

# Speakers living and languages dying: The endangerment of !Xóǀ and øHua in Botswana

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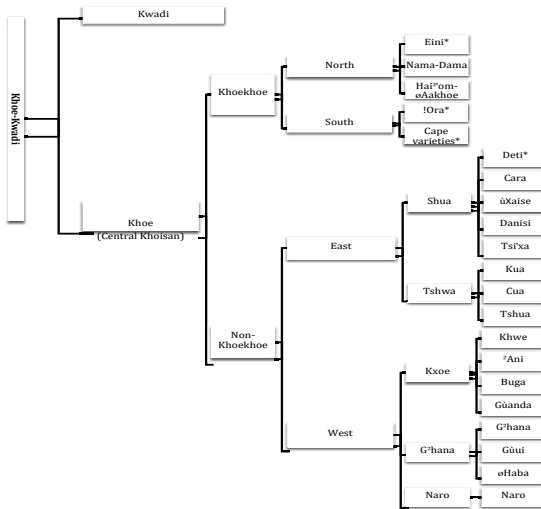
## Abstract

!Xóǀ and øHua are San languages spoken in Botswana, with !Xóǀ also cross-bordering into South Africa and Namibia. !Xóǀ is a Southern Khoesan language genetically affiliated to the Taa branch of Khoesan languages. The classification of øHua has been rather problematic. It has been classified with Southern Khoesan or Northern Khoesan, as an isolate or into the Ju-øHoan conglomerate. Both of these languages are acutely endangered. The objective of this article is to address the classification of !Xóǀ and øHua, discuss the geographical spread in Botswana and lay out factors that lead to their acute endangerment in the country. The paper argues that endangering factors include the San relocation exercise in Botswana, contact with powerful Bantu groups and the current language/language-in-education policy. The collective effect of these factors is the obliteration of !Xóǀ and the øHua cultures and languages, and the domination and marginalization of these people in the land of their birth. The paper further recommends that this decimation of !Xóǀ and øHua language and culture could be curbed by an enabling political will, documentation of these cultures and languages, the development of orthographies if possible, among other things.

## Introduction: Broad classification of San languages

The classification of San languages into one language phylum or as diverse languages has plagued linguists for centuries. Two diverse views exist. The first view argues that these languages belong to one language phylum—Khoisan/Khoesan. Proponents of this view include Schapera (1930), Kohler (1963) and Greenberg (1948; 1963). According to this view (Khoe) San languages may be divided into Northern, Southern and Central Khoesan (Greenberg, 1963; Schapera, 1930). Slight variations exist among linguists regarding the incorporation of the 'Hottentots'. Some classify them under Central Khoesan (Greenberg, 1963) and others do not (Schapera, 1930). There is further variation

about the classification of the East African languages of Sandawe and Hadza. Some scholars classify them under Central Khoesan whereas

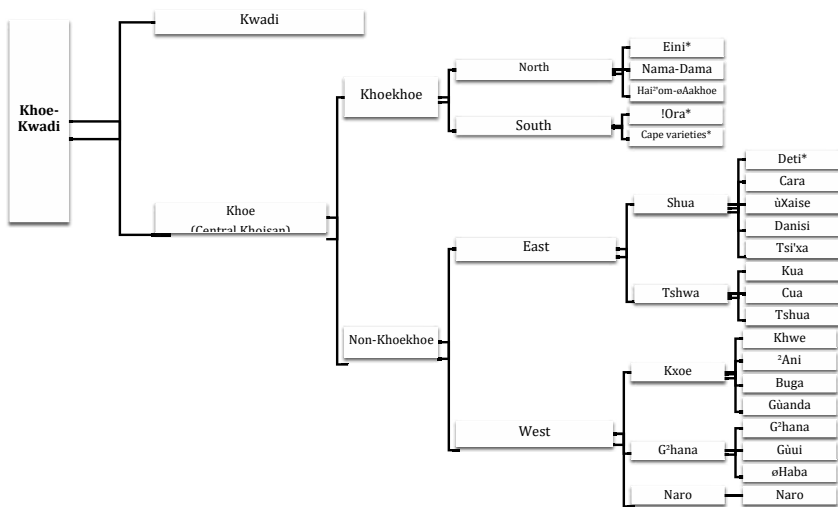


Greenberg (1963) classifies them separately from Northern, Central and Southern Khoesan.

