



Aesthetic of Innocence: Experiencing Self-filming by the San of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article discusses the process and outcome of a participatory video production endeavour in which selected members of the Twai Twai San community in Zimbabwe were taught to operate video cameras and mobile phones for the purpose of documenting their realities. The study was aimed at finding out the nature of audio-visual narratives that the marginalised community would create if empowered to do so. The article pays particular attention to representations of the self by the San community, the underlying power dynamics and socio-technical concerns of the production process. A combination of participatory action research and filmmaking methodology was employed for the study. Data for the study were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with the filmmakers and some members of the community. The article also benefits from the authors' observations of the film production process, which is critical in the analysis of the completed ethnographic video-films *The Golden Story of Makhulela* and *The San of Twai Twai*. The study established that the films made by the San youths projected the ways in which they perceived themselves as a community. As such, the films were some form of self(ie)-representation. This perception of themselves could be the chief reason behind the film techniques employed and narratives chosen by the San youth as well as the aesthetics of the video-films. It was also found in the study that video-film could play a critical role of preserving or archiving Tyua language, which is slowly dying among the San.

Keywords: San, cellphilm, Twai Twai, ethnography, participatory video, action research

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Résumé

Cet article discute du processus et des résultats d'un effort participatif de production vidéo dans lequel des membres de la communauté Twai Twai San du Zimbabwe ont appris à utiliser des caméras et des téléphones portables afin de documenter leurs réalités. L'étude avait pour but de découvrir la nature des récits audiovisuels qu'aurait créé la communauté marginalisée si elle était habilitée à le faire. L'article porte une attention particulière aux représentations de soi de la communauté San, aux dynamiques sous-jacentes de pouvoir et aux préoccupations sociotechniques du processus de production. Une combinaison de recherche-action participative et de méthodologie de réalisation de films a été utilisée. Les données de l'étude ont été recueillies à l'aide d'entretiens et de discussions de groupes avec les cinéastes et des membres de la communauté. L'article bénéficie également des observations des auteurs sur le processus de production du film, chose essentielle dans l'analyse des films ethnographiques achevés comme *The Golden Story of Makhulela* et *The San of Twai Twai*. L'étude établit que les films réalisés par les jeunes San projetaient leur perception d'eux-mêmes en tant que communauté. Ainsi, les films étaient une forme de représentation de soi. Cette perception d'eux-mêmes pourrait être la principale raison des techniques cinématographiques employées et des récits choisis par les jeunes San, et l'esthétique des films. L'étude a également révélé que les films pourraient jouer un important rôle dans la préservation ou l'archivage de la langue tyua, qui meurt lentement chez les San.

Mots-clés : San, cellphilm, Twai Twai, ethnographie, vidéo participative, recherche-action

Introduction and Background

This article discusses the process and outcome of a participatory video production endeavour in which selected members of a San community in Zimbabwe were taught to operate video cameras and mobile phones for the purpose of documenting their realities. The main objective of the research project was to find out the nature of audio-visual narratives that a marginalised community would create if empowered to do so. The San are among Zimbabwe's marginalised groups in terms of economic development, as will be discussed in detail later in the article. The article examines the processes of engagement between the community and researchers who initiated the project, and analyses two video-films produced from the endeavour, paying particular attention to representations of the self by the San community and the attendant power dynamics and socio-technical concerns of the production process. This section provides the background, context and justification of the study. Subsequently literature related to the subject is reviewed, including discussion of the study's theoretical framework and methodology. The last sections of the article present and analyse data in line with the main research objective.

Sabase is a small village in Makhulela Ward, Bulilima District at the periphery of Matabeleland South, with a population of about 400 people, most of them San or of San lineage. The village is characterised by thatched pole and daga huts and Mopani-populated bushes. The terrain along the drive to the village is bumpy and almost renders the place inaccessible. Driving there in summer is extremely difficult. The clay soil retains water, making the roads impassable, even for the best off-road vehicles. When it is not raining, the African sun is at its most scorching in this area. These are the conditions encountered by the team of researchers who ventured into Sabase on a research endeavour that involved teaching some San community members how to use audio-visual recording equipment. Our involvement with the San community was part of a protracted negotiation process in which we visited Sabase several times to seek the community's consent to involve them in the project mentioned above. There are several theoretical and ethical implications to this negotiation process, some of which are discussed under the theoretical framework of this article. A detailed discussion of theoretical and methodological issues of the study are accommodated elsewhere (see Mhiripiri et al. 2020). The negotiation for entry started in 2018 when we approached local authorities such as police, the President's Office, the headman and eventually Matjena Ncube, the female village head, who cautiously consented to our research after acknowledging that it might benefit youths in the community with life-long skills. At some point during the project, one of the participants, Knowledge Ndlovu pointedly asked our team leader how the San community would benefit from the project and why we had selected them as a group worth making films about. Knowledge insisted that this conversation should appear in one of the edited films. Upon reflection, we found the question pertinent as well, because it continuously reminded us of the core purpose of our endeavour and the attention it might attract. That question compares very well with what Navajo leader Sam Yazzie asked Sol Worth and John Adair in a similar project they conducted with that community: 'Will making movies do the sheep any harm?'; then, 'Will making movies make the sheep good?'; to which questions the answer was 'No' upon which Yazzie asked 'Then why make the movies?' (Worth and Adair 1975:4). To these scholars, the last question remained unanswered, but in our case, a key assumption is that making the movies might help the San realise the agency to represent themselves (hence action research and participatory video). It is assumed that there is a relationship between access to, and ability to manipulate media technology and how subaltern communities imagine and represent themselves. As Stuart Hall (1980:33) argues, people should be active in making their own films. There are multiple reasons for this, as shall be discussed later in the article.

