

The Usefulness and Challenge of Contextualized Documentation

A case study from research with

Taa-speaking San in Namibia

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1 Abstract

The talk is about the usefulness of contextualized documentation and draws from my anthropological research on the history of the Taa-speaking San or Bushmen in Namibia - and from my experience with the still ongoing integration of context information into the archive.

My starting points are

- the concern for documenting the situational and cultural contexts in which the texts were recorded which is reflected by the numerous fields in our IMDI database and
- the acknowledgement of the fact that our recorded texts are related in multiple ways to the macro- and micro-political contexts in which they are created, expressed and instrumentalized.

I want to (1) show how these multiple relations can look like, (2) demonstrate how contextualization changes meaning and (3) make a case that contextualizing our information is the best we can do – especially in a contested or conflictive setting.

In particular, I am going to argue

- that recorded texts are messages of the members of the speech communities to their imagined audiences and expressions of their efforts to shape the documentation according to their own agendas.
- that researchers enter into ongoing conversations or discourses which render interpretations of the past insoluble from current contexts and imagined future uses.
- that we need to organize our information and reflections on effective aspects of the context in a way that mirrors the multiplex interrelations between people and between texts or the "conversational character" of our documentation.

2 The Taa-speaking San in Namibia

I start by giving some benchmark figures on the Taa-speaking San in Namibia: Taa is the only language within the whole family of Southern Khoisan languages, which is still spoken in everyday contexts. The speakers of the two Namibian varieties call themselves either !Xoonatee (sing.: !Xoon) or 'Nluhmte (sing.: 'Nlohan). The number of people with some proficiency in Taa is about 500, about half of them being fluent native speakers. The ratio between !Xoon- and 'Nlohan-speakers in Namibia is about 4:1. Other varieties are spoken in Botswana (cf. Traill 1974). Their number and the number of speakers is unknown. More 'Nluhmte than !Xoonatee have family ties to people living in Botswana or have themselves lived in that country for some time.

In official histories, Namibian Taa-speakers are – at best – mentioned under the general label "Bushmen" which might, however, also refer to other San living in the area. Research on the history of Namibian Taa-speakers from both archival and oral

sources is, therefore, one of the central research topics of the DoBeS Taa project. It has resulted in a large number of texts with biographical or historical contents and in the production of a booklet meant to serve the community as a tangible result of the project which they can also sell to tourists.

Today, Namibian Taa-speakers live in different political-economic settings: Some live relatively autonomous at a place called San Plaas, where they occupy a small area around one borehole. Others live as clients attached to Herero or Tswana households in communal areas, again others live as farmworkers on commercial farms, mostly owned by Boer farmers, or as minorities in the locations of the local urban centres. These different settings correlate with different degrees of exposure to notions of backwardness on the one hand and notions of victimization coupled with unique indigenusness on the other. To say it in an admittedly simple and a bit provocative way: the more "apart" Namibian Taa-speakers live the more help they can get for being considered victims of dispossession and discrimination and the more they are ready to expose their identity as Bushmen, - since the latter are at the focus of support-campaigns by NGOs as well as – of course - the marketing of ethno-tourism and craft-making (cf. Sylvain 2002; 2003).

On the local level this contributes to contest and even conflict between the !Xoonatee and 'Nluhmte for resources devoted to "authentic" Bushmen culture, such as, for example, benefits from the production of a CD with Bushmen music (Tietie 2002) and occasions for cultural performances like dancing, village tours or bushwalks taking place or starting from the community campsite at San Plaas and initiated by the San support organizations WIMSA (Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa) and OST (Omaheke San Trust) (cf. Boden 2005).

On the national and global levels, support NGOs and increasingly also Indigenous People themselves have started to claim that research should be carried out in the interest of Indigenous People or at least that published results should not be detrimental to their interests and the DoBeS Code of Conduct explicitly accepts this demand.

