The Discursive Dynamics of Action-Research and Zimbabwean San People's Production of Audio-Visual Stories

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Abstract

When conducting research with historically marginalised peoples, such as Zimbabwe's autochthonous San, it is necessary to observe the most sensitive ethical and methodological practice. The San are a group of people living largely on the edges of the contemporary market economy in the whole of southern Africa, including Zimbabwe. The San of Zimbabwe often work as unskilled labourers for their Ndebele and Kalanga neighbours in rural areas of Matebeleland. Historically, the San's identity and culture was denigrated in popular oral and media myths. This article presents a theoretical and methodological approach steeped in critical social sciences and cultural studies to restore the San image through making the San themselves the constructors of contemporary cultural texts about their way of life using modern film and video technologies. The San tell their stories after being trained in filming and editing techniques by researchers from Midlands State University. The negotiation of space and status for both the visiting researcher-trainers and host-student San youths makes a fascinating reflexive reading of researcher-researched power dynamics. What eventually emerges is a scholarship that is cognisant of both existential humanism and the need for respectful engagement by the researchers from university citadels with ordinary people who are often belittled and exploited.

Keywords: Zimbabwe San, action-research, critical social sciences, cultural studies, video-filming training, ethics

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Résumé

Lors de recherches sur des peuples historiquement marginalisés, comme les autochtones San du Zimbabwe, il est nécessaire d'observer les pratiques éthiques et méthodologiques les plus sensibles. Les San sont, en grande partie, un groupe de personnes vivant en marge de l'économie de marché présente dans toute l'Afrique australe, y compris le Zimbabwe. Les San du Zimbabwe travaillent souvent comme ouvriers non qualifiés pour leurs voisins Ndebele et Kalanga dans les zones rurales du Matebeleland. Historiquement, l'identité et la culture des San étaient dénigrées dans les mythes oraux et médiatiques populaires. Cet article présente une approche théorique et méthodologique imprégnée de sciences sociales critiques et d'études culturelles afin de, avec des technologies modernes de cinéma et de vidéo, restaurer l'image des San en en faisant les concepteurs de textes culturels contemporains sur leur propre mode de vie. Après avoir été formés aux techniques de tournage et de montage par des chercheurs de la Midlands State University, les San racontent leurs histoires. La négociation d'espace et de statut à la fois pour les chercheurs-formateurs invités et les jeunes étudiants-hôtes San constitue une lecture réflexive fascinante de la dynamique de pouvoir entre sujets de recherche et chercheurs. Ce qui en émerge finalement est une étude consciente, à la fois, de l'humanisme existentiel et de la nécessité d'engagement respectueux des chercheurs des citadelles universitaires avec des gens ordinaires souvent rabaissés et exploités.

Mots-clés : San du Zimbabwe, recherche-action, sciences sociales critiques, études culturelles, formation au tournage vidéo, éthique

Introduction

Anthropologists, historians, filmmakers and cultural studies scholars often tell cultural or 'ethnographic' stories about peoples other than their own. Often the latter communities lack the technologies, skills and expertise to document their cultures beyond their orality (Ong 1982). Although some First Peoples have relayed cultural memory with relative precision for more than 20,000 years (Stille 2002), sophisticated print and audio-visual technologies used in chronicling and archiving are arguably more enduring for preservation purposes. Non-literate or semi-literate First Peoples on different continents have relied on outsiders for the documentation of their cultural capital. Hence, a team of Zimbabwean researchers engaged the San of Bulilima district, Sabase village, in culture-based action-research that involved training San youths to use digital video technology and video-film production for storytelling.

Ten San youths produced two documentary films, *The San of Twai Twai* and *The Golden Story of Makhulela*, which were then screened for

the San community. The youths pitched their filming ideas after learning how to operate cameras and mobile phones for video recording. They divided themselves into two groups, one with five males and another with five females. We, as trainers, followed suit by joining the two groups according to our gender. Our CODESRIA-funded team from Midlands State University occupied the double role of being trainer-facilitators and researchers. The first role entailed imparting film production skills to the San, and the second entailed data-gathering through a mixture of participant observation, observation, interviewing and focus group discussions.

The action-research was strictly an academic endeavour intricately linked to the training project. This article is preoccupied with the ethical, theoretical and methodological challenges and opportunities of engaging a marginalised community which has so far not attracted many researchers, as compared with another Zimbabwean San group, in Tsholotsho, or those in neighbouring countries. Critical social science ethics of praxis and cultural studies methodologies inform the article's ontological perspective. These approaches examine the politics of relations of engagement by all individuals, groups and institutions concerned – including the researchers and the researched – and new digital technologies of expression/communication, to ascertain whether such relations do not perpetuate or normalise domination, degradation, oppression and exploitation.

We conveniently selected a Zimbabwean 'marginalised' San community located in Sabase (or Twai Twai as they call it), a remote rural place 140 kilometres from the border town of Plumtree. Popular media is implicated in reproducing an archetypical, denigrated, stereotyped and mythologised image of the San or 'Bushman' in the global public imagination (Tomaselli & Homiak 1999; Biesele & Hitchcock 1999; Hitchcock & Vinding 2004). One of the key motivating factors for this work was that while the San of southern Africa in general are misrepresented as vanishing into extinction, or their remnants are stereotyped as primitive and premodern people through mainly the ethno-fictional film *The Gods Must be Crazy* (Uys 1980), Zimbabwe's San communities rarely feature in mainstream media reportage.

The research straddles the creative arts and critical social sciences/ humanities. In the creative arts, there is growing recognition of creative practice as a form of research and expression (MacDougall 1998; Turner 1992). We assumed that the San youths would make films that directly addressed their circumstances of life and how they encountered non-San outsiders. Theory and methodology inform the creation of creative texts, and similarly the analysis of the same texts requires sound theoretical and methodological grounding. In critical social science pedagogics, the text is

best understood when the (con)text of its production and distribution is equally comprehended. The practical and stylistic elements of texts contain a symbiotic relationship with the theory and methodologies underpinning them. This is both research-led practice and practice-led research, and, ultimately, we aspired and endeavoured to produce results that were relevant in the spheres of both academia and culture. The research brought academia to a marginalised community, thus we strove to peel off in our small ways the persistent stigma that academes are alienated in ivory towers. Indigenous peoples have appropriated video filming technologies for their own ends, including asserting social status in their own communities, mediating their cultural identities, documenting their histories and as instruments of social and political protest and affirmation (Turner 1992).