Indigenous Filmmaking, Participatory Video and Self(ie)-Representation

There has been similar research in the past but there remains a dearth of literature on the African continent. Worth and Adair's project with the Navajo Indians in Pine Streams, Arizona, cited above, is quite related to our research endeavour. Their main research question is one that concerned us too: 'What would happen if someone with a culture that makes and uses motion pictures taught people who had never made or used motion pictures to do so for the first time?' (Worth and Adair 1975:3). While in *The Navajo Film Themselves*, the end-product of Worth and Adair's endeavour resulted in seven films of varied themes, in our case, only two video-films were completed, although they each contained different themes as well. Also of interest is Fran Edmonds' (2014) work that documents how Aboriginal youths developed digital stories using mobile phones and content extracted from Facebook, as well as Grady Walker's (2018) work, conducted in Nepal, which explored the potential of visual story-telling in critical pedagogy. There is also the Shootback Project, started in 1997 by American photographer Lana Wong and Kenyan youth leader Francis Kimanzi, which equipped youths in Nairobi slums with cheap cameras to tell their own stories. The Kenyan participants photographed their lives and wrote about them over three years, with the images becoming the basis of a book (Wong 2000). In Tanzania, locals of Stone Town started Baraza Television, an initiative in which film was used to raise awareness about the Stone Town heritage site (Mhando 2005). The current study complements the growing body of literature on First Peoples and on participatory video in an African context.

The study is informed by theoretical work on participatory video (Mhando 2005; Lunch and Lunch 2006; Blazek 2016; Walker 2018) and the subject of selfies and self-representation (Rettberg 2018; Edmonds 2014; Cruz and Thornham 2015). We consider the San's activities as acts of mimetic representation in which they try to show their own life as it is. At the same time, the various procedures that they undertook during pre-production and production were designed to achieve a particular negotiated outcome – films that not only showed the world who the San were, but that also showed themselves how they appeared on film, hence selfie-videos. As Rettberg (2018:444) argues 'Self-portraits can be a way to communicate with others, but they can also be a way for the photographer to imagine how he or she could be different.' The video-films produced by the Sabase community youths can be classified as 'selfie-videos' to the extent that the producers appear extensively in the narratives, but are also participatory to the extent that they are produced by the San themselves. However, as

argued by Cruz and Thornham (2015), the visual might be a smokescreen for deeper lying power relations. Thus to limit our analysis to the images produced would be at the expense of the socio-technical dynamics behind their production. For a long time, it has been the white male (invariably Western) filming or studying the 'Other' of colour. While we do not make our claim for space on racial grounds, we do subscribe to the call to decolonise visual anthropology (Schiwy 2009). Freya Schiwy (2009:2) argues that 'the geopolitics of knowledge invokes a hegemonic structure of thinking' in which the North is the centre of knowledge while the 'so-called Third and Fourth Worlds produce culture'. Likewise, Valentine Mudimbe's (1988:10) questions about representatives of an African gnosis are pertinent in this critical reflection: 'Who is speaking about it [African gnosis]? Who has the right and the credentials to produce it, describe it, comment upon it, or at least represent opinions about it?' This would also invite the question: why should we be the ones *deciding* that the San make a film about themselves? It appears, in trying to help the San attain agency in their cultural narrative, we had to take it away first, or at least be the ones to give it.

The concept of participatory video tackles the problematic of engagement between researchers/producers and the researched/performers, in this case the assumed roles and the production activities thereafter. Participatory video can be defined as 'the range of activities involving novices creating a film collaboratively as an act of political or social expression or investigation' (Walker 2018:29). The 'collaborative' aspect of such production work is not as straightforward as it may seem. There are underlying power dynamics that present both opportunities and challenges to those involved. We adopt the 'outsider to insider' model of participatory video (see Walker 2018) in which external agents initiate the engagement. The researchers/facilitators, in this case, are the outsiders: 'the external initiating agents whose goal is to disseminate information or change behaviour with the help of video', while the San are the insiders: 'certain members of a community on whom the initiating agents are trying to have an impact' (Walker 2018:30). We accept that for being non-San we are outsiders (which explains why the filmmaking had to be negotiated), but for being Zimbabweans, we are equally insiders. We are aware that our economic and intellectual privileges make us a dominant group that, to some extent, 'others' the San just as they have been othered in previous research and cultural production and this also has its influence on the subject matter and production tendencies. However, from an Africanist (see Schumaker 2001) and nationalist standpoint, we are insiders hoping to contribute, from the global South, a voice to the discourse on cultural knowledge on the First People. It is from that background that we embed ourselves, in collaboration with the San, in the production of

both culture and knowledge – an alternative epistemology – being scholars from the South and indigenes of Zimbabwe.

Filming and Research Methodology

We are not sure whether to describe this work as ‘ethnographic’ or ‘anthropological’, both of which, depending on the definition adopted, exclude this study to some extent. For instance, Durlington and Ruby’s (2011) definition of ethnographic film as that made by ‘professional anthropologists’ disqualifies ours, as none of us, including the San filmmakers, has formal anthropological training. Emilie de Brigard’s (1995:13) definition of an ethnographic film as one that ‘reveals cultural patterning’ is much more accommodative of our endeavours. Nevertheless, the methods of filmmaking and research employed can be described as participatory. The films may alternatively be described as participatory videos, ‘bio-documentary’ (see Gross 1980) or simply ‘research films’ (see Durlington and Ruby 2011:192–5) that have some ethnographic value. As such, we use the ethnographic ‘I/we’ to narrate our experiences and observations.