The second view argues that these are diverse languages with no genetic affiliation. Any similarities between them are superficial and are limited to a click phenomenon, common vocabulary items and borrowings (Voegelin & Voegelin, 1964). Linguists who hold this view argue that “the term Khoisan is of no linguistic usefulness whatever, and ... there is no ‘Bushman family’ of languages because “Bushman .... denotes a way of life, and not a linguistic term” (Westphal, 1963, quoted in Voegelin & Voegelin, 1964, p. 257). Figure 1 provides a summary of the typology of the languages according to the second view, and shows three distinct groups of San in southern Africa (adapted from Gueldemann, 2008).

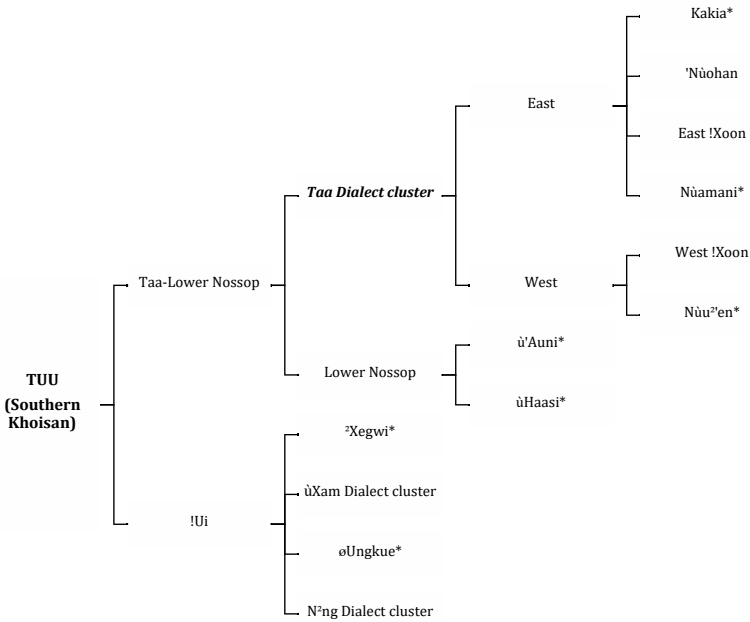
**Figure 1a: The genealogy of San languages in southern Africa: The Khoekwadi typology**