That is to say, that on both the macro- and the micro-political level the documentation team is entering into ongoing discourses centering around the topic of the inimitable language and culture of the San on the one hand and of their discrimination, dispossession and suffering, on the other. Earlier occasions of this discourse have created certain expectations on the side of the San as to what researchers and foreigners interested in their culture and traditions are looking for. This was most obvious when people made their appearance in traditional leather-dresses which they only wear when performing for tourists on the first evening when two of the team-members arrived at the campsite. My first example will show that these resonances also speak from our recordings.

3 Unexpected - Another way to make use of the documentation

During my research on oral history I used to work with an interpreter and in the vehicular language Afrikaans since Taa is not yet described to a degree that allowed me to learn to speak the language on the necessary level of competence. I always started with semi-structured biographical interviews in Afrikaans and afterwards asked the people to tell their life stories again in Taa. When translating the recordings it turned out that the contents of the texts were often very different from what we had talked about during the interviews. People not simply left out some topics, such as places of birth, changes of residence, routes of migration, identities of group leaders, descriptions of livelihoods and the like. Instead, or in addition, many of them took the chance to speak about their poor lives to their imagined audiences.

It turned out that this was not only true for these "biographies" but also for other recordings such as, for example, procedural texts describing craft production or game processing. Almost every person who got the chance to do so was obviously truly concerned to tell his or her imagined audience about the numerous difficulties they had and have to face in their poor lives.

The imagined auditors were not only we as researchers but, as some direct addresses reveal, also future generations of Taa-speakers and any "people out there" whom the

speakers wanted to make aware of their poor lives and whom they eventually directly addressed for help.

Whereas these 'stories of suffering' might be regarded as a tiring repetition of cultural information or even the creation of redundant data, I think that - exactly because of their sum and the way, or rather the detour, by which they came into being – they should instead be regarded as an important document, however, not only a document of historical developments and current living conditions but also a document of what people wanted to tell their imagined auditors and of what they thought the latter would make most sense of.

Interestingly, when looked at in more detail, these "(hi-)stories of suffering" nevertheless reveal certain patterns. For example, younger or middle-aged people who did not experience a foraging lifestyle themselves were more ready to depict past lives as being characterized by abundance and well-being than elder people. Further, people identifying themselves as belonging to the !Xoon group used to depict poor living conditions as a recent phenomenon caused by the in-migration of other people (especially Tswanas, Hereros and Boers but also including the 'N!uhmte), the occupation of their *n!ore* or 'territorial' settlement and foraging areas by others and the subsequent destruction of resources as illustrated by the following quotation which I am not going to read.

"In the past our life was good. There were many springboks and ostriches. There were also lots of bushcrops growing in the ground. When the animals were all killed we started to suffer. Today we have to buy our food in the shop. Other people have taken our land. They hunted with guns. I am talking about the black people who are staying together with us. We started to do calabash work and to make butter [for them]."

K.A. !Xoon woman, *1935; translation from Afrikaans by author

The stories of people identifying themselves as 'N!uhmte, instead, tended to construct a story of continuous suffering which started at the beginning of times and was sometimes brought forward as a reason why they or their forefathers moved from Botswana into Namibia in order to search for a better life - but only to find equally bad or even worse living conditions where they are now.

"Life was bad when we lived off the *veld*. We ate that root which is called *n!aqa* (*Coccinia rehmannii*). We carried water in ostrich eggshells. When you were running you heard the sound of the water inside like "!gubu, !gubu, !gubu". When there was no water we smeared our bodies with wet sand in order to [be able to] breathe. That's how we suffered. Up to now I am poor."

K.K., 'Nlohan woman, *1927; translation from Afrikaans by author

The numerous accounts of suffering are certainly as much a product of current political and economic contexts as they are testimonies of former lifestyles. They are, also, the product of the way in which Taa-speakers tried to make use of the archive already during the process of the creation of documents by conveying messages to the potential users of the archive. As such they are valuable documents in their own right. Socially patterned as they are, they are also telling with respect to different evaluations of the past by members of different generations and sub-groups within the speech community.

While the interest in making the world aware of their poor living conditions obviously was a common one of all Taa-speakers irrespective of their membership to one of the two sub-groups of !Xoonatee and 'N|uhmte, the differences in representations of past lives relate the recordings to the faultline between them.

