

**An Endless Desert Walk:  
Perspectives of Education from the San in Botswana**

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### **Abstract**

The San tribe in Botswana has historically been oppressed as they have struggled to maintain their culture and livelihood in the face of change. This article presents a portion of a multiple case study of access to education in Botswana, examining access to education for the San, a minority tribe with little access to formal schooling. The findings indicate that the San face barriers to educational access such as language differences, the inconvenient location of formal schools, the impact of tribal resettlement, and cultural differences. The barriers experienced by the San imply the need for educational reform to better include this group in formal education.

### **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Is it equality to bring in a few token San people, into formal schooling? Or, is this really just going to force these people into cultural genocide for the sake of maintaining the elitist structure? And, then what is the answer? You can never un-ring the bell as it were. Once the inequality exists, and it always does, it is nearly impossible to make an even playing field. Many efforts need to be evaluated to see if they are being made with true sincerity, or merely a puppeteer's maintenance of the system of the status quo (Researcher Journal, June 25, 2001).

Looking back through my journal, I found this reflection about my experience in Botswana. This passage was written on June 25, 2001, only ten days after beginning my

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Robert Hitchcock for his support of my research in Botswana and Robert Armove, Barry Bull, and Rich Hoover for reading earlier versions of this paper and providing insightful comments. All errors and assertions remain my own.

research project. I began my journey to Botswana, and my research, with all of the naiveté and arrogance that my own life of privilege had afforded to me. My intent was to study access to higher education. However, the study of access to higher education for the San, a minority group in Botswana, would be nearly meaningless as many San do not even complete secondary school.

This paper presents part of a multiple case study analysis of access to higher education in Botswana. Specifically, this paper considers San perspectives regarding primary and secondary schooling access for the San. The findings of this research indicate that there is much work to be done for the San to achieve access to formal educational systems in Botswana. This paper proceeds as follows: the context of Botswana, the research design, the findings and a discussion of the San schooling situation.

## **2. The Botswana Context**

The San of Botswana have been historically oppressed as a minority tribe. In education, the San are often marginalized and subordinated. A portion of a multiple case study will provide a background of the challenges that the San face within the educational system in Botswana. These challenges imply the need for educational reform in Botswana to better serve the San.

### *2.1 Historical Framework and Background of Botswana*

The tension between unity and pluralism is evidenced worldwide and Botswana certainly is an illustration of this tension. As Kymlicka (1995) notes,

According to recent estimates the world's 184 independent states contain over 600 living language groups and 5,000 ethnic groups. There are

estimated to be over 6,000 different languages worldwide (Grimes, 1992).

In very few countries can the citizens be said to share the same language, or belong to the same ethno-national group (p. 1).

Botswana has a large majority tribal group and numerous minority groups. The Setswana-speaking principal tribal majority group, the Tswana or Batswana people, account for approximately 80% of the nation's population (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1998, p.48), which may be an underestimate according to more recent data which suggests that the correct figure may be closer to 90% (De Beaugrande, 2000, p. 331). There are also twelve to fifteen minority groups in Botswana who generally speak Setswana and English as second and third languages (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1998, p. 48).

Some of these minority groups are the San, the Kalanga, the Mbukushu, the Yei, and the Herero. The Kalanga are the second largest group in Botswana (Swaney, 1999). The Kalanga, mostly descendents from the Rozwi Empire responsible for building the Great Zimbabwe, are a growing elite tribe in Botswana (Swaney, 1999). The San, on the other side of coin, arguably one of the most underprivileged groups in Botswana, are discussed in this paper. The San account for less than 1% of the population in Botswana (Grimes, 1992).

