

# Perpetuating the Myth of the “Wild Bushman”: Inclusive Multicultural Education for the Omaheke Ju|’hoansi in Namibia

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Namibia has adopted an inclusive education policy with emphasis on cultural and linguistic diversity. The policy encourages educators to adapt the curriculum and include content that reflects the cultural background of their learners. Despite these positive provisions, severely marginalized groups, such as the Omaheke Ju|’hoansi, continue to underperform and drop out of school at greater rates than learners from other groups. This article is based on ethnographic work in eight primary schools in east central Namibia and explores how educators understand and treat Ju|’hoan culture in schools. Analysis of the data points to preoccupation with superficial cultural differences that further marginalize Ju|’hoan learners. The study discusses the challenges of multicultural education for severely marginalized groups and questions its applicability in a highly segregated society.

## Introduction

After Namibia’s independence from South Africa in 1990, the government democratized the education system with the aim of closing the socio-economic gap created during apartheid. The inclusion and recognition of diverse and historically oppressed groups has become the benchmark of education theory, policy and practice in the country. One such group are the indigenous San people.<sup>1</sup> Once nomadic hunter-gatherers, the linguistically and culturally heterogeneous San groups of the region have lost secure access to land and resources, and, as a result, their traditional livelihoods have undergone dramatic changes. Some of the changes that underscore the lives of the contemporary San are their increased incorporation into the local and regional economy and their participation in state development projects, one of which is education. Prior to independence, due to geographic dispersion and

<sup>1</sup> *San* is an umbrella term that denotes the (former) hunter-gatherer groups in southern Africa. In academic discourse, it has replaced the more derogatory term *Bushman*. The San self-identify as an indigenous people in the international legal meaning of the term based on their original occupancy (before Bantu and European settlement), their consequent colonization, and their current asymmetric relationship with the state.

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stigmatizing views against the San, the colonial administration put little effort into providing access to schooling for San children. After independence, the San gained improved access to education, with state efforts including the adoption of a progressive education policy that recognizes the value of cultural and linguistic diversity. Yet, despite a comprehensive educational reform, and research that has repeatedly identified the barriers to education for San children, their participation in the education system remains limited and unsatisfactory.<sup>2</sup>

This article outlines the education policy framework in Namibia with respect to San learners and provides an empirical analysis of the policy implementation in primary schools in the Omaheke region in east central Namibia. The Omaheke region hosts a Ju|'hoansi San population that has undergone severe oppression from dominant neighboring groups.<sup>3</sup> Policy documents, such as the *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children* (MBESC 2000) and the *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education* (MoE 2013), encourage schools to add multicultural material that accommodates the cultural background of their learners, thus seeking to create a sense of acceptance and belonging for marginalized groups such as the Ju|'hoansi. Yet, evidence exposes an enormous gap between policy and practice and suggests that the current schooling environment further marginalizes rather than empowers Ju|'hoan learners.

Education is a powerful sociopolitical arena for the legitimization of national narratives. Therefore, what is taught, and how it is taught, matters. The struggle for recognition of diverse racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and so on, minority cultures during the American Civil Rights Movement paved the way to the rise of multicultural education (Sleeter and McLaren 2009). Multicultural education entails reforms in educational and other institutions that would foreground the equal inclusion of learners from diverse backgrounds. Representation of groups facing discrimination is understood as an important step toward decreasing prejudices and increasing school participation and performance, with the potential for leading to social justice and national unity among the nation's citizens (Banks 2009). The first countries to adopt the framework outside the United States were other Western democracies—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and England. With the intensification of global flows within and across national borders and amid an increased awareness of the diverse composition and inherent inequalities in modern states the world over, multicultural education has since become a global phenomenon (Banks 2009). Yet, the theory and practice of dealing with diversity in education have been scrutinized both in their original Western democratic

<sup>2</sup> LeRoux (1999); Dieckmann et al. (2014); Hays (2016a, 2016b); Ninkova (2017).

<sup>3</sup> The term “Ju|'hoansi” (“true” or “ordinary people”) refers to the people and the language, whereas the term “Ju|'hoan” is an adjective (as in “a Ju|'hoan learner”). For those struggling to pronounce the click sound |, the word can be read as “Zhutwansi.”

context and worldwide (May 1999; Sayed et al. 2003; Reid and Major 2017; Moland 2019). “Difference multiculturalism” (Gitlin 1992) risks essentialist representations of culture that obscure the processual, fluid, and contested aspects of cultural identity, and reinforce rather than challenge discriminatory stereotypes against nondominant sectors of the society (Gupta and Fergusson 1997). Preoccupation with naïve and superficial aspects of culture—the “food, festival, folklore and fashion” approach to multicultural education (Meyer and Rhoafes 2006)—reinforces rather than challenges the hegemonic status quo. The export of multiculturalism to non-Western “modernities” has also come under scrutiny (Shome 2012), with scholars recognizing that the way it has manifested in each nation “is both historically specific and transnationally formed” (Sutton 2005, 98).