San history, naming and identity problems

The San are widely acknowledged as an autochthonous people and the first inhabitants of southern and central Africa before the arrival of Bantu people and European colonialism. The Sabase San also refer to themselves as Amasili or Abatwa (meaning 'person'). Unlike the ≠Khomani San of South Africa, who subverted the term 'Bushmen' and use it endearingly (Mhiripiri 2008), the San group in Plumtree has not yet appropriated that identity, which some consider derogatory. The Zimbabwe Constitution recognises the San among sixteen other ethnic groups in the country. San groups found in the Tsholotsho, Bulilima and Plumtree Districts of Zimbabwe are universally known as the Tshwa in current literature, although in other neighbouring countries they are often identified as distinct small groups with different languages and ethnicities (Hitchcock et al 2016; Tomaselli 2007). The Tshwa language is Tshwao and there are very few Tshwao speakers left. In Sabase, a community of about 400 people, only one old woman – Masenyane Dube – can speak the language proficiently. These San are multilingual; many speak both Ndebele and Kalanga, and a few speak Shona.

Although the community at Sabase identifies itself as a San group, there are ongoing efforts to establish their exact history as a distinct group amongst other San groups of southern Africa. Historian Godfrey Tawona Ncube is writing this history, including the colonial displacement of Zimbabwean San communities from what is now the Hwange Game Park (Ncube forthcoming). Ncube has established that colonial authorities forcibly displaced the San from the Hwange Game Park in the 1920s, thereby disrupting their livelihood, from which most have not recovered. This information is slowly coming from San members such as the female

Sabase village head, Matjena Ncube, and Knowledge Ndlovu (a San youth leader in the same community), but it equally requires cross-referencing and verification with existing historiography. For ethical reasons, we are content with the Sabase community's self-identification and self-recognition as San, and therefore do not consider genetic justification or scrutiny of phenotype as necessary 'evidence' to establish the veracity of this claim. This is in line with the theoretical view that identity can be self-ascribed and identity is a form of or outcome of personal and social construction (Hall & Du Gay 1996), much as identity is performative (Mhiripiri 2008).

Selection of Participants and Training Activities

The trainee filmmakers initially consisted of five males and five females, varying in age from sixteen to thirty-five years.

Table 1: Sabase San trainee filmmakers' group composition at the start of the training

Name	Gender	Age
Tongai Ncube	Male	24
Enias Moyo	Male	24
Buyani Moyo	Female	21
Knowledge Ndlovu	Male	35
Zondiwe Moyo	Female	33
Tjulukani Dube	Female	23
Kwenzakele Tshuma	Female	26
Dennis Moyo	Male	18
Mphiliseni Ndlovu	Male	19
Sibongusuku Anita Ncube	Female	16

Source: Authors' own

We had planned that the youngest participants would be eighteen years. But some enthusiastic sixteen-year-olds also wanted to take part. Knowledge was five years and Zondiwe three years older than our maximum cut-off age of thirty. However, they were both enthusiastic and immediately demonstrated their ability to organise and lead their colleagues. They soon developed into critical point persons for planning and managing training sessions. This was especially the case for Knowledge because he owned a cellphone.

Figure 1: San trainees and the Meaning-Making Research Initiative Team. (Photograph by Servious Chirara)

We conducted four three-day-long research and training activities with the selected participants at Sabase. After that, we held a four-day editing session at Midlands State University in Gweru. We worked with the selected youth filmmakers and their community from May 2018 to mid-April 2019 when we screened the resulting films at the village head's premises. We carried out interviews and focus group discussions at the communal clearing in Sabase the day after the screening. The communal clearing is referred to in our writings as 'The School', adopting the parlance the community used, in recognition of our activities there with the youth. The main feature at the school is a big *mubvumira* (*Kirkia acuminata*) tree. Over the days that we worked in Sabase, the *mubvumira* was the preferred rendezvous with an affective inclusiveness. As researchers, we imagined the space as a generally preferred public sphere.

Matjena's homestead hosted a few meetings, including the screening of the completed video-films. We however noted that Knowledge and others in his class preferred all gatherings to take place at The School. In some ways Matjena's homestead represented officialdom, something from which the community occasionally wanted to escape. The screenings inevitably were done at Matjena's homestead due to the convenience of the hut walls on which we hung the white cloth that served as a screen. Otherwise, there were subtle indications that, due to her position, Matjena benefitted more

from interactions with outsiders than was desirable, hence the need to find a less constrictive public space. The communal School clearly symbolically represented freedom of expression and freedom of association.

Critical Social Science, Cultural Studies and the Ethics of Working With the San in Video Production

This study is partly inspired by Sol Worth and John Adair's (1969), Terence Turner (1992) and David MacDougall's (1998) classic works with indigenous communities outside their own original cultural contexts. In those respective projects, they (as 'outsiders') assisted 'indigenous' peoples to make their own ethnographic films. These researchers spent long periods with the communities, a privilege which our Zimbabwean research team could not afford due to other work commitments and logistical challenges. This technicality disqualifies our research team from the status of 'ethnographers'. By virtue of themselves choosing the components of filmic content to focus on, the San became self-ethnographers because they have intimate knowledge of their culture and traditions. They were born and live 'inside' their own culture, unlike us in relation to the ethnographic/representational objective. We presented the San participants with cameras to make their own films in contradistinction to the dominant cultural 'outsider's' camera gaze. Of significance is the critical concern by filmmakers such as Sembene Ousmane, that 'Western' filmmakers exoticise the African image; hence the need for Africans to make their own images.

