
Towards Design Inspirations for Cultural Technologies from Explorative Workshops with San Youth

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Abstract

Namibia praises itself as multi-cultural yet united country with a wide variety of ethnicities. Most communities take pride of their traditions, cultural values and practices. Based on historical legacies differences amongst tribes can still be observed. While some are well positioned in the socio-political landscape others are marginalized, such as the San communities. Youth caught between tradition and modernity, ethnicity and nationality, rural and urban contexts is affected at many social levels. Thus we conducted two explorative workshops with San youth seeking design inspirations for cultural technologies encouraging young Namibians to engage with their traditions and cultural practices in the modern world. We speculate that seductive cultural technologies could bridge the gap between the often perceived conflict of the past and the future of indigenous urban San youth.

Author Keywords

Namibian Youth; participatory design; seductive design; indigenous knowledge; Inspirational designs, San, youth

ACM Classification Keywords

H.2.10. Software Engineering: Design;

Introduction

Namibia, a southern African country, can pride itself of a very rich cultural heritage and ethnic diversity. As many as 11 ethnical groups are maintaining their languages, values and practices amalgamated into a modern-traditional lifestyle. This has been encouraged by a

<http://www.unesco.org/new/>



Figure 1: first 3 phases of design thinking (Stanford Design School)

number of government initiatives acknowledging traditional authorities and indigenous communities. Though at national level a unifying socio-political programme is pursued, diversity is equally celebrated and welcome. Meanwhile a split between ethnical groups can still be observed. "Ethnic entities in Namibia still live to a large extent separated from each other in own compartments, culturally and geographically. This is equally applicable in rural and urban areas"[4, p. 17]. This divide inevitably creates power imbalances between the groups which led to marginalisation of mostly two tribes, namely the San communities (also called Bushmen) and the OvaHimba. Both have been predominantly nomadic in the past.

Moreover, Namibia has experienced a vast increase in urbanization. Thus young people have been leaving their rural homes in search for better living conditions. As a consequence, migrants who have been growing up amongst their tribes are now in a metropole, far away from home and the familiar. Although they regularly return back home they lose out on much of their cultural practices in which their values are rooted. Thus we are exploring the possibilities to re-connect the youth with their traditions in difficult current situations addressing the youth's concerns and needs.

San communities

According to Suzman, "The San community makes up 2% of the Namibian population, which is approximately a total between 30 000 – 33 000 San people. They are regarded as one of the most disadvantaged ethnic group compared to other groups in Namibia on almost every socio-economic indicator" [3].

The San have often been considered to be one ethnical group, while the San tribes differentiate themselves through their languages which are: Hai//om, !Kung, Ju/'hoansi, Naro, !xoo, N/oha, #xao//ae and khwe. Most of the San communities are settled in the northern and eastern part of Namibia

Design process

In order to derive technology inspirations, we followed a design thinking approach (see side bar). We ran two explorative workshops with the youth, of which we report only on one in this position paper.

Explorative workshop: Past, Present and Future

The purpose of the workshop was to empathize with the San youth, identify youth challenges and aspirations as well as their positions in relation to their past and their future. A number of activities were created to enable the youth to express those. The workshop was also intended to serve as a basis for the ideation phase. We made use of observation, notes and recordings during the workshop for post-situ analysis.

Sixteen San youth took part. The workshop was structured in several phases and temporalities. The energizer brought out the youth's current skills. The second phase led the youth into a fantasy phase of having super powers and representing those in a tangible format using available scrap material and stationaries. Then the real life challenges were depicted in rich pictures as groups and in phase 4 the virtual ancestors were called for help and advice. Last but not least all was to be combined in a group performance.

These activities brought out a number of relevant issues such as skills the San youth have, e.g. singing, dancing

Design Themes

PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

Technology can subtly encourage the youth to preserve their ancestral advices and revisit them when they are in need of advice.

ENGAGEMENT

Technology will enable the youth to express their feelings in a form of stories.