This study contributes to the debate on the globalization of multiculturalism in two important ways. First, it scrutinizes its applicability in a starkly segregated postcolonial, postapartheid setting. While the political system in Namibia has democratized since independence, racial, ethnic, and class segregation remains deeply entrenched in the sociopolitical operations of power. One of the major challenges for the country’s postapartheid government has been to strike a balance between national unity and equal inclusion of previously excluded groups—a sentiment also reflected in the country’s education policy. Evidence from other postcolonial African contexts suggests that the transplantation of Western multicultural practices in deeply conflicted or segregated societies is plagued with challenges, some of which compromise the very premise behind multicultural education. In her work with a multicultural educational TV program in Nigeria, *Sesame Square*, Moland (2015, 2019) provides a compelling analysis of the anxieties and dilemmas faced by the program’s creators when dealing with the balanced and authentic representation of the country’s three largest groups divided along ethnic, religious, linguistic, and educational lines and currently engaged in ongoing conflicts. Moland (2015) emphasizes the importance of sociopolitical context and argues that before successfully dealing with diversity, a nation must have achieved a certain level of unity and peace. The “soft power” of education and media, Moland (2019) argues, cannot overpower the impact of an unjust sociopolitical environment. Another case study that challenges the translatability of the multicultural approach comes from South Africa. Carrim and Soudien (1999) show that educational desegregation and the adoption of multiculturalist perspectives in postapartheid South Africa have led to increased assimilation and to the reiteration of racial stereotypes with the effect of caricaturistic representations of cultural differences. South Africa and Namibia have shared a troubled recent history, and many of the themes emerging from Carrim and Soudien’s study are relevant for the case study presented in this article as well. In the context of continuing racially grounded socioeconomic inequality, focus on superficial cultural differences facilitates the use of

dehumanizing colonial metaphors and perpetuates rather than challenges the legacy of apartheid.

Second, the article brings forward an African indigenous group's experience with multicultural education. The limits of the multiculturalist approach to successfully include and represent indigenous learners in mostly Western settler-states have long been documented (May 1999; Marker 2006; Writer 2008). While all minorities might face various levels of oppression, indigenous peoples have been particularly harshly affected by their forced inclusion in encompassing states. Indigenous peoples' experiences have been systematically negated or contorted to fit the "national story" and morally justify their colonization, including (or particularly) in school curricula and settings. As Writer (2008) asserts, multicultural education should facilitate the redistribution of power and resources through the inclusion of multiple sources of knowledge that challenge oppression and allow for the coexistence of converging and diverging forms of diversity within oppression. Practices on the ground, however, indicate that in multicultural educational settings, indigenous cultures and knowledge systems have been mostly essentialized, devalued, and stripped of contemporaneity and social relevance (Courage 2012; Kim 2015). The failure of multicultural education to disrupt hegemonic narratives is thus reflective of the systemic historical dehumanization of indigenous peoples and the devaluation of indigenous epistemologies (Smith 1999) and of the willful blindness of liberalism toward inconvenient or threatening indigenous epistemologies and ontologies (Povinelli 1998). Set against this theoretical framework, this study brings forward the experiences of an African indigenous group and adds more nuances to the complicated field of multiculturalism in non-Western contexts.

#### **Education Policy Framework in Namibia**

Namibia gained independence in March 1990 after a long struggle first against German and, later, South African colonization. Racial segregation, unequal distribution of resources, and denial of freedoms and opportunities were among the major drivers of the liberation struggle, and the new independent government saw the need for national reconciliation and socio-economic development as among its principle objectives. Rooted in this ideological framework, equal access to quality education became one of the major political reforms that marked the transition from apartheid to democracy (Gonzales 2000). Under South African rule, education was segregated along racial lines and was geared entirely to the interests of the colonial elite. After independence, Namibia adopted one of the most progressive education policies in the southern African region based on the ideal of a strong sense of national belonging, yet inclusive of cultural and linguistic diversity. Adopted in 1993, the policy document *Education for All* acknowledges education to be "central to the national development strategy," and outlines the basic

framework of the country's education ideology (MEC 1993, 2). Schools should work toward abolishment of all forms of racial discrimination, the document reads, and education should facilitate the emergence of a sense of national pride and belonging, using culture as a unifying force. The government also replaced the previous teacher-centered approach with the more pedagogically sound learner-centered approach, which, among other tenets, recognizes individual agency and lived experience as contributing factors to the development of the national culture (MEC 1993; MBESC 2002).

#### *Education Policy and the San*

In line with its ideology for national integration and antitribalism, the government of Namibia does not recognize the San as an indigenous people in the international legal meaning of the term. Instead, it refers to them as "marginalized communities." As equal citizens in a democratic state, the San are represented in all state policy documents. However, the two documents that specifically address the educational needs of San learners are the *Language Policy for Schools in Namibia* of 1991 (revised in 2003) and the *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children* of 2001. The language policy recognizes the pedagogical soundness of mother tongue education and allows for the use of mother tongues as languages of instruction in the first 3 years of schooling. Of the seven San languages spoken in the country today,<sup>4</sup> Ju|'hoansi is the only San language adopted as a language of instruction in the Namibian education system. The challenges to the implementation of the language policy in the regions with Ju|'hoan populations are multifold, with classroom linguistic heterogeneity and lack of trained teachers being among the most urgent (Hays 2016a; Ninkova 2017).