As researchers and trainers, we did not intend to impose genres or content on the San people, since such presuppositions could lead to the introduction of topics and subject matter that might not be relevant to their community. The production was not meant to inhibit, but explore, interact with and possibly broaden the imaginative capacities of the participants. We were conscious of our responsibilities as facilitators in the project—a status arising out of our craft literacy and competence in rudimentary production practices. We further contend that contemporary African cultural productions should not be restricted to the dominant old established texts and narrative forms that now seem to typify, if not stereotype, Africa.

In the preface to the book *Contemporary African Cultural Productions*, Mekgwe and Olukoshi (2012:xiii) aptly note that there is an unprecedented explosion of original cultural productions across artistic genres and forms. It is possible to (re)produce African-based ethnographies and an 'anthropology' that empowers and dignifies instead of perpetuating old negative imaginations of Africa. Such 'anthropologies' are steeped in producing a critical 'social knowledge and social reform' for the betterment

of the societies from which empirical materials are drawn and reproduced for textual and epistemic purposes (Ntaragwi, Mills & Babiker 2006).

Our roles as researchers and intellectuals, as well as imparters of technical skills, is to ensure that we remain relevant and useful to the cultural development of African societies. We should move from the citadels of 'intellectualism' to get ourselves 'dirty' with praxis, interacting with 'ordinary' people. We are aware of critiques of African scholarship and intellectualism that focus on how intellectuals on the continent historically position themselves in relation to the state, civil society and other actors, and whether their work is effectual and contributes to policy (Mkandawire 2005). This research tries to ascertain the societal significance of our ethical, philosophical and practical work.

By producing their own epistemic work of a filmic nature we hoped the San participants would emerge as 'new' ordinary cultural producers using modern communicative technologies, which simultaneously would lead to the establishment of synergies for public communication and interaction with us, and a tolerant and appreciative intellectual growth of all involved. The action-research was even more pertinent because we were researchers from a public university funded by taxpayers' money and CODESRIA, which supported the research through the Meaning-making Research Initiative grant programme – equally a pan-African public institution.

Cultural Studies and Emancipatory Textual Projects

As action-research, this study included training selected San men and women in story construction, video filming and editing. The stories they created emanated from the filmmakers' own life circumstances. The entire production process was a critical component of the San community's symbolic expressions of ethnic cultural identity. Our research methodology was mainly qualitative but derived from cultural studies, which is a markedly multidisciplinary field of inquiry. Cultural studies methodologies are highly eclectic and can include components of ethnography without fully satisfying the rigours of ethnography. This study is not strictly 'anthropological' or 'ethnographic' because the researchers and trainers were never long-term participant observers in situ – uninterrupted time spent doing participant observation is arguably the mainstay of ethnographic methodology. Secondly, our research is founded in cultural studies traditions in an institutional sense, that is to say the university department from which we do our research consciously locates itself within the genealogy of critical cultural studies (Mhiripiri 2018). Immanuel Wallerstein (1999) has aptly written about the fictional nature of separating disciplines, but

maintains that their organisational and institutional structures and the rules and regulations and codes of operation within specified disciplinarian boundaries are a fact of reality. Our first 'lack', which denies us the identity of ethnographic researchers, is a function of the second definitional premise. Our combined training of and research on the San was based on short-term but fairly regular visits to Sabase village, with at least one reciprocal visit of the small group of the San for editing purposes to our university in Gweru, approximately 400 kilometres away. Our practices extended cultural studies research paradigms by borrowing useful ethnographic techniques, such as doing fieldwork, filming the training and other encounters, observing and making notes, rather than merely confining ourselves to the library and office.

The amorphous boundaries and ambiguous identity of cultural studies is acknowledged, and perhaps therein lies its strength in the quest for understanding. While cultural studies lacks the definitive forms of a discipline as such, it is however recognisable in practice and as documented records, hence its existence is indisputable, thereby availing itself as a teachable and assessable field of study (Gray 2003:3, 11). Larry Grossberg (1996) is on record for stating the dilemma of the identity of cultural studies, which ironically, for us, might be its current and long-term strength and driving impetus. 'Those of us working in "cultural studies" find ourselves caught between the need to define and defend its specificity and the desire to refuse to close off the ongoing history of cultural studies by any such act of definition' (Gray 2004:3). Simon During (1993:1) also notes this ambiguity, arguing that 'Cultural studies is not an academic discipline quite like others ... Cultural studies is, of course, the study of culture, or, more particularly, the study of *contemporary culture*.' Cultural studies entails a 'methodological eclecticism' of the 'critique of everyday life' and 'an investigation of particular ways of using "culture", of what is available as culture to people inhabiting particular social contexts, and of people's ways of making culture'(Gray 2003:12)). The 'materiality of culture' is a basic component in understanding the idea of culture (Mhiripiri 2008:70). Culture is not just:

> a set of free-floating ideas or beliefs, nor is it exemplified only by a canon of great works of art or literature. The meanings, processes and artefacts of culture are produced, distributed and consumed within particular material circumstances. In other words, texts and practices are both products of and constitutive of the social world… Therefore, any attempt to understand culture and cultural processes must take account of this always-complex set of material conditions (Gray 2003:12).

Cultural studies prioritises the study of media texts and media audiences and their interactions for interpretations of texts (Fiske 1994). New communication technologies now mean that the areas of production, audiences and the construction of discourses are intertwined. Instead of merely receiving texts produced elsewhere, individuals and communities can create communicative spaces using digital devices. Digital infrastructures and devices now shape people's lives, the way we conduct research and the economies of interaction. Such methodologies express the materialistic, the practice, the ontological and the affective dimensions in cultural and social studies (Gillespie et al 2014; Gregg & Seigworth 2010; Grossberg 2010).

Since culture is actively produced through complex processes, 'signifying practice' happens at every social level and every moment within the cultural process itself. People in different contexts and nationalities make culture for certain reasons and purposes as they live through their everyday lives. Culture then is implicated in the shaping of social relations and in instigating or resisting social transformation. Thus, writes Gray (2003:12):

> In order to begin to investigate these complex sets of relationships which are present in cultural processes we require a variety of methods ranging from textual analysis, observation, different ways of gathering knowledge and information from individuals and groups, such as diaries, different kinds of interviews and participant observation.

