

# KHULUMANI SUPPORT GROUP: USING ART-MAKING AND ORAL NARRATIVE TO ADDRESS LAND DISPOSSESSION, POPULAR RESISTANCE AND RESTITUTION

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## ABSTRACT

The Khulumani Support Group has developed a workshop process that integrates art-making (drawing and painting) with oral narrative, so that participants explore and discuss their experiences, ideas and understanding of events that shape their lives, unlock the stories of people who have been 'forgotten' in our current discourse around the struggle for a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa.

The stories that emerge from this process provide a wealth of insights into issues of land dispossession, resistance and restitution; and how we address land issues today.

**Keywords:** Khulumani, art-making, oral narrative, land dispossession, resistance

UNISA   
university  
of south africa

Oral History Journal of South Africa  
Volume 3 | Number 1 | 2015  
pp. 25–31

Print ISSN 2309-5792  
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## THE PROCESS: KHULUMANI'S ART, HEALING AND HERITAGE WORKSHOPS

The Khulumani workshops use visual art making combined with oral narrative to gather stories about the lives of Khulumani members across the country. Participants draw and paint images that recall and explore their own experiences of and responses to social injustice, focusing on the impact of personal and structural violations of human rights resulting from our apartheid past.

This concept grew out of four 'Art and Memory' workshops that Khulumani held with the South African History Archives in the East Rand and Vaal in 2007 and 2008. Based upon the East Rand workshops, Khulumani implemented the Art Healing and Heritage Workshop project with funds from the National Lottery. Between April and September 2013, Khulumani held three-day 'Art Healing and Heritage' workshops in 9 locations around the country. Each workshop consisted of 14 to 20 participants, chosen from Khulumani members in the community. The pictures of their experiences and ideas thus created are then displayed on the wall to the workshop; each person talks to the group about what they show in their picture – their personal journey. As workshop participants come from the local community, these stories invariably overlap and reinforce one another. The individual narratives are then followed by intense group discussion to develop a community perception and a collective response to the events described in the pictures. These narratives are recorded (both in notes and on video).

So far, Khulumani completed workshops in Illovo and Adams outside Amanzimtoti in KwaZulu-Natal; in Moutse in Limpopo; in Zamdala near Sasolburg; in Cathcart and Aliwal North in the Eastern Cape; and in Taung and in Tisneng village near Kuruman. We have also used a variation on this process in a workshop with widows attending the Marikana commission in Rustenburg. In total, the Art, Healing and Heritage Workshops have produced 142 personal narratives to date (not including the model workshops held earlier in the East Rand and the Vaal).

## ON THE METHODOLOGY

Many aspects of this workshop process have ramifications for the construction of oral history.

In the opening speech of the 10<sup>th</sup> OHASA conference, Radikape Ntsimane suggested that we must interrogate all oral history processes. He proposed that we consider the structures of identity, and the interactions of class, locality, gender, language, and power – and we must consider these for both the interviewer and the interviewee. We need to ask, for all of those involved in the oral history process, for each specific interview – what are the motives? What are the own subtexts?<sup>1</sup>

Let us investigate how methodology used in these workshops may address these critical questions.

First and upfront, we see this as an *activist research* methodology.

‘Activist research’ draws upon and extends the concept of participant research. The aim is to gather both individual and group experiences, moulding these into an alternative knowledge base that challenges entrenched ideas and explanations that emerged from, and commonly reinforce, the status quo.

Thus, activist research:

- enables people to build a narrative based upon their own experiences and insights.
- aims to build a collective understanding among people who share similar experiences and a common perspective of events.
- provides space for people to move away from repeating points of view that are embedded in established and publicly distributed histories.
- places the activist researcher on an even footing with other participants, so that their direct experience and knowledge of events are key to shaping conclusions.

A key outcome is that this approach encourages people to see themselves as actors, as creative and constructive contributors to their lives, rather than as passive objects who remain always on the receiving end of someone else’s power. Khulumani Support Group aims ‘to turn victims and survivors into victors’. This methodology works towards this.