The *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children* explicitly states that the government must "facilitate the education and training of San children and at the same time allow them to keep and be proud of their culture" (MBESC 2000, 12). It also encourages teachers to be flexible in interpreting and teaching the curriculum, so that they can "include multicultural issues in their teachings" (28). The need for diversification of the national curriculum is also acknowledged in the *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education*, developed by the Ministry of Education. While the policy does not specifically mention the San, it recognizes the need for flexible and alternative teaching and learning approaches that reflect the cultural and linguistic background of marginalized learners (MoE 2013).

#### **Barriers to Education for San Learners**

On-the-ground realities show that simply providing inclusive multicultural education on paper does not translate into equal representation and

<sup>4</sup> There is little detailed linguistic research on San languages. Dieckmann et al. report seven (possibly eight or nine) San languages spoken in Namibia today (2014, 23).

inclusion for all. The latest assessment of the situation of the San in Namibia reports that San children experience numerous barriers to education that result in low attendance and completion rates and dropout rates disproportionately higher than those reported for other groups in the country (Dieckmann et al. 2014). The latest education statistics from 2017 indicate that the 11,317 San learners enrolled in schools comprise 1.6 percent of the total number of learners (in comparison, the San comprise about 2–3 percent of the Namibian population). Of these, 10,211 attend primary education, compared with only 79 learners (less than 1 percent) at the upper secondary level (EMIS 2018). The statistics shows an increase from the previous census from 2012, when the total enrollment was 8,396 San learners (EMIS 2013). However, it also exposes a disproportionate distribution of learners in the different phases and an alarmingly limited retainment rate.

The challenges for San learners in education are many and interconnected and have been well documented.<sup>5</sup> Whereas local and group differences exist, many common trends emerge, and the barriers for San learners to education can be most broadly divided into three categories: (i) barriers related to socioeconomic standing; (ii) barriers related to stigma and ill treatment; and (iii) barriers related to linguistic and cultural alienation in schools. Despite the fact that education is free by law, many schools operate a school fund and press parents to contribute regularly. Since most San communities are located in remote areas, hostel and transport fees add to the cost. San children unanimously cite lack of uniforms, shoes, and supplies as major reasons for dropping out. The availability and quality of food at home and at school also play an important role in San children's decisions to attend or drop out of school. Over the years, state and private donors have taken a number of measures to alleviate San communities from the burden of costs related to education. Most recently, the government passed an amendment to the Education Act of 2001 that exempts marginalized students from payment of hostel fees and guarantees free education through the completion of the basic education cycle of 12 years (OPM 2017). A lot remains to be achieved in regards to the socioeconomic situation of San learners; however, things seem to be moving in a positive direction.

The findings of this article contribute mainly to our understanding of the effects of stigma and cultural alienation in school. Within those two categories, educators' attitudes and the curriculum's cultural relevance play a major role in the estrangement of San learners in the education system. While the focus of this article falls on educators' perspectives and experiences, it is important to note that the Ju|'hoansi are not passive victims in these processes. Ju|'hoan learners, parents, and communities have repeatedly voiced their concerns and continue to make strategic decisions and resist the forces that oppress them both in the Omaheke and beyond (see Hays 2016a;

<sup>5</sup> See LeRoux (1999); Dieckmann et al. (2014); Hays (2016a, 2016b); Ninkova (2017).

Ninkova 2017; Hays and Ninkova 2018). The study's findings are presented after a brief description of the Omaheke Ju|'hoansi and of the conditions in which Ju|'hoan children access education.

