

San Musical Futures

Ethnographic Video 3

Listening, Refusal, and the Ethics of Representation

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Opening

“For decades, the San have been among the most researched peoples in the world — yet they have remained among the least heard. Many San recall researchers who came, collected, and left — taking information without returning to share findings, building careers but leaving little trace or benefit within the communities themselves.

At the start of this project, I asked every participant to speak freely about San research — what it has done, what it has failed to do, and how it might do better. Their reflections form the foundation of this ethnographic video. These reflections did not function simply as background context. They shaped how this research was designed, conducted, and continually revised.

Many San participants expressed that while they value the role of research and its contributions, they believe even more strongly in the power of music to tell their story. Their comments speak to the heart of this study, revealing how intentional they are about music’s agency and its role in affirming identity, dignity, and recognition.”

Listening & authority

“These testimonies make one message clear: decolonising research begins with listening. Not listening as extraction but listening as duration — staying with voices rather than selecting only what is easily translated or resolved.

In this research, I have attempted to shift authority from observer to participant — from external interpretation toward lived narrative. This study therefore positions San voices not as subjects of inquiry, but as authors of knowledge.”

Design & methodological argument

“The research design grew from this principle. It was built as both ethnography and practice-based inquiry, combining observation, dialogue, and collaborative performance. Music and performance were not only objects of study; they were also methods through which ideas of

identity, belonging, and recognition were enacted.

In this sense, the ethnographic videos are not illustrations of the written thesis. They are part of its methodological argument — producing knowledge through presence, pacing, and ethical restraint.

By allowing San youth to speak, sing, and reflect in their own ways, the project becomes a space where knowledge is not extracted, but co-created.”

Practice-Based Research

“Practice-based research provided the most ethical and effective framework for this study. Music and performance were not simply topics to analyse — they were active research tools. Each performance, each song, each conversation contributed to an ethnography in motion. The ethnographic videos embody a participatory approach that invites San youth to represent themselves on screen and to shape how their stories are told.”

Fieldwork Strategies

“Fieldwork combined semi-structured interviews, community discussions, observation of performances, and collaborative filming. The focus was on dialogue — on giving participants time and space to articulate their own meanings of music, education, and recognition. These choices were shaped by a desire to avoid a single story — and by the recognition that inclusion requires time, access, and ongoing negotiation.

During fieldwork, many San expressed concerns that research has often privileged certain voices over others — sometimes favouring particular regions or communities while neglecting others. To address this, I expanded engagement beyond the Ghanzi District, visiting multiple settlements and working with different San groups across Botswana. This approach sought to reflect a broader spectrum of San experiences and perspectives, rather than a single dominant narrative.

This process aimed to challenge extractive legacies within anthropology and ethnomusicology, offering instead a model in which San contribute directly to how knowledge about their lives is constructed, represented, and understood.”

This work was carried out in affiliation with the San Research Centre and the University of Botswana, whose support was vital in facilitating field access and providing academic resources such as books, archival materials, and research documents that would otherwise have been inaccessible.

Through the San Research Centre, I was also able to attend seminars and research presentations where I engaged with San-led critiques of earlier research. Hearing these perspectives refined the ethical conduct of my own research, reinforcing the need for

accountability, reciprocity, and sensitivity when working with communities whose experiences with research have often been extractive or misrepresentative.”

Positionality

“Having grown up among San communities, I entered this field with familiarity but also responsibility. My position is neither insider nor outsider. Rather than claiming neutrality or activism, I approached the work as a facilitator rather than a spokesperson — creating conditions where San perspectives could lead interpretation.

Editorial decisions — what to translate, what to subtitle, what to leave unresolved — were guided by questions of dignity and consent. These were not neutral choices, but ethical judgements made in relation to specific people, contexts, and risks.

Not everything that can be shown should be shown.

Visibility can offer possibility. But it also carries risk.

For many participants, remaining dignified — speaking carefully, withholding selectively, and enduring misrecognition — is ongoing labour.

Being seen has often meant being misread. This tension shaped how stories were shared, and how they were withheld.

Reflexivity was essential: every edit, translation, and narrative choice was guided by the principle of inclusion — aiming to represent what was said faithfully and sensitively, within academic and ethical standards.

Yet one question persisted: why are there still so few San researchers producing academic work about their own communities? Many participants reflected that the education sector remains one of the spaces where San people experience the deepest institutional disadvantage. As a result, few are able to reach the levels of higher education required to conduct and author academic research in their own voices.”

Research Challenges

“Working within marginalised and geographically dispersed communities presented logistical and ethical challenges. Time, limited funding, travel constraints, and institutional limits shaped what was possible — and what remained unfinished.

Scheduling interviews depended on local realities: school timetables, work demands, and weather conditions.

Ethically, there were deeper questions. How do you record without reducing? How do you represent trauma without exploiting it? How do you ensure consent when participants have long histories of being misrepresented? And how do you film marginalised lives without risking humiliation or loss of dignity for those who agree to be seen?

Yet within these difficulties, some of the most meaningful insights emerged outside formal interviews — songs sung while litter picking, spontaneous dances in dusty courtyards, conversations that unfolded slowly, moments of hesitation or humour that resisted summary. These unplanned moments carried an authenticity that scripted research rarely captures.”

Decolonial Ethics

“To decolonise research is to open space for participation and reciprocity. Inclusion meant more than having San voices on camera — it meant collaboration in the interpretation of their own narratives. Some San participants also assisted in the editing process through translation and contextual clarification, helping preserve meaning across languages and cultural nuance.

Closing Reflection

“This research moves beyond description. It becomes an act of translation — between academia and community, between theory and lived reality.

Its purpose is not to speak for the San, but to create space where they can speak, sing, and interpret themselves.

It does not claim resolution. It remains a process — an ongoing negotiation between listening and interpretation, presence and restraint.

The ethical commitment is simple: to represent faithfully, to listen responsibly, and to ensure that every voice recorded is returned, not appropriated.

In this space, research becomes not an act of capture, but an act of recognition.”