

From Life Force to Slimming Aid: Exploring Views on the Commodification of Traditional Medicinal Knowledge

Saskia Vermeyleen*

* Lancaster University, Geography Department, Lancaster LA1 4YQ, United Kingdom.
s.vermeyleen@lancaster.ac.uk

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Abstract

The commodification of traditional knowledge is a lively topic for academic debate, with opinions ranging from categorical rejection of this process, to views that it could be a liberating act. This debate is often characterised by generalisations and a lack of empirical engagement. This paper presents a case study of the commercialisation of traditional medicinal knowledge of the San in Southern Africa. A scenario survey in 3 communities reveals a range of different views amongst individuals and communities - much of which could be linked to differing local and historic socio-economic factors. Although the survey indicates that commodification is widely accepted, the subsequent use of a 'life story' approach to examine the actual commercialisation of the Hoodia (Hoodia Gordonii – a plant with appetite suppressant properties), shows that this acceptance is problematic. San informants reflect on it as a pragmatic choice informed by experiences of deprivation and economic hardship, resulting in a process which changes the cultural meaning of the plant and undermining its traditional healing power for the San themselves.

Introduction

The process of commodifying traditional knowledge has been subjected to strong criticism (see e.g. Nijar, 1996; Dove, 1996; Shiva 1997; 2001; Takeshita, 2001; Heath and Weidlich, 2003; Halbert, 2005) and it is seen as a typical characteristic of a market-based economy and therefore should not be incorporated into the so-called indigenous economies of gifts and reciprocity (see e.g. Gudeman, 1996; Zerda-Sarmiento and Forero-Pineda, 2002; Posey, 2002). While the very essence of the market-economy is perceived to be based on profit accumulation and wealth maximisation, the gift-economy is perceived to be based on the obligation to give something back in reciprocity (Zerda-Sarmiento and Forero-Pineda, 2002). In other words, the growing (commercial) interest in traditional knowledge raises the question whether it is possible for traditional knowledge to be commodified and become valuable to the larger world without posing a threat to the social structures that sustain this knowledge and the livelihoods of indigenous peoples who depend on it.

A number of authors have noted that some of the depicted controversies with regard to the commodification of traditional knowledge tend to project indigenous communities as bounded and discrete while simultaneously ignoring the changing environment and circumstances of indigenous peoples (see e.g. Strathern, 2000; Heath and Weidlich, 2003; Green, 2004; Moran *et al*, 2001; Tobin, 2000; Riley, 2004; Castree, 2003). The poignancy of their critique is underlined by the observation that even some of the most recent literature about traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights (see e.g. Gibson, 2005) is paying little or no attention to the variety of ideas and perceptions that can be encountered on the ground. The debate about traditional knowledge is often still muddled by an implicit assumption that indigenous peoples represent a coherent and authentic voice, whilst the protection of their traditional knowledge is portrayed as their sole and maybe last stance against the advance of Westernisation. Can empirical research ‘in the field’ yield the ultimate ‘one’ truth about indigenous peoples: who they are, what they want and how they perceive commodification and intellectual property rights, as some of the more generic literature tries to convey (see e.g. Shiva, 1997; 2001; Gibson, 2005; Halbert, 2005).

The need to inject more empirical evidence into the dialectics about the commodification of traditional knowledge has been addressed in this paper by exploring an actual case study of the San in Southern Africa, who have recently entered into a benefit sharing agreement for the commercialisation of the Hoodia, a plant traditionally used for its medicinal properties. The San peoples of the Kalahari desert in Southern Africa have chewed the Hoodia for thousands of years on hunting trips as a thirst quencher and an appetite suppressant. Without the San’s knowledge a patent was awarded in 1998 to South Africa’s Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) who had researched the Hoodia in their labs and identified the active ingredient. After a campaign for the rights of the San peoples, a deal was struck so that the San peoples could benefit from the commercialisation of the slimming aid ‘P57’ (the active ingredient) which was being developed. This benefit sharing deal has now been praised by some as a major breakthrough and presented as an example of best practice for indigenous peoples (for more details on the benefit sharing deal see Vermeulen, 2007).

