

# *The father in San culture: oral histories from Botswana and Namibia*

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*For 12 years, the author worked in different positions with the Kuru Development Trust, the last eight years as Training Coordinator. Kuru is a community-owned development organisation for mostly San people<sup>1</sup>. Towards the end of her time with Kuru, she undertook a study on the educational situation of San children in Southern Africa, interviewing many community members in Botswana and Namibia. San people from each of the various language groups worked closely with her on the interviews, and also on formulating the conclusions. Among these collaborators was Kamana Phetso, one of the most prominent young leaders of the San in Botswana. He had been with Kuru since 1992, and was Secretary of the Kuru Board for the past six years. Tragically, he was killed in a car crash in January 2001, on the eve of his departure to Australia to work with an aboriginal programme for a year.*

*This article shows the real challenges that face parents and children in environments that constrain and devalue them, and that also weaken ancient practices and beliefs that have traditionally provided positive support for the healthy development of their children. A number of clear themes run through the article. These include: the interface of San children with the education system and the clashes that result; and the differences between San and non-San with respect to discipline.*

*Willemien le Roux is currently coordinating an oral testimony programme with the San people for WIMSA<sup>2</sup>, assisting community members to use tape recorders to record their own and their families' experiences and thoughts about a range of topics, many of which they suggest themselves. For her, an important aspect of the collecting is to take this information back to the communities. The programme therefore includes workshops and other devices to allow people to reflect on who they are so they can inform their own decisions.*

Botswana: San children dancing

photo: Willemien Le Roux, Kuru Development Trust

The people were sitting in a circle outside their hut, a small fire burning in the centre. At a quick glance they looked no different from the people in the other huts in the small village around them, homes we had been visiting all morning. But my colleague Kamana Phetso's eyes met mine and we smiled.

We had found them. We had been looking for the past few days for the remaining San people in this area, the Eastern side of Botswana, as part of a research project funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, in collaboration with Kuru Development Trust and the regional San organisation, WIMSA.

In the other parts of southern Africa it had not been as difficult to interview and meet San people as here, for their languages and culture are quite distinct and they live in either government determined resettlement areas, or in conservation or nature areas. But here in the east, the San have mostly lost their languages and have almost completely integrated with the Tswana and Kgalagadi groups around them, so the distinction was not that easy to make.

The five children in this family, ranging from six months to fifteen years approximately, were sitting among the adults as we were going through our questions. A toddler of about four years was putting more wood on the fire to help his father, who was cooking in a three legged pot. The pot was obviously too small for the whole group. The man was stirring the soft porridge with a wooden three-pronged fork. While he was doing this, the four year old leaned against his father watching their meal cook, his arm around the man's neck. The baby was suckling her mother's breast, while an aunt and possibly a grandmother were watching. We were all sitting on the ground, the women squatting in that remarkably lithe pose typical to San women everywhere, knees bent outwards alongside their bodies with skirts tucked in between their legs.

We asked: 'You and the other people here say you are the Basarwa<sup>3</sup>. But why is that, since you speak the same language as the other people?'

'We are Basarwa because we are poor'. The younger woman answered. 'We have long lost our language and our culture,

but we know we are Basarwa since all other people progress, but not us'.

Kamana and I looked at each other again. Sad as her words were, showing such utter desperation, it was clear that they had not completely lost their culture. One of the features of the San culture we had come across all over the trips to several San groups, had been the distinct role of the father in the upbringing and care of the children. Another has been the equality of men and women – a consequence of women's historical importance as food gatherers in the days when the San people roamed free. Although there were specific tasks in food gathering assigned to men and women, things like daily chores and raising children were shared more equally. Many things are changing in the San's lives and these special features are under threat in most areas, due to the influence of stronger and more powerful groups who have moved into their areas. Yet, even in areas where men had started to play a bigger political role than women, we still observed the free interaction of children and fathers, and the ease with which fathers do certain tasks in caring for young children – things which, in

most of the male dominated cultures around them, would have been passed on to the women with condescending grunts.

In certain areas we asked about the role of the father in the upbringing of the child. Mostly regret accompanied the stories that followed. 'This is how it was in the old days, but we do not manage it any more'. The !Xõo and Naro people in the Aminuis reserve in Omaheke district, Namibia, gave long accounts of the importance of their fathers' teaching, especially for young boys.

