Forgotten World
The Stone Walled Settlements of the Mpumalanga Escarpment

Peter Delius, Tim Maggs and Alex Schoeman

If you drive through Mpumalanga with an eye on the landscape flashing by, you may see, near the sides of the road and further away on the hills above and in the valleys below, fragments of building in stone as well as sections of stone-walling breaking the grass cover. Endless stone circles, set in bewildering mazes and linked by long stone passages, cover the landscape stretching from Ohrigstad to Carolina, connecting over 10 000 square kilometres of the escarpment into a complex web of stone-walled homesteads, terraced fields and linking roads.

Oral traditions recorded in the early twentieth century named the area Bokoni – the country of the Koni people. Few South Africans or visitors to the country know much about these settlements, and why today they are deserted and largely ignored. A long tradition of archaeological work which might provide some of the answers remains cloistered in universities and the knowledge vacuum has been filled by a variety of exotic explanations – invoking ancient settlers from India or even visitors from outer space – that share a common assumption that Africans were too primitive to have created such elaborate stone structures.

Forgotten World defies the usual stereotypes about backward African farming methods and shows that these settlements were at their peak between 1500 and 1820, that they housed a substantial population, organised vast amounts of labour for infrastructural development, and displayed extraordinary levels of agricultural innovation and productivity. The Koni were part of a trading system linked to the coast of Mozambique and the wider world of Indian Ocean trade beyond.

Forgotten World tells the story of Bokoni through rigorous historical and archaeological research, and lavishly illustrates it with stunning photographic images.

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