

## “A future for our past” – a workshop in Namibia

Memorizing – how does it work and what am I doing while I am remembering? How do I know that I am memorizing? It is not easy to answer questions spontaneously about processes that usually happen subconsciously. Yet the answers, once found, are enlightening for everyone.

In April 2005 this experience was made by 20 youths of the San community in a workshop in Outjo in northern Namibia. They were motivated to participate in the workshop because they wanted to advance their project of establishing a Cultural Heritage Centre. They have erected a small pavillion near Outjo in which they want tourists and other interested people to get in touch with their rich cultural heritage. Of course, since there are few opportunities to generate income in this region, this will also support their livelihood.

Between 14 to 25 years old, the young people themselves have had very little experience in the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Even their parents' authentic experiences date back to their early years because later they usually lived sedentary on farms, being deprived of the basics for their traditional life. Memories of the times before they moved to the farms are of priceless value today. They are the last link to a trove of experiences of a vanishing culture.

In talks with WIMSA (Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa), the umbrella organisation looking into the rights of the San, the idea for a workshop to raise awareness for the memorizing processes was born. Participants should be enabled to support their parents and grandparents in remembering through talks and interviews, in order to transcribe a rich and complete picture of life from the past into the present. desirable effect can be avoided in interviews.



During the training in Outjo with members of the Hei//om Youth.

With my background as a communication trainer I worked with the young people using a combination of theory and self-experience to become conscious about the very process of remembering. In any given situation we make experiences through our sensory system – we see, hear, taste, feel and smell. This concrete sensory experience is stored and transformed into memory. So what does the moment of memorizing this situation – even years after – have in common with the moment of experiencing the situation? It is the concrete sensory elements. We know that we remember because we have an inner representation of the earlier sensory impressions. We see internal pictures, we hear what we originally heard, and we sense what could be felt, smelled and tasted. These are subconscious processes that rapidly take place, evoking emotions of the same kind as in the original situation. Sometimes only a memory of a certain scent (our sense of smelling is the most archaic one) may trigger a true firework of other details of memory. Such processes have a specific inclination with every individual (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory or gustatoric). Those who would like to do so may close their eyes and think back to their first kiss in order to find out what was there to be seen, to be heard, to be smelled and to be tasted. The result may be a very rich experience, almost like the original situation.

Another important aspect raised by the workshop was the problem of “foreign”, or even collective memory being sensed as though it is very individual and personal. It is often the photograph in an album, which comes up first as the inner picture of our first day at school, for instance, rather than an unmediated visual memory. In the context of the San it may be collective attitudes about life as a hunter-gatherer, fed through books and other sources, which in their memory turn into presumed true personal experience. If the authentic memory is adequately supported, this undesirable effect can be avoided in interviews.

Memorizing training helps to enhance results from the dialogue between generations.





Participants of the workshop perform a traditional dance in front of their Cultural Heritage Centre.

The young participants of the workshop were highly motivated and conveyed the impression of not only finding better access to their own memories but also knowing how to support others in memorizing. In interviews with their elders they have been enabled to get a good deal more authentic information and details.

In talks during the breaks it became obvious how much the young San are torn between their (acquired) Christian religion and their strong leaning towards the spiritual roots of their forebears. Traditional healing of trance is still an important asset of the young San's identity today and the strong will to preserve this San tradition was tangible. The expansion and running of the Cultural Heritage Centre will be an important means for the young people to reach their goal.