This methodology emphasises the importance of the Khulumani Support Group as the organising body and framework for the workshops. Khulumani is a civil society-based membership organisation, which now has 85 000 members. It was originally formed in 1996 to support victims’ access and testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This included providing social and psychological support for people talking about traumatic, painful and often contentious events that determined the course of their lives. Holding these workshops within Khulumani’s space is an essential ingredient in building participants’ trust and respect, and leads to willingness to speak openly about contested events.

Within this space, we use art-making as a way to revisit their own experience and perception outside the filters built into most of our narratives through language, power and form. This is especially important for those who have had little access to formal education, and who may withdraw or hesitate if asked to tell their stories in a second language.

When people talk about events, even events they themselves have been through, they fit their ideas into an existing discourse. That discourse is commonly infused with preconceptions, from the words and language structure used, to decisions as to what is included as ‘relevant’ or ‘important’. This tends to confirm the notion that existing discourse commonly reflects the prevalent power structures.

By accessing memory through drawn images rather than ‘received words’, people are often more willing and able to put forward recollections and ideas that fall outside preconceptions and limitations.

Participants often begin describing events that happened to them with a comment on this process:

I am a Khulumani member. I am so glad that when I was giving up, Khulumani people came to my house, to come to this workshop .... When I was lying there, thinking about what I should draw, all things came back to my mind. I thought of that main day, when myself and my husband were staying in the house, it was five in the morning, we were sleeping ....<sup>2</sup>

A further step in this workshop methodology is to consider the process by which this unique heritage, once gathered, is conserved, made accessible and distributed in the public domain. This requires finding technologies and mechanisms that ensure that the originators of the heritage – the people who experienced and told these events – are involved with, and agree with, all subsequent stages: translation, editing, publication and exhibition, archiving and commemoration. For these workshops, this is still ‘work in progress’, and we hope to apply the questions Dr Ntsimane raised on the structures of identity, and the interactions of class, locality, gender, language and power to assess what works, and what problems arise around these.

## PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES: HOW THESE STORIES SPEAK TO OUR DISCOURSE ON LAND

So what do these narratives say to our national discourse on land dispossession and restitution?

The first, most striking outcome, is the extent of injustice over land. Having collected nearly 150 stories about how people experienced apartheid, we are impressed that almost inevitably each person begins with the loss of land, and the damage resulting from that – to great-grandparents, to grandparents, to parents and to the person speaking today.

I’m from Mankeng. The first thing was that when I was still working, in 1972; when I came home my parents were evicted. I lost my cattle, I lost my everything, because of the forced removal. I am still hurt (O Kebegile (Taung workshop)).<sup>3</sup>

Originally we lived at Richmond, then in Umkwanasi. In this area, we had seven children at home with my father and mother – but the Group Areas forced us to move to KwaMashu, where my father was working .... The father died. Three of the seven children died in KwaMashu. Four were left. One passed away on the same day as the father. When my father died, the municipality took the house at KwaMashu. We had difficulties when thrown out, but the neighbours took us in. Our mother went to work on the farms. The mother took us with her – the education of the children was difficult because we had to move around (Delisile (Illovo workshop)).<sup>4</sup>

In 1961 I started attending school at the primary level. After I passed standard six, I dropped out, then I went to look after my father's cattle, and helped him to plow the fields .... My father had TB, and we were plowing with him, even when he was in that situation. While we were busy plowing, the police came, looking for *mochelo* (a registration disk). Every day we went to the fields .... When the police came I hid my father from them. The police ran after us and beat us with sjamboks. They were beating us because they wanted us to show them where our father was. When the situation was like that, we would run to the mountain and hide in the caves so the police would not find us (Johanna Mojela (Matlereng workshop)).<sup>5</sup>

I resisted against forced removals, of the removal in 1948, against the reincorporation into KwaNedebele in 1986, and also the demarcation of 2008. I survived in 1948, I was five years. I was put in the tent – I still feel the sensation when they put me in that tent on an ox-wagon, crossing the river from that side to this side.... I'm still involved in the struggle for land redistribution. I gave a petition to the Minister on June 12, 2013. I gave him the soil and said: they stole our lands and our names, gave us names we will never accept. Now I am old, walking with a stick, but I'm still in struggle. I won't rest until the land is returned back to its owners (Jonas Makuhyana (Moutse workshop)).<sup>6</sup>

Without land, people had to work as farm labourers on white-owned commercial farms. Families were broken by migrant labour and urbanisation. Participants tell of their struggles for survival and resistance through these life-changing events.