(Adapted from Güldemann, 2008). Note: \* indicates that the dialect is extinct



**Figure 1b: The genealogy of San languages in southern Africa: The Ju-øHoan typology (Adapted from Güldemann, 2008).**

**Figure 1c: The genealogy of San languages in southern Africa: The TUU typology (Adapted from Güldemann, 2008).**



## The classification of !Xóǎ?

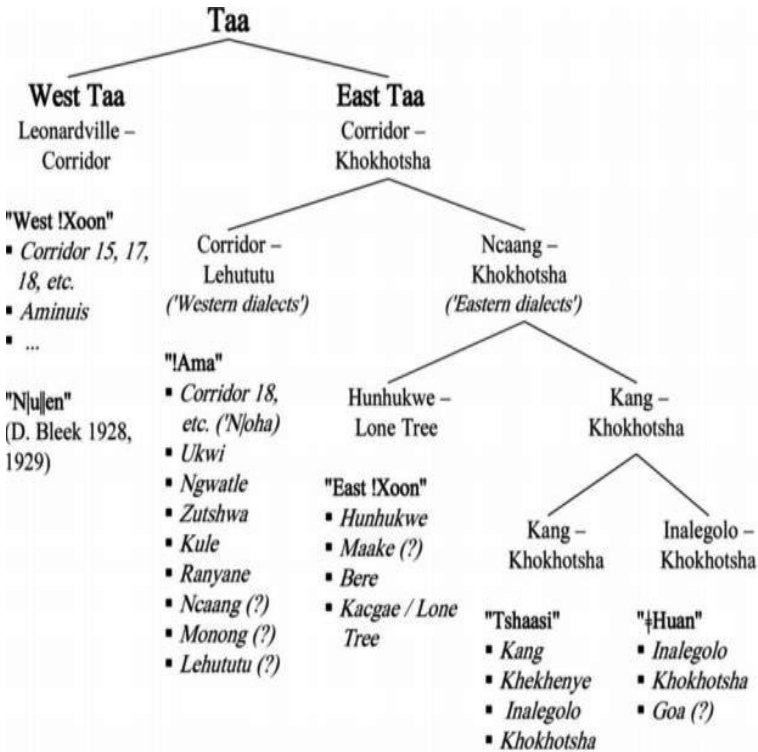
!Xóǎ typologically belongs to Taa, also called Tuu or !Ui-Taa branch of Khoesan (Güldemann & Vossen, 2000). !Xóǎ is a non-Bantu language spoken in Botswana, Namibia South Africa (Hasselbring, 2001). Historically they also inhabited places such as the Nossop basin. Taa means 'person/human being', and the Taa language is sometimes referred to as *tâa* #ââ, 'the language of the people.' Various spellings exist for !Xóǎ, including Koon, !kǎ:, !xǎ, !ko/!kǎ, !xor, Gxon, Qgoon, !aa, and Khong (Batibo, et al., 2003; Voegelin & Voegelin, 1964). Other non-indigenous names have been used to refer to the !Xóǎ including the Tswana names Magong, Tshasi, Tshase, Tjase, Tsase, Sase, Casi and Basarwa, with the latter used as a generic term to refer to all indigenous non-Bantu groups of people in Southern Africa (Hasselbring et al., 2001; Batibo, et al., 2003). The environment also plays a significant role in !Xóǎ identity. For example, there are !O!uN (forest !Xun') and !Xu!u!uN or !a!le!u !Xo!a!uN (valley !Xun'). The !Xóǎ further distinguish themselves by direction; there are the #hûâ O?âni (southerners), !ama O?âni (westerners), and the Oqhôa O?âni (in-betweeners). Other characteristics are used for identity purposes such as *tûu* ?Onâhnsâ (pure people), *ùAsi* (the big ones), !Xuun or ku!a!úndo!u !xuun ('Kwando !Xun), !Xu!u!uN or !a!kho!le!u !xo!a!uN (Kwanyama !Xun') (Heine & Honken, 2010), although these latter ones apply to the !Xun in Anglo which Heine and Honken (2010, p. 7) appear to classify as a !Xóǎ group.

Dialects of !Xóǎ are broadly divided into Eastern varieties and Western varieties (Traill, 1974a, 1985). Western varieties include West !Xoon, which Bleek (1928b, 1929) called !Nullen, and are spoken mainly in Namibia. Eastern varieties are further divided into East-eastern dialects and East-western dialects. They include East !Xóǎ, !ama sub-groups (e.g. !ama O?âni, !Gwaa- O?âni) *ùAsi*, and the Tshaasi/Tsaasi-#Huan dialect group and its sub-varieties of Tshaasi and #Huan. These Eastern varieties are mainly spoken in Botswana. Shelala is also considered a dialect of !Xóǎ (Batibo et al., 2003). Balala, who are found in the Matsheng village of Lokgwabe, are classified as a !ama O?âni offshoot of !Xóǎ group, but who have completely assimilated into Shekgalagari culture.

A sub-group of the !Xóǎ *dialect*, which was known as Koon [kǎ:], has now become extinct (Bleek, 1913, 1928b, 1929). Other extinct varieties of the !Xóǎ *language* include (a) Kakia, also referred to as Katia, Kattea, Khatia, Khatlia, Xatia, Vaalpens, *ùEikusi* (ibid., 1913, 1929 cf. Voegelin & Voegelin, 1964, p. 270), (b) !namani, Inamani, Nglamani, !namasa (Westphal, 1974) and (c) #Huan (#Hûa) or #Hûa- O?âni (Ibid.). Figure 1c shows the classification of !Xóǎ (Taa dialect cluster) within Khoesan,

and Fig. 2 shows !Xóǎ dialects in Botswana and Namibia as well as the areas where they are spoken (Naumann, 2011).

