

The usability and benefits of the DoBeS Archive as a source for contextualized oral history documents – A case study from the !Xoon and 'Nǀohan in Namibia

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The DoBeS initiative has committed itself to not only collect and archive documents of endangered languages together with the respective cultural knowledges and practices but also to document the situational and cultural contexts in which these documents were recorded. It thus acknowledges the condition that the effects of the research process on what is documented cannot be eliminated but should be integrated in a way which is informative for future interpretations. The IMDI-database offers a number of possible entries for this purpose. The data on the basis of which I would like to illustrate the chances and challenges of producing a culturally contextualized documentation are the oral history accounts recorded with Taa-speaking !Xoon and 'Nǀohan in Namibia. The paper deals with the usability and benefits of this part of the archive for the researcher who enters his information and also for the potential future users who want to make sense of it.

The documentation of oral histories is one of the central research subjects of the Taa project and has resulted in a large number of texts with biographical or historical contents as well as in the production of an oral history booklet for the community and the wider public.

The documentation of oral histories is generally seen as an important tool for marginalized people with respect to their recognition as communities in their own right, recompositions for past injustices, claims for land rights and the like. It can fairly be said to have developed into 'a thing to do' since it is obvious that for the purpose of achieving political aims, documented evidence is more powerful than undocumented evidence. This in itself presents one condition of the context in which our documentation of people's memories is carried out and contested. Another central condition of the context is that the people whose memories and biographies have been documented belong to one of the smallest and most marginalized groups of San in Namibia who in the past have nearly completely been neglected as a distinct speech and cultural community. At present, they therefore have to cope with - and at the same time can play on - extremely discriminating, romanticizing, victimizing and revaluing images of themselves.

With its standards of contextualized documentation the DoBeS initiative, on the one hand provides the chance to accomplish the task of contextualization which researchers (too) often have to perform from retrospective when they try to reconstruct contemporary contexts of documents. On the other hand, the demand to provide information on the cultural – hence the social, economic and political – contexts of the creation of oral history documents at the very moment they come into being is not less challenging than the reconstruction of such contexts from hindsight, since it affords not only reflectiveness (and room to document these reflections) of the ways in which the research situation interacts with the research results but also of the ways in which speakers and researchers interpret the past from the present perspective and of how the research process is inter-twined with such partly or possibly conflicting interpretations.

In particular the paper is going to

- sketch the results of the anthropological research on the (oral and archival) history of the !Xoon and 'Nǀohan people in Namibia,
- outline the social, economic, political and academic contexts in which the oral history accounts were produced,
- demonstrate how these contexts (may) have shaped the documentation and vice versa,
- discuss to which degree a simultaneous documentation and contextualization is possible,
- examine on the usability and benefits of the documentation for future users including Namibian Taa-speakers themselves.