The study utilised collaborative participatory methodology. It is participatory action research anchored on reflexive filmmaking techniques and qualitative methods of research. Participatory action research combines theory with action and participation. It accumulates knowledge through practice while advancing the interests of underrepresented social groups (Walker 2018; Gillis and Jackson 2002). It is a combination of reflective action and theoretical practice whose main aim is to impart social change (MacDonald 2012; Chevalier and Buckles 2013). In this case, filmmaking is expected to encourage the San to think critically (from the dimension of visual representation) about their circumstances and, hopefully, take up careers in filmmaking as a result of knowledge attained in training. This project fits the description of ‘converting indigenous communities into protagonists’ (Schiwy 2009:6). From that view, the community might identify its own problems and aspirations and proffer solutions from within itself even when probed by outsiders. Participatory action research therefore offered us the opportunity to suggest to the San community the benefits of documenting their everyday lives, as well as the vocational skills that their youths could attain by taking part in the project. All collaborators in the project were therefore knowledge partners. Apart from the completed films, our everyday interactions with the San filmmakers and other members of their community constitute data. This means aspects like production choices, particular techniques employed during filming, which we observed, as well as conversations made informally, were important data. The article

only reflects our interpretations of San culture, which is influenced by many factors and may unconsciously omit other critical detail, although we do incorporate their own meanings gleaned from focus group discussions. In our write-up, we describe the participants interchangeably, sometimes as filmmakers, trainees, members or participants. However, in our interactions with them and in their introductions of us to others, we were either friends or brothers and sisters.

After the granting of consent to the project, 10 participants selected from the Sabase community through snowball sampling were divided into two groups. One had three females and two males, while the other had three males and two females. We identified the groups as 'female' or 'male' depending on the gender that constituted the majority in either group. Though these labels are only for convenience, it is possible that there could have been other underlying dynamics that influenced the females and males to group along gender lines, including their affinity to female and male members of our facilitation team that conducted the practical training sessions. Gender assigned roles were also evident in the ways the community interacted, even before we started training them: for example, females were the ones that cooked, males fetched firewood, males fetched water from the borehole, females washed the dishes etc. These dynamics seemed so socialised among community members that they seemed natural, and we did not question them because the same socialisation, to a large extent, characterises our own communities of origin. We envisaged that this gender orientation might have an influence in the documentaries that the participants would produce. The gender dynamics were also manifested in the reticence by some of the females, who appeared to let the males enjoy more prominence in all interactions.

Despite having initially selected 10 participants, when we visited Sabase later in January 2019, we found the numbers of our participants depleted. Only six of the original team remained – three males and three females. The other four participants had either migrated to Botswana or had gone to seek menial work in the neighbouring areas. Enias Moyo, one of the most promising talents of the male group, was said to have travelled to Botswana in search of employment, only to resurface much later, but only in time to view and comment on the completed drafts of the films. We had anticipated this development based on our prior readings on the migratory tendencies of members of this community. In fact, a close affinity with other San groups in Botswana still exists (see Madzudzo 2001). We also encountered during our visit a San man who was said to have visited from Botswana to live among the San of Sabase.

The remaining participants regrouped and reconstituted two groups of filmmakers that were distinctly demarcated on gender lines. Knowledge Ndlovu, Denis Moyo and Mpiliseni Sibanda constituted one group entirely made up of male participants. The females Kwenzakele Tshuma, Zondiwe Moyo and Anita Ncube made up the other group. From our research teams, a male member provided oversight and guidance to the male group, while a female did the same for the females, such that gender became the key organising criterion as well as a critical influencer of group dynamics, production choices and outcomes. The research team consciously tried to minimise its influence on how the two groups operated, being limited to trouble-shooting, technical advice and sometimes capturing behind-the-scenes photographs. However, while members of the research team filmed background scenes, these were not separated during editing from what the San filmmakers shot. However, some of the facilitator-captured shots were integrated into the edit to aid understanding (by an external audience) of the scenes in a reflexive way, rather than create their own narrative. We are also aware of the uniqueness of each member's filming style, which could be influenced by a number of factors, including how they each understood the technical instructions we provided, as well as other physical and psychological factors. Our team leader, Nhamo, admitted to them that he did not fancy camerawork because, standing at about two metres tall, it was cumbersome for him to stoop low, either to accommodate the tripod's maximum height or to film people at their own eye level. From this standpoint, we understood that the participants who operated recording devices each contributed their own unique capabilities and shortcomings, but we analyse their work as a composite, collective effort. Nevertheless, the analysis does benefit from our presence when the footage was filmed, such that we know who filmed what and who interviewed whom. An external audience would not be able to make this distinction from the edited films.

It is nearly impossible in the social sciences to attain pure objectivity and neutrality in spite of the best intentions of observing such a stance. That a male mentor aligned with a male group of San filmmakers and a female similarly aligned with a female group certainly has implications, for better or worse, for the subject-matter the respective groups ultimately decided to tackle in their films. Notwithstanding, this was an incidental outcome in spite of the project's critical quest to maintain researcher neutrality and objectivity, and to ensure that the filmed content was entirely the production and imaginative output of the San members.

The group led by Knowledge proposed to produce a short documentary on how the San traditionally constructed their huts. They pitched this idea after a short consultation. While the group seemed set on what they wanted

to do, the females initially seemed reserved and passive. This tendency towards 'tokenist participation' (Blazek 2016) is identified as one of the risks of participatory video, as a result of sedimented power relations. There might have been a realistic fear in the patriarchal community that the project would subvert existing gender power relations. The initial hesitation by the females and the general submission to patriarchy that we observed was somewhat ironic because the village head was a female who appeared to wield a lot of power as demonstrated on a few occasions in our presence. After further encouragement and brainstorming with one of our members, the female group decided to explore traditional indigenous medicine as well as reproductive health issues, themes that are usually closely guarded secrets among women.