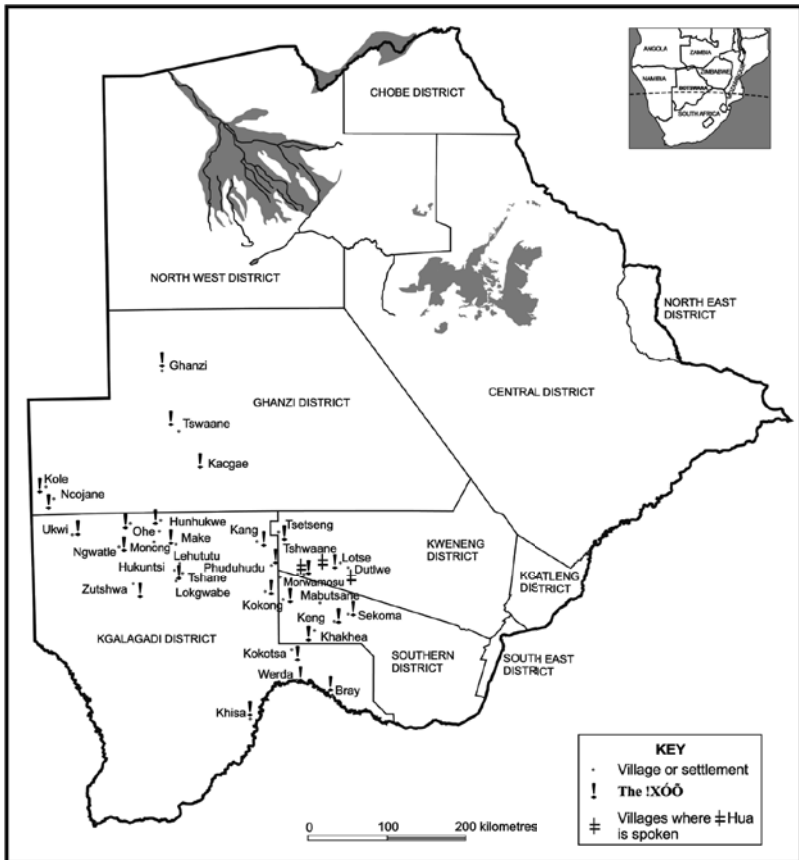
**Fig. 2: !Xóǎ dialects in Botswana and Namibia as well as the areas where they are spoken (Naumann, 2011)**



### Geographical distribution and demographics of !Xóǎ in Botswana

In Botswana, !Xóǎ territory stretches across at least six districts, covering an estimated area of 150 000 km<sup>2</sup>. The estimated number of !Xóǎ speakers range from 2000 (Traill, 1985) to 4000 (Hasselbring, 2001). Figure 3 shows the geographical distribution of the !Xóǎ in Botswana.