### The Ju|'hoansi of the Omaheke Region

#### *History of Marginalization*

The Omaheke region lies in the northwestern fringes of the Kalahari and is ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous, comprising mainly Herero, Damara, San (Ju|'hoansi, !Xoon, and Naro), and Afrikaner communities.<sup>6</sup> The Omaheke Ju|'hoansi constitute one of at least seven San groups living on the territory of Namibia today (see Dieckmann et al. 2014). During the first half of the twentieth century, German and, after World War I, Afrikaner colonial settlers penetrated the remote fringes of the Kalahari in central eastern Namibia. With the establishment of white-owned cattle farms and the creation of the "native reserves" for the "local population" under apartheid segregation policy, the Ju|'hoansi of east central Namibia became encapsulated on either Boer commercial farms or Bantu communal farms, completely losing rights and access to land.<sup>7</sup> Life and conditions on farms varied, with evidence suggesting anything from forced capture to bonded labor, minimal rations, and abuse at the hands of farm owners (Suzman 1999; Sylvain 1999; 2001; Gordon and Sholto Douglas 2000). After 1990, work conditions on farms improved. However, farm labor has also become scarcer and more unpredictable (Sylvain 2001; Dieckmann et al. 2014). One of the more tangible changes in the lives of the landless Ju|'hoansi has been the resettlement of some families on government-owned farms, where the government assists them in becoming self-sufficient subsistence farmers. The lasting positive results of this endeavor are yet to be achieved; however, beneficiaries have expressed a sense of ownership and independence on resettlement farms (Suzman 1999; Ninkova 2017). In the last 3 decades, the state has also provided remote and marginalized communities with access to health care and education, drought food support, and welfare benefits. Currently, the Omaheke Ju|'hoansi practice a mixed subsistence that includes varying combinations of underpaid employment, government welfare, subsistence farming, and foraging. Despite some positive developments in the years since independence, unemployment, lack of access to land and weak political representation remain significant challenges for the contemporary Omaheke Ju|'hoansi (Dieckmann et al. 2014; Ninkova 2017).

<sup>6</sup> While their presence in the Omaheke is very small, Oshiwambo-speaking people comprise almost 50 percent of the population in Namibia. Most of the Namibian Otjiherero-speaking population, which makes up less than 10 percent of national population, is concentrated in the Omaheke, where it is in the majority.

<sup>7</sup> The Boer of the Omaheke are mostly Afrikaner and German settlers. They constitute about 8 percent of the population in the region, however, they own over 50 percent of the farmable land.

As part of their colonial project, Boer farm owners have also worked to civilize their Ju|'hoan workers. Their efforts included giving the Ju|'hoansi Christian names and introducing them to Christian moral, social, and gender norms (Suzman 1999; Sylvain 1999, 2001). Restricted access to land for foraging and working in close proximity to non-Ju|'hoan farm workers have resulted in changes in the livelihoods of the Ju|'hoansi. Yet, despite these disruptions, the Omaheke Ju|'hoansi have exhibited a remarkable resilience and continuity of traditional institutions and values (see Marshall 1976; Lee 2013). The Omaheke Ju|'hoansi have paired Christian names with Ju|'hoan names, and they have maintained their inclusive kinship system. They have also retained an egalitarian ethos, based on principles of nonaggrandizing and leveling-up of inequalities. Ju|'hoan children are socialized in a much more relaxed environment than Bantu and Afrikaner children are, and both men and women exhibit a strong individual autonomy. While considerably limited, hunting and gathering of bush foods constitute an important identity marker for many (Ninkova 2017).

*Schooling in the Omaheke*

Because of the geographic and demographic layout of the region, government schools stand next to major roads or larger settlements. The majority of Ju|'hoan children attend boarding schools from age 7, where they may remain for months without any contact with their families. Conditions in schools and hostels vary; however, for the most part, buildings are run-down and neglected, and the security of learners can sometimes be compromised. School routines are strictly regimented, and corporal punishment, despite being prohibited by the constitution, is widely reported.

The distribution of Ju|'hoan children in schools vary, and in some schools they are in the majority, whereas in others they are in the minority. In the Herero-dominated areas in the easternmost and northernmost parts of the region, most of the learners are Otjiherero speaking, including some of the Ju|'hoansi. In the rest of the schools, besides Herero, the learner population includes mostly Damara, Tswana, and Owambo children.<sup>8</sup>

Currently, a teaching diploma is obtainable through a bachelor program, the admission for which requires completed senior secondary education (grade 12). There are no Ju|'hoan teachers in the Omaheke. There also do not exist any government initiatives that offer relaxed entry requirements or other forms of support to San individuals interested in pursuing a teaching degree. The ethnic background of the teachers in the Omaheke includes predominantly Herero, Owambo, Tswana, and Damara teachers, with a few

<sup>8</sup> The Damara are a pastoralist Khoi people who speak Khoekhoegowab and whose current socioeconomic situation is similar to that of the San. The Tswana are a Bantu minority group with some visible presence in the Omaheke.

Boer and members of other small ethnic minorities. Some of them are originally from the region and come from households that have engaged in master-client relationships with San members. The geographic isolation of the region, its rural character, and the large number of San learners make it an unattractive working place for those coming from the outside.

#### **Context of the Study, Methods, and Data**

I have carried out ethnographic work with Ju|'hoan communities in southern Africa since 2008, including 11 months of fieldwork in 2013. My research has focused mostly on barriers to schooling for Ju|'hoan learners in the Omaheke and the strategies that Ju|'hoan individuals and communities employ to resist the encompassing state (Ninkova 2017). During my fieldwork in 2013, I repeatedly visited 12 primary and secondary schools in the Omaheke and carried out over 70 hours of classroom observation and multiple open-ended interviews and focus group discussions with learners, parents, educators, and government and NGO officials. When not visiting schools, I spent my time in a Ju|'hoan settlement, where many of my informants were adolescents who had dropped out of school. In 2015, I carried out an evaluation work for a Norwegian-based organization (Namibia Association of Norway, or NAMAS), which supported educational efforts for the Ju|'hoansi in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in the Otjozondjupa region in northeastern Namibia (Ninkova 2015). For this project, I visited 10 schools and carried out over 60 interviews with educators, parents, and community members.

