

# **A NOTE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN INDIGENOUS TEACHING CLASSROOM FOR THE SAN: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS**

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## **Abstract**

The need to have a culturally relevant education system is not unique to Botswana. Over the last two decades, many governments in developing countries have changed their ideological orientation towards indigenous people's education and espoused a more pluralistic, inclusive approach to the cultural diversity within their borders. The inclusion and participation of San in the education of their children as well as the use of teaching methods like observation and practice has the potential to change the current educational results among the San community.

**Keywords:** Observation and practice, teaching methods, indigenous education system, San

## **1.0 Introduction**

In the traditional education system in Africa, children observed family and community members on a daily basis not only as part of the socialization process but also educational in regard to the culture and tradition of their community. Through this teaching method, younger generations acquired the history and values of their community and learnt how to fit into the culture of the community. The content of indigenous education was of paramount importance; acquiring attendant requisite skills needed to harness this indigenous wealth was also pivotal. Malin et al. (2003) avers that the traditional education system is intimately integrated with the social, cultural, artistic, religious, and recreational life of an ethnic group. The teaching method of practice further stressed togetherness or unity as well as understanding the obligations of everyone in the society. The concept of togetherness fostered the notion of living and working with others within societies or chiefdoms. There were rights and obligations, but there were also limitations of rights so that all understood the boundaries. Darch et al. (2004) confirms that norms and values of the community such as honesty, loyalty, bravery, leadership, responsibility, and accountability were part and parcel of the curriculum that developed the child. This article seeks to contribute to knowledge by sharing some of the best practices of the San that could potentially benefit the current education system in Botswana.

## **2.0 Brief literature review**

In Australia, indigenous education advanced as the Aboriginal people maintained complex social, political, and cultural kinship systems encompassing customary laws, lore and the type of learning that embraced and explained their conceptual understanding of the intricate interconnections between the world, their land, and their environment (Saugestad et al., 2001). Their education practices and systems were based on the transferring and acquisition of spoken knowledge; teaching was thus done by experience and observation. The Aboriginal children observed and learnt from community elders. Ntseane (2011) stressed that Aboriginal students

prefer learning facts and practical skills in a concrete, sequenced, and structured manner and through intuition, as evidenced in their artistic and creative abilities. They also prefer extroversion, and this suggests that indigenous education took pleasure in cooperative and group-oriented learning, involvement in discussions, interactions, and activities.

In Nigeria children observed adults as they performed their communal activities and imitated them (Malin et al., 2003). However, Adeyemi et al. (2009) opine that some generations have diverted from these original modes of teaching and modified the culture they inherited and have adapted it to their own modern situations. In Botswana, children were drilled in social etiquette, instructed in agricultural methods and many other skills to ensure efficient running of the social entity of which they were integral members. For instance, boys were equipped with trapping skills, young men who had come of age were taken through initiation schools where they were capacitated to hunt, skin animals, work with leather, among other things. For girls it was the skills of doing household chores, gathering wild fruits and vegetables, and working in arable farms, among others. Observation, experimentation, and participation were the main modes of teaching (Tlhalefang et al., 2006). San people in Botswana had expertise in locating water sources and this task was performed by adult men who taught younger ones on how to locate water through practical indigenous methods (Tlhalefang et al., 2006). Practice as a way of educating younger generations in the community meant that the behaviour of children reflected a people's way of living, within which their identity was partly embedded. The San children of Ghanzi, like those of many traditional hunter-gatherer communities, participated in adult social processes and activities by identification and imitation and learnt through observing these practices and emulating the adults. Other means of learning and teaching were by narration. Traditional legends and proverbs were told and retold by the fireside in the evenings by the adults, especially older women who were traditionally the repositories of such legends, proverbs, and other kinds of narratives. These tales were rich in culture and heritage and were significant conveyers and vehicles of such cultural heritage to posterity and a means of perpetuating and preserving it. Mokibelo et al. (2006) highlight that San education was holistic and socially determined and emphasized practical, theoretical modes of skills acquisition and knowledge generation, and this is the reason why San children do well in egalitarian and collaborative work.

### **3.0 Aim of the study**

The current study sought to explore modes of information and skills transfer and acquisition to younger generations of San people, with particular focus on the San of Ghanzi. For this exploratory study, data collection was done through face-to-face interviews with village/settlement elders, community leaders and the youth in the Ghanzi district.

### **4.0 Methodology**

Exploratory research design was used to collect data. This type of research design explores a phenomenon which is not clearly defined in order to have a clearer understanding of it (Babbie, 2016). Exploratory research is typically carried out at the preliminary stages of an investigation to provide a general idea about and better understand an issue; it does not usually lead to conclusive findings. This kind of research usually forms the basis for future, in-

depth research. It is sometimes also referred to as grounded theory approach or interpretive research. Exploratory research falls within the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative approach seeks to unearth people's attitudes, beliefs and perspectives on a contemporary, real-life issue that is under investigation (Creswell, 2014). It seeks to understand the meanings that people have constructed of their world, how people make sense of the world they live in as well as the experiences they have in this world.

### **5.0 Selected findings and discussion of findings**

Some of the findings of the study revealed the pivotal nature of the environment as a traditional educational space. Land to the San has traditionally been a place and space for teaching, learning, living, building materials, clothing, medicine, and of hunting and gathering. Whilst there is conscious division of home environment and the veld, both are considered as educational spaces just like typical, physical classrooms.