While the Hoodia agreement has been widely publicized, to date little attention has been paid to the San’s perceptions of the commercialisation of the Hoodia. Positioned within a wider remit of developing more ‘emic’ insights into the commodification of traditional knowledge, this paper aims to document the responses among San individuals to the commodification of the Hoodia. First, the San’s generic views about the commercialisation of their traditional knowledge will be explored by using scenario surveys that reflect the ways in which western style commodification may take place. Second, a more holistic cultural perspective is explored by recording ‘life stories’ about the Hoodia to reveal how some of the San feel and experience the actual commercialization of Hoodia. The concept of recording life stories of the Hoodia has been inspired by Kopytoff’s (2005) biographical approach towards commodities. This method is part of the cultural school of thought on commodities, first introduced by Appadurai in 1986. The cultural study of commodities allows examining the changing meaning of things (including knowledge) when they pass through various local and

global circuits and cultural meanings (Radin and Sunder, 2005). While the scenario surveys are useful to examine to what extent San individuals accept or reject the concept of commodification in a hypothetical case, the recorded 'life stories' of the Hoodia provide a deeper insight into how some San individuals actually feel about a real case study where their medicinal knowledge has been used and commercialised on a large scale. The life stories of the Hoodia are then compared with the ethno-historical findings – as recorded by anthropologists - of the changing meaning of the San's trance dance. The final part of this paper will reflect upon the issues raised by the San and revisit some of the key concepts that have been prominent in the ongoing debate about the commodification and protection of traditional knowledge. Before the fieldwork results are discussed, first, a brief overview of the San and the case study communities will be provided, followed by the fieldwork methodology.

San Communities

The San are former hunter gatherers and the oldest surviving inhabitants of Southern Africa. The arrival of pastoralists and agriculturalists of the Bantu-language group (in the last 2500-500 years) and white settlers (in the last 300 years) has resulted in the assimilation, subordination or even persecution of the San peoples. About 100,000 San survive today in the Kalahari basin, but while their physical survival may no longer be at risk, their cultural survival is highly precarious. While local and regional variation exists, the vast majority of the San have lost their land rights and with that, the opportunity and skills to hunt and gather food. They are almost invariably poor by local standards and few can survive on subsistence farming, as this requires access to land, a suitable soil and climate and some capital in the form of livestock or fences to protect their crops. Many depend for their livelihoods on seasonal farm work (often paid in kind) and the collection of bush food. In countries like Namibia and Botswana food aid from the government is important.

The selection of the communities in Namibia was controlled by the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) with whom every researcher has to sign a research contract prior to conducting any research. Nevertheless, the case study communities capture some of the diversity of circumstances in which the San may find themselves, including culture, geography, the situation with regards to land rights and general socio-economic conditions. Below is a brief description of the communities.

Blouberg and Vergenoeg (Namibia). These formerly white-owned farms in the Omaheke region are now community-based resettled farms where the San are living together with other black groups (mostly Hereros) who have usually been more successful in farming than the San. The San here do not have de jure land rights and seem to be more marginalised (both from a socio-economic; political and cultural perspective) than the San in East and West Tsumkwe. The San hardly own any livestock and the opportunities for the collection of veld food and for growing crops are much more limited in comparison to the opportunities in East and West Tsumkwe, both because of land

ownership issues and because of the physical environment is drier. Some of the San in Vergenoeg are harvesting the Devils Claw (a traditional medicine) under a scheme run by the Centre for Research Information Action in Africa and Southern African Development and Consulting (CRIAA SA-DC, 2003). While the devils claw is harvested across rural Namibia, this scheme is characterised by price guarantees for contract harvesters and the promotion of sustainable harvesting methods. CRIAA is not active in Blouberg.

Andriesvale-Witdraai (South Africa). The San were labelled as ‘coloured’ under Apartheid and widely scattered. They were thought to be culturally extinct in the early 1990s when a search across the Northern Cape Province rediscovered a handful of elderly individuals who could still speak the language. A community of their descendants have been more or less ‘reconstructed’ to claim back their land rights in and around the South African part of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. On the back of this successful case, the San’s human rights lawyer negotiated a benefit sharing agreement with the CSIR to compensate the San for the use of their traditional knowledge about the Hoodia.

Scenario Surveys: San Responses to the Commodification of Medicinal Knowledge

Methodology

A scenario survey was conducted to assess and clarify attitudes toward the commodification of traditional knowledge in view of demands from the outside world. It consists of a hypothetical story about a businessman coming to a community because he has heard about a medicinal plant, which he would like to sell in the outside world. He meets three fictitious San individuals who respond in different ways:

1. Refusal to share knowledge over the plants.
2. Agreement to share knowledge in exchange for a share of the benefits (profits) when the company starts selling the plant-based medicines. However, when the company patents its new pills they will not acknowledge the San in the patent, neither will the patent be jointly owned.
3. Willingness to share knowledge, provided the San will get legal protection over their knowledge so that they can control its use by others.