The findings of my research all point to the existence of deep structural barriers that prevent the Ju|'hoansi from full participation in the wider Namibian society. The continued exclusion of groups such as the Ju|'hoansi, however, is easily dismissed by government officials who refer to the progressive policy framework that the country adopted after independence and blame the San for perpetuating their own marginalization. Drawing on these insights, I decided to conduct a study that traces the implementation of one such progressive policy. To collect focused data on educators' interpretations of the education policy and the challenges they faced to its implementation, I undertook a month-long ethnographic fieldwork in the Omaheke in November 2018. I visited eight primary schools in and north of the administrative town of Gobabis, where the Ju|'hoan population of the region resides.<sup>9</sup> I carried out semistructured interviews in English with seven school principals and 12 teachers. The interviewed educators self-identified as Herero, Owambo, Tswana, Damara, Afrikaner, and Coloured. The respondents were made aware of the scope of my research, and I received oral consent from each. I also carried out a total of 7 hours of classroom observations in three schools. For

<sup>9</sup> The visited primary schools include Gunichas, Hippo, Drimiopsis, Gqaina, Epukiro, Goeie Hoop, Christoph Ngatjizeka, and Usiel Ndjavera.

ethical reasons, I have opted to remove any identifiable information, such as personal and school names. To better contextualize the study, I also use quotes and data from my previous research.

Before we turn to the findings of the study, a note on terminology is due here as well. School learner records contain information not on ethnicity but on languages. In these records, all San languages are lumped under the category of “San language,” despite the fact that the other major languages are represented. The existence of this practice in a system that has committed to promote cultural and linguistic diversity opens questions for further research. For the purposes of this article, it suffices to know that the San learners in the visited schools are Ju|’hoansi. In the empirical section below, when respondents use the general term *San*, they refer to the Ju|’hoansi.

## Findings

### *Interpretation of the Education Policy*

All seven interviewed principals were well aware of the education policy and the normative framework within which they should work. They reported that every school was free to interpret and implement the policy as they saw fit. When asked what the education policy implied in regards to San learners, respondents cited “respect” and “appreciation” of San learners; the use, visibility, and inclusion of “San language” as a medium of instruction; and “the use of traditional San culture.” Six out of seven principals reported that they did not have the necessary resources or support to implement the policy regarding marginalized learners in their schools. Many associated the implementation of inclusive multicultural education for the Ju|’hoansi with the presence of Ju|’hoan teachers in schools. The presence of Ju|’hoan teachers was linked not only to the opportunity to include mother tongue education in Ju|’hoansi but also to the fact that they would facilitate the visibility of Ju|’hoan culture. One principal remarked:

You ask me about implementation of the policy but I have to ask you this: Where are the San teachers? They are not on the market. The policy is one thing, but when it comes to implementation, our hands are tied. If we have San teachers, the children and the community will have a feeling of belonging. The whole community will feel proud to see their culture [represented] in the school. Right now, they feel like they are colonized. (November 2018)

Interviewed teachers were less certain what the policy postulated in regards to cultural content, and 10 out of 12 admitted that they did not have sufficient guidance or support from the school management when dealing with Ju|’hoan learners. Seven teachers reported that they lacked but needed “special training” that would have enabled them to work in multicultural settings. To “know the San” was cited as a prerequisite for successful work with Ju|’hoan learners.

A small number of educators saw the Ju|'hoansi as having too many privileges within the school system. A primary teacher from a school with over 85 percent Ju|'hoan learners answered my question of whether they took any measures to better include the Ju|'hoansi like this:

Why should there be? Why is it always about the San? This makes them feel special, and they behave worse. Why can't they be like everyone else? They need discipline and not [any] special measures to make them feel important. (November 2018)

Another teacher from the same school pointed out the fact that if the Ju|'hoansi wanted to develop and catch up with the rest of the society, they should follow the national curriculum as it was. Teachers also expressed concerns that the Ju|'hoansi were "starting to know their rights" and expected things in return, such as free uniforms and toiletries, as well as more relaxed discipline. This, according to some, put the Ju|'hoansi in a stronger position than the school, and they had begun to "expect unrealistic things."

#### *Attitudes of Educators*

The *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children* states that one of the tasks of the government is to make San children feel proud of their origin and culture and concludes that "it is the attitudes of others that prevent this to happen" (MBESC 2000, 12). These "others" also include educators. One principal acknowledged that a major contributing factor for the dropping out of Ju|'hoan learners was that "appreciation for San learners lack[ed]." Educators' attitudes toward Ju|'hoan learners in the Omaheke vary greatly, ranging from sympathetic to neutral to overtly negative.