Filming using both digital single lens reflex (DSLR) cameras and smartphones, as well as editing were conducted for a cumulative period of four weeks between December 2018 and April 2019, although there was other non-production related contact outside this time. The process culminated in two 20-minute long video-films titled *The San of Twai Twai* (by the males) and *The Golden Story of Makhulela* (by the females). Both films were shot, directed and conceptualised by the San filmmakers and feature, in large parts, their lifestyles, history and traditions. In both groups, members took turns to operate cameras and phones allocated to them. In our analysis of their activities, we are cautious not to generalise their behaviour to the entire San community.

After the collection of raw footage, four members of the groups visited our university studios for editing. Over a week, they were taught the fundamentals of editing but due to lack of prior exposure to computer technology, they had very limited capacity to actually execute the editing. To get around that problem, we asked members of our team to sit in the editing suites with the participants, who narrated their imagined narratives and how they could be visualised, and actively decided which shots would be placed where in the sequence, and to what effect. During the same week, the members were also introduced to and taught how to operate the drone, which Knowledge had had a previous unpleasant first encounter with when hunters deployed it over Sabase village. When the films were completed, they were saved onto a micro-secure digital (SD) card which the members took away for previewing with the rest of the community. A few weeks later, we exhibited the films to a 200-strong audience on a carnivalesque Sabase night. Focus group discussions followed the exhibition. The discussions involved both the filmmakers and other members of the community and elicited participants' opinions about the film content as well as (for the filmmakers) the filmmaking experience.

The San of Twai Twai and The Golden Story of Makhulela

At the onset of the project, we informed participants that we were not expecting them to rehearse cultural practices that had long been documented (albeit by outsiders) in documentaries and fiction films such as *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (Uys 1980), *The Great Dance* (Foster and Foster 2000), *People of the Great Sand Face* (Myburgh 1986), *Once We Were Hunters* (Hangula 2012) etc. In this thinking we were trying to escape the long held suspicion that anthropology was a 'collection of curious facts, telling about the peculiar appearance of exotic people and describing their strange customs and beliefs ... an entertaining diversion, apparently without any bearing upon the conduct of life of civilized communities' (Boas 1962:11). Indeed, it has been observed before, that one of the facets of marginalisation of the San people in Zimbabwe was based on 'other groups' ethnocentric evaluations of their culture' (Madzudzo 2001:78). A San model hut featured in one of the films had no bearing whatsoever on the conduct of their life, since they had been relocated from a place called Twai Twai to Sabase. The circumstances of the relocation are given later in the article. We were also quite sure that focusing on an architectural practice that was no longer existent was akin to a 'collection of curious facts' that had the net effect of exoticising and romanticising San life. Yet the historical, traditional themes in the San productions were another page out of *The Gods Must be Crazy* script. We, together with our participants, were no different from Robert Flaherty who has been criticised for not documenting reality but rehearsing and re-enacting dying traditions to capture them into some form of visual museum. The traditions include walrus-hunting in *Nanook of the North*, tattooing in Moana etc. We found that the content produced by the San youths bore more similarities than differences to the corpus of anthropological films mentioned above.

In both productions by the San youths, the filmmakers feature in the narratives, in addition to conducting interviews with other members of the community. Thus, the video-films straddle the range of reflexive-participatory-performative-observational modes as described in Bill Nichols' (2001) modes taxonomy. *The Golden Story of Makhulela* focused on diverse issues including herbal medicine and its extraction and preparation. It also features female sexual reproductive health issues such as contraception and child birth as well as alternative therapies for a variety of conditions. On child birth, the discussion juxtaposed hospital with home deliveries. The women who feature in the film express the opinion that despite the positives of modern allopathic medicine, it fails to acknowledge the positive contributions of traditional indigenous medicine. During the interviews

and demonstrations of how to acquire and use traditional medicine, the elderly ladies seem more knowledgeable and confident compared to their younger counterparts. The younger females, most of them single mothers, seem ashamed to talk about child birth and traditional medicine. They laugh uneasily during the interviews when the older women are talking. This augers with Walker's (2018:7) observation in the context of participatory video, that 'certain knowledge is not expressed out of fear of derision or of being seen as subversive', which might lead to the perception that dominated groups are complacent (Walker 2018:7). The younger females could have been much more aware of other external cultural dynamics, and were possibly afraid that their interests would be subordinated by our presence, that we might look down upon some of their practices as archaic and uncivilised.

Some scenes in the film show females talking about the medicine used to make the vagina tighter, to enhance sexual pleasure. The older women demonstrate the process of digging for roots and stripping tree-barks in the nearby forest and preparing these into a powdered concoction which would be used by women before having sex. The women explain why they think the vagina has to be tight, including that it makes sex more pleasurable for both parties. One woman declares that she uses herbs to ensure that her husband is satisfied and thus might not have extra-marital affairs.

Judging from the filmmaking process and the film content itself, it appears that the idea of marriage is sacred to most San females. To some that participated in focus group discussions, a dysfunctional marriage means a man is not sexually satisfied. They said they would do everything in their power to retain their marriage and the favour of their men. In spite of this, most of the young women in this community are divorced, single mothers. During the discussions the older women also revealed that they were burdened with taking care of their grandchildren whose fathers refused responsibility. This can be explained using the argument by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2017) that society conditions girls to aspire to marriage and does not equally prepare boys for marriage, so there is already a terrible imbalance at the start; the girls will grow up to be women pre-occupied with marriage. The choice of film content described above seems to buttress Adichie's point.

