CHAPTER TWO

Researching the video - following the trail of a portable story

This chapter deals with an exploration of how retelling and processes of recording (transcriptions into a different medium) shape and re-shape oral accounts.

I. Introduction

According to Mackenzie, a text is ‘invested with new meaning and being when the physical form through which it is presented for interpretation changes’.1 ‘The Medicine Bag’ production process presented an opportunity to use Mackenzie’s observations to interrogate shifts in meaning as the various phases of ‘The Medicine Bag’ production process yielded new texts in different forms. As a filmmaker I became interested in how this process of text generation in different physical forms impacted on the accounts presented by the participants involved in the history of this medicine bag or in similar and other cultural practices in the Northern Cape.

The research process produced initial video and audio tape recordings of the discussions between the research team (Letitia Petersen and I) and the potential participants (Schwartz family members, other healers and accessible cultural players). These tapes, transcripts of the interviews and digital photographs from the expedition were

1 McKenzie quoted by Chartier (20)
instrumental during the pre-production planning stage and the materials were used to plan the production schedule\(^2\) and to construct the documentary shooting script\(^3\) outline.

Much later, when Marie Petersen, Letitia Petersen, the film crew and I left for the Northern Cape to record the selected material for the video programme, yet another set of texts was generated. The materials recorded during this phase included more photographs, notes, Nama music CDs and the audio-visual material that would become the ‘new media’ text that set out to tell the story of the medicine bag and its keepers.

The source material generated by the efforts to produce a documentary film, namely the old and new interviews and the accompanying transcriptions, the recordings of cultural events and the scenes included to reveal various aspects of the landscape and life in the Northern Cape as well as the final product, the documentary video, were all outcomes of this process and represented a ‘constellation of texts’ that were ‘multimedia and multilingual portfolios’ that ‘straddle[d] the printed and the spoken, image and text, the visible and the invisible world’,\(^4\) all insights that became apparent only as the process unfolded. As ‘The Medicine Bag’ production process ran its course I had a rather special opportunity to investigate and ‘write up’ what happened to the ‘meaning and

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\(^2\) The production schedule is a list of shooting requirements fitted in to an allotted number of shooting days, dictated by available financial resources and the audio-visual requirements to construct a documentary video.

\(^3\) The shooting script is a provisional script, designed to guide the production crew as to which scenarios and as to the amount of material required for the final product. The shooting script has to be flexible as documentary projects, different to fiction films, depend on the input of the participants and not on the interpretation of scenes as for previously constructed narratives performed by actors according to a set script or text.

being” of the oral accounts as the content passed through different stages and different forms as required by the production phases to make this documentary film.

II. A. The Protagonist – A First Encounter

Letitia Timas Petersen

To develop a proposal\(^6\) Letitia and I met on various occasions to discuss the project and to enable me to construct a proposal for fundraising and commissioning purposes. Some aspects of these interviews are recounted in this chapter to set the scene for the explorations as set out in the introduction.

As a young schoolgirl in an urban area, Letitia learnt about the Bushmen – an indigenous ‘people’ who once roamed the South African hinterland and spoke a language of clicks, but who were now ‘extinct’. This information, taught from prescribed history books, did not conform to her personal experience as at every opportunity the Petersens packed their bags and took to the road to visit relatives and acquaintances in Namaqualand. Here Letitia heard the click language, described as extinct in her schoolbooks, but still spoken by older members of the Khoisan in these regions.

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\(^5\) McKenzie quoted by Chartier (20)