One of the most common tropes accompanying Ju|'hoan learners in the Omaheke is that they are "difficult" to work with. The principal of one school said that they were "lucky" to only have a limited number of "difficult" (meaning Ju|'hoan) learners in the school. In the words of one school secretary:

We try to give them what and what, but the San learner is a San learner. We can't change this. They are bush people. That's why I'm telling you that the San learner is the most difficult learner on Earth. (June 2013)

Another principal attributed the difficulty of working with Ju|'hoan children to the fact that "during the first seven years of their lives, the San have a natural upbringing," referring to what they perceived to be a lack of parental control and negligence in the formative years of children's lives. The same principal questioned whether the San needed education at all:

I don't see a future for them. The whole world is concerned about them but they don't want this. It's unfair to force Western education upon them. They are happy to sit around the fire and talk to one another. That's all they want. (November 2018)

All interviewed teachers acknowledged that the Ju|'hoansi were culturally different from the other learners, but this difference was often seen in negative terms and as a hindrance to their educational participation. Said one teacher: "There is something there but I can't tell you what it is. They are difficult children."

In five of the schools that I visited, teachers and principals agreed that things were moving in a positive direction. A principal acknowledged that they had encountered many challenges with Ju|'hoan learners in the past but that things have changed for the better because the learners were becoming "less wild" and "more settled." In three of the schools, however, educators assessed the situation over the past 5 years as worsening. Some referred to an increasing number of dropouts, whereas others referred to a decreased quality of the school environment and an increased lack of discipline and respect for the institution.

Ju|'hoan learners have often reported that teachers refer to them with derogatory terms in their own languages. The Ju|'hoansi do not generally get their names used and recognized in communication with others. On Boer farms, farmers use Christian names to refer to their San workers. Christian names are also used on birth certificates and ID documents. Many Ju|'hoan children learn their Christian names only after they start schooling. On communal farms, instead of names, Bantu employers use derogatory terms similar in meaning to "Bushman." This practice has also spread to schools, where over the years, learners have repeatedly expressed to me that they feel hurt and embarrassed by it. Following is an excerpt from an interview with a principal of a school in a Herero-dominated area:

PRINCIPAL: We also have this problem that some teachers don't use their names. They call the San "omukuruha" in class, and they don't like it.

RESEARCHER: What does "omukuruha" mean?

PRINCIPAL: It means "You, Bushman" in the Otjiherero language. This is what the Herero call the Bushmen who work for them. If they call you this, it means you are lower than them. That you are not a person.

RESEARCHER: Are you taking any measures to prevent this from happening in the school?

PRINCIPAL: I talk to [the teachers], and I tell them that this is wrong, but it is difficult because this is what they know. This is how they speak to the San. (November 2018)

Teachers also held divergent views about the mental capacities of Ju|'hoan learners. According to some, they were like any other children and "you can find good San students and bad San students." For others, the Ju|'hoansi were either exceptionally stupid or exceptionally gifted, particularly in sports and

the arts. Teachers referred to Ju|'hoan learners as "stubborn," "uncooperative," "lazy," or "shy" and often reported that they refused to participate in class. When asked what the reasons behind this might be, one teacher concluded that "this is how they are." Another teacher rationalized the presumed "laziness" of Ju|'hoan learners with "this is how they were created."

The depiction of Ju|'hoan learners as "gifted" is also interesting because it often refers not to academic subjects but to subjects that are usually associated with "natural talent." Many teachers kept collections of their Ju|'hoan learners' drawings and readily talked about the Ju|'hoansi's artistic and athletic skills. Some mentioned the children's ability to acquire new languages, and some described them as "curious" and "quick learners when interested." One teacher explained this in the following manner:

The San are smart people because they are bush people. You cannot survive in the bush if you are stupid. Their brains work fast and they learn quickly. But they are also very lazy, and this is where all the problems come from. (March 2013)

*Provision of Culturally Relevant Education*

Schools are encouraged to adapt the curriculum not only to meet the specific cultural background of their learners but also in response to the immediate physical and social environment of their learners. Namibia is one of the most unequal countries in the world, and the socioeconomic disparities between areas (or groups within a single area) can be huge. Most primary schools in east central Namibia are located in impoverished rural areas, where the majority of the population have little mobility and exposure to the wider world. Classroom observations in schools in the Omaheke have repeatedly shown that teachers often follow teaching plans strictly and seldom take the initiative to include topics relevant to the learners' environment or to modify topics that do not readily speak to the children's lived experiences. This is a classroom observation of a grade 6 English class with 26 children, about half of whom are Ju|'hoansi:

TEACHER: Listen to me now. We will compile a shopping list. Tom has a birthday and he wants to throw a party. He goes to the shop to buy products for his party. Write down: six packets of chips; one bag of popcorn; straws; bags of sweets; 20 liters of cool drinks; paper plates; paper cups; balloons; sausages; and rolls.

The teacher walks between the desks, leans toward a student and says:

TEACHER: Not "straws of sweets." I said "bags of sweets."