**Figure 3: The geographical distribution of !Xóǒ in Botswana**



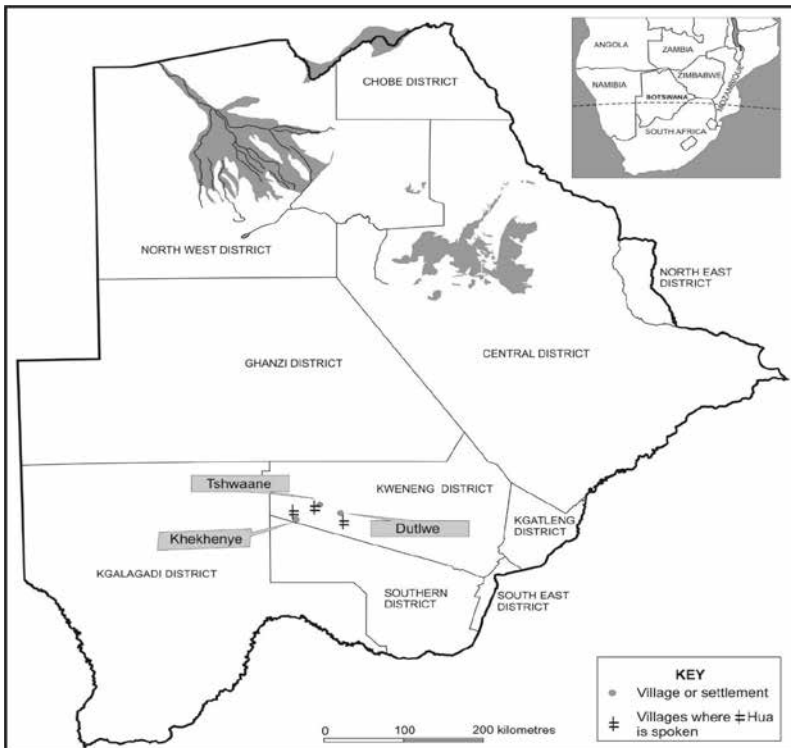
### The classification of øHua

øHua is also a non-Bantu language and is spoken in Botswana only (Hasselbring, 2001). Alternative names for the language include øHǒǎ, Tchaun, Sasi and Sesarwa (Batibo, et al., 2003). The classification of øHua has been rather problematic. For Traill (1973), øHua could be associated with both Southern Khoesan or Northern Khoesan. Other scholars classify øHua as an isolate (Traill, (1994); Gueldemann & Vossen (2000)). However, most scholars Batibo (2005), Westphal (1974), Güldemann (2003), Honken (2004.) classify øHua together with Ju/’hoansi and øKx’au<sup>2</sup>éin in the Ju-øHoan conglomerate of San languages. Figure 1b shows the classification of øHua within Khoesan.

## Geographical Distribution

øHua is found in the Kweneng-Letlhakeng sub-district village of Dutlwe and in the settlements of Tshwaane and Khekhenye in the sub-district. The øHua speak øHua and have no ethnomyns they are otherwise known by. Just like Sasi (Batibo & Chebanne, forthcoming), Hua is arguably the language with the least number of speakers in Botswana. It is spoken by 120 and 300 people (Hasselbring et al. 2001), mostly adults and old people (Batibo, 2005b). Figure 4 shows the geographical distribution of øHua in Botswana.

**Figure 4: The geographical distribution of øHua in Botswana**





## **Factors causing marginalization and endangerment**

### *Colonization of San territory by Bantu migration and expansion:*

The colonization of the San began approximately 900 and 1000 AD with the large-scale arrival of farming and iron-working Bantu populations in southern Africa (Tlou & Campbell, 1997). The agro-pastoral immigrants amassed large portions of lands for agriculture and mining. Prosperity in these enterprises led to population explosion, and the settlers in turn occupied more and more land and became geographically more spread. With time, interactions between the more powerful farmers and the foragers led to considerable shrinking and disintegration of the indigenous San communities “due to the large-scale loss of territory and speakers on the part of non-Bantu languages” (Guedemann, 2008, p. 96). Guedemann (2008, p. 118) further notes that it is this expansion of the iron-working agro-pastoralists that “is responsible for the large-scale obliteration of many non-Bantu populations as distinct linguistic groups...” For the San, contact with the colonizing Bantu groups resulted in language change through borrowing and shift, subsistence change including cultural devolution. In linguistic terms, this influence begins with stable bilingualism and accompanying borrowing but often ends in language shift, and eventually even in complete acculturation. This type of scenario started in the northern Kalahari but swiftly expanded to more southern areas wherever food-producers took control over the land. With the advent of European colonization this culminated in the modern situation in which hunter-gatherers are highly marginalized minorities all over southern Africa and their languages, if still spoken, are threatened by extinction (Guedemann, 2008, p. 125).

Interactions between the incoming farming smelters and the nomads were not on equal footing—the food producers were numerous, more powerful, more structured, self-sufficient and exerted profound influence over the small and weak bands of egalitarian foragers. Influence in the other direction was virtually non-existent, and influence almost always led to loss of language and/or culture. The following sections focus on the interactions between the Bantu and San communities in Botswana, with specific focus on the !Xóǀ and øHua.

## **The resettlement of the San in Botswana**

The land issue as it relates to the !Xóǀ and øHua (and other San groups) in Botswana can be traced back to the establishment of the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP). RADP was established in 1978 as a drought and hunger relief programme targeting mainly the San, but included other impoverished rural and remote populations. With time,

heavy implementation costs led the government to relocate the San from their ancestral lands to 'accessible' locations called settlements. Currently there are 71 settlements, provided with various amenities such as health facilities, feeding programs, drinking water, sports and recreation facilities, shelter, sanitation services, etc. (Motshabi, 2006; cf. Botswana Government, 2014).