Since 'lived experience' is a paramount element of cultural studies research, 'texts' include written texts, such as literature and the press, as well as orature (oral stories), music and radio, and visual texts, such as film, photography, advertising and all other kinds of symbolic artefacts and phenomena (Gray 2003). Nonetheless, whatever 'texts' are used in an enquiry should supplement and complement actual lived experience, that is to say there must be a relationship between the text and its social context, as well as how readers interpret the text.

An important facet of cultural studies is the exploration of 'the creativity of ordinary people's experiences while acknowledging that experiences are always shaped by social discourses and context' (Saukko 2018:467). Experiences are influenced by multiple and diverse factors, ranging from human and non-human actors and technological devices that offer discursive platforms, etc. The important task ultimately is to 'map the different elements that come together to configure or enact a specific experience' (Saukko 2018:467), and in our case it is the experience in the filmmaking and film-viewing by the Sabase San.

In the true fashion and tradition of earlier cultural studies, concern and interest (as well as, in this case, empathy) for the less powerful was given

priority. The researchers strategically tried to give a voice to the historically marginalised or at least to legitimise in academia the everyday understandings and passions of ordinary people (Gray 2003:51). The San were discriminated against during apartheid and colonial rule, and they still make up a large number of the underclasses The epistemological questions to be answered by this research are largely those pertaining to how we know what we know and the relationship between the knower and the known, accepting that 'there is no such thing as a disinterested knower' (Gray 2003:2).

Figure 2: First visit to Sabase with MSU students. The village head is Matjena Ncube (seated, in orange T-shirt). (Photo taken by Servious Chirara)

Governmentality, National Security and the Politics of Researching Autochthonous Communities in Southern Africa

Conducting research in Zimbabwe has both its bureaucratic formalities and potential hazards, which admittedly has implications for logistical operations and ultimately the nature and quality of research findings. Currently, there is no powerful civil society organisation that directly controls research over the San or imposes an ethical regulatory framework, as the South African San Institute (SASI) does in South Africa. Our interactions with the San started in May 2018 when we carried out our reconnaissance trip. We established contact and requested permission from the San village head to involve youths in her area to participate in the project, as discussed

earlier. Permission to conduct research and training was granted first by the Matebeleland South Provincial Police Officer in Charge, then the Province's District Intelligence Office and finally the San kraal head[1].

These formalities fall into the category of what Cannella and Lincoln (2018:179) refer to as 'institutionalised forms of governmentality', where to 'govern' is an action predicated on a 'mentality' which is 'the way people think about accepting control, the internalization of beliefs that allow regulation' (Dean 1999). Research ethics and researchers' acceptance of structures of control are part of 'governmentality', whether values and moral commitments are socially negotiated or arbitrarily adopted by researchers as a 'right to know' the other, or are reflexively applied, or are 'forms of legislated research regulation ... that create an illusion of ethical concern' (Lincoln & Tierney 2004).

Institutional regulation and application of ethical standards and forms of control include and involve at different levels academic institutions with codes of engagements, civil society organisations and professional bodies, and the state machinery. Cannella and Lincoln (2018:178) note that in their diversity and levels of authority all these institutions are 'embedded within the notion of governmentality'. Social groups or populations are controlled through technologies of (regulatory) power. Disciplines of researchers also internalise self-controlling values and norms for their practising individuals. Whether in the state system or in the so-called self-regulatory/autonomous institutions, such as academia and research bodies, there are bureaucratic structures and formalities, which ought to be satisfied. The issue of governmentality is complex in that it has dialectical facets, one being externally imposed on the individual or group, and the other self-imposed by the individual or group. Perhaps Cannella and Lincoln (2018:180) express this better:

> Research regulation that is legislated is most often recognized (and critiqued) as an institutionalized form of governmentality, a technology of power that constructs, produces, and limits and is thus tied to the generation of intersecting oppressions. ... We believe that our discussion of ethics within critical social science can be interpreted as a form of governmentality; most likely, any construction of ethics (however flexible) represents a form of governance. To construct a critical ethics regarding research is to address mentality. Any belief structure, however emergent or flexible, certainly serves as discipline and regulation of the self.

Authorisation of research is mandatory, and researchers adhere to it to eliminate restrictions. As Zimbabwean nationals, we submit ourselves to certain strictures. We seek permission from bureaucratic authorities in

what may appear to be 'informal' ways, especially when operating in rural environments where the ruling party ZANU–PF is dominant. We often notify the police, the rural district administrators or the state intelligence to access and interact with local populations. This is to avoid conflict and unnecessary suspicions regarding our presence in a potentially volatile environment. We were fortunate to be granted permission the first time we went to Sabase. Our entry was also 'smooth' because we incidentally got a police officer who was off duty to operate as our interpreter.

The San community we worked with were aware of the state's restrictions and were willing to work with us only on condition that central authority was supportive of the interactions. In fact, when the editing team visited us in Gweru, their leader, Knowledge, revealed that he was expected to report not only to his village head but also to the state officials what exactly our intention was in teaching the community to operate communication technologies and tell their own stories. How this relationship frees up imagination or constrains it is open for debate. The two filmed projects the San filmmakers opted for – constructing a traditional hut and discussing the near extinction of their San language, and the exploration of the benefits of herbal medicines – verged on 'innocuous' ethnographies as compared to other openly political subject matter. The realisation that we were equally under observation by our research participants in that manner made us more self-conscious and cautious in the way we conducted ourselves. Nevertheless, our realisation that the participants had something to learn from us was gratifying under the circumstances. We must note here that foreign researchers need to satisfy more requirements to practise in Zimbabwe. We also concede that local and foreign journalists have suffered more professional hazards when they visit (especially rural areas) without institutional (state) authorisation, whereas we do not have records of such abuses of academic researchers.

However, the possible safety and security that we enjoy as researchers could not be taken for granted during one of our trips in January 2019 to Sabase, at a time when Zimbabwe was in turmoil. There were demonstrations and riots triggered largely in urban areas due to escalating food and petrol prices. The ZANU–PF government views urban areas as political strongholds for the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change. Our university is based in urban Gweru. Much as academics are regarded as public officials whose institutions rely on government grants, suspicions remain mainly because many among the MDC leadership are former university lecturers and students.