4 Insoluble – Interpretations of the past and current contests !

My second example will show that besides being related to current macro-political contexts, interpretations of the past are also hardly soluble from recent micro-political conflicts.

When talking about the mutual reservations between members of the two groups people often brought forward a violent encounter which took place about fifty years ago at a pan called Si!gonghu in Botswana. The !Xoonatee used to explain the outbreak of violence as resulting from the reluctance of the 'N|uhmte to accommodate the !Xoonatee on their *n!ore*. The 'N|uhmte, instead, used to blame the !Xoonatee for having come as aggressors who started the violent acts.

This event was, however, not only presented as being at the root of the current conflict but, in addition, was projected also into the past and used to explain events that happened much earlier. For example, in one interview about the times of the Nama-German war of 1904 to 1908 which also affected the settlement area of the Taa-speaking San, an old !Xoon man used the same phrase, i.e. that the 'N!uhmte – as I should know by now was their habit since we had already spoken about the Si!gonghu encounter - refused to accommodate the !Xoonatee who were seeking refuge from German persecution in Botswana. The sound-waves of the Si!gonghu encounter so-to-speak spread into both directions, the present and the past.¹

The old man talked like that during an interview when no 'N!ohan individual was present. At another occasion I brought a young man of mixed 'N!ohan-Nama origin who said he liked that old man and to whom, as it seemed to me, the old man was sympathetic as well. When I steered the conversation to the Si!gonghu encounter, the old !Xoon man addressed the young 'N!ohan man with a grin and said: "The 'N!uhmte say that we were the first to use the weapons at Si!gonghu" and subsequently explained the violence as a result of juvenile hotheadedness into which the elder people had allowed themselves to be drawn. This example shows how meaning changes with every detail of the context such as, for example, the presence of other people during an interview. As Schragger (1998:284) has pointed out, narrators do not create their accounts for the first time when asked for by the researcher. Instead researchers are entering into ongoing discourses, the focus and tone of which change with every detail of the context.

The example can also serve to illustrate that not every occasion of the research process is as good an opportunity as any other to leak one's propaganda against the other group into the documentation.

More generally, the ways in which Taa-speakers represented former practices related to *n!ore* were extremely inconsistent and could be best understood when related to

¹ Friedman (2005) gives another example of such a bi-directional effectiveness of an historic event which serves to interpret both, what happened earlier as leading to it and what happened later as a consequence of it.

the identities of the speakers and to how they took stand within the conflict. The aim of the documentation to serve the community or at least to not be detrimental for it is more easily set than fulfilled. In this case the choice seems to be only between four bad alternatives, i.e. either

- a) changing to the side of one interest group, which is, of course, unacceptable when seen through;
- b) constructing common ground which is easily disputable when looked at more closely,
- c) documenting disaccord and thereby putting the community at the risk that their internal disaccord is exploited by the government or competing third parties with detrimental effects for the community as a whole (for example it could be made the reason to deny government recognition to the joint Traditional Authority they are currently applying for), or – as a last resort:
- d) restricting access to the documented data which is contrary to the DoBeS aims.

In my opinion, the more related to current conflicts a topic is, the greater is also the need for contextualization because this enhances the chances for differentiated evaluations and, thereby for unmasking simplifying or interest-driven uses by whoever within and without the communities.

5 Unmanageable? -

Can contextualization ever reflect the multiplexity of relations?

However, before information and reflections on contexts can actually be entered into the archive, one has to be aware of how the things in the world into which one enters are inter-related. While it is simply naive to think that community members are all concerned with the well-being of all their co-members, one must certainly not always expect what happened right at the beginning of our first fieldstay when a !Xoon

woman who was my interpreter was killed by her ex-'Nlohan husband who worked with my linguist colleagues. I am more than ready to admit that this event has shaped my own perception of how fierce the conflict between the two groups is. This is not so much due to the fact that the murder took place but much more to the discussions and interpretations which followed and which related the murder to the conflict between the two groups. (Some people also said that the murder would probably not have taken place had the man and the woman not been working with us and, therefore, staid in one place.)²

Whereas everybody agreed that the murder was committed out of jealousy or rather unwillingness to accept having been deserted, there were also lots of allegations who else had a share of responsibility by either poking the man's jealousy, by working towards the separation of the couple, by having failed to talk to the man when he had started a quarrel earlier the same evening and so on. (A classificatory sister of the murdered woman who is the current chief of the Traditional Authority and at whose homestead the murder took place was also critically hurt during the attack, was brought to the clinic by two of my colleagues and survived).