Botswana was a Protectorate of the United Kingdom from 1885-1966 (Merkstein, 1998, p. 173). Upon independence in 1966, the government of Botswana declared that the people of the country would *all* be called "Batswana", regardless of their actual ethnic origin or ancestry (Lane, 1997). In part, this policy was a reaction to the history of Apartheid in South Africa, of which Botswana is a northern neighbor. After the end of Apartheid policies, there was a push in Southern African nations not to separate or

distinguish between ethnic groups. Due to the painful history of Apartheid policies, there is a suspicion of moves to defend group cultural rights in much of Southern Africa (Enslin, 2001). As well, the people of Botswana desired to become a unified nation upon their independence

## *2.2 The San of Botswana*

The San most likely inhabited southern Africa for at least 30,000 years as a nomadic hunter and gatherer tribe (Lane, 1997; Swaney, 1999, p. 430). The culture and language of these people are distinctly different from the Batswana. They speak a language called Khoisan, which consists of dental and palatal clicks (Swaney, 1999; Lane, 1997). The culture respects individualism, has no formal system of leadership, and is highly peaceful (le Roux, 2002).

There are currently very little to no demographic data regarding minorities in Botswana. The political climate, as previously explained, facilitated the reluctance of the Government of Botswana to single out any specific ethnic group as needing any type of special attention. However, a potentially unintended consequence of the political attitude has resulted in a neglect of attention to problems that *may* in fact be unique and specific to the San and other minority groups.

There is an overt oppression and a condescending attitude toward the San in Southern Africa (Bolaane, 1997). Traditionally Tswana groups have dominated the San (Meyers et al., 1993; Nthomang, 1997). During the past few decades, the San lost access to their homeland, and to their traditional hunting and gathering livelihood. Settlements, part of the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP) through the Botswana government, were built in an attempt to provide a solution to the impoverishment of the

San after they lost their land and were no longer able to maintain their hunting and gather lifestyle (le Roux, 2002). The resettlement of the San is a controversial topic, but it initiated as cattle farmers began to move into the Kalahari Dessert. Although previously, as early as the 1970s, some of the San moved from the Kalahari to resettlements of their own free will, there was a forced resettlement of the majority of the San in 1998. The resettlement initiated much distrust between the San people and the government. Taylor (1997) in a study of San identity was told by a San man, “Our government is involved in an intentional programme of genocide against the Basarwa. All over the country, the Basarwa have not been treated as people.”

There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the San resettlement. The discovery of diamonds and oil in the Kalahari Desert where the San resided, has led to speculation that the San were moved for political and economic reasons. After all, diamonds alone account for 40% of Botswana’s Gross National Product, 50% of its government revenue, and 70% of the country’s foreign exchange (Swaney, 1999).

Hitchcock et al. (1987) argued that the standard of living for many indigenous people was declining because of dispossession of land, exploitation, and the interaction with a more complex culture. The San have experienced this decline in standard of living since resettlement. After the resettlement, the San were encouraged to make their living from agriculture, but they have no experience in this area (le Roux, 2002). The forced resettlement of the San, coupled with the loss of their traditional livelihood, created a sense of hopelessness and despair (Hitchcock, 1992) which manifests itself in unemployment, poverty, and alcoholism (le Roux, 2002).

### *Centralized Education in Botswana*

The United Kingdom influenced the country of Botswana and its institutions in many ways. One of the most salient areas of British influence that is still noteworthy today is education. After Independence, Botswana retained British English as the official language of the country, while Setswana, the language spoken by the majority group in Botswana, was declared the dominant language (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1998). In education, the British model was maintained, and English is the primary language of instruction. Students attend primary school for seven years (Standard 1-7), middle school for three years (Form 1-3), and secondary school for two years (Form 4-5). While ten years of schooling are available to all, examinations at each level often determine the type of schooling received and future educational opportunities such as the chance to attend tertiary education. For tertiary, or higher education, there is university offering four-year degree programs, the University of Botswana.

The historical influence of the United Kingdom provided a model of centralized institutions in Botswana (Meyer et al., 1993, p.471). While individual schools and educational experiences vary, the educational system in Botswana was primarily centralized. Upon Independence, Botswana further centralized the educational system: the teacher selection, curriculum, examination writing, and grading are all centralized through the Botswana Ministry of Education (Meyer et al., 1993). While there is a system of private education in Botswana, the examinations are still controlled by the government. Even the adult literacy program is centralized, under the control of the national government (Maruaratona, 2002).