\(^6\) A researcher or filmmaker writes a proposal to convince producers, financiers or commissioning editors to finance production projects for the independent film festival circuit or for broadcasting slots. In order to write a proposal an in-depth research process is required.
A history teacher helped to dispel some of her confusion. He encouraged his young student to question all the information presented as fact in textbooks from the apartheid era. Her curiosity and the support of her parents, who encouraged their five children to read and to educate themselves, led Letitia to pursue a career in journalism. She saw the qualification as valuable preparation and training for her desire to record oral histories and accounts and, ultimately, to re-channel the information back into the community who, in many instances, had lost their roots. She worked with many other researchers and groups from the area in a concerted attempt to keep aspects of a marginalised culture alive. For Letitia the suppressive effects of the apartheid era had left many scars on the culture and the livelihood of her group. According to her, many Nama speakers were forced to forsake their mother tongue and culture due to being classified as so-called coloureds. Her subsequent research revealed to her that appropriation of land, and the forced removal of groups and families by the apartheid government, has resulted in a loss of stories, of dreams, and of identity, and that the servitude resulting from the many practices designed to take control and to maintain power had been the force behind the abandonment of their culture. Parents forced their children to learn and to speak Afrikaans as they came to believe that being able to converse in their ancient mother tongue held no promises for the future. Even within her family the few individuals who did speak Nama were reluctant to reveal their ability and no one encouraged their children to embrace the language of their forebears. Her uncle Attie Schwartz also felt uncomfortable speaking about his family’s cultural heritage – the powers of healing and the medicine bag.
Letitia’s first job as a researcher was to assist a BBC production team who visited the Northern Cape to record “The Last Voice of an Ancient Tongue”, oral accounts by a woman believed to be the last speaker of one of the San dialects. Ninety-six-year old Elsie Vaalbooi, from Rietfontein in the Northern Cape was a Bushman or San woman who told her life story in this very old and rare dialect and in snatches of Afrikaans. Subsequent visits to the region revealed more speakers of other dialects - it was as if the interest in the language empowered other speakers to expose their ability to express themselves in their mother tongue.

Later, using an audiocassette recorder or a video camera, Letitia recorded and transcribed aspects of Nama culture and a variety of stories and legends that had survived. Interested in filmmaking, she found her way to the Wits School of Arts Television Division and we started working on ideas for a documentary programme on how the onomatopoeic Khoi and San language dialects found an echo in the austere yet beautiful Kalahari landscape and how these dialects were indeed under threat of extinction.7

On one occasion, in an attempt to secure finance, we met Dr Ben Smith from the Rock Art Research Institute who suggested that the Schwartz family story of the medicine bag might be a more suitable topic for a documentary film. Letitia and I soon realised

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7 The Pan South African Language Board set up fourteen National Language Bodies, one for each of official language, one for Sign Language, one for Heritage Language and, in 1999, for the Khoi and San languages. There are about ten thousand South Africans who speak one of the Khoi, Ju or !Ui languages. These include Khoekhoegowab (Nama), !Xun, Kwedam and N!u. There may still be speakers of Griqua (Xirigowab), but these have yet to be positively identified. – SASI ANNUAL Review 2002
that her family’s living historical legacy was indeed the subject we should pursue for our intended project, a documentary film on aspects of Nama culture.

B. The Original Oral Account of the Medicine Bag

During Letitia and my initial discussions to construct a proposal for the documentary video on ‘The Medicine Bag’, before we visited Upington for research and planning purposes, Letitia recounted her understanding of the history and the current status and where-about of the medicine bag. According to her, the bag had been an important part of her family heritage for many years. For many generations, selected members from her maternal family, the healers or !aixa, possessed the knowledge of how to collect and prepare herbal remedies from indigenous plants as well as ‘gure’; raw ingredients and other objects such as tortoise shells, dried sections of a porcupine stomach and pieces of ostrich egg shells (Fig. 1); and to use their hands to massage, and use rubbing techniques and sounds, smelling and other skills to heal people.

![Figure 1 – Medicinal herbs and ‘gure’](image-url)
Her great-grandfather passed on the bag, its contents and the information to Letitia’s grandfather, //Ahab April Schwartz and when he died, her mother Marie Petersen and her uncle Attie Schwartz became the custodians of the bag. In line with tradition, one or more members from each generation with an aptitude for and an interest in healing powers were selected and trained as healers. According to Letitia there were two kinds of !aixia or healers – those who use their knowledge to make people better and others who cause disease and destruction. It was important to her to mention that the Schwartz family had always applied their powers and their skills to improve the health and wellbeing of the community.