We embarked on our January 2019 trip without making the usual visit to the state gatekeeping authorities to announce our arrival in Plumtree since we feared we could be turned back to Gweru. Previously, during the reconnaissance trip and again when we travelled to Sabase when Zimbabwe was going through national elections, the off-duty police officer mentioned earlier had acted as our guide and interpreter. In spite of the well-documented fear of the security apparatus by Zimbabweans, in this case the police officer's presence might have inspired trust and confidence in all those with whom we associated because he was well known around the area. He had worked and socialised with the San before, whereas – in comparison – we were complete strangers. Generally, our research team's compliance with state authorities brought more benefits of accessibility. Nonetheless, there are some ineluctable practical necessities and concessions that make 'governmentality' an ambiguous fact of praxis. There is arguably more public good in strategically negotiating slippery terrain without undermining the right of the less powerful social groups to associate and express themselves.

The protection of indigenous communities

The San all over the southern African region enjoy the status of undisputed autochthons. No other group claims the state of original inhabitants of the area, and the ancient rock paintings and the oldest archaeological discoveries in the region are attributed to the San (Buntman 1996a; Buntman 1996b; Chapman 1996; Jeursen 1995). This status needs to be protected. The concerns raised above about the exploitation of research communities and their relations with researchers, filmmakers and other economic players cannot be glossed over. These are theoretical, methodological and political concerns that cannot be dodged.

Civil society organisations or non-governmental organisations specifically concerned with San issues and interests are a recent phenomenon compared to neighbouring countries. The Tsoro-o-tso San Development Trust (TSDT), which advocates for the development of the Tshwao/San people of south-western Zimbabwe, was established in 2014 only. It is currently the only organisation dedicated to the needs of the San in Zimbabwe. In South Africa, there is a coordinated strategy to protect indigenous communities, especially the San, from exploitation of all forms. There is also the supportive involvement of organisations such as WIMSA (Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa) and Survival International. South African San groups together with the South African San Institute (SASI) developed a Code of Ethics for researchers (Callaway 2017). It is still to be seen whether TSDT will also take the same stance towards researchers.

While the Zimbabwe government is concerned with the status of the local San as arguably the poorest ethnic group in the entire sub-region, it still insists that it does not want the San to be treated differently from other racial and ethnic groups in the country. The International Labour Organization (2010) and several researchers on livelihood levels concur that 'Zimbabwe's San have the lowest socioeconomic level compared to all racial and ethnic groups both in the country and across the region' (Hitchcock et al 2016; Suzman 2001; De Wet 2010; Dieckmann et al. 2014). Besides working as very cheap labour for their neighbours from other ethnic groups, the Zimbabwe San continue to forage in search of food and herbal medicines. They have indeed been marginalised compared with San communities in countries such as Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. The general assumption is that the Zimbabwean San simply do not exist. Ironically, the Zimbabwean Constitution included Tshwao, the San language, among the officially recognised languages, and a team of orthographers have since translated the Zimbabwe Constitution into that language.

Just before the 2018 Zimbabwe general election, the First Lady, Auxillia Mnangagwa, visited Sabase and donated goods, signifying a new turn of events (Rupapa 2018). This is notwithstanding the slowly but surely growing research on the Zimbabwe San (Hitchcock & Nangati 1992, 1993; Zhou 2014; Hitchcock et al 2014, 2016), albeit sparse and requiring more committed, conscientious and specialist researchers across the disciplines. A more robust San civil society organisation might emerge. At the theoretical level, research might have some agency, playing a facilitating role for San societal organisation in the cultural sphere.
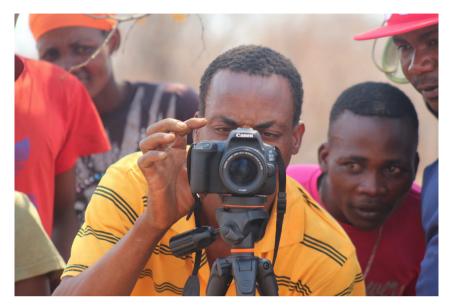
San Handling Video Technology and Heightened Self-Esteem

The training offered all participants their first opportunity to operate cameras and use computers. Although they had used cellphones before, the First Lady's visit mentioned above ironically stimulated interest in the professional camera. Journalists and other state photographers were part of the visiting entourage and they looked very important holding the filming equipment. 'I never dreamt I could hold something similar and shoot just like they were shooting at us!' exclaimed Knowledge. There was a tinge of pride and heightened self-esteem in the articulation.

The training on camera maintenance and basic shooting elicited a number of interesting responses from the participants, since such experiences are affective. The introduction of new technologies to those who have never used them before elicits different reactions. The recipients can be hesitant and curious, timid and petrified, or enthusiastic and eager

to know more. The San group exhibited all these reactions. Generally, they were eager to interact with new technologies of expression, as evidenced by their punctuality and memorisation of taught concepts. During our second day of camera training, Enias kept repeating the names of some of the accessories and tools he had been introduced to the previous day, such as 'tripod', 'lens', 'zoom' and 'Canon' (the brand of the DSLR cameras we were using). Enias and Knowledge even took it upon themselves to teach others, revealing a promising intra-group/intra-ethnic peer-to-peer skills impartment. This dispelled our earlier assumption that, given the very low or non-existent levels of print literacy in the community (some of our participants had attended only primary grades of school), it would be difficult to provide training on highly technical skills. This assumption was based on evidence that some students enrolled in our universities struggle with new communication technologies when undertaking full-time studies.