Meyer et al. (1993) stated that, “Botswana is not to be seen as a collection of disparate groups but as an integrated entity whose policies are to be formulated nationally. Deviations from this are not seen as desirable instances of localism but as exceptions and failures to be overcome.” (p. 460). In fact, in their study of mass education expansion in Botswana, Meyer et al. (1993) found that even in the rural areas of Botswana that the people did not desire increased local control of education. Because the system is so centralized, it may seem easier to meet the needs of the majority, and to keep from focusing on differences. The centralized education has some inherent power structures because this system is primarily led by the people from the dominant Tswana tribal group.

Educational policies and practices are not considered to be an area of controversy in Botswana (Meyer et al, 1993, p. 463). The lack of controversy could stem from the centralized system and from the overarching goal of the country to present a unified front. Or, the discomfort with controversy could be the tribal culture which is highly respectful of authority and of elders.

#### *2.4 Education of the San in Botswana*

The San, coming from a culture which values peace, non-violence, and free interaction between adults and children, often find a culture clash in formal education in Botswana because traditional San education is informal and incorporated into the everyday lives of the children (le Roux, 2002). The San are often excluded from formal education altogether because the resettlements are in the remote areas of Botswana where it is more difficult to gain access to education (Meyers et al., 1993, p.465). While boarding arrangements do exist, retention remains a problem (Mazonde, 1997). In fact, a



study conducted in 1995 found that only 18% of San children were in primary or secondary school (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 1995, p. 1).

There are many reasons for a lower success rate, attendance rate, and rate of retention. Hitchcock (2000) describing the educational situation for the San gave seven primary reasons for the situation including: an emphasis in schools on the dominant Tswana culture, teachers with cultural backgrounds different from the San, teaching and corporal punishment methods which are contrary to San culture, the separation of children from their families, insufficient financial support, and the need for parents to have their children working at home (p. 3).

### **3. Methods**

The purpose of this portion of the multiple case study was to explore San perceptions of access to education and experiences within education. I employed a case study research methodology in this study. I chose case study research because: the research question was perception-based, the study was exploratory as there was very little existing research, multiple views were desired, and English was a second or third language for the participants. Initially, I conducted fifteen informal interviews to gain initial access to the participants. Twelve of these participants were then chosen for semi-structured interviews. Individuals in this case study were selected for their unique perspectives on the system of education in Botswana in order to understand participants' diverse experiences in education. The interviews varied in length from one to six hours.

I recorded each interview on audio-tape and transcribed them verbatim. Also, I kept a research journal for field notes. Then, I coded the transcriptions using "in vivo" coding, or the exact language of the participants. Theme and sub-theme funnel diagrams served

as a way to group the in vivo codes. I manually sorted the data into specific themes and sub-themes.

The validity of the findings were enhanced because: the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim; there was prolonged engagement in the field; observations were triangulated using multiple methods and multiple sources; thick, rich descriptions were developed; a clear record of participant selection processes and of methods was maintained; and a research audit was completed to compensate for potential researcher bias. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality for the participants.

#### **4. Findings from the San**

Five themes about San education emerged: language, school distance, resettlement, Batswana, and cultural differences. Each theme is defined below:

- Resettlement: The forced move of the San tribe from one part of the country of Botswana (i.e. the central portion of the Kalahari Desert) to another area (i.e. the Northwest corner).
- School distance: The distance travel to attend an educational institution.
- Language: Discussion of language differences, the impact of language, or language in education.
- Batswana: Any comments from Batswana people, or regarding the majority ethnic group in Botswana.
- Cultural Differences: Discussion about the differences between San culture and the culture of schooling, or the culture of decision-makers in education.

#### *4.1 Resettlement*

The forced resettlement of the San required them to be moved to the northwest corner of the country. The large portion of the resettlement occurred in 1998 and it is rumored that the motivation behind the resettlement was that of diamonds and oil that were found in the Kalahari Desert where the San were living. For the San, they were forced to change their entire system of survival because they were no longer allowed to be nomadic. This resettlement has a continued significant impact on the access to education for the San. Pedisi explains the situation, “You see the dominant group reaching for the justification. So he has to trample on the minority.”

In speaking with one of the elders, I was struck at the intense sorrow that he expressed in the interview regarding the resettlement and the extraction of diamonds and oil from their old homelands:

...you are taking me out of the place where the dust from which our Creator is. And the land rejects me. You see the lands where these people are fighting...those are the bones of our great grandparents. The oil that they are talking about is the marrow from their bones. The grease they are talking about is the brains from their heads.