*There was a time when the fathers taught their sons about living in the bush. It was almost like giving a course to a young man ... The young people stopped wanting these courses. Today that time is over. Now we realise the importance of traditional knowledge, and 'though we should make an effort to retain as much as we can for our children, some of the power of that knowledge is lost. (!Xõo man, Aminuis Corridor, Namibia)*

In D'Kar in Botswana as well as in the Rietfontein area in Omaheke, Namibia, we were told about the important role



Botswana: San parent and child at a traditional dance festival in D'Kar  
 (Bokamoso promotes traditional dancing in all preschools that take part in its training programme)  
 photo: Mattias Hofer

of the father with regard to discipline or behavioural instruction. There were exceptions, especially in more integrated societies, but the majority of the San people interviewed still vowed that corporal punishment was undesirable. They said that disciplinary methods were based on community approval of good behaviour, and group

disapproval which could result in ostracism.

*Discipline had to do with the laws of nature. Some children were not allowed to eat certain berries and roots, so that nature would keep on providing. If these laws were broken, the rains would not come as they*

*normally do. If you did not listen to these taboos, you were responsible for the downfall of everybody, and everyone cared for the well-being of the whole group. (Naro San man, Aminuis Corridor, Namibia)*

The cornerstones of San traditional education were experiential learning and observation, integrating the child in every aspect of life. The San child, even as young as two years old, would be allowed to experiment with what many other cultures view as dangerous objects, such as fire, knives, and needles. The adults would always be close by, however, and would either be busy with the same activity alongside the child, demonstrating care, or would be encouraging the child verbally on how to handle such items without endangering themselves. The father's craft making (bows and arrows, axes, leather work, wooden tools or crafts) would be copied by the boys, while the mother's beadwork, preparation of wild food, thatching or clay building would be copied by girls of all ages.

The child's 'lessons' consisted of discussions with adults on equal grounds, analysing a practical situation

in order to draw a hypothesis on the basis of which further action could be judged. 'Look at this spoor. Can you guess how old it is? How far would the animal be ahead of us?' The consequent finding and killing of the animal tracked, would prove the hypothesis or qualify it, making an indelible impression on the participating child's mind. Little boys were allowed to experiment with hunting by setting snares, using tiny bows and arrows to kill mice, birds, and so on. When they were old enough, they would use arrows with poison, an act that would also announce the advent of manhood and be celebrated by all, by praising the young hunter's skill with song and dance.

Although a distinction was made between the father's and the mother's teaching roles where boys and girls were concerned, in the past this distinction only concerned the food-gathering activities. It was based on the division of skills needed for survival in an often hostile and harsh environment: the most effective use of energy and human resources was an issue of life and death. Today, many San people emphasise the importance of story telling, dance and

games as part of their education, and the important role of the father in these activities for both boys and girls. Traditionally, San culture generally did not even have the same taboos following child birth, found in many other African cultures. For example, a San man had immediate access to the new-born infant and bonding took place from an early stage. This kind of flexibility and interchangeability of roles was necessary in a hunting and gathering culture, since mobility was of utmost importance. Everyone needed to help carry (goods, children) and everyone needed to help find food when on the move (see Draper and Harpending, 1987 and Biesele, 1993). Another reason for this more flexible environment in childrearing had to do with the fact that homes were never permanent structures, and in a mobile lifestyle there were also no doors to exclude children from adult talk or activities.

However, since they were treated in such a free and equal way since early childhood, San children in today's mixed societies are often perceived to be unruly and undisciplined by teachers and caregivers of other groups. The

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*... the best caregiver is the natural caregiver – what is the role of parents and caregivers in supporting development of learning in children? We should not forget that<sup>4</sup>*  
 ”

different disciplinary systems of the cultures they are moving into cause conflict and confusion, and many cases of the drop-out reported to the research team were related to that issue. In other cultures the father especially is seen as the one to instil fear and obedience in such 'problem' children using corporal punishment. That means that there are expectations in these other cultures for the San father to play such a role and pressure is put on them to develop this responsibility in forums such as parent-teacher associations. But this fails to take into account the role of the wider San society.

To test these perceptions and to measure the changes in today's San societies with regard to the father's role in disciplining his children, we spent much time on these issues during our interviews.

'What then would San parents do if a child misbehaves, or refuses to adhere to the norms of society?' We asked in various interviews.

*We know this can happen. And sometimes the mother of such a child does not find it easy to teach the child how to be a good member of our society. Often the mother as well as the father of such a difficult child protect the child. Then they need other people in their group to help them. (Ju'/hoan San elder, Mogotho, Botswana)*

*I was very naughty when I was small. Then I was assigned to my grandfather. He kept me next to him all the time. He kept me from doing wrong things, all the time until I became like a human being. I did not change immediately, but he made sure that he knew what I was doing.*

*always. (Naro San man, Donkerbos, Namibia)*

We were informed that the father's role in many San cultures can also be extended to the oldest uncle on the mother's side.