The participants were asked to choose the response they liked best and comment on it or give their own response. The survey was developed on the basis of Soleri and Cleveland’s (1994) scenario survey¹ which was adapted after testing the scenario in Omatako² and was subsequently replicated in Vergenoeg, Blouberg and Andriesvale.

¹ Soleri and Cleveland (1994: 19) argue that the scenarios they have developed are ‘an instructive example of the sort of questionnaire that can be effective for assessing and clarifying attitudes toward the proper use of traditional cultural knowledge’.

² This relatively large and diverse San community is located in West Tsumkwe District, Namibia (part of an area that, in the Apartheid days was known as ‘Bushman land’).

With regard to sampling, the communities in Vergenoeg and Blouberg were relatively small so that the sample includes the majority of adults present in these communities during the fieldwork. In Andriesvale, the key informant/translator made suggestions as to whom should participate in the scenario surveys. With the exception of Vergenoeg, the key informants/translators were community members proposed by WIMSA for Namibia or by the South African San Institute (SASI) for South Africa. In Vergenoeg the translators and key informants did not belong to the community and were proposed by CRIAA SA-DC and the Omaheke San Trust (both are development agencies that were at the time of the fieldwork operating in the Omaheke region, including Vergenoeg). The data was collected between July and October 2004 but the interpretation of the data also includes observations made during subsequent fieldwork between July and September 2005; September 2006 and June 2007.

A total of 89 people participated in the scenario surveys of which 48 people did the scenario exercise as part of a longer in-depth interview. Of the total sample³, 50 people were women and 39 people were men and were spread over different age categories with a minority being younger than 20 and older than 59 (note that not all the participants know their age and government officials issuing ID cards have often simply made up a date for them). Almost 80% of the participants were ‘ordinary’ community members in the sense that they did not belong to any of the community committees that either ‘govern’ the community or represent the community at the local or national level. The remaining 20% of the participants were - what can be called - ‘elite’ San; these are community members that fulfill leadership or representational functions in the community.

Although this survey instrument has some limitations in the sense that it invites the San participants to respond to the issue of commodification within Western options, the scenarios represent potential ways in which the San’s traditional knowledge may be realistically be commodified and indeed (as in the case of the Hoodia) has already been commercialised. Therefore the scenarios are a useful tool of analysis that can be used to confront the San with the dominant (i.e. ‘Western’) concept of commodification and commercialisation of traditional knowledge and subsequently encourage the San to think about and comment on these issues.

Results

Table 1 summarises the results of the scenario survey, dividing the participants into categories that are distinct in their responses. Clear differences were found in the

³ Because of very high mobility, poor communication facilities and questionable census data regarding the San, statistically representative sampling was not a realistic or useful approach. People typically relate themselves to places through their extended family but many family members are ‘away’ at any one time – e.g. to (look for) work on farms or stay with relatives elsewhere. However scenario interviews were carried out with a diverse range of community members (across age groups, gender, relative socio-economic position) until saturation was achieved, i.e. no new or additional insights were gained. In short, the sample can be said to be large enough to provide a fair reflection of the range of views held by community members present at the time of the survey.

preferences expressed by men and women. Overall, men had a very strong preference for option 3, which was three times more popular than option 1 and almost five times more popular than option 2. The opinions of women were more spread out.

Insert Table 1 here

Option 2, which is the equivalent of the Hoodia benefit sharing agreement, was the most popular option for the women interviewed in this survey. When asked why they opted for benefit sharing, their view tended to be utilitarian: Generating money was important to feed the children, pay for school fees and buy clothes. It was repeatedly argued that by giving the children a decent education, they might be able to rise on the social ladder and become teachers, civil servants or even members of parliament; this would help them to shake off their stigmatised identity and become full and equal citizens.

Another reason for women choosing the benefit sharing agreement was that money could give them the possibility of starting their own development projects so they would not be further dependent on government handouts. Starting small farming and agricultural projects topped the list of what could be done with the money. Often, it was also mentioned that in order to start small cultivating and herding projects, they first had to have access to land and it was hoped that the money would allow them to buy land. They also thought that by having money, other people would treat them with more respect. It was particularly interesting that buying the land was described as a community project. Buying land, farming and empowerment were all expressed as community-based achievements. It was repeatedly mentioned that they had to work together as a community to achieve something. Even when people chose money as the preferred option, they made it frequently clear that the rationale behind this option was not related to the accumulation of personal wealth but for community-based development projects.