The San of Twai Twai is a multi-layered video-film in which the filmmakers/characters reflexively document the history of their community and advocate for the revival of their mother-language, *Tyua*. They also demonstrate how to erect a pole and thatch hut, a type of shelter they used in their past, and provide a sub-narrative to account for its extinction. Initially the group had pitched the idea of constructing a complete hut,

but given the limited time, scaled down on their ambition and opted to construct a miniature model instead. This was a small pole and thatch affair, which they managed to erect within an hour, without breaking much sweat in the sweltering summer heat. The conical thatched model hut is an architectural archetype that is nearly ubiquitous in cultural tourism sites where the San perform especially in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. For the Sabase community, such a structure only exists in their memory, as their architectural designs have since evolved, partly influenced by the Kalanga and Ndebele ethnic groups that surround them in Matabeleland South province. The group also pitched an idea of documenting how they could catch fish in the river using tree branches, an impression that they insisted on even when the Tekwane riverbed was dry. Both proposals centred on gender-assigned 'manly' tasks, which automatically excluded women. It is possible that the members of the group felt that they could demonstrate their masculinity by representing themselves conducting these manly tasks.

The group felt that their film reflected their history and culture. Knowledge, the leader of the group, declared that there was a need to resurrect or preserve this dying architecture.

We selected this subject because it reflects our culture. Many people, particularly those living in the cities, do not know this. So this would be a way of showing them (Knowledge Ndlovu, interview).

Apart from demonstrating the construction, the group was also interested in the history of their community. They captured interviews with village elders Mavuka Tshuma and Bhomeni Tshuma to trace San genealogy and the transformation of their architecture over time. The interviewees revealed that the San community had been moved from a place called Twai Twai in 1997 by the Norwegian humanitarian aid organisation Redd Barna, also known as Save the Children. Redd Barna is a children's rights organisation with interests in areas of education, health aid and child protection.¹ It emerged in discussions with some members of the San community that they had been relocated from Twai Twai because it was feared that their hunter-gatherer lifestyles threatened game conservancy efforts in the area, which is situated near the Hwange Game Reserve. Ironically, tourists who visit the area for trophy hunting often use the San for tracking game. When they make a kill, they leave the San trackers with the carcass while they take away the precious parts of the animal, such as ivory and leather. Thus the San remain poor, marginalised and sometimes yearn for a return to their past, a theme that constantly appeared in their films. In *The San of Twai Twai*, the filmmakers Knowledge, Mpiliseni and Dennis introduce themselves in

relation to their residency in the village, with Dennis triumphantly shouting 'Twai Twai number one!'² Although this village in Makhulela ward is called Sabase, the San still nostalgically call it Twai Twai. Twai Twai/Thwayi Thwayi³ rhymes with the place referred to as Kai Kai by John Marshall (see Barnard 2007: 56) and seems to occupy a special place in the collective nostalgia of the San community. Thus the film became a platform through which to project their pride in their community, their history and their identity.

An Aesthetic of Innocence

In making the films, the San members generally preferred wide shots, filmed from a 'safe' distance and at times the *mise en scène* was not well composed. Mobile phones were relatively easy for the youths to use, probably because a few members of the community already possessed such gadgets. Without the technical dexterity to zoom or dolly closer to their subjects, they tended to keep wide, distant shots. One could sense that this was 'good enough' for the members behind the camera. They trusted their eyes more than the recording gadget. In mimetic fashion, they tried to record events as they saw them with their eyes. A good example is footage of Mphiliseni chopping poles from a Mopani bush. The footage is a continuous, entirely wide shot from a very objective eye level, though remarkably stable. The same applies to when Dennis films Knowledge explaining what he is about to demonstrate (building the model hut). He records a long shot at eye level as he asks a few prompting questions. All three also rolled the recording devices for long periods, not wanting to miss any detail, no matter how seemingly trivial. Both Dennis and Mphiliseni filmed the hut construction sequence, from digging holes in the ground, erecting wooden poles in those holes and fastening them together into a cone structure, using flexible tree branches and bark, then thatching the structure with grass fastened with bark strips. The filming technique in these clips would tick all the boxes of ethnographic film produced by well-trained practitioners going by Karl Heider's (2006:3) argument that 'ethnography must take precedence over cinematography'. In their inexperience, they seemed motivated, not only to capture aspects of reality, but to reproduce it. In their filming technique, perhaps by accident rather than design, the group achieves something that Heider argues to be not feasible: 'It is not possible to demand that everything about an entire act be shown. That is unrealistic realism' (2006:71). Perhaps this curtailment would only apply to 'professional' ethnographic filmmakers whose awareness of the complexity of post-production limits the lengths of acts that they capture on record. In such cases, institutionalised standards curtail creativity and, quite often, the end product.

As a result of the continuous recording, on one of the days, within three hours the camera batteries were flat, though close to 20 gigabytes of footage had been recorded by each of the participants. What we witnessed was a 'naïve', if not innocent filmmaking style unfettered by theory and industry-imposed standards. It was an aesthetic of innocence. The edited films maintain that rawness, which purists can easily dismiss as 'poor technique'. The purity of San life that has long been narrated and sometimes romanticised and exaggerated (see Marshall-Thomas 1989) is somewhat evident in their choice of narrative and their treatment of it. The decision to hold eye level shots, which was observed when any of them were operating the camera, could have been influenced by a desire to tell an objective story. It was apparent that they were not concerned about an expressive aesthetic even when we had introduced them to it when we played back *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (Uys 1980), a fictional film about the San of the Kalahari. We also noticed this objective, mimetic style when they interviewed elders. In Knowledge's respective interviews with village elders Bhomeni Tshuma and Sinyeyo Dube, he sat on a wooden stool and lowered the tripod to their seated levels. At first, it appeared this was a conscious decision carried over from the instructions we gave on camera handling. On closer analysis, this seemed to be also influenced by the cultural norms among the San, as indeed among other cultural groups in Zimbabwe, that one does not stand up when having a conversation with a seated elder. This is usually given as a rule of thumb, that 'youngsters must not see the top of elders' heads'. From this perspective, therefore, the participants were already socialised into what Edward Branigan (2006) calls an 'objective camera'. An objective camera focuses on unobtrusive reality in mimetic fashion. Like Dziga Vertov's *zhizn vrasplokh* (life caught unawares, as it is), the camera is motivated by its operator's desire to capture an objective, truthful account. This type of camera work is comparable to the Lumière brothers' actualities at the birth of modern cinema in the late nineteenth century.