In the home space, traditional values and history would be passed to younger generations through storytelling, songs, poems, plays, riddles, and other such narratives. This was also the space for the famed healing dance, a unique type of dance that existed in the history of every hunter-gatherer society including the San of Botswana. Mmila and Janie (2006) explored this dance among the Naro of D'Kar in Ghanzi district. They observed that, among other things, the space for the ritual dance was sacred, the choice and identification of which was the sole prerogative of the healer or shaman. Certain taboos were prohibited in the space because of its sacredness. Recently bereaved members of the community were not allowed in the space and were thus not allowed to attend the dance. Foul language and bad behaviour were also prohibited. Other dances like the puberty dance and the wedding dance were performed in the home space. And in all these the practical, holistic, and socially determined education and skills were transferred to young San people, as one of the participants of this study stated that younger generations "observed what their parents were doing and learnt through such practical lessons" (KI4).

The home environment was also a space where dances and prayerful chants to the spirits were often made to solicit prosperous expeditions from the gods, spirits, and the ancestors prior to hunting and gathering. Gathering dances were done mainly by women and young people in the evening. After the community had a good fill of the day's collection of eatables, spontaneous singing marked the onset of a fully-fledged dancing session throughout the good part of the early night. The elderly would join in to teach new songs and demonstrate ancient dances. Integral in all these was the education of the young, as ECR9 emphasized "Our environment is the place where we learn. We learn how to hunt and gather wild fruits in the veld. Our education is environmental as we do everything in the environment. Learning surrounds us. We do it as we do our daily activities, we hunt, cook, do beadwork crafts and painting"

The wilderness was one massive classroom where hunting and gathering skills were taught, acquired, and honed in. After necessary preparations of the hunting equipment, the hunting ritual begins when the first arrow is shot at the animal. This is an act which establishes an intimate link between the hunter and the animal. From this moment onwards, the behaviour of the hunter is crucial to what happens in the rest of the hunt. There were lessons on sensing and behaviour of wild animals, on the meanings of the blowing of the wind, on animal tracks, on injured and pregnant ones, and on many other things related to hunting. “These were part of the traditional education system of the San people” (KI1). The wilderness was a deterrent of social ills that have come to bedevil San communities who have now been gathered from this natural space and confined to ‘domestic’ environments called settlements (Polelo & Molefe, 2006). Buttressing this point one participant stated, “We did not have social ills such as alcohol abuse like it is now as the bush kept us occupied” (ECR 5). Another participant added “... our children tapped from a learning system which has not been documented. Monaka and Chebanne (2005, p.110) state that the unique environmental and ecological knowledge systems and social organizations of the San people have been disrupted by this relocation to settlements, and “has become an accelerated and exacerbating way of ethno-linguistic endangerment .... This is so in view of the abrupt and uncoordinated manner of severing the San from their historical and traditional means of existence in the land they understood better.”

What is evident from some of the preliminary findings presented here is that San life was regimented by the environment. Land was home and they were intrinsically part of this land. Dances, prayerful chants to the gods, spirits, and the ancestors meant that the land where they hunted and gathered was venerated like deity. It is widely known that for people of San extraction inanimate things such as trees were animate, and some were even feared or revered (Lewis-Williams, 1985). Making appeasements to spirits and ancestors was believed to bring peace and contentment to the land and its people. Dances and chants were the most favoured means of communicating with the by-gones, spirits, ancestors, and with nature. Human activities such as hunting, gathering, and eating could easily end in a dance and a trance.

Because of its centrality in their lives, the San in turn took great care of the environment. A respondent stressed “We teach our children the importance of caring for nature as it has plants that we need for food, medicine, dye and animals which we need for food” (ECR 8). Augmenting this, KI1 added that “Management starts with your own environment...”, and KI2 stating further that San were skilled [in] the “conservation of animals, plants, and all that is in the land.” ECR15 also stressed the issue of preservation, not only of the land but of all that is in it, because that was their source and means of living.

The study findings established that for the San the environment was a principal source of information and was saturated with traditional values to transmit to the young. Survival skills were based on their daily interaction with the environment. The consequences of abstracting a people from their culture and language in education has now been topical for decades, one of such consequences being detachment from school. With regards to the San people in particular, Pansiri (2011) reported that they prefer an education system that is inclusive of their identity and indigenosity. Whilst the magnanimous effort by the government of Botswana to remove

the San from their ancestral lands to so-called settlement could be applauded for the amenities it provided to them, it hardly addressed the issue of lack of education among these people. The problem appears to hinge on a minimalistic, non-inclusive curriculum. Mokibelo (2010, p. 200) notes that:

The missing important link, it appears, could be derived from the social context/element, which could in turn inform curricula content. A bilingual education in a multilingual society is failing large portions of the society, and in this case, Khoe learners dismally. Meaningful education must respond to the individual learning needs such that learners are empowered to learn and relate to knowledge in a way that is culturally and cognitively relevant. An education (system) that alienates people from their culture really starts off on a wrong footing.

It should always be remembered that the San people put a spirited agitation against the government of Botswana for the recognition of their ancestral lands where they had for time immemorial freely practiced and enjoyed their culture. They landed a landmark victory when the High Court Judgment ruled in favour of them in 2006 and gave them the right to their ancestral lands. This, however, has remained an illusion and a mirage which has not transformed into concrete reality.

## 6.0 Conclusion

The study revealed that, historically, San people had a traditional education system which was hinged on the environment. The administration used by the current education system aims at effectively elevating and privileging Botswana's homogeneous ways of knowing, which invalidate and denigrate San's traditional education epistemologies. This therefore does not contextualize with the environment as San learn what they are not holistically connected to. As the current governing administration in the country is pondering the inclusion of other languages in the school system, the Ministry of Education in particular should consider adoption of a multicultural education approach in schools where teaching and learning affirm cultural pluralism as well as the promotion of equity among all cultural groups in the society. Curriculum and teaching materials should be developed in the 'language' that the children understand.

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