Of her grandfather’s many offspring, only two, Attie and Marie, were instructed on how to use the contents and how to heal. Marie settled in Gauteng with her husband and the Schwartz family decided that the bag should stay in Upington with Attie so that he could continue the practice of healing in the region where the tradition originated. According to Letitia and other members of the family, the family felt that the bag should be kept in the area where the practices developed and in the vicinity of fresh herbal supplies and access to ‘gure’ for frequent restocking. So, although Marie never took possession of the bag, she obtained fresh herbs, ‘gure’ and ‘hotnospoeier’8 from her relatives in the Northern Cape whenever possible and used her knowledge of herbs and the techniques she gleaned from her father to heal sick people where she lived in the Suurbekom district south of Johannesburg. Other siblings, although not chosen as keepers of the bag, also acquired many of the skills required to find herbs in the veld and to heal others. The eldest surviving brother Hans Schwartz (Fig 3), as well as

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8 ‘Hotnospoeier’ or Hottentot powder is a mixture of finely ground herbs and gure, used for medicinal purposes.
Attie’s widow Katriena Schwartz (Fig. 2), also knew how to find herbs, prepare potions, and how to apply these medicines.

![Figure 2 - Katriena (Tina) Schwartz](image)

At the time of Letitia and my initial discussions, the account around the future of the bag, was that it would pass from Attie to his daughter Elsa Smith. Elsa had told Letitia
that as a young girl it was revealed to her in a dream that she should qualify herself as a health care practitioner so that she could combine Western and traditional medicine to better serve her people. At the time of our project, Elsa was working as a community-nursing sister in Ennerdale, south of Johannesburg. She specialised in midwifery and also applied some of the rubbing and massaging techniques that her father and her grandfather used to support women during pregnancy and in childbirth.

III. Preparing for the Documentary

A. A Research Trip to the Northern Cape

After Attie died in early 2003, Letitia and I decided to visit the Northern Cape conduct interviews with various members of her family and other possible participants from the region and to plan for the production phase when we would re-visit the region accompanied by the crew to record the material for the documentary video on the medicine bag. We would also configure how we should record the occasion of Elsa’s official acquisition of the medicine bag now that her father had died as Letitia mentioned that the event might include traditional Nama practices involving the slaughter of a goat or sheep and rituals involving the blood and stomach content of the animal.

In September, Letitia, Marie and I travelled to Upington to do research and to initiate the planning process. We used a digital stills camera and a small high 8 video camera to record our visit and videotape the various interviews with members of Letitia’s family
and other individuals whom we thought could contribute to the unfolding of the story around the medicine bag and the accompanying healing skills.

On the first day of our trip, we interviewed Oussietjie Springbok (Fig. 4), the eldest of the Schwartz siblings, who revealed that she was in possession of the bag and that it was safely stored on top of her wardrobe. She told us that Attie had entrusted the bag to her as protection against spirits who accosted her at night. Oussietjie lives at Raaswater, not far from Upington and it seems that her house was built on a graveyard dating back to the South African War. She told us that Boer soldiers on horseback, firing their guns noisily, circled her house at night making it impossible for her to sleep.

Figure 4 – Oussietjie (Susanna) Springbok

Attie had promised Oussietjie that the bag would protect her until she died and that it should be buried with her to safeguard her passage in the spiritual world. At the time of
our visit, Oussietjie felt that the healing powers of the contents had left the bag, as it had been unopened for more than twenty-five years.

It became apparent that the family members from Johannesburg were completely unaware of what had been decided about the future of the bag and that over a period of time, the spatial separation had allowed for two very different oral versions of the locations and the future of the bag to develop.

At the time of these initial revelations around the actual status and location of the bag, I did not really participate in the ensuing discussions on whether the bag should be buried with Oussietjie or still be passed from generation to generation as was the previous family tradition. Although Oussietjie was aware of the previous custom of using the bag to pass the healing skills from generation to generation, she said that she would prefer to adhere to her brother’s wish and let the bag buried with her when she died.

On the way back to Upington we discussed the matter in more detail. Marie felt strongly that the bag should not be buried with her sister, as their legacy, the customs and the healing skills, was in a symbolic way, embedded in the bag and that should the bag be buried, their heritage would be diminished significantly as the bag had become an important object which represented their inheritance. She felt, however, that the ultimate decision rested with Oussietjie as Attie had passed the bag on to her for a very specific purpose. Letitia shared these views. To me it seemed as if we had lost our story and the narrative for the documentary and also as if the bag had taken on a different or an added meaning: it was now used as a talisman to protect its keeper. Attie gave the
Letitia insisted that the shielding power of the bag was an additional and not a different meaning, and in a subsequent interview, Abraham Schwartz, Attie’s eldest son, recalled how his dad had often made, when they were younger, small bags containing a special mixture of herbs to wear on a string around the neck as protection.

