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Personal Reflections on Nama Khoe Men and Matriculture: Transcript

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[*lightly edited; please cite using time signatures*]

Good day, I'm Geralte Cloete. I'm a theatre maker by profession, and I'm from South Africa. The name of the community that I'm from in South Africa is called Sanddrift in the Northern Cape Richtersveld. I'm from the Nama tribe. The Nama tribe is also part of the Khoekhoe family. Through my theatre work, I normally speak back to our culture, our heritage, where we come from as a nation. Yeah, that's me.

[*00:36*]

So, I was born in the nineties, 1993, yeah, in Sanddrift in the Richtersveld. We had midwives back then, before we had nurses and hospitals, and because we, our rural community, so far from the cities, where you have all these facilities, I was born at home through a midwife. So yeah, my mother and the midwife was there. As a young boy growing up in the Richtersveld, I kind of had a lot of freedom as a young boy there, because it's such a small community and such a safe neighborhood. I could be out, I could go out of the house, I could play outside and come back at any time. Obviously, any parent would always be worried about your whereabouts, but it was never an issue as I was

growing up because I'm in a small rural community where everyone knows everyone, and when you're outside, you know there's a certain time that you have to be home. We know before sunset, you have to start making your way home. I had the best time growing up, especially knowing that it's such a small community and knowing that everyone know each other. You know that when you go and play at another kid's house, you know that you are safe, you know you'll return back home safely, your parents know where you are, and they don't have to stress about your whereabouts because it's such a tiny community.

[*02:28*]

I have four sisters, and then I had one brother who passed away. May his soul rest in peace. He was the eldest, and then I have four sisters, and then I'm the youngest in my family. And then, my grandfather was still alive at that time. May his soul also rest in peace. My grandfather and my grandmother stays in the same neighborhood as myself and my family, which is my grandmother and grandfather from my mother's side. My grandmother and my grandfather from my father's side live in a small community, also a Nama community, which is about fifty or thirty kilometers away from us. The community is called Kuboes.

[*03:12*]

So, the language that we spoke, and that we are still speaking in our house, is Afrikaans. Our first language is Afrikaans, and my parents, however, grew up speaking Nama, which is the language of our tribe. It's Nama. Some people call it Namagowab, but then some people say, like, why do you have to call it Namagowab, because Namagowab means 'Nama language,' and you don't say 'English language,' 'Tswana language;' why do we have to say Namagowab? So, my parents grew up in homes where they spoke Nama. However, because of colonisation and how colonisation has influenced our people, we kind of stopped speaking Nama, and I was asking my dad once, like, why didn't he teach us Nama as we grew up, or why aren't we speaking Nama as a family in our home? And then he told me as they were growing up as children at schools, the teachers wouldn't allow them to speak Nama in schools, and also they called the language demonic.

[*04:30*]

The church called it demonic, and they weren't allowed to speak it, and once they speak it in school, they were punished. So, for them as parents, they carried their trauma, and they didn't want us to be carrying the same trauma as them, and they didn't want us to be punished at school for speaking a language that's our home language, or our mother tongue. So, I'm sitting with a tongue that's not my mother's tongue, which is Afrikaans. I'm

sitting with some other mother's tongue in my mouth [*laughs*], if that makes sense! If that makes sense. With us, also with the missionaries, came the schooling system. With the schooling system came the torture and the trauma and the ripping away of language, the ripping away of culture, the ripping away of identity. Yet till today, we've got such a strong belief in the faith that we have learned from the missionaries. Till today our people still believe in going to church, still believe in the biblical views, whilst at the same time there's such a huge connotation when you think about it, because it's with the church that we've lost so much of who we are as Nama people, and I feel like today, it's also the church's responsibility as much as it's the responsibility of our country, South Africa, to ensure that they put systems in place to ensure that we reclaim our land, reclaim our languages, and reclaim our identity.

[*06:30*]

So, as I was saying when we started this interview and I introduced myself, I'm a theatre maker, and I work under the company that we call Nama Khoi Productions. Nama Khoi Productions work as a community arts centre in Sanddrift, where I'm based. I started this organisation in 2022, and the reason why I started this organisation was because I wanted to use the arts as an artist, as a theatre maker, to start reclaiming land, to start reclaiming identity, to speak about the traumas of our past, because they always say, like, we need to forget about the past in South Africa. And how can you just forget about the past when our people are carrying so much trauma, when our people are still living in poverty, when our people are still living in pain, when some of us can't even speak our mother tongues. So, for me as a theatre maker, it was important to start this organisation Nama Khoi Productions, and to use the arts to really look at how we can reclaim our identity, how we can reclaim our languages, and how we can become one with ourselves and one with our ancestors. How do we become the true, truthful versions of ourselves, and that's only by really connecting to who we really are, and that's through language, the history of my lineage.

[*08:05*]

But also, I went to a conference once, and it was a Nama conference, where one of our elders spoke about language and the importance of language. And he said something so profound; he said that it is the mother's job to teach the mother tongue to the child, and that's why it's called the mother tongue. So, [*laughs*] and then he made a joke to me, and he's like, the reason you shouldn't be asking your dad why you can't speak your mother tongue, you should go and ask your mother. In general children spend most of their time with the mother, because the mother is the one that nurtures. The mother is the one that breastfeeds. So, it kind of makes sense to call it the mother tongue, but it also makes sense

that the mother would be the one that pass on the language from generation to generation. In my general view of growing up in the Richtersveld, women have always played the role as the nurturers, the people who raise us, and as I said before, like the uncle said, that it is the mother's job to teach the children, or the child, the mother tongue. Also, in our communities, that's what mothers normally do, whether it's Afrikaans that they are teaching. There are quite a number of homes, where in the households, some families still spoke Nama, which is also coming from the grandmothers who taught their grandchildren the language.