Pedisi also spoke about resettlement and his feelings regarding the loss of his nomadic lifestyle:

Our promised land is where our Gods are. Where I can go and talk with the trees and they understand me. Where the land is alive. But here, I'm suffering because the land doesn't love me, and I don't understand the land.

This statement indicates the extent to which the San's land and culture were disrupted in the Resettlement process. For formal education to be successful for the San, it may be important to consider how the Resettlement is changing the culture and nomadic lifestyle of the San, and also ways to allow education to assist the San to keep aspects of their traditional culture alive.

#### *4.2 School Distance*

When the San experienced forced resettlement in the late 1990s, they were promised formal educational opportunities. However, the schools are often as far as 70 kilometers from the Settlements where the San live. Therefore, children, as young as seven must either leave their homes to be boarded or walk long distances, sometimes up to 14 kilometers per day in order to attend school. Ron, an elder of the San tribe, spoke about the language barrier for the San, as well as the school distance. He explained, "Some students such as the San do not have equal education. When starting schooling, they are taken away from their mother. They go to school with different others they don't know." He continued, "Children at six or seven years [old] do not go home because it is a far distance and they are not transported back. Children do not go home because it's a far distance and they are not transported back." During vacations, he noted, parents are given "two or three weeks only with their children."

For children, especially when they are young, this removal from their parents, coupled with the lack of transportation to schools, can be detrimental to their education. General, one of the few San who graduated from the University of Botswana reflected on his past:

I was taken from my parents....to go to school. Friday afternoons we are to walk some 20 kilometers until we reach our parents. It was very difficult for me to stay without my parents. I was just counting the days....I [did] not concentrate much on what I was taught in school.

Ron explained the way that school distance impacts access to and success within schooling, “Children at school start to think about their mother and their father. It gives them a hard time to really attempt to give effort to the school.”

#### *4.3 Language*

Language was a predominant theme throughout all of the interviews with the San. The majority of the San in Botswana speak Khoisan, a palatal click language, as their mother tongue. Setswana and English, which are primarily used in the schools, are usually second and third languages for the San. In schools, the San are disadvantaged, especially upon initial entry, because they often do not understand the usual language of instruction and/or English. Also, the gateway examinations following primary school, junior high school, and secondary schooling are in English. These examinations determine access for future education in Botswana, specifically access to tertiary education, and become an impediment to educational advancement, especially for the San. Ron, one of the tribal elders explains:

Children normally start with the very difficult two official languages; other than starting with the mother tongue language. That makes it very difficult for some children to capture school at the same levels as the young Hintu speaker or Setswana speaker. Because if the San children will struggle to get to know this Setswana language and will struggle to get to know the English language. That

takes a few years before he can capture [the language] and become equal with others. And sometimes the San children are beaten because of not understanding that language, forcing them to understand the language. They scare them, so the children are without hope when they stay there.

Another participant, Sedisa, recalls his own experience regarding language barriers in education:

And you are thrown into a hostile situation where you are different from everybody around you. They treat you with disregard and therefore you can't make it in education there. So, you are disadvantaged from the start. In terms of our education system, you are taught in Setswana. We have two options: English and Setswana. But, the San find themselves in a situation whereby they don't [speak those languages.]

A San parent, Gomolemo, explained the confusion that children feel, having to speak different languages at home and at school: "Every three months they have to change languages. When they go to school, they have to learn a new language. When they come home, they learn their own language."

#### *4.4 Batswana*

In discussing access to education with the San, it was apparent that the San perceived education to only be open to certain families and certain tribes, particularly those from the Batswana tribe. For example, Samuel, a young San man explained access to education, "It depends on who you really are and who your parents are. It's well known that you depend on your name....on the family that you come from." Another man explained the educational system, "Our system is very discriminatory. It

discriminates...there's no second chance...Unless you go to private school.” However, for the San, private schools do not appear to be an option from their perspective.

