidi Falls – are mystifying. The legends are countless, and recycled. Sacrificing virgins to the lake's Python God; the forest's white lion guarding the ancestors' graves; the Lightning God dwelling at the waterfall, and many others... Yet, after a recent trip to Lake Fundudzi, with the villagers' often-contrasting stories and beliefs turning in the mind, one wonders if Venda's cultural richness gets lost in translation. Or is it untranslatable? Even, in some cases, unspeakable? >
Our journey to the Venda heartland—based at the African Ivory Route’s Fundudzi Camp—yielded a mind-boggling narrative. It sometimes confounded our Venda guides, Nelson Maphaha and Thamba Masindi, and occasionally ‘freaked out’ my fellow traveller, Katchie Nzama—born outside Thohoyandou, now living in Joburg—as she was further initiated into the ways of her ancestors.

As in any culture, certain Venda traditions have weakened or died out, or at least been modified and adapted. Stories and legends have also evolved over time, although some are still intact. One thing, however, is blatantly clear: the Venda are supremely proud of their heritage, of their ancestors who settled kingdoms in Mapungubwe and Thulamela, of the preserved rituals and social networks that inform their lives today.

We talked of the past on our first night—in the camp high up in a mountain forest overlooking the village of Mukumbani and its emerald tea plantations—and how people are both secular and spiritual custodians of Lake Fundudzi and other sacred sites in the area.

“Lake Fundudzi was formed by a landslide in the Soutpansberg Mountains about 20,000 years ago, blocking the Mutale River,” began Maphaha, who recently won a Lalibela Tourism Award for the best cultural guide in South Africa. “The Netshiavha clan is the only clan doing rituals there, but there are two other clans that are dominating custodians, the Netshedzivhe, including the villages of Tshitangani and Sindande, and the Netshiheni…”

Soon Maphaha was talking about the ‘communities’ in the lake: the ancestors, the crocodiles, the ‘half-people’ (tshidudwane) killed by the ancient landslide, and ‘the real fish and ancestral fish’.

“Of course some of these traditions are falling away,” Maphaha said, “and we have people who don’t believe in these stories about the lake—because of Christianity.” The church is omnipresent in Venda; as we’d soon see, everyone points out their own church buildings as you drive by the large, often new, structures.

By the end of the evening, gathered around paraffin lamps on the dining table outside, the air laden with moisture from the first rains, we’d discussed the Domba or Python dance, typically done by young maidens, although males can also dance it (he danced the last one in 2000, Masindi confided); the major Venda clans—Venda, Lemba, Vhatavhatsimbi and Vhangona; the most powerful chief, Tshivashe, ruling over 75 villages; and the link between lightning and witchcraft. “If you are accused of killing with lightning,” Maphaha said, “you must go to the sangoma and let him shave the side of your head, or the villagers will kill you.”

We retired according to our rondavel assignments, mirroring a royal kraal—I was second wife. Baboons shrieked in the distance.

Thunder from stones

The next morning, a Sunday, we drove towards Thathe Vondo Forest, a primary sacred site near the lake, as the drizzle stopped and the mist lifted. As we passed the Tshivashe kraal, where people were coming out of traditional court, Maphaha and Masindi talked about Nwali, the Venda god and “part of the ancestors.”

“Nwali used to stay in a cave in Makonde Mountain and moved to talk to the King, who would take messages to the people; when they moved, the people heard thunder,” Maphaha said. Masindi added: “If you are accused of killing with lightning, Maphaha said, ‘you must go to the sangoma and let him shave the side of your head, or the villagers will kill you.”

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We stopped briefly at the Tshatshingo potholes on the Tshirovha River, where, Maphaha explained, “people have seen half-women breastfeeding—but when they got closer, the women disappeared…”

Then on to the Netshathle kraal of Chief Netshedzivhe, where his first wife, Joyce, a soft-spoken beauty, welcomed us with the losha greeting—a sort of diagonal curtsey where the woman drops to the ground, head bowed and
As we left, Maphaha warned us not to take anything out of the forest, to respect its sanctity: ‘If you take even one stick it will turn into a snake.’

The Good holiday

On a guided hiking trip to Venda cultural sites, you'll follow jeep tracks and cattle trails through forests and over hills.

CULTURE
palms pressed together. (The skeleton of ‘Queen Losha’ at Thulamela was so named because she was buried in a similar position.)

As we arrived at the entrance to Thulamela, driving down the shadowy gravel road with the unusually silent afromontane forest towering above, it began to make sense. "When you die in the Netshidzivhe clan, you are buried at the royal kraal," Masindi said. "But after a number of years, the family consults an inyanga who tells them when to exhume the bones and rebury them here, in the sacred forest. But they must also consult the ancestors in the forest. After reburial here, the person becomes an ancestor …"

And the legendary white lion guarding the ancestors’ graves?

"People have seen the white lion here," Maphaha said. "It’s Chief Nthathe, also known as Chief Netshidzivhe. He was a magician and changed into the lion, it’s his spirit. The lion may sometimes come down and block the road if people are not doing the proper rituals."

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We drove to the top of the mountain and there we looked towards Lake Fundudzi in the distance. It was waterless from this vantage point, a strip of lime green cradled by the darker mountains. The sound of drums welcoming us rose from one of the lake’s custodians below, the tiny village of Tshitangani.

As required by custom, we greeted the lake by turning our backs on it, bending over and staring at it between our legs, while Maphaha recited this greeting: ‘Fundudzi la ha nyankodolela u nyele phako. Ri vhaeni ni so ngo ri fhelela mbilu.’ Meaning, roughly, ‘Fundudzi, where you bend over and shit into the cave …’ Not offensive to the ancestors, I was told by Masindi later, "if you are happy, not angry, when you say it."