[*10:00*]

Like, I do have two females in our theatre company that can speak Nama, and we are kind of the same age, in our thirties, early thirties, and they can speak Nama. And the reason why they can speak Nama is because they grew up with a grandmother who still spoke Nama to them indoors, but also a grandmother that was very cautious, and said, like, "You can speak Nama inside but make sure that you don't go speak Nama at school." So, that has always been the role of the women in our community. The women in our community also played the role of caregivers, but also the ones that almost, like, played the role of the nurse, because it's the women in the community that has been the midwives, the ones that had the knowledge when it comes to traditional medicine, and also has also played the role of the teacher, because they would be the ones teaching us about our customs, our traditions.

[*11:18*]

Because we are a mining community, men has always been the ones that's been working in the mines, while women has been at home, but there's a time I think it's—I'm not sure whether it's in the twenties or the early nineties—that women started working in the mines as well. There used to be a lot of people that work in the mines, but also nowadays the mines don't even give jobs to our local community. Mostly, our community, most people in our community, doesn't have a job, and the basic income that most people get here comes from government grants. So, we have mines in our communities, and these mines bring people in from outside of our communities to come and work here, whilst our people don't have jobs. When it comes to our community, women are free to do or be whatever they want to be. We're not living in Stone Age, where women are just going to play the role of the nurturer. Women in our community, like, my sister is the principal at our primary school. So yes, women do other things besides nurturing.

[*12:46*]

As I told you before, there are quite a number of women that do work in the mines, or women that's been working in the mines, and my other two sisters are working in the sandparks. So, women get the freedom to do what they like, and because our community is still such a safe community, women can work late at night, but also like any other community, there's always that risk that women might not be as safe as they think they are, especially when it comes to going out drinking having fun. Then it's probably a good idea to make sure that you are surrounded with people that you trust, when you go out and drink. The mines is what brings in this kind of unsafety and the risks when it comes to our communities because there's a number of people or influx of people coming into our communities that works in these mines, and then, it gets to a point where you don't know everyone anymore that's in your community. So, that's that as well.

[*14:09*]

So, when we speak about inheritance in our community, it's always the youngest child who gets the inheritance, or the boy who gets the inheritance. Because I guess it's in our communities, it's also, I guess, that expectation that a woman is going to get married to a man, and once she gets married to a man, she won't be able to take care of the family, because there's going to be someone else that's going to take care of her and their family. Whilst if a boy gets the inheritance, the boy can still, like, even if the boy ends up getting married, he would still be able to take care of the family, or extended family, in a sense. So, that's inheritance work, in essence, but also there's always other ways to look at inheritance, because sometimes there would be, like, this idea of when you grew up in a house, it rather becomes a family house, so the entire family inherits it in a sense. We're an active family in general, because we are a very close-knitted family. We are close; we see each other often, because we live in this community. My… Only one of our sisters doesn't live in this community. She stays in the Upington area, but still in Northern Cape, but we also see her a number of times. Yeah.

[*15:39*]

One thing that comes to mind when I think about being Nama; I think about being first, the first thing that comes up, is being first nation, to be a people of first nation, to be the first that walked on South African soil. So, I always say this to our people, when it comes to being Nama, we have, we've been taught to hate ourselves. We have taught, we've been taught, to hate our languages, that we are ugly, that our languages are demonic, and that we are kind of not worthy. But being a Nama, you need to know that you are the first on the soil, not just South Africa, but in Southern Africa, which include Namibia, Botswana. We are the first people to live here, so if you know that, you'll know that you're an owner of this land. So, you don't have to feel any less than. When it comes to protection of land;

yes, definitely when it comes to protecting of land, our people play a big role in protecting the land.

[*17:02*]

I mean, there's been numerous times where mines wanted, or mining companies wanted, to come and mine at certain areas, and they've been stopped. There was times, there's even now a huge project that the government wants to come in, or it's a presidential project. It's called the Boegoebaai Green Hydrogen Project that they want to come and do on communal land. Richtersveld is communal land, so they want to come and do this huge green hydrogen project on our communal land, where they want to build a huge harbour, and they want to manufacture green hydrogen here on our communal land, and some of our concerns has always been, like, what is the impact going to be on the land? And also, what we've been saying is, as a community, is that you as the government gave us our title deeds for that land. Now you, as the government, are coming back, and you want to grab the land, or you want to come and propose a project on land that you gave us back, and it really doesn't make sense. But at the same time, we've been asking questions around the impact that it's going to have on the land. And one thing that's so special about the Boegoebaai area, or as we know it as is Boegoeberg, is that there's three graves, there's three graves in that area, that one of the graves are the grave of our late chief, or previous chief, and they want to do the project in that very same area which is very problematic and very disrespectful. But also, at the same time, they came back and said they would protect that area where the three graves are. Yah!

[*19:27*]

Not everything has been wiped out; there is some rituals that we still practice. There's one ritual that happens when a woman gets her first period, or her first menstruation. Then, she would be taken into a nama hut for, depending from family to family, some put the daughter in, or the young girl, in the hut for seven days, and in that seven days, no one is supposed to see her. There will be, like, one woman, normally the grandmother and the mother, that will be, that will go into the hut and see her and take care of her for those seven days, give her food, teach her about womanhood while she's in the hut for those seven years [*sic*]. And then, after the seven years [*sic*], she can return back into the community, whilst the parents now know, or the woman now know, that she is… They've passed on the values of… the cultural values, but also making sure that she understands what womanhood means from a cultural perspective, or what it means to be a Nama woman.

[*20:52*]