The settlements are located within areas 'belonging' to resident Bantu groups. These are non-San people with their own ethno-cultural identities and who engage in their own socio-economic activities. For example, the Kaudwane settlement, where the øHua (and other San groups) were moved, is located within the territory of Bakwena, a variety of Tswana group which is classified as Central Sotho-Tswana within Bantu (Chebanne, 2003). Khekhenye and Tshwaane, the other settlements where the øHua were relocated, is in the territory of Bakgalagari people, a Western Sotho-Tswana group within Bantu (ibid.). New Xade, Chobokwane, Groot Lagte, Qabo, Bere, Kacgae, Kuke, East Hanahai, West Hanahai and D'Kar settlements in the Ghanzi District, where the !Xóǀ (and other San groups) were moved, is situated within the Bakgalagari territory. The other settlements in the country are situated in the Central districted (Bangwato territory), Kgatleng district (Bakgatla territory), Southern district (Bangwaketse and Bakgalagari territory) and North-West district (Batawana territory). Furthermore, for the !Xóǀ, especially those in the Ghanzi District, the RADP resettlement program constituted *double* displacement as they had already been dispossessed of their lands by powerful agro-pastoralist settlers, especially the Indo-European Afrikaners, and by some Bantu groups. These settlers established large ranches on !Xóǀ lands and exploited them as cheap laborers on the ranches.

It should be mentioned that the resettlement exercise was and is a magnanimous and laudable effort by the government in that it made development benefits enjoyed by the rest of the citizenry accessible to San communities as well. And, in this regard, it was an effort to have these groups of people develop alongside mainstream society. However, the programme focused on the social development of the targeted communities to the exclusion of other similarly important aspects of their lives. Monaka and Chebanne (2005, 101) state that:

Their unique environmental and ecological knowledge systems and social organizations have been negatively disrupted by this development; and the Remote Areas Dwellers Programme has become an accelerated and exacerbating way of ethno-linguistic endangerment even death. 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.

That the San would experience formidable linguistic and cultural influence or dominance from the more powerful Bantu groups within whose territories they had and have been relocated was inevitable. Relocation spelt the beginning of an imminent end of their linguistic and cultural identity, and also precipitated acculturation and assimilation into the mainline Bantu society (Chebanne, 2006; Nyati-Ramahobo, 2002).

Research reveals that, apart from the mentioned amenities, the resettlement process did not bring envisaged development, at least on the social front. The San experienced estrangement as well as various social ills in the new lands, most of which were caused by alcohol abuse (Cassidy et al., 2001; Monaka & Chebanne, 2005). Furthermore, there was total breakdown of the social fabric as the people's behavior degenerated into domestic violence, theft, prostitution, sexual abuse, begging, rowdiness, apathy, truancy at school and general delinquency (Cassidy et al., 2001; Polelo & Molefe, 2006; Molamu & McDonald, 1996). The people further suffered from disillusionment and helplessness, descended into deep poverty, and became demotivated and demoralized. Cassidy et al. (2001) state that alcohol abuse is often a symptom of some malady, such as social displacement, discrimination, erosion of self-worth and loss of cultural identity (see also Polelo & Molefe, 2006).

From the cultural (and linguistic) perspective, the relocation appears to have been a process that not only brought them "under the tribal hegemonies of recognized tribal communities" (Chebanne, 2006, p. 143; *cf.* Mphinyane, 2002), but also severed them from a system that shaped their identity and provided for their livelihoods. The result would be to have living human beings whose "chagrin and bane" as Chebanne (2006, p. 143) notes, is that they are forced "to die alive—when a living body has no soul—understood here as the inner-most existence of an ethno-culturally and linguistically fulfilled and self-defining person."

### **The education system, Vision 2016, constitutional revisions and speeches**

The education system has also played a significant role in dislocating the San from the indigenous to the 'exotic.' Having been gathered to settlements equipped with (developmental) amenities, the !Xóõ and øHua were required to enrol in schools which taught a minimalist curriculum in Setswana and English only (National Commission on Education, 1993; Revised National Policy on Education, 1994). Despite having been targeted for educational development, among other things, the school system did not become ethno-culturally sensitive to this

group of people (cf. Hargreaves, 1999; McCarthy, 1999). They had to learn the languages (together with the concomitant cultures) of school. This assimilationist system perpetuated despite the commendable assertions of the country's long-term development plan, Vision 2016, which stated that Botswana would be a tolerant nation, and that a multicultural education system would be a significant contributing factor in the realization of prosperity for *all* in 2016 (cf. Botswana Government, *Vision 2016*, 1997). The then minister for education, Hon Jacob Nkate, said one of the mitigating factors against a pluralistic language-in-education was that some of the languages had very few speakers. Furthermore, the inclusion of such languages (and cultures) in the education system would not be feasible and “would only promote an ‘inward-looking’ development than enabling ‘global economy’ competition” (Chebanne, 2010, p. 92). Needless to say, San languages have the fewest speakers in the whole world, and this, together with linguistic hegemony fostered by relocation and heightened by the school system—is one of the factors that contribute significantly to their acute endangerment. To date, Vision 2016, together with various other government reports and policies have remained fruitless rhetoric with no tangible support for what they promised.