*The child knows that the mother and father do not even have the last word and that the uncle is there. He is not only the child's protector, but if the child has problems, he knows that the uncle will be the final one to discipline him. (San woman, D'Kar, Botswana)*

The purpose of the above mentioned research was to compare progress in formal education among all of the more than ten San groups in the whole region of southern Africa. Children dropping out of school at various stages, but especially in the early years (between four and eight) as well as the puberty years (11-14) still remains one of the most disturbing phenomena of modern San society. It reflects how the deterioration of their social structures and the alienating systems of education (their only option by which to join the changing economy around them) affect the general progress of San children.

The report of the research, called *Torn Apart – San children as change agents in a process of acculturation*<sup>5</sup> shows that San parents generally supported the idea of formal education for their children as a means of assisting their people to bridge the gap between their old lifestyle and the modern world they were entering into. However, they were torn between this need and the fact that this same education that they needed for survival was alienating children from their parents and their culture.

In addition, educators and extension workers who wanted to facilitate change for the San people, saw children as an entry point into San culture. Many children dealt with the pressure from both sides by dropping out, thereby showing their resistance to both the foreign and often hostile environment they were forced to enter, as well as to their parents' expectations of them as change agents.

One of the main reasons for the lack of control parents seemed to have over their children dropping out of school, was the diminishing role of the father as educator. In many cases fathers have been forced to accept jobs away from

their families (construction, cattle herding, road labour) because unskilled labour needs in the remote areas where most San live still favour men above women.

This changing economic situation of San people all over southern African has brought about the unfortunate separation of children from their parents, but more especially their fathers. In addition, the nature of the manual labour that many San men revert to for an income is such that the children can no longer share these tasks. The nature of paid employment also clashes with leisure time and the ability of fathers to decide how to fill their time, and this also makes it more difficult for them to adapt their tasks to their children's needs.

The new economic situation and structural changes in the San's environment, have also severed the extended family groups of the past. These fast changes are due to the new sedentary life caused by loss of land, border construction and resettlement schemes. These have divided families and forced people to abandon their hunting and gathering ways of the past.

In a large number of cases, women have become single parents due to casual relationships with men from other groups who are either passing by or have come to do temporary work in the areas where the San live, but who have no intention of marrying a San woman or of taking responsibility for children born from such relationships. This is due to the low economic and social status of the San everywhere, which not only relates to their present poverty situation, but also to their hunter-gatherer past, a profession which has always been scorned by pastoralists or agriculturalists. This attitude towards the San has contributed greatly to their present economic disadvantage: they lost their land, since they were not seen to be 'using' the land in a legitimate way.

San mothers find themselves unprepared for the responsibilities of single parenthood, and for raising children without the support of a man or even the wider family group. Many of their previous educational practices were not identified as education per se, but accepted as part of the act of growing up, and were not necessarily the mother's task. Learning new skills and adapting to behavioural

expectations were so much part of ordinary living, integrated in the total society, that San mothers as well as the extended family members now find it hard to identify the specific areas where the father's absence leaves a gap to be filled by others.

In the few cases where San children were found to have succeeded in modern education, it was striking how the father's influence was mentioned as playing a role in the child's success. The following two examples show this.

1. Masego Nkelekang comes from the village of Mancotae, in the Nata area in Northern Botswana. She speaks Chire-Chire, a dialect of the Shua people. Until the end of 2000 she worked as a fieldwork-coordinator for Kuru Development Trust in D'Kar, Ghanzi. She finished her first degree at the University of Botswana and is currently studying for her Masters degree in Britain.

In her primary school years, most other children were also San. She started experiencing discrimination against her only when she had to leave her village to go to Junior

Secondary School, where she found that everyone despised the San children and therefore some children preferred not to disclose their origin. Some of the San children performed better than the oppressors, however, and that helped build their self-esteem and gave them endurance.

In her early school years, her parents had to pay for most of her expenses. Masego ascribes her success in school to the support she received from her parents, in particular her father. He is not a literate man, but has always been very persistent that they should finish school. He checked her progress with the school authorities and every term he studied their school reports carefully, asking someone who could read to tell him about every subject, and wanting to know if they did not do well. He is presently Vice-Chair of the Parent-Teacher Association and serves on the School Committee. (from the book *Torn Apart – San children as change agents in a process of acculturation* – see note 1)

2. Tienie Mushavanga is a 22-year old Kxoe student at the Caprivi College

of Education. He graduated from Max Mukushi School, but his family originated from the village of Buada in West Caprivi.

After the first school break, Tienie and some other boys ran away from school. He stayed away for a year. Even though his father, the Headman of Omega, asked him to return, he did not force him, but continued with his traditional education, such as telling the children parables with animal characters and taking the boys along when he hunted with spear and dogs. There were other children who stayed with Tienie's parents for the sake of school because their homes were too far. This made him go back to school again.