Beyond the damage of land dispossession and removals, people turn towards what would be a path to reparation.

One common thread in workshop discussions is the widespread unease with underlying assumptions about how to address the land problem, which were adapted during the negotiations to end apartheid, and incorporated in the TRC and post-1994 land claims processes. The negotiations agreed that land dispossession would not be addressed by the TRC. The TRC looked at human rights violations during conflict over land; but not at the broader, structural issue of land dispossession as a fundamental violation.

The point was recently emphasised by Frank Meintjies:

[T]he TRC's bigger failure is that it failed to address the more collective loss of dignity, opportunities and systemic violence experienced by the oppressed. No hearings were held on land issues, on the education system, on the migrant labour system and on the role of companies that collaborated with, and made money from, the apartheid security system.<sup>7</sup>

Meintjies cites Mahmood Mamdani:

The TRC held individual state officials criminally responsible, but for only those actions that would have been defined as crimes under apartheid law. It distinguished between the law-driven violence of the apartheid state – pass laws, forced removals, and so on – as legal if not legitimate, and the excess violence of its operatives, as illegal.<sup>8</sup>

Rather, the injustices in land dispossession were limited to acts done under the 1913 Land Act, and apartheid removals. Restitution was based upon the principle of

‘willing buyer willing seller’. In practice this limits restitution to giving people or communities back the patch of land for which they can show a legal claim.

These restrictions to the land claims process ignore our history. Many people were forced to move from their established lands from the early 1800s, causing loss of livelihood, property, prosperity and sometimes life. The current restitution gives no remedy for descendants of these people.

A second problem arises around the gendered nature of the current land claims process – a problem that gender activists have repeatedly raised. Land claims are commonly defined in terms of ‘traditional’ rights to the land, which are interpreted as patriarchal rights. Restitution comprises a narrow legal process to return specific identified land areas to heirs who can document claims – these most often identify male descendants. Women’s claim fall off the table.

## TOWARDS A WAY FORWARD

The narratives that emerge around land dispossession and restitution in the Khulumani workshops lead to a different perspective on how we should approach problems and solutions towards the land issue today. People’s demands go beyond impatience at the slow process of identifying, obtaining and giving back land to ‘rightful heirs’. The current offer by government to reopen the existing land claims process for a further five years does not begin to address these larger structural issues.

Workshop discussions growing from participants’ own stories around land lead towards another approach to remedy, to completely revisit our national discourse around land dispossession, removals and restitution. We need to recognise the broad trail of human suffering caused by injustice over the land, and the structural damage that remains engrained in our society. Continuing or even strengthening the current narrow settlement of land claims simply will not bring about social, economic and political transformation that our nation so desperately needs.

## NOTES:

1. Dr. Radikabo Ntsimane, Acting President OHASA, opening ceremony, 10 National OHASA conference, 8 October 2013, Kimberley.
2. Susan Keagilenyane, narrative Taung workshop, 26 August, 2013 (video, Khulumani Support Group archive).
3. O Kebegile, narrative at Taung workshop, 27 August 2013 (video, Khulumani Support Group archive).
4. Delisile (surname withheld on request), narrative at Illovo workshop, 17 March 2013 (video, Khulumani Support Group archive).
5. Johanna Mojela , narrative at Matlereng workshop, 28 June 2013 (video, Khulumani Support Group archive).

6. Jonas Makuhyana, narrative at Matlereng workshop, 28 June 2013 (video, Khulumani Support Group archive)
7. Frank Meintjies. The TRC and CODESA failed South Africa: It's time we reflected on this. Retrieved from <http://www.sacsis.org.za/site/article/1783#comments> (Accessed 12 September 2013).
8. *Ibid.*, Frank Meintjies.