The teacher returns to the front of the room and claps to get children's attention:

TEACHER: What are paper plates made of?

A boy raises his hand:

BOY: Plastic.

TEACHER: No, paper plates are made of paper.

TEACHER: What are rolls?

A BOY: Fruit.

TEACHER: No, they are not fruit! They are something entirely different.

The learners laugh, and a boy shouts:

Boy: Teacher must jump out [of] the window! (June 2013)

The Ju|'hoansi do not celebrate their birthdays. Most do not know their age because a person's age is a relative attribute that only matters in relation to another person's age. Thus, the Ju|'hoansi keep track of birth succession and not of individual age. Yet, even if any children from the other represented groups did celebrate their birthdays, throwing a party and shopping for balloons and straws went beyond the lived reality of any of the attending learners.

All interviewed teachers understood culture to be determined by a limited number of observable or imagined superficial markers that differentiated one group from another. This is well illustrated in the following observation of a grade 4 English class with 24 learners, the overwhelming majority of whom are Ju|'hoansi:

TEACHER: Which traditions do we have in class? We have San, Herero, Damara, and Owambo. Velina wants to know how we use different cultures in class. Tell me: Which tribe are you? What food do you eat? What do you wear?

Silence. The children look bewildered.

TEACHER: I'll give you an example. I am white. I eat goat meat. I drink cool drinks. I wear normal clothes.<sup>10</sup> Come on, who is next? The Herero people are very easy. We have only two Herero in class.

A boy volunteers.

Boy: I am Damara. I eat porridge. I wear normal clothes.

A girl raises her hand.

GIRL: I am Herero. We eat meat.

<sup>10</sup> To protect the educators' identity, I must note that in this case the teacher was not white. Instead, they used me as an example.

The teacher interrupts hurriedly.

TEACHER: What do Herero women wear?

GIRL: They wear horn hats and long dresses.

TEACHER: Exactly. Next?

A BOY: I am Owambo. I like meat and oshikundu.<sup>11</sup> We wear normal clothes.

TEACHER: Any San in the room?

A girl stands up.

GIRL: I am San. I eat bush food and I drink water. I wear skins.

TEACHER: Where do you keep the water?

GIRL: In a bottle.

TEACHER: No, you keep it in an ostrich eggshell.

The class laughs and the girl sits down.

TEACHER: We have many different cultures in Namibia. Some wear clothes, some wear skins. Some eat normal food, and some eat what they find in the bush. (November 2018)

*Essentializing Ju|'hoan Culture in School*

When asked what constituted Ju|'hoan culture, teachers unanimously reduced it to the following traits: the San wore skins; they had an intimate knowledge of the bush and its edible resources; and they were good dancers and performers. It is important to note that the contemporary Omaheke Ju|'hoansi do not wear skins, except for cultural performances (most commonly in front of tourists), and foraging for bush food, while still practiced, is not sustainable in itself.

To the question of what measures they took to integrate or represent Ju|'hoan learners specifically, most teachers referred to the extracurricular cultural groups, where "the San can do their culture." All visited schools had San cultural groups, where children dressed in skins and sang and danced to traditional songs. The groups performed at school gatherings, and some participated in bigger regional cultural competitions or events. Children spoke positively about their participation in these groups at the primary level, and parents enjoyed the performances when they gathered for school events. In secondary schools, however, teachers have reported that it is difficult to

<sup>11</sup> *Oshikundu* is a fermented millet drink.

recruit members for the San cultural groups, because many feel embarrassed to self-identify as San or to dress and perform in sparse clothing.

Only one grade 1 teacher admitted that she tried to incorporate multicultural perspectives in the curriculum. In her words, when she talked about different natural phenomena, such as “the sun” or “the rain,” she asked children to tell stories related to these phenomena. Her account continues:

Only the San know such stories but they are shy to tell them in class because the other children laugh. When I push them, one or two might share something. And what they say is usually cute. (November 2018)

When asked whether certain aspects from Ju|’hoan culture could be incorporated in the curriculum and be relevant or valuable for all learners, teachers could not come up with specific ideas. One teacher acknowledged that the San possessed a lot of knowledge about “survival in the bush” but that this knowledge was not compatible with “modern education influenced by Western values.” Teachers cited two major barriers to inclusion of more culturally specific material in schools, namely, lack of knowledge and heterogeneity of classes.

One principal reported that their school organized “cultural days” on which elders from different ethnic backgrounds, including Ju|’hoansi, visited the school and told stories. When I asked whether I could attend one of these cultural days, I was told that they had none scheduled in the coming weeks. It seemed that the practice was not firmly established yet; however, the principal cited positive feedback from learners and parents. Another school had held such storytelling events with Ju|’hoan elders, but they had been discontinued. The principal of a third school came up with the idea of “community involvement” during our interview and said that if the school had enough resources, they would implement it.