REFLECTION

Technology can dwell in the peacefulness of the past and the youth can go back in time to connect with their elders to reflect more deeply on what they see, and feel.

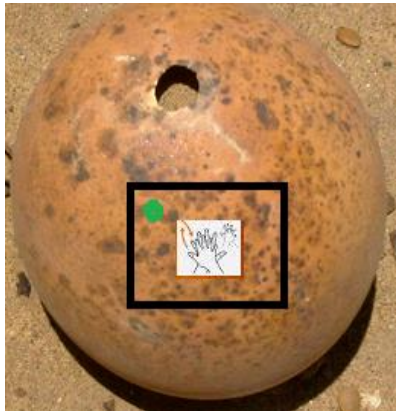


Figure 2, shows the ostrich egg system design

and many others were named. The challenges centered a lot on basic needs of transport, food, safety, loneliness, and money to survive. While the ancestor advices were encouraging such as "Never Stop Believing in God, he is always there no matter what you are going through.", "Save money and make time for everything and help people in need". Amazing were the stories the groups wove together and the easiness of the San youth performing them, clearly showing their skills in performance and storytelling.

IDEATION

The workshop conducted with the San youth allowed us to gain insights on the importance of their culture and that they are susceptible to their ancestor's advice. "Recently there has been increasing attention paid to the role of community engagement with heritage, from facilitating the participation of various stakeholder groups in the safeguarding, preservation and communication of heritage to encouraging communities to record and share what they feel is of value to them" [2]. Thus inspired by their ancestral advice and stories, analysing the workshop data three design themes emerged (see side bar).

A preliminary design concepts inspired by these themes was developed, addressing the themes.

Design Concepts

An ostrich egg device that will enable the youth to record challenges and advices provided by the elders was conceptualized (Figure 2). The design concepts were also informed by Reitsma's story beads recording system, where she elegantly weaved traditional baskets and beads with modern RFID based recordings [5].

The Ostrich egg plays a vital role in the San Community. It is normally used as a means of food and storage of water. The shell is used for making beads, and these beads are a symbol of protection from diseases and bad spirits. The ostrich eggs value has also been expressed in different narratives by the San community as recorded by Candy Miller: "I once heard a San storyteller begin her tale by saying 'Let me crack open this egg to tell you...'" Pro: Eggs for nourishment, ostrich eggshell for water storage; stories for nourishment" [1, p.104]. and "to handle something like an ostrich egg as expressed by Leon Tsamkgao recorded by Miller in May 2013 [1, p.105].

Ostrich egg System Design

The Ostrich egg is a recording system that aims to record daily challenges and ancestral advices. It is a highly technological design that contains a server, database, a microphone and speakers and sensors that will detect the type of action to be done. Such as record, listen and stop. The technology that is inside the ostrich egg device recognizes the words and invites the user to either record an advice that is linked to a challenge by shaking the device or listen to an already existing advice by rubbing the surface of the device. The ostrich egg device will be used whenever they need advice especially when they are facing challenges. The ostrich egg device fits into the San community very well as it is a true representation of some the items they use on a daily basis. Therefore, they can just place it in their houses and use it whenever they need it irrespective of where they are staying.

The ostrich egg device will work by means of hand motion detection, the following procedure are to be followed:

To start recording: Shake the device ones. A red light will appear.

To listen: Rub on the device. A green light will appear

To finish recording or listening: tap twice on the device. A blue light will appear

Conclusion and Future work

In this paper we have presented a qualitative empirical study of the San youth conducted through the technique of workshops in order to inform design concepts. We had the goal of both developing our understanding of the San youth engagement and to gain design inspirations.

The approaches used were conducting of workshops with the San youth on their current position of their cultural practices and traditions. We conducted two explorative workshops with the San youth, in which they allowed us to gain design inspirations to enable them to digitally engage in cultural practices and traditions. We have shown how workshops have allowed us to study the practices and attitudes of the San youth. In the next phase we will design more digital prototypes with the San youth. The modalities and findings from this study have been instrumental to conduct co-design.

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