The decision whether the bag should be retained as an apothecary rather than buried with Oussietjie presented the family with a difficult situation as the bag was now of value to an individual instead of being beneficial to an extended neighbourhood as ‘pharmacist, pharmacy and protector’. Burying it would put an end to a long tradition.

The next day, driving back to Raaswater to collect Oussietjie for a visit to the Augrabies National Park and Riemvasmaak, I suggested that, for the purposes of collecting the information for the audio-visual narrative, we should make a new bag, restock the new container with herbs and other remedies and ask Marie to train a member or members of the next generation in all the healing skills she knew. This would allow Oussietjie to be buried with the family bag and for the tradition of healing and the inheritance of a bag, even if it was a new bag, to continue. Although the idea was greeted with enthusiasm, no final decision could be taken. The outcome needed consensus from a wider range of family members.

When we returned Oussietjie to her home that night, she agreed to open the bag and unpack the contents for us to record. Oussietjie consented only because Marie, one of the custodians, was present and gave permission for this to take place. As no one had
opened or used the contents of the bag for a long time, and although some of the herbs could still be identified by their various aromas, it became obvious that the object, an archive of healing and a material expression of an oral text, was no longer used for physical healing, but rather as a talisman; an object for the protection of the bearer.

It was an awesome (in the literal sense of the word) experience to watch and photograph Oussietjie and Marie as they opened the bag, removed the contents and tried to identify the various medicines and other objects (Fig. 5). There were many smaller packages inside the big bag; mostly the old Springbok tobacco bags, many small pieces of tied-up cloth or ‘vasgeknoopte lappietjies’ (tightly-knotted bits of fabric) that were used to wrap up the herbal mixtures. The bag also contained some small Zam-Buk⁹ ointment tins. The women smelled and tasted the contents, and discussed the herbs and their possible or probable uses and expressed their opinions on all these practices.

*Figure 5 – Marie and Oussietjie unpacking the bag*

⁹ Zam-Buk tins come in a variety of sizes. The ointment, described as a soothing, healing, antiseptic herbal ointment, contains oils of eucalyptus, thyme and sassafras as well as camphor, and is used for the treatment of minor wounds, burns, scalds, itching or rashes, chapped hands, insect bites and muscular pain. The tins in the medicine bag were used as containers.
On the final day of our visit, saying goodbye at Oussietjie’s house, we were shown a dead genet, a ‘muskeljaatkat’, (Fig. 6) killed by younger members of the family, and it was decided that the skin would be perfect for the new medicine bag. Family members, present at the time, decided that the hide would be prepared and tanned for when we returned to do the filming for the documentary film.

*Figure 6 – Sanna Springbok with the dead genet*

Interviews with Attie’s widow, Katriena Schwartz, and her son Abraham shed more light on why, despite Attie’s work as a healer, he never used the contents of the bag and why he passed it on to Oussietjie to protect her. Although Attie inherited the bag from his father, he used his own fresh herbs and newly prepared potions for healing; he never took any medicines from his father’s bag.
B. Pre-Production – Planning for the Shoot

Circumstances prevented us from embarking on the project for another year. Letitia and I grappled with issues around intellectual property and the production of a coherent narrative for a broadcaster through which some of the traditions might become accessible to the general public. With added time constraints enforced by the broadcast schedule, we had to decline a commission from the SABC. Subsequently, with grants from the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund and the National Film and Video Foundation becoming available, we reconsidered continuing with the project, also as it had become possible to proceed without any editorial obligations from a commissioning editor. So, nearly two years after initiating the process, the production team left for Upington to record the bulk of the footage for the documentary.

To prepare for the shoot, I re-interviewed Letitia and Marie in Johannesburg. The discussions included various options on how to approach and solve the issue of how to proceed with the bag – such as using the old bag to tell the story and making a different bag for future generations – an issue that, because individual family members had strong opinions, could only be settled by family consent. Our discussions also included the question of which member from the older generation should take on the responsibility to pass on the information to the younger generation as Attie was no longer available to fulfil this role.

The earlier interviews indicated that very few members of the younger generation were attracted to the skills and knowledge around herbs and healing. Letitia and Elsa,
descendents of the line of healers and students of herbal remedies, both expressed a keen interest to be trained in the traditional healing practices. Letitia’s vocation as a researcher and her passion to record and preserve the culture of her people made her an obvious choice as inheritor of the bag and as apprentice for training in the skills of healing. Her standing as an initiate in these practices would also enable her to record the many oral accounts that exist around the bag and the accounts of other healers and remedies that still survive in the community. Elsa, who trained as a nurse and was inspired by her father’s abilities to assist childbearing women, would be another candidate.

