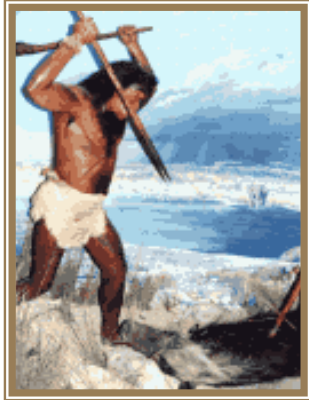




## McGregor Museum Kimberley

### Archaeology Department: Exhibitions– Ancestors



The Ancestors/Frontiers Gallery at the McGregor Museum was opened in two stages in 1998–9. It presents a history of the subcontinent, and the Northern Cape in particular, from Australopithecine times to about 1900. Integrating "prehistory" with the frontier or "historical" period of the region, it challenges the usual distinction that casts precolonial history as a relatively changeless time preceding the "advancements" of the last five centuries. The display traces the origins of humanity in Africa, and the long dynamic history before colonial contact and conquest. The more recent past is featured through the many facets of a changing frontier. One section of the display is an overview of the region's rock art.

Juxtaposing the story–line, a number of cases and panels examine such topics as the nature of archaeological sites, stratigraphy and dating, past climates, population through time, the origins of speech and language, the quest for food, tools from stone, respect for the dead, aspects of the history of archaeology and conservation in this country, and, most importantly, how we know what we know of the past. Visitors are challenged repeatedly with the idea that no objective history is possible: archaeology and history, while concerned with the past, are made in the present and are influenced by present knowledge and concerns. Awareness of this helps us as we evaluate different versions of the past.

The display contains cases and pin–boards for temporary displays to reflect new findings, debates and media reports – a means of keeping the exhibition current and topical. Alternative readings of the past can be accommodated in this way, and could be incorporated more permanently. Visitor interaction is thus welcomed, and an open–ended comments book is kept in the gallery.



Community input was sought in the construction of the display, and the museum is glad to have comment on an on-going basis. The exhibits were the result of teamwork by the archaeology and history departments, together with display designer, artists,



the desktop publishing department, carpenters and technical team, and specialists in diorama/model construction and artwork. In the end the entire museum staff and many other people beyond the museum were involved in one way or another.

A spin-off from the consultation process was an HSRC-funded study, headed by Prof Martin Legassick of the University of the Western Cape, entitled "Post-apartheid transformation of historical representation in museums: Northern Cape history in the McGregor Museum, Kimberley." This project resulted in workshops on representing the past, and included fieldwork at the museum and in the Kimberley community by research team member Michael Abrahams.

#### Some visitor comments on the Ancestors Gallery:

- *If you know where you are coming from, then you will definitely know where you are going to – Seeking Seitheisho*
- *Excellent display – will spend lots of time here – Jock & Jean Robey*
- *The museum is brilliantly coloured and alive and dynamic – very very good – Vince – Stellenbosch University*
- *This history must be taught in schools. Young people must know their cultural history and background – Natal*
- *A really enjoyable and enlightening display. Excellent. I'll take back the images and ideas to Europe – Philip Kiberd*
- *Excellent! I never expected this in Kimberley! Thanks for your effort! – G.T.*
- *You've done a wonderful job. An example to museums and educators in SA. Well done! – Sue Krige, Paul Krige & Jessica*
- *Kimberley and the district around is so interesting and its people are so friendly. We are extremely glad that we extended our trip so as to come here. It is definitely unmissable! – Audrey & Edward Draper, England*
- *I have studied South African history through the pages of books – this is the "Real" thing – Nizam, Durban*
- *I think this museum is stunning! But you need a little bit more about Egypt! – Zelda & Marozaan*
- *Very very good – possibly the best I have seen – P.B. King Cape Town*
- *Inspirational, interesting, colourful, educational. Thank you and may it be highly over-used by everyone – P-Rs England*
- *Your museum is ALIVE! That's the first time I've ever been able to say this truthfully – Sarah Mackie*
- *It is a living experience because we don't have access to such institutions – Richard Maketlo.*