As a result, the San have fared badly in school. Poor performance and significant school dropout are not uncommon (cf. Nyati-Ramahobo, 2003); Weeks, et al., 2003); Motshabi, 2006a&b); Polelo & Molefe, 2006); Mokibelo & Moumakwa, 2005, 2006); Mokibelo, 2010); Pansiri, 2011); Monaka & Baitse, 2015); Monaka & Moumakwa, 2016). Contributing factors include language problems, a culturally insensitive curriculum, and lack of enrolment/poor attendance. The foreign languages of English and Setswana constitute a considerable pedagogical impediment, and “the resultant poor performance indicates that the language-in-education policy defeats, to a significant extent, the honourable efforts of the government of trying to reach out to San communities (Monaka & Hiri-Khudu, forthcoming).

Pansiri (2011, p. 115) reports that the San “prefer an education system that also sustains their identity and indigeneness”. Since this has not been realised, the detachment and lack of interest in learning on the part of the San may partly be attributed to the invisibility of San and languages and culture in the curriculum. It is no wonder that non-enrolment and/or truancy is very high (Polelo & Molefe, 2006), with Mazonde (2002) reporting 88% of non-enrolment and/or truancy among the San. Social alienation and resentment because of the erosion of their culture also contribute to dismal enrolment numbers and truancy (Pansiri, 2011; le Roux, 1999). Evidently, RADP succeeded in providing the infrastructure, but the problem(s) it sought to alleviate such as lack

of education, among others, remain—the majority of San learners are still uneducated. 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.

Sallabank (2010, p. 62) also states that mother tongue education, especially at formative years of schooling is the most appropriate. She further notes that “additive bilingualism correlates with higher general educational achievement, including in other languages. However, the full advantages are only reaped if both linguistic varieties are afforded equal (or at least respected) status, and full ‘biliteracy’ is developed.” Other strategies, such as the submersion strategy where learners from marginalised language are submerged, as it were, into majority language classes, and subtractive strategies where one language is replaced with the other in classroom, are fraught with difficulties, including loss of self-confidence and poor performance for these groups of learners (*ibid.*). In the Botswana case, the result of the intolerance of their languages and cultures in school has been that the !Xóõ and øHua, together with the other San groups in the country, have remained on the margins regarding the promised developments.

In addition to the negative impact caused by the school system, erosion of !Xóõ and øHua languages is further exacerbated by speakers not being literate in their languages. This illiteracy is worsened by the lack of codification of these languages. For !Xóõ, the large number of phoneme inventory it has, including single consonants and consonant clusters, vowels, clicks, phonemic tones and glottal modifications of vowels that are phonemic (cf. Maddieson, 2011; Mielke, 2009; Traill, 1985, 1994) is a serious impediment to codification. And to date the language has remained the most daunting regarding orthography development.

Another endangering factor which is of significant note is the failure of the Constitution of Botswana, specifically Sections 77, 78, and 79, to recognize the San (and other ethnic groups in the country). This lack of recognition survived the Balopi Commission of 2000 mainly because the Commission’s recommendation for tribal equality in the Constitution of the country caused “upheaval among the majority Setswana tribes” (Chebanne, 2010, p. 91). The threat caused by this upheaval was so

significant that the status-quo was retained and remains. Again, the San people were and remain excluded from the mainstream society; they are not even recognized constitutionally as belonging to the land. Furthermore, even the diversity with San communities is hardly known in the country, as they are often just lumped together under the generic term *Basarwa* (Chebanne, 2010).