Cellphilm Becomes Self(ie)-film: Points of Reference and Points of View

With more encouragement, the San filmmakers ventured closer to their subjects. They began to employ tighter, more detailed shots whenever necessary. They filmed the stumps of the chopped Mopani trees, the poles extracted for the purposes of the construction, as well as the axe, as it swung up and down. They filmed almost everything with daguerreotype honesty.

After erecting the model hut, the men tried to tell the history behind the infrastructure. They interviewed community leaders, their cultural reservoirs. One of the interviewees was the village elder Mavuka Tshuma, who said that the structure that had been constructed by the group no longer existed. It had been discovered over time that it was vulnerable to termites and animals that fed on the low thatch. In response to this challenge the community members resorted to moulding 'bricks' by ramming mud into tin containers and drying them in the sun. These 'bricks' offered a more durable structure, upon which a thatched roof would be erected. The group had enough awareness to film some incomplete structures erected using this type of brick. Knowledge later explained, after showing us his footage:

We are a poor community. We cannot afford cement, so this is an affordable way to build our shelter. We want whoever will watch our film to know our conditions.

Over the years several studies carried out on the San people in Southern Africa have noted that the Zimbabwean groups had the lowest socio-economic status, both in the country and across the region. The architecture shown in the film as well as the general conditions we encountered in Sabase substantiate those observations. On our way we were marvelling at the modern structures that we saw on the roadside. Homesteads in the areas we passed through, Makhulela, Ndolwane among others, were modern structures with solar power and other civil works. Our host Forward Dube's home, though situated deep in the rural areas, was modern with a television set, tapped water, bath tubs and digital satellite television installations. What struck us was the economic shift. Twai Twai Village had traditional structures of mud, with cow dung floors and poles supporting the structures. In our focus group discussions, some of the women participants kept appealing to us that the government or civil society must train them and empower them with skills like dress making, chicken rearing or cooperatives for them to find a way out of their dire economic situations.

Furthermore, because the communities were unable to produce enough grain and livestock to feed their families, they were forced to offer cheap labour to other communities, including touring hunters, in exchange for food. On our production visits some of the students were not around and some came late for the sessions. This was mostly because they had gone to work in the fields of the Kalanga and Ndebele communities nearby. According to Hitchcock and Nangati (2000) some San adults and older children work in the fields of other ethnic groups in a kind of share-cropping arrangement, but most San people rely on irregular informal employment opportunities, and therefore do not have predictable incomes. About 10 per cent of the San people

had experienced working for other people, usually as herders, agricultural labourers, or domestic workers. Several of the selected participants did not complete the training because they had moved to neighbouring communities or illegally migrated to Botswana in search of employment.

From the above background, the desire expressed by Knowledge to have external audiences see the San's conditions presents an interesting aspect of self-presentation. The San were consciously manipulating reality through film to show existing and non-existing realities that they desired associated with them. This assumes that there might be some social reward to be attracted by their self-presentation of the well-documented poverty of the San community. Thus by showing 'to the world' their deplorable circumstances, the San are showing their need for modern infrastructure, social amenities and medical facilities. This confirms our assumption that access to and ability to manipulate media technology help subaltern communities such as the San to seize the agency to represent themselves, in the process articulating their needs, fears and aspirations.

Instead of using the recording devices to record pro-filmic events (with them behind the camera), the participants' own influence in the direction of the story was overwhelming. For starters, in both films, they feature as the first sets of interviewees, asking each other why they were doing what they were doing. Then the other interviewees follow, whom they carefully selected, more as reference points than the main subjects of the story. At times the interviewers offered more information than they solicited from interviewees. In such cases, as with Knowledge, the questions were heavily opinionated and subjective. Thus the video-films were not just a reflection of the San's everyday life, but of how particular members of this community (the filmmakers) preferred their story told – their points of view. They were a reflection of the identities of the filmmakers themselves who were not merely instruments in the construction of a narrative – they were auteurs.

Insights from the Exhibition Exercises

The Golden Story of Makhulela was deemed not suitable for the children and men to watch. Some male members of the community even suggested that it should not be screened. Their concern was that the film had strong language and its sexually explicit subject was not suitable for minors according to the community's rating. Content rating refers to the process of offering viewers advance information about the content (violence, strong language, nudity among other things) in the TV programme/film to be aired so that they can decide whether to watch or not. Kafu (2017) points out that content rating

systems have been put in place by various countries as a way of reducing media effects on children. There have been a number of studies on media effects on children and most of these studies have focused on the content's negative effect on children's social, cultural and psychological development (Friedman 1973; Grier 2001). It is on that basis that one argues that the community members that recommended a private screening for the film were using their culture as the rating apparatus to decide what was palatable or not for the community. The film was eventually screened to an exclusively female audience. The females were whispering and murmuring in agreement during the screening. They regretted not screening the film to men and suggested that the males should do a documentary about the herbs they used to increase their libido and sexual stamina. It can be argued that, inspired by the filmmaking process and outcome, female members of Sabase found a voice to challenge the social order in the community, a huge improvement from their initially passive tendencies at the start of production. Thus the film encouraged them to think critically about their circumstances and propose ways to confront them in an insider to insider manner (Walker 2018). Insider knowledge refers to local, indigenous epistemology. According to Walker (*ibid.*), insider to insider communication is important for purposes of conscientisation.