In one school, educators sometimes organized bush trips around the school, so that the Ju|’hoansi could “practice their traditional knowledge.” However, these trips were rare and not well integrated into the remaining school activities.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Educators face multiple challenges and dilemmas when teaching in diverse classrooms. Research shows that preoccupation with differences essentializes cultures and blurs intragroup heterogeneity, and this occurs in multicultural education settings globally (May 1999). The practice of a “difference multiculturalism” (Gitlin 1992) affects everyone in the classroom. As evident from the classroom event that aimed to demonstrate how a teacher in a small primary school in Namibia “use[d] different cultures in class,” all groups fared differently (and were somewhat caricaturized) vis-à-vis an imagined “norm” for

food and clothes. What complicates the situation for some groups, such as the Ju|'hoansi, is the extent and context of their marginalization. In the national imagination, the San occupy the liminal space between nature and society. The preoccupation with superficial cultural differences in school reinforces rather than challenges this already established "truth."

The stigma attached to being San is one of the most crippling factors that perpetuates their exclusion from the wider Namibian society. The San have been systematically dehumanized, exoticized, and "othered" in the long process of their subordination and exploitation. Already under German rule, the colonial administration distinguished between *Eingeborenen* (Bantu natives) and *Buschleute* (Bushmen) (Gordon and Sholto Douglas 2000, 52). This distinction had guided coercion measures, as well as land dispossession and allocation under colonial and apartheid rule, and its legacy continues to organize class and racial hierarchies to this day. The data discussed in this article expose the extent to which educators evoke metaphors that bear striking similarities to this dehumanizing dichotomy. Instead of challenging it, education reenacts it in a new light and context.

In the Omaheke, where the lives of the Ju|'hoansi have been shaped by their interactions with Boer and Bantu communities in master-client relationships, the tropes that most vividly depict others' perceptions of the Ju|'hoansi are their animality and belonging to the bush, their childlike character, and their stupidity (see Suzman 1999; Sylvain 1999, 2001). Educators who describe Ju|'hoan learners as "difficult," "lazy," "shy," or "stubborn" echo the colonial-era "childlike" and "stupidity" associations, just as the teacher who qualifies learners' stories about natural phenomena as "cute" infantilizes Ju|'hoan knowledge. When educators refer to Ju|'hoan learners as becoming "less wild," or when they reduce "San culture" to wearing skins and keeping water in ostrich eggshells, they anchor their perception of the Ju|'hoansi in an imagined ahistorical identity fixed in nature. Statements such as "this is how they are" or "this is how they were created" negate the Ju|'hoansi's social agency and naturalize their difference. These practices constitute the Ju|'hoansi's difference as "permanent and fixed" (Hall 2002, 245) and serve to "legitimize hierarchies of difference in which power relations are embedded" (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995, 20). Similarly, the school principal who does "not see a future for them" alludes to the social Darwinist metaphor that denies the Ju|'hoansi historical development and agency. Their words imply that education is wasted on them and that the Ju|'hoansi are better left to enjoy life as they are. From this perspective, civilizational maturity seems an impossible objective for the Ju|'hoansi.

As disturbing as they appear, the attitudes and practices of the interviewed educators should be regarded in the wider context in which they are embedded. Educators who have a narrow reading of culture as a set of attributes that can be "done," as the data from the Omaheke demonstrate,

speak of a negligence on the part of the state to educate teachers as to how to work with diversity. Furthermore, the inclusion of Ju|'hoan learners in school cannot occur in isolation. It must be accompanied by discussions and political actions that address the systemic character of their "othering" in the encompassing society, and the root causes of their current marginalization. This predicament is similar to the one described by Moland (2015; 2019), who questions the potential of education to instigate sociopolitical change and argues that, in order for multicultural education to include diverse factions of society, there must first exist a certain level of national integration.

This leads us to the question of multiculturalism, and to its utility for a southern African indigenous group intersectionally marginalized along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. Can multicultural education benefit severely marginalized groups in emerging democracies, and if so, under what conditions? The findings of this study point to several conclusions that might provide partial answers to this question. First, the case of the Omaheke Ju|'hoansi highlights the importance of understanding the historical and social processes that have led to the exclusion and marginalization of certain groups. This includes scrutinizing the ideologies that shape local understandings of diversity, which might differ from the imported meanings of the term. Policy frameworks should be rooted in emic self-understandings and realities, thus allowing for the respectful representation of marginalized factions of the society. Second, the enormous gap between (globally influenced) national policies and local practices demonstrates the critical importance of teacher education programs that would equip teachers with knowledge and tools for teaching in diverse classrooms. This includes follow-up programs and strengthened support for principals and schools. Third, the lack of indigenous and minority teachers is a major obstacle to the provision of equal and quality education on multiple levels. Governments who commit to providing inclusive and multicultural education on paper must also commit to the financial and moral support for indigenous and minority teachers. Finally, the study points to the urgent need for increased political emancipation and self-determination of indigenous groups such as the Ju|'hoansi. Political recognition may not automatically translate into changes of the attitudes of others but over time, it might help indigenous groups gain control over their representation and direct their own development, including in the sphere of education.

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