His father's desire that he should go to school and his support from home, as well as role models – a student from the polytechnic and the San headmaster at Omega who has since passed away – inspired him to continue in spite of hardships. His devout Christian belief also gave him courage. The San learners at Senior Secondary, who were a minority and

were seriously harassed by the Mbukushu learners, stood together and organised themselves. They did performances from their own tradition in the hostel and when volleyball teams were introduced they worked hard at being better than the others. Other problems were caused by teachers who were not serious about their work. He said some were only interested in status and money and instead of trying to encourage the learners or gain their respect, they become over-friendly and in some cases even use older boys as mediators to get them girls.

His biggest concern is that Kxoe culture is not passed on enough by the school system. The youth are angry with their parents for not having enough money and they feel a sense of loss for the things in their culture that are vanishing. (from an interview conducted by Steve Felton, as part of the research for the WIMSA/UNICEF film *Torn Apart*)

But despite these examples, the responsibilities of educating San children in these transitional societies are most often met with bewilderment

by many San parents. Outsiders who work with San people believe that they have 'lost all control over their children'. Indeed many San parents have reported that they had started to revert to corporal punishment, or worse, that they condone separation from their children by sending them to hostels at a very tender age; or that they even allow their children to be 'adopted' by wealthier and more progressive people as the best way to educate them for the new world they are entering. The increase of alcohol and drug abuse among both San men and women – one of the evils of transition and resettlement in all San societies – has also taken its toll on the education and care of children. This is used to strengthen the case of those who see separation of San children from their parents as the best solution for the acquisition of modern education. It is disturbing that these practices have such profound echoes of the history of Aboriginal and Native American children. Although it is now widely acknowledged how detrimental the separation of these children from their cultures has been, it seems to be repeating itself in Africa without too much resistance.

To try to address these realities among at least some of the San people, the Kuru Development Trust was established in the early 1980s with support from outside donors, including the Bernard van Leer Foundation (Bram le Roux 1998). The Trust is a community-owned development organisation with a holistic approach to development and a range of interlinked and interdependent activities. These include: income generating projects; a savings and loan scheme; cultural activities; and a training programme. A preschool project – the Bokamoso Preschool Programme – has been established through the training programme. This includes mother-tongue community members being trained as preschool teachers; and communities being supported in establishing and running their own preschools. The point is to restore respect for age-old San childrearing values and methods to children's lives. But this is not by slavish adherence to traditional beliefs and practices but by adaptation to current realities, values and methods that modern education theories are rediscovering. One of the most challenging areas of this programme is, however, to make San

people realise the value of what they have always had. Many choose modern education as the preferable option for their children and are suspicious that efforts to re-introduce traditional knowledge, or even mother-tongue education, are ways to 'keep us behind'.

There is a long way to go and the situation of the San people is indeed sad, if one considers their progressive educational practices of the past (Heckler, 1999). However, there is no turning back for the San people. The pre-conditions for the ideal principles of San education do not exist anymore; and modern life has taken its toll on the once important role of the father in childrearing. It has also become crucial for San people to acquire literacy and other gifts of modern education, and they have no choice but to adapt to the demands of modern economy and political conditions.

One cannot help but regret how much richer the world would have been if the San had been allowed to educate us all on how to integrate the principles of acquiring knowledge into the wider realms of our daily lives, instead of separating education from daily life.

May the practitioners and policy makers in education of the future allow us to learn from the San, and better still, allow and assist the San to integrate their old customs with modern education, and show us how the task can be divided among all members of our society, including the fathers, grandfathers and uncles! ○

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- An extensive bibliography that is also relevant to the subject matter of this article is included in *Torn apart: San children as change agents in a process of*

*acculturation*, by Willemien le Roux (see note 4 below).

More information about the Kuru Development Trust is available from <http://kalaharipeoples.org/documents/Kuru-san>

#### notes

1. The word 'San' is used as an interim term to describe all the groups. It was accepted by the WIMSA Annual General Assembly in 1997
2. WIMSA stands for the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa, a regionally represented networking organisation with its head office in Windhoek, Namibia. More information is available from <http://www.san.org.za/wimsa>
3. 'Basarwa' (in Botswana) or 'Bushman' are examples of some of the names used for these people. They actually prefer to call themselves by the name of their own language groups – for example: Ju'/hoansi, !Xõo or Naro
4. Le Roux W (1999) *Torn apart: San children as change agents in a process of acculturation*; WIMSA, Namibia
5. Le Roux W (1999) *op cit*

Botswana: At a traditional dance  
photo: Willemien Le Roux, Kuru Development Trust