The San of Twai Twai was watched by a complement of audiences, including children. Many chuckled at seeing themselves appearing in the film. The most amusing scene was the hut construction, which had been sped up to create a time-lapse of the building process. Children laughed merrily at the awkward speed and movement created by the effect. During focus group discussions, elderly men from the community said what they enjoyed about the film was that it had been created by their own children and was therefore an 'accurate' representation of their life and history.

From our observations, we concluded that the participants were now able to operate video cameras and mobile phones with minimum supervision. One of the benefactors of the community, Forward Dube, suggested that he would depend on them to produce musical videos for an upcoming artist that he was mentoring and promoting, Leebraivale 'Tjabuda' Moyo. After we screened the movies, some of the community members asked about the continuity of the programme, afraid that we were just there to collect data and leave without sustainability plans for the programme. They asked about the impartation of the skills to the younger generation and we realised that if resources permitted, there was need for some investment towards the continuation of the programme. One of the participants, Dennis, asked to make a choice between seeking employment elsewhere (as was the case with

Enias) or working full time as a videographer or phoneographer, declared that he would be happy to pursue the latter occupation. Enthused by this concrete outcome, we argue that cinematography is a language in itself, with its own technical and psychomotor vocabulary that does not depend on reading and writing skills. Sometimes a rudimentary sign language could be used to indicate when to zoom in, tilt up or pan the camera. The same could be used when communicating when to start rolling or stopping the camera. The participants developed a story without even writing a script. Their rallying point was collective memory, cooperation and common interest. They were very sure and steadfast about what they wanted to achieve, and would not deviate from it.

Film As an Archive for Preserving Language and Culture

Apart from Mavuka and Bomeni Tshuma, an elderly lady Sinyeyo Dube, who was Bomeni's wife was also interviewed and filmed as an important referral person on cultural issues. The elderly lady was said to be the only person able to fluently speak Tyua (pronounced *qhua*), the language originally spoken by the San but now becoming extinct. She had been used as a point-person by the government in consultations to include the Khoisan language in the country's constitution. From this a dictionary had been compiled and availed to the Sabase community. A few other elderly women knew some Tyua words. Most community members, particularly the youths, knew it existed, but they did not know how to speak it. Even the few who claimed to know it were not confident enough to speak it. They laughed at each other for trying. It is slowly becoming a 'lost tongue'. In *The San of Twai Twai*, Knowledge asked Sinyeyo to translate some common words and phrases from Kalanga to Tyua. He asked her to translate words such as 'children', 'water', 'fire', 'chicken' and other phrases. Most of her translations featured the clicking sounds associated with the language. After the interview, Knowledge said:

When all this is done, I want to sit down with her so that she can teach me the language. Only if it is passed down from generation to generation can it be preserved.

After interviewing Sinyeyo Dube for quite a long time, Knowledge offered to her, as a question/statement of fact:

You see, when the Shonas come here, and you ask them something, or they want to tell you something, they do so in their own language. They do not change it for your sake. They insist on their own language. Why is it that here in Twai Twai we stopped using our language and now use Kalanga or Ndebele?

Knowledge made the point that in Botswana, where other San groups resided, it was common for children to speak Tyua compared to Sabase village where they spoke Kalanga. He further pointed out that it was not fashionable for anyone from their community to boast about residing in cities such as Bulawayo and failing to identify with Twai Twai, and importantly, the Tyua language. The camera in Knowledge's hands gave him power to express himself, both to his people that he interviewed, as well as the external audience who would hear his opinion on record. This shows the importance of participatory video in critical pedagogy. The filmmaking process provides important lessons to participants about their circumstances, which they may feel more inclined to address beyond the movie-making exercise. The Sabase youths became aware or got the opportunity to amplify an already existing awareness that they could be the saviours of their own culture. It also emerged that film could be used as an electronic archive of language as argued by James Monaco (2009). There was an intergenerational knowledge exchange. The elders had information, while the youths could manipulate the technology to preserve the information. The recorded translations by Sinyeyo, if properly archived, could forever be available as a reference resource for future generations. A similar documentary effort *The Lost Tongue* (Mudzingwa 2006) was produced in South Africa. It features a San woman from the Kalahari, who embarks on a mission to save the N!uu language spoken by her people, at a time when the number of surviving elders knowledgeable about the language is diminishing.

'Bushman' Mythology, Alcoholism, Dependency and Space in Modernity

While anthropological studies are renowned or notorious for focusing on vanishing peoples or cultures, our encounter with the San presents specific ontological and epistemological challenges. Our being there and their being there in 2018 presented novel existential realities. These are neither pre-modern people nor are they a community whose culture requires to be captured before it disappears. They are already remarkably transformed from the pristine images and narratives of people frozen in time and waiting to be 'discovered'. They are not a cultural throwback emerging from *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, but live in the present; some own mobile phones; and nearly all have an appetite for manufactured food products; and they know of cars and other technologies of communication. If anything reminded us of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, it was Knowledge's ordeal with the drone. He was at the river when touring hunters launched a drone to survey the area

and track game. Knowledge was disturbed by the sight of the strange aircraft hovering above him. He told us:

I thought maybe a war had started. I immediately rode my bike and cycled desperately away from it.