While all of the San youths across gender and age quickly embraced the camera, the editing technologies were relatively intimidating. During the editing time in Gweru, Knowledge indicated that older trainees like Enias and Zondiwe would have been more adventurous, as they would not have experienced 'culture shock' in the editing training context. Zondiwe is a married woman and could not travel to Gweru due to family responsibilities, while Enias was travelling in Botswana at that time.
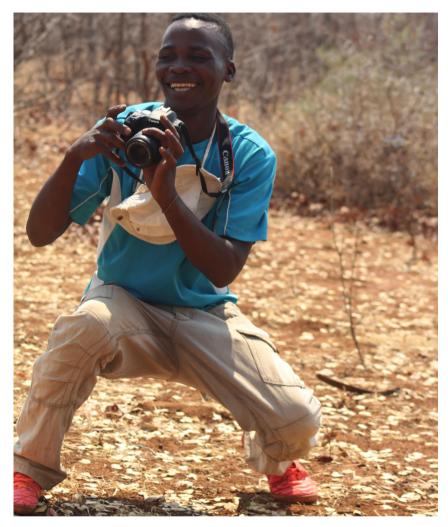
Figures 3 and 4: Knowledge Ndlovu (in yellow golf shirt) operating the camera. (Photographs by Servious Chirara)

Figure 5: Zondiwe Moyo (in striped blue top) operating the camera. (Photograph by Servious Chirara)

Figure 6: Enias Moyo immediately fell in love with the camera.
(Photograph by Servious Chirara)

The Problems Observed During San Filming and Editing

From the beginning of the training, female trainers worked with the women's group closely, and similarly male trainers worked with the male group. The female San group induced this separation by staying apart from their male counterparts. On the surface, it appeared that the women were shy and withdrawn, yet overall their subtle preferences led the trainers and the male group to act in a way that enabled the realisation of the women's interests.

The silent power of San women is vocalised occasionally: Mercy Mubayiwa intimated that in an instance of woman-to-woman banter Kwenzakele told her that local women had so much power that they had made several of their non-San lovers move in to their homes away from their own families in other villages. For instance, Knowledge's stepfather is from Masvingo province over 400 kilometres away. He returned to Masvingo only after the death of Knowledge's mother. And village head Matjena Ncube's husband is a non-San who moved into the San community.

Our research group was obliquely susceptible to the subtle San women's power; we smoothly reassigned trainers/overseers into gender-defined training groups, something that we had not planned before in our methodology. The power dynamics between the trainees/observed and the trainers/observers thus did not always assure the retention of research control, certainty and authority of the latter. Such dynamics persuaded the researchers to believe that the women's pitched ideas, at least, and their filmic practice and decision-making, were of their own initiative in an intriguing manner. The testimony from Mubayiwa reinforces the San women's subliminal influence on the encounter, on our intercultural social relations, the film production process and discursive existence.

The men chose the subject of the construction of a San hut and the discussion around the use of the San language, which now has very few speakers. The women settled on herbal medicines and traditional health care for San women pertaining to childbirth. In the men's film, the filmmakers sometimes move from behind the camera to become pro-filmic informants. There was arguably more technical discipline on the women's team, in terms of maintaining the professional filmmaker's distance that allows other voices, than was found in the males' pro-filmic operations. Restraining one's intrusion as film director has its technical advantages, especially where diverse community voices are anticipated. The handler of the film devices is already 'empowered' by virtue of the possession of equipment, and the ability to select, include or exclude subjects and who can be filmed. That power of selection is, however, not absolute since the making of a diversely vocal film requires more presences than the filmmaker's own. Authorities on cultural and community subject matter, for instance, might not always be those who handle the film and video devices. The women's film was arguably more successful in incorporating people who were not trained to film, compared to the men's production, which relied more on the filmmakers as pro-filmic subjects. The performative role of the men – especially Knowledge – places them in the film space as both filmmakers and the filmed, implying that they aspire for a starring role on both sides of the camera lens.

The San who were selected to visit Gweru for the edit actively decided on what material to include or exclude from the footage. Our initial intention was to hand over the filmmaking process in its entirety to them, just as David MacDougall or Terence Turner did with the Australian and Amazonian Aborigines respectively in the later stages of their ethnographic films. We soon realised that this was over-ambitious since the selected San youths needed a lot of handholding, especially in the critical stages of editorial work. None of them had ever worked with editing software or computers before. A simple task such as manoeuvring a computer mouse could be daunting; the displacement from their own familiar environment to the university studio was disorienting enough for youngsters such as Denis and Anita. Kwenzakhele and Anita – the female editors – would do virtually no handling of the editing equipment, nor would the youthful Denis. The three needed more prodding and urging even for the selection of material to include into the films. Knowledge complained that they were not participating enough, even though we had provided young male and female facilitators and trainers eloquent in Ndebele. The edit suite accentuated the differences between trainers/researchers and trainee filmmakers, but also between the San trainees themselves. It made us realise that it was all very well to provide a channel for San expression, but whose voice would prevail even amongst them? Such is the age and gender difference amongst the San that both Knowledge and the women agreed that the women's film production – *The Golden Story of Makhulela* – was not going to be shown to the entire village since it had sensitive material suitable only for a mature female audience.

The choice of herbal medicines as a subject was a convenient cultural affirmation in a space of need and want. There are no modern hospitals in the region, hence the women are practical and proactive in their choice of herbal remedies. They resort to traditional communal knowledge paradoxically, having been displaced from their traditional structures. They live in proximity to relative 'affluence', but they do not have schools or modern health facilities in their neighbourhood. That they resort to 'traditional' medicine is expedient and understandable. They want hope and confidence where the 'modern' offers little as recourse. The efficacy of the herbal medicine is unknown to us as researchers in social sciences, and perhaps pharmacists and physicists are best equipped to test the effectiveness of these herbs. In the absence of such research, our research team can only support the community remedies that offer physical and psychic comfort, solace and amelioration.

The intimacy of female health and sexuality were significant in restricting the screening of the film. Respect for the privacy and dignity of the women

was a critical ethical consideration. However, the mention of herbs and their uses placed the researchers in a complex position where non-disclosure of the plants and procedures is not just an issue of propriety but one of protecting San communal intellectual property rights. The researchers have a legal and ethical responsibility not to disclose the uses of the medicinal plants, an awareness heightened by the debacle between the San of South Africa and Big Pharma over *Hoodia gordinii*, an appetite suppressant.