The difference between the preferences of men and women may relate to gender inequality. Exposure to other cultures has undermined the traditional gender equality of the San. San women have lost influence and autonomy as a result of sedentarisation, the wide-ranging impact of land loss, shift to pastoralism and wage-labour and the influence of male-dominated neighbouring communities (Kent, 1993; Felton and Becker, 2001; Becker, 2003). Furthermore, the labour market in which the San have been employed (i.e. agriculture) favours men over women. This has pushed the San women further into the margins of the cash economy. Exclusion from the cash economy may explain why more women chose the benefit sharing agreement. Since more men than women have access to money, the men also tend to have more control over the financial resources within the family. Interestingly, subsistence gathering for family sustenance remains predominantly a woman activity, but the harvesting of natural resources for cash income has become a male activity.

Most of the men on the other hand seemed very keen to have legal rights and protection (intellectual property rights / option 3). Gaining rights was not limited to property rights over knowledge. When it was discussed what sort of problems the community was facing, the lack of access to land and the lack of rights over natural resources were often mentioned as the two most important causes for their poverty. Some men (especially respondents struggling to get access to land) also argued that gaining rights over knowledge, natural resources and land was crucial for restoring their human dignity. Men who mentioned that they wanted to keep the knowledge to themselves did this because they were worried that something might go wrong if they started to share the knowledge on a large scale: the medicinal plants could stop working or become poisonous (women also used this as an argument for wanting to keep the knowledge to themselves). Furthermore, there was lack of trust in the benefit sharing option and a disbelief that legal rights would be granted considering their experience of marginalisation. Keeping the knowledge for themselves seemed then the safest option. On a few occasions, and it was actually more women who said this, it was thought that keeping knowledge to themselves would give them a chance to restore the traditional way of life. The protective behaviour of women could be explained on the basis that, traditionally, women were in charge of collecting plants; perhaps they feel more affiliated with this practice than the men and hence are more protective.

The differences in opinion between the three different communities are also marked. Vergenoeg is characterized by a very strong preference for option 3, which is five times more popular than option 2. However, in Vergenoeg, no fewer than one in four found it difficult to choose, a problem that was hardly encountered in the other communities. In Blouberg, two-thirds of the respondents chose option 2 and one third chose option 1. Opinions were most divided in Andriesvale: just over half the respondents chose option 3, just over a third chose option 1 and one in twelve preferred option 2. This may be related to the heterogeneity of this reconstructed community.

The outspoken preference for option 3 in Vergenoeg is likely to be related to the Sustainably Harvested Devil's Claw Project (SHDC), which started in Vergenoeg⁴ as a pilot scheme in 1997. The SHDC project has made the San in Vergenoeg aware that their natural resources are valued in the marketplace and that control over both harvesting and selling is required in order to demand a fair price. This has made them more attentive to the importance of control and ownership of natural resources and the related knowledge over these resources. The SHDC may also explain why respondents in Vergenoeg have not opted for the first option, viz. they have a positive experience in sharing their knowledge. Even though the SHDC project made the San in Vergenoeg aware of the commercial value of their natural **resources**, it may have made them aware that not only the natural resources but also the knowledge related to the resources has a commercial value and therefore must be protected appropriately.

⁴ The NGO CRIAA SA-DC started to organise groups of registered harvesters in order to set up networks of knowledge exchange about sustainable resource use and management. Harvesters became increasingly involved in ecological surveys to determine sustainable harvesting quotas and to monitor compliance with the surveys and quotas. As a result of this pilot scheme, the harvesters deal directly with the exporters and are getting a much better price for the harvested Devil's Claw.

The situation in Blouberg illustrated that extreme poverty and exclusion from the market or cash economy can translate into a more pragmatic and utilitarian response, viz. selecting the benefit sharing agreement. People in Blouberg complained that they were without food for days and had to live on handouts. Unlike Vergenoeg, the people in Blouberg - at the time of the fieldwork (2004) - did not participate in the SHDC or any other project related to the use and commercialisation of natural resources and related knowledge. Sharing knowledge in return for money was considered as a means to alleviate poverty. When the results are compared against income, similar results emerge, i.e. respondents with an income were more likely to choose option 3 and to a lesser extent option 1. However, the interviewees without a source of income opted for the benefit sharing agreement in the hope that this could generate an income. Also the respondents who received a pension (they are 65+ of age) seemed more protective than the younger generation; they were more likely to pick option 1, i.e. not sharing their knowledge. The respondents in Blouberg who opted for not sharing their knowledge were mainly women. As explained previously, women seemed in general to be more protective than men when it comes to sharing medicinal knowledge.

