

'Rediscovering N/uu, the language of the southern Kalahari

In 1974, the language that had been spoken by the people known as the ǀKhomani San was declared extinct. This was the conclusion reached by Professor Anthony Traill, a South African and world authority on Bushman languages. In 1996, however, when working on the ǀKhomani land claim research in communities of the northern Cape of South Africa, a very old woman declared that she spoke 'die Outal' or 'die Boesmantal' - the old or Bushman language. This happened more or less by chance during a conversation in the small community of Rietfontein, on the Namibian border. The woman was Elsie Vaalboi, who was living in great poverty and very poor health with her son, Petrus Vaalboi, and his family. In fact, Elsie spent most of her time lying on a cot under a canvas lean-to at the side of Petrus's house. She thought she was 90 years old; we later discovered she was almost 100.

Elsie told us that she was the only person left who spoke this language, and that she had not had a chance to use it for many, many years. Using Afrikaans and Nama, both of which she spoke fluently, she told us that she had lived for much of her life as a servant in white farmers' homes, doing long hours of domestic labour and having little time with her own children - so she had not been able to pass the ancestral language on to them. Listening to her speak this language, we could tell that it was quite different from Nama (which is also a KhoiSan language, using a set of distinctive clicks), and unfamiliar to all of us.

Excited by the possibility that this was indeed the original language of the San of that region, we contact Professor Traill and invited him to come and meet with Elsie. He made the journey right away, bringing with him a recording of the language of the southern Kalahari that had been made in the 1930s during a research project with ǀKhomani San families gathered in preparation for their being exhibited at the 1935 Imperial Exhibition in Johannesburg. It turned out that the language Elsie Vaalboi spoke was exactly that of the 1935 tape: Elsie did appear to be a single, surviving speaker of the Bushman language of the southern Kalahari.

But we thought that there may well be others. A search began: going to townships and asking if there were Bushman families there, to the roadsides, to the backs of farms, following trails of memory from the ǀKhomani San we were meeting through the land claims research. After a year, we had found eleven speakers. Two years later the total was nineteen. We found three sisters and a cousin of theirs living in Swartkop, a very grim township north of the Orange River, who lived together in a group of extended households and were using the language every day. There were also a couple and their cousin speaking the language in Rosedale, a township on the edge of Upington, the regional centre of that part of the northern Cape. And a scatter of individuals in other townships or on farms nearby.

We were able to record and send messages between the speakers and arrange gatherings at which they could meet. They were thrilled to the core of who they were to learn that there was such interest in their language, and other speakers they could spend time with. And we set up a language recovery programme. This was helped by our being able to support the work of a brilliant Namibian linguist, Levi Namaseb, encouraging him to do doctoral research that included learning the language. Levi's work began in 1998 and is ongoing.

As we found the speakers of the language, which turned out to be called N/uu, we spent many hours recording personal histories, stories, memories and myths. We also filmed journeys with N/uu speakers back to the places they had lived, and in many cases been evicted from, years before. Several of the elders have also had a great deal to say about why the language had come so close to disappearance, reflecting on the pressures that had been brought to bear on them and the decisions they had made that meant that N/uu did not get passed on to younger generations. Meanwhile, Levi Namaseb worked with each of the elderly speakers (the youngest was in his late fifties), analysing the language. (He discovered that it has among the most complex vocal systems of any language in the world, with over 120 distinct sounds).

The testimony of N/uu speakers was of immense importance to the land claim. Their voices and personal stories gave depth and force to the evidence that was being assembled. And in the wake of the settlement, several of them, with their large families, moved back to dunes of the Kalahari. This was a complicated process, with crises of confidence and eruptions of some conflict. But their value as speakers of the language, their status as embodiments of ǀKhomani San identity, was acknowledged and shared on all sides. Defense and all possible recovery of the language became a uniting demand from the claimants, including those who had never heard this language before. Some of the grandmothers, helped by Levi Namaseb, set up language teaching courses and, eventually, a daily lesson at a new kindergarten at one of the villages that itself resulted from settlement of the claim.

In these ways, the discovery and recovery of N/uu has been at the heart of the work with and for the San of the southern Kalahari. The DVD and archive project that grew from this work can mean that all this – the language, the story of the language and the basis for future understanding of both the language itself and what language recovery and loss can mean – will be secured. Secured for the use of the people themselves, for people like them, and for future generations.