Letitia’s mother, Marie, co-inheritor of the bag and the healing skills, would be the perfect teacher. Her earliest memories included many hours with Agab and Attie; time spent to learn the names of indigenous plants, to dig for herbs in the veld and to apply the herbal remedies. After her father passed away Attie became her mentor, always prepared to advise on how to find herbs, make different remedies and assist with information on how to treat different ailments.

*Figure 7 – Some examples of Lennon’s medicines*
With time many new remedies also found their way into the traditional apothecary – shoe polish, Lennon\textsuperscript{10} treatments (Fig. 7) such as Haarlemensis',\textsuperscript{11} Witdulsies,\textsuperscript{12} Essence Amara of Groen Amara\textsuperscript{13} and Rooilaventel\textsuperscript{14} had become additional ingredients in the mixtures used to ‘rub’ (Fig. 8) or massage babies. Marie always kept abreast of these developments.

\textbf{Figure 8 – Marie ‘rubbing’ a baby}

At the time of planning for the production, the issue of what to do with the old bag and whether to create a new medicine bag was unresolved. I encouraged Letitia and Marie to discuss the issue with the extended family and to reach a decision on what should happen – should the original bag be buried with Oussietjie when she died or should the

\textsuperscript{10} Lennon is the trade name for alternative medicines, schedule status S0, available over the counter without a prescription.
\textsuperscript{11} According to the information on the packaging, Haarlemensis or Haarlemmer Olie is an alternative treatment for kidney and bladder complaints.
\textsuperscript{12} Witdulsies is used for the treatment of colds and fever and can also be taken for mild asthma attacks
\textsuperscript{13} Essence Amara of Groen Amara improves the appetite.
\textsuperscript{14} Rooilaventel treats wind, indigestion and associated stomach aches.
The Medicine Bag

bag be kept as a symbol of the healing tradition that has existed in their family for as long as anyone could remember?

A week later, I received an sms message from Letitia. The message indicated that during a telephonic discussion between Marie and Oussietjie, they decided that Oussietjie should keep the bag until she died, that the bag should then be buried with her and that it would then accompany her into the next world, as was the express wish of her brother Attie. Oussietjie also told Marie that her son, Jan Springbok, had made a new bag from the genet skin before he died a few months earlier. She added that the old bag, the new bag and the family members in and around Upington were keenly awaiting the recording process.

C. Stylistic Approach to recording Audio-Visual Narrative

As a documentary filmmaker, I set out to re-document the story in a new medium, that of image and sound on videotape, and as I felt that I would be adding another layer to the process of ‘texting’ and archiving the oral accounts generated by and related to the medicine bag, I decided to include the recording process as an integral aspect of the documentary video. As a storyteller, I became intrigued by the many layers of story that were being revealed by the unfolding and the recording of these oral accounts and I wanted to use the layering as a stylistic approach to reveal the recording processes and as an additional tool to structure the unfolding narrative; the story of Letitia’s journey to record oral accounts relevant to the medicine bag and its accompanying skills and some of my experiences as a filmmaker recording the various experiences.
To expose these processes I decided to -

1) Interview Letitia in Studio One at the Wits School of Arts Television Division using two different camera crews. The principal team would record Letitia talking and a second unit would videotape the recording process to reveal what happened in front and behind the first camera.

2) In a similar two-camera way, Letitia would interview her mother.

3) On location in and around Upington, at Riemvasmaak, Raaswater, (Fig. 9) Rosedale and Morning Glory, Letitia would be shown interviewing and recording oral accounts.