All the respondents in Andriesvale knew about the Hoodia benefit sharing agreements; yet they rejected the benefit sharing option as their preferred solution. In all likelihood, the fact that most of the interviewees complained that they had not been involved in the procedures or were not kept informed might have influenced their answer. The people that were interviewed in Andriesvale expressed feelings of exclusion and neglect. Therefore the strong rejection of option two in Andriesvale must be interpreted within the context of the Hoodia benefit sharing agreement. The majority of the interviewees in this community complained (also outside the remit of the Hoodia agreement) that the community leaders were not sufficiently reporting back to the community about land and community issues in general and the Hoodia in specific. When probed about this finding, Gert Bok⁵ - the former chairperson of the Community Property Association (CPA) - argued that the supporters of Dawid Kruiper in particular hold 'bad' feelings against the Hoodia benefit sharing agreement because in their opinion this agreement is an example of how the San's tradition can be 'misused' by giving it out of hands. Gert Bok's observation could indicate that the 'old' schism between the group organised around Petrus Vaalbooi (those who are more 'modernist' in outlook) and the group organised around Dawid Kruiper (those who are more 'traditionalist' in outlook) has had repercussions on the †Khomani San's attitudes towards the commodification of their traditional knowledge as demonstrated by the following quote:

In the past when we still had rainy periods, the Hoodia was growing, strong, big and juicy. Now that we are experiencing droughts, succulents like the Hoodia have died out. The moment the Hoodia was shown to other [non-San] people it disappeared; we showed it to too many different people such as the white people. We did not know that our plants, our knowledge would be turned

⁵ Field notes 17 October 2004

*into pills. This has caused friction in the community; we blame each other for showing it to other people*⁶.

Nevertheless, as was observed during a later visit to the †Khomani San (in June 2007), the lack of communication between the members of the CPA, the South African San Council, the Hoodia Trust and the ‘ordinary’ community members remains a re-occurring problem.

Probably as a result of the Hoodia and CRIAA experiences, the interviewees in Andriesvale and Vergenoeg were more aware of the value of their knowledge of natural resources and were keen to gain more control in the dissemination and commodification of that knowledge. Contrary to Vergenoeg and Blouberg, the respondents in Andriesvale were less concerned with their poverty, but highlighted that gaining control over natural resources and knowledge would empower them; they saw it as a recognition of their human rights and identity. However the people in Andriesvale were visibly better off; the pension money was twice as much as in Namibia and young mothers received money for childcare. Most of the people interviewed also confirmed that winning the land claim⁷ has improved their social situation and made them feel proud to be San.

In short, even though the results of this survey only represent some snapshot views of individual San towards the process of commodification and cannot be said to be statistically representative, the scenarios still indicate that the nature and extent of previous engagement by the individual or community in selling medicinal knowledge, is a key factor in the explanation of different attitudes towards the commercialisation and commodification of traditional knowledge is. As mentioned before, one of the major limitations of this scenario approach is its embeddedness in a Western framework. It tells us which of the limited set of options individuals might opt for, but it gives us little understanding of how the San *feel* about the notion and practice of the commercialisation of their medicinal knowledge.

Perceptions of the Commercialisation of the Hoodia from a Holistic Cultural Perspective

Acknowledging the limitations of the scenario survey method as being framed from a Euro-American perspective, other data has been collected to reflect upon the San’s ‘emic’ perceptions about the commodification of their medicinal knowledge. 28 San inhabitants of Andriesvale were invited to tell ‘life stories’ about the Hoodia, and to reflect upon the following questions: What does the Hoodia mean to them; has that meaning changed since the Hoodia was commercialised and made available to the outside world; how do they feel about cultivating the Hoodia and processing it in a pill for consumption by non-San people?

⁶ Field notes 21 June 2007, elderly man, Andriesvale.

⁷ For more information on the land claim see Chennells (2003), Robins (2001; 2003) and Sylvain (2002).

Inviting people to express their feelings about the Hoodia triggered stories about the San's traditional life when they were still nomadic people who roamed freely in the Kalahari in search for food and water. The Hoodia was described as one of the most important plants for the San; it was their 'life force' giving food, water and energy. The meaning of the Hoodia for the San in Andriesvale appeared to be symbolical for their (old) identity and representative of a certain way of life which was nostalgically described as 'the old days when we could still go on hunting trips and collect food in the veld'. The following two quotes capture some of these poignant feelings that were recorded during these interviews:

When you eat the Hoodia you can feel the supernatural powers coming from above. When you smell the Hoodia and taste it on your tongue you will feel how it stimulates you, how it controls your hunger, how it gives you power and energy [...]. When you eat the Hoodia in the veld you can enjoy the powers of the plant. When I notice some symptoms of cancer, I eat the plant, I talk to the plant; the plant gives me new power and energy and in return I can give all the bad energy back to the plant; the plant knows how to deal with these bad energies. [...] You can not experience these powers and energies of the Hoodia in pills; we gave the power away for money. Everything what we had here is gone because we traded the supernatural powers for money, for simple things [...] but the Hoodia was so good for us. When you were in the veld and you saw a springbok, you will follow it, you will hunt for 3-4 hours; you do not get tired, you are full of life and energy and with these forces in you, you will kill the springbok. The longer you run, the harder your heart pumps; you are flying you are not on this earth anymore; that is what the Hoodia has done for us. [...] You cannot enjoy the Hoodia when it grows in containers. You will walk past it with all your diseases and you will contaminate the plant. The Hoodia must grow in its natural environment; it must shrivel in the hot sun because that makes it strong; it will get a thick skin and when it starts raining the Hoodia will be beautiful, it will flower, it will have wonderful thick stalks. The Hoodia enjoys life and that is how it gets its forces, you will never get these forces by cultivating the Hoodia. [...] When diseases were introduced on our land [through contact with other people] we had to look for medicines to cure ourselves; that is how we got the knowledge. All the knowledge that Unilever and CSIR have comes from the 'Bushmen' but they [Unilever and CSIR] have nothing; the knowledge stays ours⁸.

When I visited CSIR and I saw the Hoodia growing in containers my heart was paining. The Hoodia is a natural plant you should not cultivate it. The Hoodia had lots of black fungi, you cannot use it then as a medicine. It was obvious that the Hoodia was struggling, it was not the same plant. [...] We never give our plants water and when you cultivate the Hoodia you must water it; the plant cannot be the same; you should not cultivate what God has given. [...] As for

⁸ Field notes 21 June 2007, middle-aged man, Andriesvale.

*the Hoodia tablets, I don't know maybe there are also some other chemicals in it that make you slim[...]*⁹

These two quotes indicate that the exact process of commodification (i.e. cultivating it outside its natural habitat and capturing its medicinal properties in a pill) is challenged by some San as a process which results in the Hoodia losing its life force and power to 'heal'. The commodification of the Hoodia is seen as another example in the historical process of marginalising the San's culture and way of life. While the scenario survey reveals that many San recognise that their medicinal knowledge may have potential use and exchange value (i.e. economic value) in the wider world and are prepared to commodify their knowledge; the life stories show that the San (also) continue to value their medicinal plant knowledge for symbolic, supernatural and ritual reasons. When the scenario survey participants were asked whether or not they would be willing to commodify their knowledge, 60 people out of 82 (excluding the 6 participants who felt unable to choose) seemed willing to commodify their traditional knowledge in a hypothetical case which mirrored the actual case of the Hoodia. However, when participants in Andriesvale (i.e. the San who have been closely involved in the actual commercialisation of the Hoodia) were asked to describe how the meaning of the Hoodia has changed since it became a commodity, this question triggered stories of (i) the symbolic, ritual and cultural meaning of the Hoodia and (ii) the San's marginalised socio-economic and political position in society. These findings are raising new issues.

If indeed the San are by and large willing to commodify their medicinal knowledge but are finding it hard to come to terms with the process of commodification in the sense that it changes the cultural meaning of the commodity, it is logical to ask to what extent the pro-commodification 'choice' is informed by the experience of economic hardship rather than by any culturally embedded convictions – be they of traditional or of recent origin. In other words is this simply a desperate choice or could it be that the role and value of traditional knowledge has been culturally, economically and socially transformed as a result of changing market ideologies both locally or globally? The results of the scenario survey suggests that the participants are willing to commodify their knowledge from a pragmatic point of view; many participants indicated that they are a poor and marginalised community and commercializing their knowledge could provide a hard needed source of income.

Anthropologists (see e.g. Guenther, 1999; 2005 and Katz *et al*, 1997) have researched extensively the changing meaning of the San's trance dance, viz. from being a traditional healing dance towards becoming increasingly a professional and commercial dance. These ethnographic research findings can add some insights as to why the San are willing to commercialise their medicinal knowledge even though they acknowledge it changes the symbolic and cultural meaning of that knowledge.

⁹ Field notes 21 June 2007, middle-aged woman, Andriesvale.