We descended to the village, where we were entertained by a local dance troupe and shown a map, drawn in the dust, of the lake and its key places: Place Where the Maidens Go to Drink; Place of the Horns, where cattle drowned; Place of the Sheep, where floods stranded the beasts; and Place of the Crocodiles, which miraculously have never devoured a human. After a traditional meal (pap, mopane worms, chicken stew, fried beef, a dried and rehydrated green, rice and roasted peanuts), we were left to a relatively quiet night on the floor of our rondavel.

Lake dances

We were up early on Monday morning, and I set off with Masindi and Al-theus, cousin of the Venda king and our host in Tshitangani, to speak to Altheus’s grandmother, Tshinakaho Netshitangani. She’d joined the dancing, walking stick and all, when we’d first arrived and I figured she’d have some old tales to tell.

She waited for us on the floor of her kitchen rondavel, wrapped in a brown plaid blanket and seated on the floor near where a black pot was simmering. I greeted her and then asked about the stories of the lake, if they were true.

"On the corner of the lake I used to hear the sounds of the Tshikona dance, the drums and the flutes," said Netshitangani, who claimed she could not remember her age, but her relatives guessed it to be around 100. "But if you went to look, there would be no one there."

"I have not heard them for a long time, maybe 50 years," she said. "There is too much interference now, people going on the lake with their boats, camping there. Maybe the ancestors are not happy with that."
Mashudi, a grandson, 30, chimed in on behalf of the younger generation.

“Yes, we believe in the spirits, in the legends. But people are doing fewer rituals today, or maybe they are doing them in private.”

How the half-people made rain

We reunited with Maphaha and the others and walked down to Lake Fundudzi. Or rather we walked into where the lake was meant to be. Elias Manhungu, an elder from the village of Sindande, one of the lake’s custodial villages, accompanied us. The Mutale, the main river ‘swimming’ through the lake, was scarce, but we crossed a couple of tributaries, mainly stepping on little hillocks of dried grass, passing a donkey and, later, a fisherman.

Maphaha stopped and delivered a lesson we’d been waiting for, how Fundudzi, Thathe Vondo and Phiphidi Falls are spiritually linked: “People believed that the tshidudwane, the half-people, moved from the lake through the forest to Phiphidi Falls. They took water from the falls, and brought it back through the forest to the lake, where it evaporated and brought rain. The half-people did this when the Netshiavha royal family were doing their rituals.”

Manhungu added to the story: “When the Netshiavha are hungry, a leopard will be seen going to the royal kraal. The senior sister of the chief and only her will leave to go to the lake to perform a ritual. She will put mealie grains in the lake and if the next day they have grown into plants, the people will come together at the celebration place (where the rocks are ‘drums’), make traditional beer and have meat, and then only a few will go to the ritual place…”

A Zonist Christian Church (ZCC) member, Manhungu seemed reluctant to talk too much about the ‘spirits’ in the lake. He said he’d never seen half-people, but knew people who had seen them, peeping in windows, for instance. Manhungu did see, however, sheep peeping out from the waters of the lake and then vanishing.

Finally we reached the water of the lake, then only about a tenth full. We greeted the lake again, this time each throwing a stone between our legs into Fundudzi. Maphaha pointed to the lake’s far northern corner, to a ‘valley’ between rock faces where the Netshiavha hold their rituals.

Questions lingered: What about the leper story? That the lake was formed when a leper passing by a village was denied food and shelter, and that this caused the landslide that caused a flood that drowned the villagers and their cattle, crying and bellowing from under the water till this day?

Never heard of the leper, said Manhungu.

What about sacrificing maidens to the Python God?

Never heard of that either, Manhungu said. Maphaha admitted to hearing of both, but that he didn’t “know much about them.”

And we left it at that.

In the name of tourism

On our last morning at Fundudzi we drove to Phiphidi Falls. It didn’t seem so sacred, what with the accommodation and ablution blocks along the way. Nzama described it as a “party place on weekends.”

But it was once held sacred by many, and some say a Lightning God lived at the top of the falls – quite a modest flow of water, but scenic – and some people still make offerings there.

“Imagusu will tell you to buy a candle, snuff, maybe a chicken,” Maphaha said, “and make an offering to your ancestors here in the bush. But Phiphidi is no longer a sacred place – not to me anyway.”

Yet reverence for these sacred sites – the lake, the forest, the falls – remains, even among tourists. It’s a sign of the times, an indication that ritual protocols have relaxed somewhat, when Maphaha can say this: “Once one of my clients wanted to be baptised in Lake Fundudzi. So I said, ‘Well, in the name of tourism, I can…”’

Fundudzi Camp is simple but scenic, a useful base for exploring the Venda heartland.

Legend has it that a lightning god once lived at the top of Phiphidi Falls.

The sight of white water at the Tshatshingo potholes is daunting, but there are calmer places to swim.

For more information, contact Eleanor Muller at TFPD on 021 701 7860 or info@tfpd.co.za. Visit www.africanivoryroute.co.za.

Trip PLANNER

Lake Fundudzi lies north-east of Louis Trichardt/Makhado. Guides to the sites are recommended, as are 4X4 vehicles for the often rough roads. It’s possible to visit Lake Fundudzi and other important Venda sites as part of a five-night, six-day guided hike arranged by Transfrontier Parks Destinations (TFPD), which manages the African Ivory Route camps, including Fundudzi Camp. The cost is R6 850 pp, including all food, for a minimum of four hikers and a maximum of 10. Guests who are not keen on so much hiking can also take guided day trips from Fundudzi Camp.

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