

## CHAPTER ONE

### **The Medicine Bag - a case study of translating and structuring oral accounts into a documentary film**

#### **Context**

This thesis is based on the biography of a documentary video 'The Medicine Bag', featuring a family from the Northern Cape who have been the keepers of traditional knowledge and skills on healing practices over many generations. One of the resources in their healing repertoire is a medicine bag, the subject of this video. The bag belongs to the Schwartz family – a family of Namas<sup>1</sup> who hail from Keimoes and Upington in the Northern Cape. Chosen members of the family, all healers or !aixa,<sup>2</sup> have passed the medicine bag, its contents and the required skills associated with the bag, from generation to generation. Until the start of this video project, the information, the healing powers and the skills, existed only in practice and as oral accounts. The

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<sup>1</sup> The Nama is one of various indigenous Khoi groups who live in the Northern Cape and in Namibia. The Khoi were previously known as the Hottentot or Hottentots. The word Hottentots became hotnots or hotnos in popular etymology. Both terms acquired a pejorative meaning and became terms now seen to be racist and which are no longer acceptable even though it is still used for 'hotnotspoeier' or 'hotnospoer', and 'hotnotsknoffel' or 'hotnosknoffel' in everyday life (as encountered during this project). At present, there is no consensus on whether these groups should be known as the Khoi or be grouped with the San or Bushmen under the umbrella term of Khoisan. These terms all evoke strong emotional responses, an exploration of which does not lie within the scope of this report.

<sup>2</sup> In the Northern Cape and southern Namibia, herbalists or traditional healers are known as !aixa (Qaiga).

medicine bag (Fig. 1), made from a tanned springbuck hide, contains ‘gure’<sup>3</sup> or raw ingredients and mixed herbal remedies. The different ingredients are tied up in strips of fabric or pieces of plastic, or kept in small ‘Springbok Magaliesberg tabaksakkies’, the packaging for a commercial brand of tobacco made from fabric or in small metal tins. The bag also contains objects such as dice and an old-fashioned razor blade.



***Figure 1 - The Schwartz family's medicine bag***

The skills required to use the bag include finding and collecting ‘gure’ and parts of selected indigenous plants from the veld; drying the raw materials; mixing herbal remedies and other potions; massaging and rubbing; and healing with sounds and smells. The bag also acts as a talisman by protecting the keeper of the bag against evil spirits. Small bags containing a special herbal mixture, prepared with herbs from the big bag and worn around the necks of babies and young children safeguarded the youngsters in a similar way.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Gure, are pieces of organic and inorganic objects used in potions and individually for healing

Letitia Timas<sup>4</sup> Petersen, a direct descendent of the Schwartz family and an occasional researcher at the Wits Rock Art Institute, where she was employed to record and transcribe previously unrecorded oral accounts, focusing on Nama myths and legends in the Northern Cape, a rich rock art site. Letitia (Fig. 2) approached me to produce a documentary video on the Nama language and culture from the Northern Cape and, in the end, we settled on the narrative of her family as custodians of the bag and its contents as a suitable focus for the project.



***Figure 2 – Letitia Timas Petersen***

As a researcher and documentary filmmaker who is attached to the Wits School of Arts Television Division and keen to record the story in the medium of image and sound, I became involved in the unfolding and recording of the oral accounts attached to the history and the purpose of the medicine bag. Preparation for the production included her research, my research and a joint research trip to Upington and environs. Our

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<sup>4</sup> Timas is Letitia's childhood nickname or 'klein-naam'(name when she was a child)

investigations included interviews with Letitia, her mother, Marie Petersen (Fig. 3), her extended family and other members from the //Kharra Hais<sup>5</sup> and Riemvasmaak regions.



*Figure 3 – Marie Petersen*

## **Literature Review**

I used this opportunity to critically evaluate some of the processes involved in producing an audio-visual text in a Southern African context. Such an undertaking necessarily involved the production of texts under complex circumstances since the texts emerged in multilingual and multimedia formats and contexts. To make sense of the various stages of the process, I drew on a range of bodies of theorisations concerning texts and technologies as discussed below.

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<sup>5</sup> Upington Municipality

As texts and text technologies formed the major focus area for the research project, the theoretical framework leaned heavily on readings from the relatively new study field, the History of the Book, a multi-disciplinary academic endeavour that re-visits accepted definitions of the book by engaging with print history from a contemporary perspective.<sup>6</sup> This new look at ‘texts and text technologies’ had become relevant and necessary as technological advances over the last hundred years or more, such as photography, film, the computer, the internet, cell phones and video recordings (for the purpose of this study) had liberated ‘texts’ from the page and from the book. It was as if the ‘closed structure’ of especially the modern book, had been turned inside out to accommodate other forms of texts generated in different mediums.

The scholarship on book history has had a lot to say on the production of texts and I have adapted some of their viewpoints for my purposes. History of the Book theorists see the production of texts as a circuit of communication that includes its production, transmission and consumption to examine the shift in our understanding of texts and to create a dialectic to further insight as the process of text production changes.<sup>7</sup> Important aspects of the production process include the cultural locality of the text and the social circumstances within which the text is generated, and the interaction between culture and technology to understand what happens at their interface.

As the research and the narrative elements of the text for the documentary video originated in oral accounts, the first act of translation required a reading of how the recordings influenced and re-presented the content of a previously unscripted tradition

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<sup>6</sup> For this point I drew on Darnton; Chartier; McKenzie.