The Commodification of the Trance Dance

The trance dance has in recent times undergone some radical changes among some of the contemporary San, moving increasingly towards a commodified and professionalised status. Originally, the dance was performed for its curing ritual, held throughout the night around a fire, in which mostly male dancers, either single or in groups, dance to the chanting and clapping of women. During the dance the dancer reaches a trance stage through which a curing potency (*n/um*) is activated in the dancer's body, which enables the curing of all sorts of illnesses. The San perceive *n/um* to be a personally owned consumable that is shared with the community and is traditionally given as an unreciprocated and uncalculated gift to people who require it and may demand it. The dancer's rewards for giving *n/um* are not material but moral, such as personal satisfaction, the love and respect of the family and the gratitude of those he has saved.

The trance dance occupies a very central position within the spiritual and social life of the San. While a number of the older dancers continue to perform their curing rite in the old fashion, viz. as a communal rite executed in the spirit of sharing and cooperation, others have professionalised the dance by incorporating a number of significant alterations, such as collecting payment, rationalisation and instrumentalisation of healing, employment of self-promoting, status-enhancing ritual and mystical props, and the expansion of the healer's repertoire of healing practices. Especially, collecting payments is a good example of the dance's move towards professionalisation.

For some of the dancers, healing has become regular work and their only source of regular income on which they are dependent to sustain their livelihood. For many farm San, performing the trance dance is work and, within the logic of farm work to which they have been exposed, work is something for which one gets paid (although the trance dancer may make some exceptions when healing their own family members). Furthermore, the San copy the model of other medical specialists they have been in contact with (i.e. Western doctors) and who charge the patient for their services. Not only must the patient pay for the service of the trance dancer, on some occasions the trance dancer expects to collect a fee from people just watching the dance, like tourists.

What is the explanation for the transformation of the trance dance from a ritual performance carried out in the spirit of sharing and moral interaction to a rational service performed for a fee by a professional dancer for a client? Both internal and external factors can explain this. With regards to the latter, over the past decades the San have been confronted with many economic, social and cultural changes and many of the San are now living in a cash economy. Getting money for labour is now a commonly accepted fact in most of the San communities and this has started to displace the traditional sharing ethos. This also had repercussions for the trance dance which is now increasingly validated and transacted through money. Ultimately, this is leading to the objectification and depersonalisation of the dance.

With regard to the internal factors, Guenther (2005) has identified five explanations for the commodification and professionalisation of the dance. The first is the erosion of the

sharing ethos as a result of the San becoming part of the cash economy; second, depersonalisation of the relationship between the ‘patient’ and the trance dancer; third, disassociation of the professionalised trance dancer from his community; fourth, scepticism in the community of the trance dancer’s capabilities; and finally, competition between the trance dancers.

When the interviewees in Andriesvale expressed their concerns about the commercialisation of the Hoodia, they were asked to give their opinion on the commercialisation of the trance dance by the San in Namibia and Botswana. For example, the middle-aged man in Andriesvale who argued that the commercialisation of the Hoodia was in a sense a desperate act (see footnote 8), also voiced the same feelings with regard to the commercialisation of the San’s trance dance:

Our people in Namibia and Botswana get money for their dances, they heal other people, but the people in Tsumkwe [Namibia] and Botswana are also still dancing in the traditional way but the church disagrees; it [the church] tries to disempower our traditional beliefs and knowledge [...] as a result our people are suffering and doomed because we gave our powers away. They [the San in Namibia and Botswana] are doing this to get money, to make a living but they are using their power in the wrong way; they can never be the same. By performing in a commercial way, changes are made to the dance; going into trance is imitated. [...] We gave our secrets away and recorded our deepest and most spiritual feelings on camera, this has made things worse. You must keep your most inner secrets to yourself, the slightest feelings you show to the outside world, for example, during dance festivals, is wrong; the spirits will run away and they will give you the wrong guidance. On top of that outsiders do not understand the spiritual feelings and they get scared and start misinterpreting things¹⁰.

Discussion and Conclusion

To summarise, the life stories and the trance dance example supplement the earlier findings of the scenario surveys to show that the acceptance of the commodification of traditional knowledge can be brought about through both internal (e.g. changing symbolic values) and external (e.g. changes in the socio-economic situation) circumstances. However, it still raises the question whether commodification can become an act of emancipation and liberation, as argued by some of the new commodification scholars (see next paragraph) when poor and subordinated people are forced through internal and external circumstances to commodify some parts of their culture (e.g. the knowledge of their medicinal plants and the trance dance).