### **Ways to curb the endangerment of !Xóǀ and øHua**

In order to curb the endangerment of !Xóǀ and øHua, various measures need to be put in place by the government, by various organizations, linguists and language activists as well as by !Xóǀ and øHua community members. Some of these include a strong and positive political will, the codification and description of !Xóǀ and øHua and a systematic documentation of their culture(s), the development of literacy programs and an inclusive school curriculum, a recognition of the cultural and linguistic genocide nature of San relocation and many more.

A positive political will is first and foremost, and would be the impetus for many other efforts aimed at curbing the endangerment of !Xóǀ and øHua. Whilst policies and declarations are important, they are frequently never reinforced with action. A positive political will would not only make policy statements and various promulgations but would put in place the much-needed measures to promote and preserve the multi-linguistic and multi-cultural nature of the citizenry. It would also find ways of addressing the varied problems that could inhibit the implementation of policies and declarations. Various enabling factors could be put in place such as teacher training programs that are inclusive of the diverse languages and cultures in the country and the development of appropriate, inclusive educational materials. It is also imperative that, while the government and various organizations are applauded for good efforts in bringing disadvantaged communities along with mainstream society, they should also be sensitized about the negative side of the relocation exercise and the need to recognize and address language and cultural loss for targeted communities and for others in the country as well.

There is need to conduct intensive research on the !Xóǀ and the øHua, including systematic description of their languages and cultures. Although such programs tend to be long and protracted as Kube (2006) notes, they are, ultimately, a great source of empowerment and preservation (Batibo, 2009). Efforts in the study of these languages and peoples have already begun as attested by the literature. Furthermore, in order not to overlook other endangered languages and cultures in

the country, a comprehensive inventory of all such languages and cultures needs to be established, specifying critical areas that need urgent attention (Wamalwa & Oluoch, 2013). Such critical areas must include the development of orthographies for these languages, which is essential for literacy efforts. Literacy is a vital factor in the prevention of language dearth and death. Codified languages stand a better chance of reversing the tide of decay (Derhemi, 2002), and puts them in position to be used in education, the media, and in many other areas of significance such as record keeping, translation, compilation of reference books (dictionaries, thesaurus, word lists, glossaries), in recording of cultural activities such as myths and legends, religious rituals, and so on.

It must be mentioned that there are significant challenges that would plague the revitalization exercise of !Xóǎ and øHua. As mentioned earlier, one of the major challenges in the preservation of !Xóǎ is the largest sound inventory it has, making it difficult to determine orthographic symbols to represent most of the sounds. This means the descriptions and documentation of this language and its cultures would have to be done through other means. Wamalwa and Oluoch (2013, p. 265) observe that the “preservation of [such] languages may require digital archiving. It is accepted that the principal role of archiving is to store records, potentially indefinitely, and make them available to those entitled to access them.” Digital formats such as MP3 can be used to store linguistic and cultural data on endangered languages (Wamalwa & Oluoch, 2013). The fact that øHua is moribund adds the element of urgency to the need for its documentation. Should things continue the way they are, it is conceivable that !Xóǎ and øHua languages and cultures may soon be lost before satisfactory preservation measures would have been undertaken on them. The other thing that plagues both of these languages is that they are not considered economically viable. As was pointed out earlier, a consideration for the inclusion of these languages in the education is ‘inward-looking’ and does not promote ‘global economy’ competition” (Chebanne, 2010, p. 92).

## **Conclusion**

This article examined various factors that endangers the cultures, languages and ethnic identity of San communities in Botswana, with particular focus on the !Xóǎ and the øHua. Such factors include the San relocation exercise, contact with powerful Bantu groups and the current language/language - in - education policy. The cumulative effect of all these factors is the annihilation of !Xóǎ and the øHua cultures and languages; and the domination and marginalization of these people in

the land of their birth, which, in some ways is and has become a sort of alien land. They “remain refugees in the country of their citizenship, and human beings with dead ethno-linguistic identities” (Monaka & Chebanne, 2005, p. 103). The decimation of the cultures and languages of the the !Xóõ and the øHua people could be curbed by the much-needed muscle of an enabling, positive political will, the description and (digital) documentation of these cultures and languages, the development of orthographies if possible, among other things. Urgency is added by the fact that San languages have the fewest speakers in the world. These will not only preserve !Xóõ and øHua cultures and languages but will also preserve linguistic and cultural plurality in the country. Multilingual and cross-cultural education would benefit majority population also.



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