<sup>7</sup> For this point I drew on McKenzie; Chartier; Debray.

that the process set out to capture. Writings on the fluidity of oral storytelling, the performative nature of these oral accounts, transcriptions of recordings, interpretation and selection for the final documentary were used.<sup>8</sup> These oral accounts also pointed towards questions of literacy. The field of orality and literacy is generally dominated by two approaches; the first associated with Walter Ong who sees technology as a primary factor in determining human intellectual formations.<sup>9</sup> The second approach is associated with figures like Finnegan and Street who stress the socially embedded nature of technologies and its unpredictable outcomes.<sup>10</sup> As I was interested in the complex and mutually shaping interactions of many kinds of different media, I drew on the latter set of ideas.

Because documentary filmmaking involves an equally complex process between the author, the recording process to make the film and the social actors (the filmed), another way of looking at the joint intellectual production between social actors and the recording of their memories was made by exploring theories on documentary production.<sup>11</sup> As recordings do not expose the motives or causes for the actions that the footage represents, intervention by the auteur remains a necessity and is the basis for the idea that a 'text' is a process of material construction.

The impact of the intervention, the recording of the medicine bag oral accounts for research and for production purposes, was of interest and I used writings by theorists

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<sup>8</sup> For these point I drew on Hofmeyr; Finnegan; Ong; Brown, Duncan; Brown, Cynthia Stokes; De Certeau; Grele; Terkel.

<sup>9</sup> For this point I used Ong; Street.

<sup>10</sup> Here I used Finnegan; Street.

<sup>11</sup> For these points I drew on Nichols; Bruzzi; Giannetti.

Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi to understand how the process unfolds in a South African situation.<sup>12</sup>

The issue at stake here was the degree of mediation, present in each ‘text’ generated by the medicine bag during the production process. Selection of participants, recordings, translations and transcriptions, the editing process and editorial decisions all impacted on what Duncan Brown has described as the ‘need to acknowledge the specific strategies and performative energies of oral texts, while locating these texts in the spaces and constructions of the societies from which they emerge.’ He also mentions that many oral texts survived only in printed translated forms as ‘highly mediated and artificially stabilised print forms,’<sup>13</sup> forms that are shaped and ‘directed by present needs and ideologies’.<sup>14</sup>

According to Jean Mitry a ‘film is a world which organises itself in terms of a story’<sup>15</sup> and as a researcher I was interested in the public spaces that come into being when a filmmaker, the social actors and the crew undertake the journey to produce a film or video. It seemed that the production generated and depended on or drew from a series of public spheres based on these texts and that these public spheres ultimately moulded the elements and determined the content of the recordings that were used to construct the documentary narrative by the inclusion of the selected participants and the invitation for them to participate. In the multicultural, multiracial South African society, against the backdrop of our recent political past, the selection of participants became an important

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<sup>12</sup> For these points I drew on Nichols; Bruzzi; Giannetti.

<sup>13</sup> Brown (2)

<sup>14</sup> Brown (2)

<sup>15</sup> Mitry as quoted by Giannetti

consideration for the research process. In attempting to understand these interactions, I drew on various theories of the public sphere, particularly those that focus on questions of circulation and how these constitute publics.<sup>16</sup>

In the making of any film one also generates different kinds of archives: interviews, stories generated around a particular object (in this case the medicine bag) and the film itself. The medicine bag project also drew on recent theories of archives, which see such concentrations of texts as particular formations of power.<sup>17</sup> This aspect of the various archives was investigated (as indicated above) through ideas of the people and social relations that unfolded around the collections of texts. In addition, the project set out to understand the medicine bag as a site of memory and a tangible manifestation of a larger memory bank that contains aspects of Nama culture and of the Schwartz family.

As indicated above, this project was concerned with texts and the technologies of texts. In this section I have outlined the theoretical scaffolding I used to build my understanding as supported by different bodies of knowledge. The major theoretical foundation common to all of these approaches focuses on the technological mediation of texts and in theoretical terms this project set out to understand the different dimensions of this process.

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<sup>16</sup> For this point I drew on Barber; Henkel; Orsini; Warner.

<sup>17</sup> For this section I drew on Harris; Mbembe; Petersen



## **Methodological Approach**

Two distinct methods were employed. Firstly, the research report includes a detailed narrative of the production process that was followed to research, record and edit the documentary video. Aspects such as the participants, the procedures and the issues encountered during the course of the procedure were considered.

The second methodological approach included a theoretical contemplation on the narration focusing on the issues outlined above.

In terms of using these ideas I proceeded as follows:

### **1. History of the Book**

The key concept here was the circuit of communication or biography of a text and this was applied to track the life history of particular texts in the filming process. For example, part of the thesis traced the process of oral interviewing and the texts produced in that process, and how sections/segments of these texts made their way into the filming process and so on.

### **2. Orality and Literacy**

The key issue in this field was the effects of mutually shaping interaction of different media, particularly oral and written. I applied this idea by examining the ways in which the oral discourses attached to 'The Medicine Bag' started to shift and change in

response to the interventions of researchers and the film crew, but equally how these oral discourses imprinted themselves in the ideas of the latter group.

### **3. Documentary filmmaking as text production**

One key idea here was of that of documentary filmmaking as a joint intellectual production between many players. Following the ideas set out in points one and two above, I traced the mutually influencing exchanges that characterise the filmmaking process.

### **4. Texts and Public spheres**

Text production necessarily invokes the construct of one or more public spheres. This idea was used to analyse some of the interactions that characterised the filmmaking process. Pertinent here were the instances in which a public discussion was involved.

### **5. Text as archive**

Various elements from the newly created archive, constructed during the production process, are contained in this report. This includes the documentary video, an editing script, photographs and a selection of summarised transcriptions. The collection of multi-media 'texts' generated by the process of producing a documentary video became an archive for the family and for future researchers. The material was made available

for inclusion at the new Origins Centre at Wits and at selected schools in the Northern Cape.

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