Turning the Camera Gaze on the Outsider

During an interview-training session, researchers urged the trainees to consider turning the camera gaze on us as the outsiders/visitors and to ask us questions about anything. From shy inquiry, Knowledge's confidence grew until he eventually pointedly asked why we were there and what we wanted from them. He was concerned about the possibility of the 'pilfering' of their cultural ideas and mores. Nhamo Mhiripiri was asked these radical questions. He replied that the research team was interested only in imparting filming skills to the San so that they could represent themselves through audio-visual imagery. The imagery of teaching a person to fish instead of giving out fish was used to clarify the aim.

Within the scope of the current research, we may not be able to ascertain that the explanation was fully absorbed by the community. That we were teaching a skill to empower the community might not have been immediately visible to them. Some of the community members seemed to have understood the notion of opportunity in collaboration, and Knowledge and a few others were interested in the actual ideational value of skills acquisition more than receiving material handouts. A frequently mentioned appreciation of the film projects was their importance in conserving the community's history and culture through documentation. The older San concurred with Knowledge that, in the absence of print literacy, modern technologies of communication offered a new opportunity and potential for cultural restoration. The film devices could record and package a considerable amount of information expressed in their ordinary language. They could also revive the old, nearly dying San language, as Masenyane had demonstrated in one of the films.

The films assumed efferent and educational status among the elders. Just as writing was extolled as a powerful device of recording and preserving cultural memory in some oral cultures faced with rapid changes (Stille 2002), film similarly assumes the same status in the San community with scant print literacy skills. The most impressive response of the San under the rapid homogenising effects of globalisation and the market economy is to

offer to teach their youths to handle the new communication devices and manage the documentation and storage of their history and culture. This is the reason why even the head of the neighbouring San village came to plead for the inclusion of some of his own youths into the filming training project. One elderly resident from Sabase objected to the idea but the rest welcomed the inclusion of at least four more youths. The rejection by the one resident was typical of a contestation for scarce resources but it also underlined the existence of inter-village jealousies and vendettas. Our training team was now a protected 'local' resource, which could be used in intervillage negotiations and overtures for community sharing and unity. This is the typical traditional sharing for which the San are legendary (see Marshall 1959) and which some people see as a weakness. Our Kalanga host Forward Dube noted that the Ndebele and Kalanga are often wary of intermarrying with the San. Twenty San in-laws could move in with the bride!

Some members of the community, who did not appreciate the positives of the training, requested payment for receiving training. This is not as ridiculous as it may seem, nor is it an inversion of the principles of the capitalist funding of education. According to economist and social scientist Friedrick Hayek (2006:325) critical knowledge and (skills acquisition) 'is perhaps the chief good that can be got at a price'. Knowledge is a public good that benefits the individual and the public, although those without knowledge or useful education may not immediately realise the incentive to possess it. There is expenditure of money and resources in spreading knowledge and skills. Many successful students in the modern age benefit from grants and scholarships in order to excel! The public purse for education and training of marginalised communities like the San ought to include the same mechanism used to cushion public education in social welfarist and socialist states. Mentoring San graduate and postgraduate students in the social sciences, and particularly in cultural studies and/ or ethnographic studies, will create a necessary intellectual alter-ego to all those interested in this marginalised society, instead of speaking about or on behalf of them. Issues of voice and authority are therefore partly addressed in this democratisation of cultural studies.

While the possibility of filming other cultures and other peoples was open to them, the Sabase San remained inward-looking. The only outward gaze and interviewing of the other is manifest in the scene when Knowledge interviews Mhiripiri, an urban Shona academic. The community was still preoccupied with itself. The creation of its own record from its own perspective was apparently more important at this juncture than the outward gaze and interest in how others appear beyond their own spatial conditions.

The inside gaze is both an individual and community cultural affirmation which is necessary for a people that have been marginalised. They are placing themselves at the centre first, to stabilise themselves conceptually, reconstruct their historical memory and relate it to the present, before they dare venture out to test intercultural dynamics.

Figures 7 and 8: Buyani Moyo turns the camera gaze on Nhamo Mhiripiri while Knowledge interviews. (Photographs by Oswelled Ureke)

The San And Technology: Confrontation and Negotiation

Regardless of the challenges the participants faced in operating the editing suites, it was not lost to them that a film is a sequential assemblage of selected shots and scenes. In spite of the general reluctance to do practical editing – that is, cutting and pasting together selected shots and scenes to create a narrative – the teams did select the materials to be included in the films. For instance, Knowledge was adamant that the scene where Mhiripiri is filmed answering interview questions about the essence of the film-training project should find space right at the end of the men's film. Mhiripiri's answer in part was metaphorical: 'It is important to teach someone to fish instead of providing fish.' Knowledge's ontology about the encounter with the trainers and the purpose of the project, and his desires for cultural recuperation through adopting and adapting new technologies, manifested themselves in this choice. He believes the condition of the San can be improved only through collaboration with

others but that the relations between the one and (an)other must be based on cordial respect and equality. Film is then the space for mutual but strategic exchanges, play, role performance and interaction.

This is something David MacDougall realised about his own work with other peoples. Writing about MacDougall in the *London Review of Books*, Paul Henley (2001:36) noted:

> For him, an ethnographic film should be understood as a record not just of another culture, but of an encounter between film-maker and film-subjects who between them achieve a form of communication across the cultural divide. Far from seeking to present a disengaged account of another society, good practice should be measured by the degree to which the film-maker has been able to work through the personal relationship established with the subjects in order to provide an insight into the world in which they live.

Knowledge used the post-screening focus group discussion to initiate community discussion about their distressing encounters with drones. A drone had terrorised the villagers before. Several villagers added testimonies of their encounters with the intrusive device 'that flew over their homesteads making a whirring sound like a giant bee'. The drone – nowadays used for aerial shots – is a welcome and convenient filming and surveillance device, but with associated political and ethical implications and ambiguities. When used by state institutions such as the military, intelligence and defence forces, its roles and purposes are obvious. However, when filmmakers and hunters use this technology there are several problematiques. The use of drones can breach all notions of ethics when filmmakers film without permission and disregard people's privacy and integrity, especially when the filmed are presumed to be ignorant of the nature and purpose of the invasive technologies.