In their book *Rethinking Commodification*, Ertman and Williams (2005) argue that it is time to change the debate about commodification and go beyond the traditional question of whether or not to commodify. According to the so-called new commodification theory, under certain conditions commodification can be an act of empowerment and

¹⁰ 21 June 2007, middle aged man, Andriesvale.

emancipation. While previously Radin (2001) argued that the poor and subordinated were likely to engage in ‘desperate’ exchanges, the latest works on commodification (see e.g. the edited volume by Ertman and Williams, 2005) argue that the ability to commodify things could be or should be a liberating act, but so they argue, the poor have neither the ability nor the right to commodify. Early commodification theorists (see e.g. Radin, 2001) argue that the role of law is either to prevent commodification of some things or at least to regulate trade in a more equitable manner. The new commodification scholars, on the other hand, argue that law should facilitate trade in a wide range of things that were previously labelled by the old-style commodification theorists as contested commodities, including the commodification of (indigenous) culture (see e.g. Harding, 2005; Austin, 2005). However, the new commodification scholars also argue that while the range of things that can become commodities should be extended, it is equally important to focus on processes of social change so that some people would not have to engage with – what has been labeled by the San - ‘desperate’ exchanges as the last resort to improve their lives.

Radin and Sunder (2005) argue that commodification can only become an act of emancipation and liberation when poor and subordinated people are sufficiently involved in setting out the rules and meaning of the exchange or commodification process. This means that in order for commodification to work in the best interest of indigenous peoples, there is a need to have a critical understanding of historical trajectories and to question underlying power structures that dominate local settings. In practice, this means that the focus of attention should be on the empowerment of those who want to use their traditional knowledge and resources to improve their livelihood.

The challenge emerging for any (pharmaceutical) company that wants to use the medicinal knowledge of indigenous people is, first, to get consent from the knowledge custodians. Whilst indigenous peoples are often portrayed in the literature as one homogenous group voicing one opinion, the scenario surveys have clearly indicated that already within a small group of people spread over 3 communities many different opinions can be found on whether or not to commodify traditional knowledge. This diversity of voices is not so surprising when the local context is taken into account, and current and historical socio-economic and political circumstances at the individual and community level are considered. Second, it must also be acknowledged that although some indigenous peoples may recognise the economic value of their knowledge and accept the commodification of their knowledge, simultaneously – as shown with the life stories of the Hoodia – indigenous peoples may also continue to value their medicinal knowledge for symbolic and ritual reasons. This finding chimes with anthropologists’ findings (see e.g. Malinowski, 1935; Davenport, 2005) that indigenous communities have always made a distinction between ordinary commodities and valuables and that one thing can simultaneously have an economic or material value and a mythical, supernatural or symbolic value. The problem is that in the current processes of commodification only the economic value is recognised and compensated for by (pharmaceutical) companies when using indigenous peoples medicinal knowledge. This can lead to situations wherein indigenous peoples develop feelings of mistrust, inequality and betrayal because the non-economic value (i.e. cultural value) of the commodity has

been ignored in and damaged by the exact act of commercialisation. Whilst the commodification involves two parties, the parameters that control and govern the commodification process of traditional knowledge are based on Western, and therefore one-sided, perceptions of what constitutes a commodity. These perceptions are embedded in a neo-liberal framework that emphasises the economic value of a commodity that should be regulated through market mechanisms. One of the biggest challenges for (pharmaceutical) companies is to recognise the cultural values of the commodity and to find ways to use and compensate for these values according to indigenous peoples' traditional rules and customs of how the knowledge is used and passed on. As long as the criteria that govern the commodification of traditional knowledge are based on these neo-liberal western parameters, this process cannot become an act of liberation, emancipation and empowerment of marginalized indigenous groups. Unless indigenous groups obtain the power and means to negotiate on equal terms, or at least are truly allowed and enabled to trade on their own terms, it is difficult to see how the commodification of traditional knowledge can ever be more than an act of desperate exchanges.

The changing life story from the 'Hoodia as a life force' to the 'Hoodia as a slimming aid', exemplifies that at the heart of the debate about the commodification of traditional knowledge, lies the unequal power relations that (in the words of Radin and Sunder (2005), steer the relationship between commodification, objectification and subordination.

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Table 1: Responses to Commodification of Medicinal Knowledge in three San communities; a breakdown by gender, community, country and income.

Breakdown by		Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	No idea	Sum
Gender	Men	8	5	25	1	39
	Women	14	20	10	6	50
Community	Vergenoeg (Nam)	0	3	15	6	24
	Blouberg (Nam)	9	19	1	0	29
	Andriesvale (SA)	13	3	19	1	36
Country	Namibia	9	22	16	6	53
	SA	13	3	19	1	36
Income	Pension	7	3	4	N/A	14
	Devil's claw (only in Vergenoeg)	0	0	04	N/A	4
	Nothing	2	6	2	N/A	10
	Child care (only in Andriesvale)	3	0	5	N/A	8
	Occasional	1	2	10	N/A	13