



# Rethinking Indigeneity: Research, Reality and Representation

*A long and dusty ride home behind the donkeys through Witdraai*

**Y**OU WILL BE CHANGED, Prof. Tomaselli tells his visual anthropology and development communication graduate students when preparing for a field trip among some groups of Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert!

I am one of those students. And I have changed. Not completely, but my experience 'out there' doing research amongst the #Khomani of the Northern Cape of South Africa and !Xoo of southern Botswana since 2002 has changed the way I see things in the world. Images of Bushmen elicit a long past history of pre-modern man and if viewed through 'contemporary' eyes conjures up notions of the 'romance of poverty' from coffee table books whose glossy pages feature smiling children playing with empty coke cans and wearing shoes that are either two sizes too big or are simply a sole attached with string to the bottom of

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**By Lauren Dyll-Myklebust**

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their feet. When doing research within Prof. Tomaselli's 14-year project entitled *Rethinking Indigeneity* the contradictions between theory or these images; and practice or lived reality, are blindingly evident. These contradictions piqued my interest and have led me to do both an MA and PhD within the project.

The *Rethinking Indigeneity* project is one of the research tracks within the Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS) and has seen nearly 80 honours, MA and PhDs registered at UKZN and numerous local and international research affiliates join the project. It is characterised by four ongoing research phases. Phase 1 introduced the analysis of cinematic, television and cultural tourism representations of Bushmen and Zulu groups. Phase 2 entitled "Semiotics of the Encounter", started extensive empirical fieldwork in Namibia (Eastern Bushmanland), Botswana (the !Xoo), the Northern Cape (the #Khomani) and amongst Zulu-speaking Bushman descendants in Kamberg, KZN (the Duma) introducing analyses on identity, performance, resistance and researcher-researched relations, and provided the basis for the development of auto-ethnographic and participatory field research methods. Phase 3 known as "From Observation to Development" started research on development communication, media production and reception, livelihoods and micro-enterprises and community radio as a development medium. It also introduced the !Xun and Khwe communities of Platfontein to our students. This has led to phase 4 where there is a major focus on a specific development project; the genesis, establishment and performance of !Xaus Lodge, co-owned by the #Khomani and Mier communities in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

Photo: Lauren Dyll-Myklebust



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*Dawid Kruiper's home*

The sun goes down over the desert in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park



Photo: Lauren Dyll-Myklebust

Students surveying the surroundings at !Xaus Lodge



Photo: Lauren Dyll-Myklebust

Trading beads at Witdraai

The type of questions this phase will attempt to answer is: How will the ≠Khomani employed at !Xaus Lodge construct, negotiate and rearticulate their discursive cultural and environmental resources of 'authenticity', indigeneity and their First People status in terms of tourist expectations, interactions and media discourses? And, what kinds of generalised community-lodge partnerships can be designed to best negotiate the demands of cultural marketing on the one hand, and the symbolic, spiritual and livelihood needs of a cultural community of practice on the other? (see Projects/Rethinking Indigeneity, <http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za>).

Groups of CCMS students guided by the principles of action research enter the Kalahari attempting to answer research questions such as these. Sometimes they are answered, and other times they are awakened to an entirely new research topic through actually *meeting* and *hanging out* with the members of the community who often tell you how *bartseer* (heart sore) they are, assuming the role of 'victim' that many NGOs champion to facilitate funding. However, the people we meet also reveal how they are modern citizens where they engage the world politically and, as the primary form of income for many groups is cultural tourism, establish unique 'marketing' skills that would make even the best *AppleMac* marketing gurus blush.

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> See Tomaselli, K.G.; Dyll, L and Francis, M. (2008) " 'Self' and 'Other': Auto-Reflexive, and Indigenous Ethnography". In Denzin, N. et al (ed.) *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*. London: Sage.

Photo: Lauren Dyll-Myklebust