During the visit for editing in Gweru, we introduced Knowledge, Anita, Kwenzakhele and Denis to how to operate a drone for filming. While the other three were timid about handling or operating the instrument, Knowledge manoeuvred it with characteristic enthusiasm and curiosity, watching activities on campus on the screen. On his return to Sabase, he told others about the drone. When we visited the village to screen the films the Sabase team had made, Knowledge excitedly recounted his introduction to the drone in Gweru, and how he realised a similar gadget had terrorised him right there in Sabase a few months before. He had been resting by the river when a drone had flown over him. He tried to shoot at it using a catapult, but it dodged. He rushed for his bicycle and rode off fast, but the drone continued to hover above him, chasing him. It left him when he entered his hut in a panic. 'I thought war was about to start', he told us. Several other

Sabase elderly male residents narrated their own less dramatic encounters with the drone, how it had whizzed and hovered around their homesteads. With new information about the drone acquired during the editing trip to Gweru, old fears were replaced with dismay. They suspected a group of white tourists at a nearby conservancy of filming them without their consent. 'It took going to Gweru first for me to know that the white tourists used a drone to film us without our permission. It's bad,' said Knowledge. The male members requested that we bring a drone for demonstration to the community on our next visit.

The community members' urge to know more about the device was not mere curiosity about novelties. Lurking underneath was an anxiety to know and understand why 'strangers' and 'outsiders' should snoop on them and observe them like some exotic curio. Understanding the operations of the flying automated gaze was also a way of exorcising the ghosts of the unknown and to manage alien intrusions. The villagers required the reassurance that came with the knowledge of contemporary devices and processes so that they could settle into a 'stable' psychosocial state in which they felt somewhat in control against the odds. Managing technology, and possibly possession of it, reinforces what Saukko (2018:472) explains as technology's ability to emphasise the 'materiality of discourse'. Through the possession and use of technologies it is possible not only to study representations and identities – both textual and performative – that individuals produce, but also to examine how the communicative platforms are created, evolve and shape definitive socio-cultural and political actions (Van Dijck 2013).

Conclusion: The End of San/Bushmen Studies?

This article discussed the broader ethical and political issues of academics conducting research on a marginalised community and the expressive role of new communication technologies in such human encounters. The Sabase San have not as yet appropriated video-filming technologies for direct political self-articulation, as the Amazonian Kayapo have done (Turner 1992), but possibilities that this will happen in future as the San attempt to escape their marginalised status and as they respond to encounters from outsiders. The drone incidence is a case in point.

Ethics as praxis permeates all levels of research and encounters between researchers and the researched, visitors and hosts. Critical social sciences and cultural studies are informed by the lofty ideals of humanism and social justice, love, care and respect for others. The materiality of culture and cultural texts such as films has implications on how individuals and groups construct communicative spaces and shape their lives. The Sabase

San's production of stories on video, and the communal sharing of the same film through public viewing validate the people's lives and experiences. Researchers hence have a moral responsibility to bring back to research communities the products of that research. For example, the film screening was a deliberate act to return to the San people the cultural products that emanated from the research and training activities. Besides screening the films, still photographs of the San community were given to them. This was done to give back cultural resources to the participating community that was central to the production of the particular cultural text.

In countries where the San are over-researched, researchers have become introspective. Researchers do not only question their research purposes and intentions amongst the San, but whether the area of study should be abandoned outright so as not to create a debilitating San exceptionalism. While Zimbabwe's San are extremely under-researched in comparison to their counterparts in other southern African countries, it is daunting to discover these Zimbabwean San at a time when other researchers are reconsidering their relations with San topics. The Zimbabwean San are neglected in both research activities and socio-economic development projects.

At the end of yet another conference on the San, John Wright predicted 'The end of Bushmen studies'. Writing with Jill Weintroub, Wright acerbically noted that San studies tend to ahistoricise them as a people, presenting them as living in the present but as 'authentic' and frozen in prehistory. They suggest that a recuperation of the San studies ought to place them within historical context across millennia right to contemporary times (Wright & Weintroub 2014:735–736). The pure 'authentic other' is probably no longer to be found, hence researchers must be reflexive enough to acknowledge that most San now constitute the impoverished underclasses of capitalism on the subcontinent. The existential grievances of the San and the realities of the socio-cultural–technological politics within which they survive must be enunciated and solutions provided. In the postcolony '(t)he veneer of culture, language, purity and whatever other aura of Bushmen' need peeling off, in order as it were, to reveal the 'metaphoric pornography' of the 'naked, hungry, snot-nosed and dirty people' who are icons of rural poverty and disease (Tomaselli 2014:723). These are the very people (the researched) with whom researchers often interact.

Articulate San such as Deon Arends (2014:737–738) must demand and find space for self-articulation of their personal and community grievances and disillusionment. There is a ray of hope and possibility of epistemic reflexivity for scholars such as the Midlands State University team in that we are aware of the politics of knowledge production around marginalised

people such as the Zimbabwean San. We can take experiences from the region and endeavour not to repeat the (un)witting epistemological condescension and arrogance exhibited by counterparts elsewhere. The study of the San communities in Zimbabwe is gathering steam. However, it is very important to avoid the theoretical, epistemological, methodological and ontological pitfalls that have been identified in previous studies of the San or other First Peoples elsewhere. The Zimbabwean San are fortunately under-researched, and the epistemic violence that has been perpetrated on similar groups in other parts of the world is not as devastating as has been the case elsewhere. The action-research is cognisant of the epistemic, methodological and symbolic violence perpetrated by researchers previously, hence, our effort to impart skills as unobtrusively as possible in our modest endeavour to compensate for past professional injustices. New technologies allowed the San use of a variety of technologies of self-expression, film included, with which organic intellectuals can now articulate their grievances against oppressive systems, as well as their hopes for structures that enable respect and dignity for their contemporary struggles.

Note

1. Zimbabwean village heads are part of the state administrative structure and they receive a very modest monthly wage, even though they are appointed from amongst community members.

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