

The Development and Preservation of the Basarwa's Traditional Culture through Art and Education in Botswana



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Introduction

In countries around the world—developed and developing—providing curriculum that honors language and cultural practices has proven to be an effective measure in assisting indigenous minorities attain the practical skills they need in order to become productive members of society. It has been stated that the challenge development practitioners face in providing indigenous children with educational provision is to create curricula, pedagogical methodologies and school environments that foster rather than undermine respect for indigenous culture—whilst simultaneously offering a rigorous educational program in literacy, numeracy, and other intellectual and vocational skills they need in order to succeed socially and economically in the national context (Schimmel 2007). The language in which education is administered is an often overlooked problem within various education systems around the world, yet the detriment this linguistic schism causes language-minority students is far from negligible.



Figure 1. Basarwa Students

Methods

I interviewed Khoisan residents that were from Ghanzi: 2 were employed and 3 were students at the University of Botswana. I asked them questions pertinent to their culture, traditions, educational experience, educational attainment, and views of development in order to gain a better sense of education's holistic effect on personal development in Ghanzi. While their views and experiences may not serve as the general perspective of San located in Ghanzi, the questions I asked produced fascinating results.

I am beginning to interview Basarwa as well to assess their views and knowledge of San art and culture. More importantly, I will analyze how those views and notions affect their interactions with San citizens. In this case the San and Basarwa views on development may not vary as much due to their relative inclusion in mainstream Tswana society. This affects the findings in my study, because I am not able to visit a community where a larger Khoisan population is available. If I had gone to the CKGR to conduct interviews the results and responses may have varied more, and would have given the reader a more balanced perspective of this very important issue.

Results

When asked about the cultural functionality of art, four out of five respondents agreed that art was culturally significant. Some respondents agreed that art was a fundamental part of Khoisan culture. The respondents said that they did not really learn about their culture much in school. Four out of five stated that they were displeased with how their culture was represented in history books. Two out of five stated that this affected their ability to matriculate through formal schools. When asked about the state of formal education in Ghanzi, all respondents described the schools they went to as inadequate. This means that the quality of staff, the environments, curriculum were lacking. Shortages of staff available to teach, shortages of classrooms and lack of resources, hostile environments, and location of schools were all reasons for their views. All five agreed that a Sesarwa language transition program would have helped them in school. One respondent stated, "it felt like I was using foreign knowledge. More so, I felt like I was expected to follow the rules in a foreign learning environment. It was like brainwashing." He went on to say that this feeling did manifest itself in his low academic performance. Another respondent said that the foreign hostile environment in which he received instruction caused him to drop out at the age of eight years old.

Of the 5 Khoisan members interviewed, all of them were males. All identified themselves as 'Masarwa'. Their mother tongues varied, two out of five interviewees spoke Sengologa and three spoke Naro. Both of these languages are dialects of Sesarwa. Four out of five subjects believed that their native language was both culturally significant, and beneficial to their personal development. All interviewees spoke multiple languages including English and Setswana. All five agreed that knowing these two languages was functional for their socioeconomic development. Four out of five subjects were introduced to English and Setswana in formal school. Four out of five graduated from primary school. Two out of five are currently in college. Three are currently working and received some level of formal education. All respondents recalled being introduced to Western and Tswana culture more than their own culture in school. They expressed dismay in the small amount that they, and other, learned about their culture. One stated that it glossed over the intricacies of San living such as initiation, animal tracking techniques, and belief systems.

Four out of five respondents saw benefits for the San in development. However, all respondents stated that they did not believe that the formal education system helps the San fully develop. One respondent stated, "it doesn't because it is not in accordance with the Basarwa lifestyle. Art is there, but our language should be recognized, and we should be taught in Sesarwa and Setswana during our primary school years." Another respondent said, "They throw us in these schools without understanding the Bushmen mentality. They don't know how our minds work. We learn through using our hands, friends, nature, and the spirit. We experience education; it isn't something you can just read to us." All subjects stated that they did not have a single class taught in Sesarwa throughout their matriculation.

Indigenous populations in Botswana still have the lowest educational attainment in Botswana (Hay 2011). While the Khoisan in Ghanzi may not be ready for complete assimilation, views of development amongst this group have changed significantly since 1966. Most people in this region were not interested in education immediately after independence, however that has changed. Nonetheless, students still encounter environments and curricula that are intimidating and often times not conducive to sufficient learning. Many students drop out, but a few survive. Since education is heavily linked to upward social mobility in Botswana, many dropouts in Ghanzi join the ranks of the unemployed in Botswana, and those who matriculate have the chance to chart their own destinies.

When indigenous minorities do matriculate through formal education systems they tend to play a big role in advocating for better development in their communities. Of the two collegiate respondents I interviewed, both stated that they would like to help in Ghanzi region. One stated, "With my degree, I plan to use my skills to get into community development initiatives in the Ghanzi region." The other stated that he would like to provide jobs for citizens in the region.

Education is obviously an important component of the development process. Indigenous lawyers, activists, and teachers who have endured formal education understand that it is like a 12-year sentence for most indigenous students; and these indigenous advocates tend to play a vital role in informing local, national, and international development movements and policies related to the education rights of indigenous people worldwide (Hays 2011). Contemporary human rights organizations such as, the World Declaration on Education have produced laws that state, "Traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development" (Hays 2011). This section will present the reader with examples of successful language-minority programs and cultural curricula around the world, and then present the reader with a solution that may work for Basarwa students in Ghanzi.



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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the University of Botswana and the Ministry of Youth Sports and Culture for approving my topic. I would like to thank Chris Collins for lending me linguistic materials pertinent to my study. And I would especially like to thank Bill Moseley for his continuous help throughout this independent study process.