Sedisa, an advocate for the San explained that many of the San school-age children were working on farms for people from the Batswana tribe. He elaborated, “They are underage. But they are employed and do not attend school. They work and they are not getting paid.” When asked to discuss the San, many from the Batswana tribe did not see there to be any issues. For example, Mguni, a college-educated Batswana man explained:

We are all Batswana and we are proud to be that. Batswana. We see ourselves as one identifiable group. You don't break them into groups. Generally, we just mingle together because we use the same language. I mean its not like in the United States [where] there are so many nationalities from all walks of life out there. But as far as here, we are all just from on ancestor. We don't have that kind of problem.

Nonetheless, even though some people from the Batswana tribe do not recognize the San as a unique tribe, the San are at times harassed by Batswana teachers and by their Batswana peers at school. Particularly this discrimination comes in the form or name-calling. For example, the term “Basarwa” or “Mosarwa” is often used as a derogatory term to denote a person from the sticks, an ignorant person, or someone who is not intelligent. As a San tribal elder, Ron explained:

Some other children or other Setswana speaking people will discourage them by saying, nickname, by saying, ‘This Basarwa’ or ‘This Mosarwa’ will not capture

education. Those little discouraging words make them feel pain in their hearts and they do not concentrate on school

#### *4.5 Cultural Differences*

While boarding arrangements enable the San to attend formal education, there remains a significant difference between education for the San and for the Tswana majority. Another emergent theme in the transcripts of the interviews with the San was that of cultural differences in education. The San overwhelmingly described the formal educational experience to be contrary to their culture. One participant explained, “The problem is what I like to call frozen education, where you’re importing something.” Not only is the language unfamiliar but there is also frequent use of corporal punishment in schools. Gomolemo reflects on this, “In the primary schools [the San] are uncomfortable because sometimes teachers would bully them.” The San, a peaceful people, do not believe in violence of any kind. Ron describes this, “In our culture we do not beat our children. But in school, the way they have been beaten in several schools...we hear reports that children have been beaten.” This is only one example of school culture that is not inclusive of the San. Pedisi provides his view of the culture clash in schools:

[There is] culture shock that one has to deal with. There is abuse by other young people, their classmates, maybe even teachers. The way they look at you. For you to make it...you have to go there and be concerned that you have a point to prove. But it’s not healthy to want to prove a point.

While the formal educational system can at times be discriminatory toward the San, there is evidence of a strong desire from the San to become



formally educated. Gomolemo, a San tribal elder, discussed the way in which the aforementioned harassment impacts the San children. Gomolemo explained:

I'm not educated at all. And though I'm not educated, I used to stay with someone who taught me how to read in Setswana. Definitely, I think that the San can be thirsty of education. But at schools they are bullied and people are laughing at them and makes the shy away from education. That is, to run away from education. In the primary schools, they are uncomfortable because sometimes some teachers [are] bullying them.

Another cultural difference can be attributed to economic differences between the San and other students. Gomolemo elucidated the situation, "Economic [status] counts, because that's idealized at schools." The San children notice, "folks will be dressing in nice cloths...and will be enjoying the nice food. Those things make them shy, they don't become free in education."

For those San children who do attend schools, they may experience a culture clash upon returning home, potentially leading to a lack of acceptance from their own tribe. Ron explained this from his own perspective, alluding to the importance of elders in the San culture:

If they go back to our village, he will refuse even an elder. I'm trying to think if this is how he is taught at school because I don't know why he is behaving like this. Why is he behaving like this? School confuses lots of customs and cultures.

The San often have difficulty understanding the hierarchy represented by mainstream education in Botswana. Because the educational system in Botswana is centralized and primarily administered by those from the Batswana majority tribe, it

seems unlikely that people who are in the minority have a voice in educational policies. For the San, this could be very detrimental as the educational policies do not reflect their culture and their self-perceived best interests. Sedisa, an advocate for the San argued, “How do we, without imposing anything, help them to help themselves out of where they are?” He inquired, “How can people be educated and still be different and have something?” He continues, “[We] made them what they are not instead of an education that helps.” Sedisa explains the Government of Botswana’s actions in education as perceived by the San:

We are writing all of these policies and everything [from the] outside looking in. One needs to be with the people, see where they want to be going, what they believe in...and [then] help them in their education. Help them to determine what [education] means to them.