4) Although I chose to reveal some aspects of the technical processes involved in constructing an audio-visual narrative, I also wanted to retain some of the magical aspects of filmmaking, namely the creation of a new reality for the audience who would ultimately watch the programme in the museum or being broadcast on television. To create and retain the illusion of ‘being there’ with Letitia in the northern Cape, I decided to show the collecting of herbs, preparing of remedies and acquisition of skills on location, without any visible interference by the technical aspects of filmmaking.
During the research trip, Letitia and I visited selected members of her family and other Khoisan members who, according to her previous research, were still involved in or had knowledge of traditional medicine and healing methods. These occasions included conversations with Lionel ‘Liney’ Losper, a volunteer disc jockey from a local community radio station, Dawid Kruiper, leader of the !Khomani San group who live on the edges of the Kalahari Desert and who is known as an activist for the rights of his and other indigenous people from this region, and Elsie Matthys, a traditional herbalist. A woman we planned to interview in Riemvasmaak died, unknown to us, a few days before our visit. On arrival at her house we were sprinkled with drops of water, as is the local custom when visitors arrive to pay their condolences.

Lionel Losper, also headmaster of a local primary school, told us that Radio Riverside transmitted programmes between 06h00 and 24h00 daily. According to Losper, the station had played a significant role in re-awakening local interest in traditional Nama music and other cultural activities. He presented a music programme on Saturday nights.
between 19h00 and 23h00 taking requests for ‘Langarm’\(^{15}\) and ‘Nama Stap’\(^{16}\) tracks. He gauged the programme’s popularity by the large number of phone calls he received during each shift. He also mentioned that the local police had told him about a noticeable drop in the crime rate for the duration of his programme.

On our second last day in Upington, we drove to Witdraai, nearly 300 kilometres north of our Northern Cape base, to visit Dawid Kruiper. After asking for directions at the Askam Police Station, we travelled for another ten or so kilometres before we found a small group of people sitting in a small natural cavern formed by the overhanging branches of a tree next to the fence of the Molopo Lodge, a luxury tourist destination with a bottle store and craft shop situated at the entrance. It transpired that this was Dawid’s birthday and that he was celebrating the event with his wife, a small daughter, his brother and a young white man who had attached himself to the group to learn more about the San culture. On advice from the Southern African San Institute in Upington, we presented the group with groceries to the value of approximately R100. To counter alcohol abuse the accepted practice was to offer food instead of money in return for access to local indigenous peoples and also for subsequent interviews. Although Dawid consented to an interview, he did not divulge any information that would be of value to our project. We were advised by the white youngster not to use any material without permission from Dawid’s lawyers. After a marriage proposal from Reg, Dawid’s brother, and purchasing various pieces of contemporary handmade San curios, we returned to Upington to meet Elsie Matthys. Elsie and her blind husband lived with

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\(^{15}\) ‘Langarm’ is the Afrikaans term for modern ballroom dancing

\(^{16}\) ‘Nama-Stap’ is a dance peculiar to the Nama where the participants move forward and stamp their feet in the dust at certain times. Stap means walk in English.
various generations of their offspring in Rosedale, a township near Upington. To keep busy and to augment her pension Elsie made colourful patchwork quilts and prepared ‘hotnospoeier’ for personal use and for selling.

The exposure to other cultural practices made me realise that inclusion of some of these scenarios would be beneficial in setting the Northern Cape location and the heritage and practices of the Schwartz family and I decided to include some aspects in ‘The Medicine Bag’ narrative.

Figure 10 – A ‘kookskerm’ (A cooking shelter) – an example of a cultural practice from this region

IV. Conclusion

I approached the project expecting to find a fixed storyline - a ‘single correct’ text, as is often assumed when one engages with written literature. It soon became apparent that

17 Lord quoted by Finnegan (132)
in these areas ‘where reading is not uniformly institutionalised’, the oral accounts around the medicine bag and other events became a ‘poetic process of composition by which each performance’ was ‘liable to be different and unique in itself.’ Each recording or re-telling acquired a ‘performative aura’ produced by the participants and by elements of dislocation through space and time that was determined by the ‘para-literate’ culture in which the bag exists. Although it became obvious that some of the healing skills were still practiced by family members both in the northern Cape and in Johannesburg, the geographical separation and limited financial means in most instances prevented easy access to the bag and herbal remedies from the region and communication around the whereabouts and the destiny of the bag. It became clear that the ‘sustained thought’ that ‘is tied through communication in an oral culture’ became disrupted across distance and over time and could account for the shifts in oral accounts relating to the location and the future of the bag as encountered in Johannesburg and in Upington.