The hunters must have been amused by the sight of Knowledge, cycling at full speed in an attempt to escape from the drone. He said the drone descended and flew dangerously close to him as he desperately cycled home. It accompanied him all the way home, where he told the other villagers about the strange occurrence. Knowledge could only relate to the drone much later when he visited Midlands State University where he encountered and operated the drone. During our discussions, there was palpable relief when Knowledge told the villagers that the drone was not a 'war machine'.

Writings on San culture have tended to oscillate between mythical, often romanticised aspects of their life and their struggle with modernity. Our research team, most of whom were encountering the San for the first time, took a keen interest in observing this. The moment our vehicle drove into Twai Twai village, it did not escape our attention that some youngsters ran away, disappearing into the bushes. They seemed to be shy, even though this was our third contact with them, authorised by the village head. Even in some of our interactions, they seemed to be secretive, particularly about their traditions. Mau, one of the men who assisted in fetching firewood and cooking, could not open up when asked about traditional rituals such as rainmaking. Rather he deflected questions by talking about modern hunting activities that were headed by a white hunter, Mr Brown, in the conservancy nearby. He revealed that all they got from the hunt was elephant meat, and never the ivory and hides. They often got invited for the skinning and dehorning of the animals. Sabase is in the midst of a bushy area, making it susceptible to stray game from nearby conservancies. In avoiding talk about traditional issues, it appeared as if, among other possibilities, the San wanted to claim their space in the modern world even though there was evidence (for example the traditional medicine documentary engaged by the females) that they still practised a lot of traditional rituals. They still had incisions on their bodies, and rarely would we come across any young girl in contemporary fashion like skinny jeans. In informal conversations, they revealed critical knowledge about the types of winds that would bring rain (on the first day of our third visit, there was a heavy wind and a cloudy sky, but they insisted, against our fears, that no rain was coming). In spite of their justifiable claim to modernity, the San still possess some mystical knowledge and skill that they cannot let outsiders have, as evidenced by *The Golden Story of Makhulela*.

As the two groups filmed, two members of our facilitation team who were coordinating feeding logistics were confronted by one of the community members, a heavily drunk man with a deep facial scar and damaged eye. He staggered from the bushes demanding the whole pot of relish. The incident was resolved amicably, the man was fed and he eventually participated in the communal drawing on the large fabric that a South African colleague of ours Levinia Pienaar had brought. The drunkenness and alcoholism of First Peoples has been noted frequently in studies (Tomaselli 1993). Writing about Aborigines, O'Regan (1996:45) notes that 'aboriginal life-ways and aspirations are in many cases bounded by chronic social crisis manifested in alcoholism, violence, unemployment and homelessness, stemming from the 85 ongoing effects of colonization'. Similarly, writing about the Kalahari San, Louis Molamu argues that this alcohol abuse is a direct result of socio-cultural alienation, marginalisation and impoverishment. Alexander Stille calls it 'alcoholism of boredom' because he blames the absence of proper productive activities, compounded by the lack of skills and competencies to fit into modern capitalist economies, that haunt First Peoples. The alcoholism was a sideshow which nobody bothered to capture on film, and when told about it village head Matjena was far from amused. She was livid that 'her visitors' were made to see the murky side of her community.

Apart from the alcohol, we also had to deal with various demands for money, foodstuffs, clothes and the cameras we were using for the training. We learnt that neighbouring communities do not relate well with the Sabase San, a point that also came out in Mavuka's interview in the film *The San of Twai Twai*. Levinia, who is of mixed race and San heritage, and had visited us from Cape Town, South Africa to audit our project, experienced the chronic dependency first hand. Because of her light skin colour, everyone assumed she was white and that she was 'the boss' of the project. Members of the community were surprised when she revealed that she was also of San lineage. The women went out of their way to accommodate her and show some affection. Some of them even tried to speak to her in English and during the interviews they would answer questions directing to her, not their own filmmakers who were asking the questions. Her presence brought a whole new dimension into the filming exercise. The women wanted to prove that they had so much indigenous knowledge and offered to cure her menstrual pains. However one of the elderly women kept saying our female researchers should pay to be shown the medicine. Her argument was that they were outsiders and were being shown special concoctions meant for insiders. Taking these incidents into consideration, we also felt that film production could become a profitable enterprise that could help keep youths away from some of the social vices described above.

Conclusion

The article describes the filmmaking activities undertaken by researchers and selected members of the San community as part of participatory action research designed to find out what sort of films the participants would create if they were capacitated. The research participants, who received basic training in recording and editing videos, produced two 20-minute documentaries, namely *The Golden Story of Makhulela* and *The San of Twai Twai*. The films were exhibited to members of the San community of Makhulela, Matabeleland South, from which the filmmakers had been drawn. The article shows that the San filmmakers appreciated the importance of film technology in documenting their lives, histories and circumstances. In so-doing, they adhered to a simple style of recording a truthful account of events around them, while featuring in their own films at the same time. This culminated in an aesthetic of innocence that film purists may dismiss as poor technique. The study also shows that film could be used as an electronic archive to document and preserve dying languages and cultures. Above all, the films produced by the San members also reflect their identity as a people and the way they relate to the outside world, how they perceive themselves, and how they wish to be perceived.

Notes

1. <https://www.reddbarna.no/internasjonalt>.
2. The San in this area also identify themselves as *Amasili*, a record that exists in literature (see Madzudzo 2001; Hitchcock and Nangati 2000; Zhou 2014).
3. In a painting exercise, the participants wrote the name as Twai Twai, although it appears in Madzudzo (2001) as Thwayi Thwayi. The pronouncement is the same, however.

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