Sedisa considered an alternative to the current educational policies and practices regarding the San:

It must be them helping us together to determine what kind of educational system would be best for them. And that should influence the whole country now because I guess we have something to learn from them also.

In summarizing his passionate stance on San issues, Sedisa reasoned that the San “should be key players [in educational policy] but now, they are like pawns.” He stated with a note of nostalgia, “They are holding onto what they have. What we used to have.” He concluded, “We should have learned from the mistakes and the agony of the past that we had to go through, so as not to help the other people experience the same agony.”

## 5. Discussion of the Situation of the San People and Education

One participant who was in the majority explained her view that the educational system in Botswana is not equally accessible: “So, there is a bottleneck [of education]. A bottleneck, whereby it is fixed and only a few can get through it.” However, for the San, the bottleneck in education also includes the language and cultural differences in school. For the San, it seems that very few are able to move through that bottleneck because of cultural differences, language barriers, school distance, and oppression. One participant, Madala discussed his perception of a way to improve access, “To have a broader experience, we need to integrate related cultures and unrelated cultures and come up with something that is good for us from all of these other cultures.”

The findings of this study are not inconsistent with the limited research conducted about San issues in education (le Roux, 2002). For example, in a study examining the outcomes of pre-school education for the San, attempting to understand San progress in primary school, there was evidence that the San children face barriers to education because of the lack of mother-tongue teaching, a lack of cultural understanding in formal education, and corporal punishment (le Roux, 2002). Because the findings le Roux’s (2002) study were consistent with the findings presented here, I will adapt some of the recommendations made in that study:

- Build relationships between San parents, children, extension workers, and schools.
- Cultural training should be offered to all teachers teaching San children.
- Parents should be included more centrally in decisions about the educational process.

- Options for teaching traditional San tribal knowledge should be pursued for curriculum in primary and secondary schools.
- Schools should consider hiring permanent translators and parents as teacher's aides as a way to overcome the language barriers in education.
- More attention should be given to palatal click languages so that teachers can understand ways to teach spelling and grammar that are amenable to the San's native language.

Ultimately, the San must be brought into the discussion about formal education. Perhaps lessons can also be learned from multicultural education frameworks, many of which stem from nations such as the United States, Australia, or Canada (Banks & McGee Banks, 1993, 2004). Kymlicka (1995) argues that some human rights policies and multicultural policies still fall vulnerable to serving the needs of the majority at the sacrifice of minority groups (p. 5). He cites the case of the American Indians from the United States as an example of what happens in the absence of multicultural education. Kymlicka (1995) states that, "racism against Indians comes primarily from the denial by Whites that Indians are distinct peoples with their own cultures and communities" (p. 60). Perhaps this is the issue at hand in Botswana: as the Government of Botswana attempted to create a unified nation, deeming all people to be "Batswana," there was a failure to recognize that the San are a distinct people with their own culture and community. Botswana should be advised to compare models of multicultural education from other African nations. For the San and other minorities in Botswana, it would be important to include them in the discussion about what traditions should be maintained within the educational system, thus creating a unique form of multicultural education.

From this study, one can consider extended research that would be beneficial to the work for educational equality of the San. A more extended study, such as an ethnographic study, needs to be conducted before one can make more conclusive suggestions regarding the possibilities for helping the San gain access to education. For example, one needs to fully understand the cultural situation, tribal norms, and the desires of the San before implementing further educational policies. Also, this study did not have evidence of the government's perspective on San education and this perspective would provide valuable insight for future research.

## **6. Conclusion**

Taylor (1997) in his study of San identity cited San people saying, "It is our culture and we don't want our children discarded by progress. We want to teach them as we ourselves were taught by our parents." (p. 65). I cannot underscore enough the importance of including the San in further discussions about educational policies and practices. The findings of this case study of San perceptions of access to education in Botswana indicate a need to fashion formal education in a way that is culturally sensitive and relevant to the San people. Parents of San children must be included in the educational decisions-making process if access to education is to be increased for the San. Hitchcock (1992) concludes that over the past two decades, the San have organized local action committees, attempting to empower themselves. These grassroots organizations may provide a useful example of ways in which the San can be included in educational processes.

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