I felt all the accounts were generated by and linked to the medicine bag - an object that had become like a rosary, a ‘physical site where texts are generated.’ The medicine bag became a site of memory and a tangible manifestation of a larger memory bank – aspects of Nama culture, of the Schwartz family and in some ways ‘… a cemetery’ where ‘fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred…’ As with the

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18 Prinsloo and Breier quoted by Hofmeyr A Miraculous History of the Book (2)
19 Lord quoted by Finnegan (132)
20 Hofmeyr Metaphorical Books (103)
21 Hofmeyr A Miraculous History of the Book (2)
22 Ong (34)
23 Hofmeyr A Miraculous History of the Book (7)
24 Mbembe (19)
accompanying oral accounts, the bag was no ‘fixed artefact’, but rather a ‘changing and creative formulation’ of human interpretation and need. The medicine bag as an anthropological [art] object or artefact had become a multiple new media ‘book’ of potentiality and about ‘doing’ rather that a ‘mere matter of meaning and communication.’ In a preface to Alfred Gell’s book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Nicholas Thomas summarised Gell’s position on ‘iconic objects’ as an ‘index of agency’ that occupy a position ‘in the networks of human social agency that is almost equivalent to the positions of humans themselves.’ The new interest shown in the bag, that of it being important enough for a documentary film, highlighted the importance of the object for the interviewees and presented them with new opportunities to contemplate the meanings attached to the bag and their positions in relation to its existence and meaning, both in the family and a larger context, with implications for their own sense of identity in South Africa at the time.

For the duration of the shoot, I now expected the oral account to shift as we moved from location to location and from interview to interview. The account moved from generation to generation, and from family to family within each generation and although it had now been video- and or audio-recorded and written down, it was living history that belonged to living people and therefore it was active and never passive. The ‘oral accounts have to be studied as active processes’ and not as ‘frozen products’. The active process of the medicine bag became a resource for the descendents and others from a group that was marginalised during the previous political dispensation in

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25 Finnegan (132)
26 Gell (X)
27 Finnegan (134)
South Africa. They could now apply these oral accounts, cultural objects and practices to re-establish their place and position locally and nationally in the South African society of the time; they could seek and confirm their ‘national identity in oral tradition’ and ensconce their existence in the future. In Gell’s words, taken from another context, the bag became a function of ‘the transmission of ancestral social efficacy, (social prestige, ritual privileges, land-rights, etc.) through the display of memorial sculptures which are incorporated into successors as memories (internalised visual images).’

The changes in the oral accounts as recorded during the research process and as documented earlier in this chapter, should confront each new researcher or storyteller as a resource that creates tension within the narrative and the shifting parameters should infuse each retelling of the narrative with new dynamism. Bill Nichols, documentary film theorist, contended that all films are documentaries. He wrote that even ‘the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and that reproduces the likeness of the people who perform within it’. He differentiates between ‘documentaries of wish-fulfilment’ - films that convey ‘truths if we decide they do’ and ‘documentaries of social representation’ – ‘films that give tangible representation to aspects of the world we already inhabit and share.’

For me the process that accompanied the documentation of the Nama medicine bag combined elements of wish-fulfilment and social representation; the oral accounts were

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28 Finnegan (131)
29 Gell (223)
30 Nichols (1, 13)
influenced by the knowledge that existed around the bag and by the various social implications that accompanied the recordings of the interviews.

The book has been defined as an interaction between three elements: (1) the text, (2) the media that conveys the content and (3) the act of reading and grasping it, and by extrapolating these relationships to the genre of documentary filmmaking, it seemed that, in a parallel way, even the research aspect of the production process involved ‘a verbal formulation of a three-way relationship or interaction between the filmmaker, the subjects or social actors and the audience or viewers.’

As with books, the direction of the flow chart that represented the relationship between producers, players and objects was neither linear nor one-directional. The outcome of the above processes and the re-injection of the ‘text’ back into the community were bound to enhance insights around how ‘new readers’ would re-negotiate the ‘public spaces’ and ‘participate in events’ to make ‘new texts’, and how the meanings of the new texts would be determined by these ‘new forms.’

Visualising and recording the documentation of oral accounts blur the boundaries between history as we know it and the histories of an object whose existence had never been written before: ‘The awareness of the voices of “others”, the plurality of stories to tell, and the fluidity of the stories, have produced as Foucault describes it, “a new form of history trying to develop its own theory.”’

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31 Nichols (13)
32 McKenzie quoted by Chartier (20) and Hofmeyr *Metaphorical Books* (103)
33 Quoted in Kruger and Mariani, (X)