Such mutual accusations not only present challenges concerning the relationship to individual members of the community but are also relevant for the annotation of recorded texts, because a considerable number of our recordings – also those on totally different subjects – contain more or less direct references to the murder. For example, a man in his fifties, who had been asked to talk about marriage procedures in the past, not only took the chance to complain about the decline of traditional normative rules and practices. He also said that when couples nowadays choose their partners themselves instead of letting the woman's elder relatives arrange the marriage for her, mutual killing was a natural thing to happen and even a justified

² When the murderer was released on bail we avoided working with him although he had been one of the best 'Nlohan field assistants because of his proficiency in the vehicular language Afrikaans and also with respect to his understanding for questions of grammar and clear articulation. We did so out of respect for the family of the murdered woman, two sisters of who were our main informants for the !Xoon language variety.

one. He even added that a man had the right to kill a woman who had not followed the tradition.

I guess that everyone would agree that an explanation concerning the recent murder and the role of the speaker within the network of mutual accusations would change the understanding of such a text. (If I would tell you that he belongs to the !Xoon group, you would probably think that this throws doubt on the statement that the front line is between the two sub-groups. If I would further tell you that he is a Traditional Councilor with aspirations to the position of the Chief, you would say he is defending the attack in his own interest. If I would then tell you that he was blamed for not having taken steps against the murderer when he started a quarrel the same evening, you would possibly think that he is using the "tradition" in defending his own case.) It is also, again, revealed that people extended their internal debates about the murder to the medium of our documentation and thereby involved us as researchers and even the future users of the archive into their discussions.

The murder was an obvious event to cause internal debate. I argue, however, that all our recordings should be regarded as contributions to internal micro- and macro-political debates of which we as researchers only recognize those which we came to research and those which are too glaring or flamboyant to be overlooked.

In the meantime I came to think that we might have over-interpreted the solidness of the conflict between the two groups because I recently learned from a farmer living nearby that members of both families have lived for some days with a group of tourists on his farm to provide for the tourists the experience of living with a (!) 'Bushmen family'.

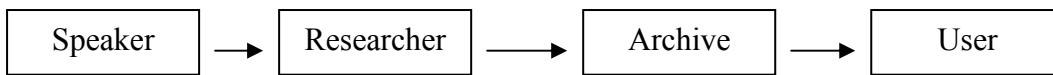
At present, I would argue, that we just cannot be sure to what degree the conflict between the two groups is a product of our documentation – of course only as one in a line of projects focusing on the unique culture of the Bushmen – and to what degree our documentation is a product of the conflict. It is probable that the assessment of effective contexts – including our own involvement - will have to be revised during the period of research and afterwards. The more aspects of the context we are able to include in the documentation, the more clues for future revision we provide.

6 The usefulness of our archival tools

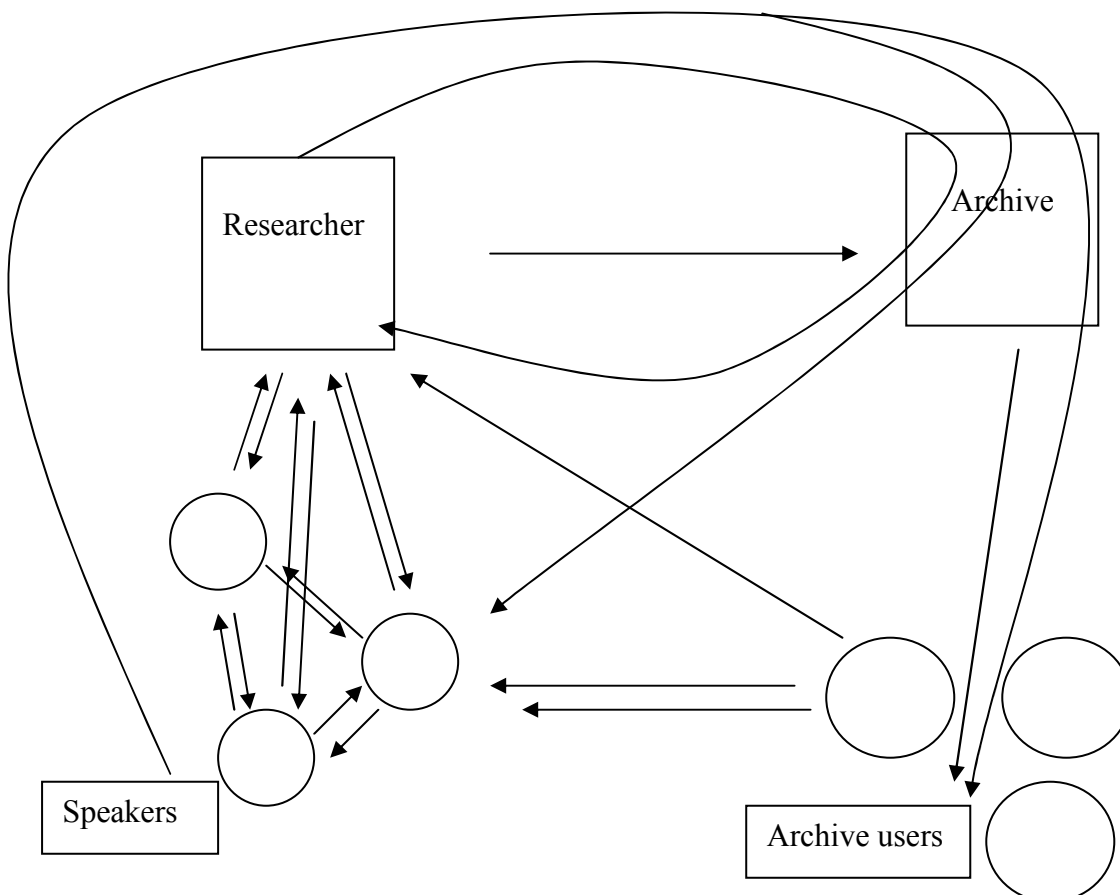
I will now very shortly address the question whether this conversational character of our documentation can actually be reflected in the archive.

Whereas the data themselves flow uni-directionally from the speakers to the researcher into the archive and through the archive to the archive users, the flow of meaning is much more complex and certainly even more complex than represented in the diagram below.

Flow of Data:



Flow of Meaning



While I think that in principle IMDI and ELAN are flexible tools which allow everyone who is ready to do so to include context data on any desired level, I think that for the purpose of keeping information about the multiplex and continuously changing interrelations between people and texts updated, it would be less time consuming to have different databases such as one for speakers or participants and, one for central topics discussed within a speech community at the time of research. This would make it possible

- to update such information independent from the session level and thereby save time
- to reflect the timeline - not only of the events themselves - but also of when a certain piece of information came to be known to the researcher and thus included in his interpretations.

I am, however, overtaxed with presenting an elaborated solution for such inter-linked databases and rather see this talk as a chance to address the technical staff with the challenge.

7 Conclusion

To conclude: I hope that the little information I have provided here has demonstrated

- 1) how context information does change meaning and that we have to be aware of the resonances of our documentations with current macro- and micro-political contexts.
- 2) that documenting contexts requires a lot of work and time and is at least as challenging as the reconstruction of such contexts from retrospective.
- 3) that taking up the expenditure – including possibly a reorganization of the database – is worthwhile and makes more sense than detach cultural concepts from current contexts (not the least because the reconstruction of contexts from retrospective would be even more costly and difficult).

Thank you for listening.

8 References

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