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## **The San Culture and Education Centre !Khwa ttu: A Process of Heritage Restitution**

Irene Staehelin

*!Khwa ttu*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The San Culture & Education Centre !Khwa ttu is located on the slopes of a former wheat farm 60 km north of Cape Town. A vista of  *fynbos*  and  *renosterveld*  mixed with alien trees meets the rugged Atlantic coast to form the horizon. At first sight this might seem an unlikely location on which to establish a center dedicated to the San peoples and their culture, as no San communities have lived in this coastal area for centuries. However, the regional history and recent archaeological finds reveal that the Western Cape was once part of a vast territory occupied by the |Xam Bushmen who were driven into the interior, indentured on farms and who mostly perished in serfdom or in commando raids by Dutch settlers in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the proximity to Cape Town, perhaps even more than historical considerations, establishes this as an attractive site, for it makes available the concentration of potential visitors and the range of logistical support necessary for the financial viability of !Khwa ttu. Of equal importance was the timely convergence of two events: A providential meeting of minds by a group of individuals who deeply cared about San development and education, and the coming up for sale of a particularly beautiful farmstead.

!Khwa ttu aims to become a hub of cultural restitution and training for the San, who have been forcibly separated from their lands, languages, and significant cultural roots all over Southern Africa. In this respect the San share a fate similar to those of indigenous minorities the world over. The loss of land and culture — and in the case of the Angolan San, forced militarization — has resulted in a pattern of traumatic effects that include alcoholism, substance abuse, and a high incidence of rape and domestic violence. These effects are frequently the harbingers of a community's complete disintegration as a viable social unit. It is a sad irony that in the midst of this social destruction, San communities are frequently sought out by new-age merchants eager to provide an insatiable West with words of wisdom from 'the last hunter gatherers.'

It is equally ironic that South African media and government officials periodically make use of the San as symbols of national unity. The San are projected

onto the public consciousness as the immutable common ancestor of all South Africans. There is perhaps less malice than ignorance or indifference involved in such a practice. A recent South African publication, for example, beautifully illustrated, richly sponsored and with a foreword by Thabo Mbeki, positions the San as follows:

Today, remnants of San hunter-gatherer communities still occupy the drier reaches of the Kalahari, living more or less in the same way as they did a thousand years ago (Barber and Lee 2002: 28).

The lack of education on issues of history and heritage, however, does not start or stop with the general public; it is most urgently needed within the San communities themselves. It is a worldwide phenomenon that indigenous groups suffer disproportionately from poor health, hunger and abject poverty. Overwhelming apathy results not only from a lack of food, but also from finding oneself in an uprooted, hopeless condition. The well-intended efforts of development organizations flush with donor money to provide food, schools and clinics have more often than not failed to uplift such communities. The failure is laid at the feet of the people themselves as they are labeled self-destructive, genetically pre-disposed to alcoholism, or worse yet, weak links on the human chain of evolution destined for extinction.

The field of psychotraumatology, a sub-discipline of psychology, has amply documented such behaviors as a kind of cultural trauma, the by-product of non-validated and suppressed grief, rage and shame. A seminal discussion of this concept is found in Sousan Abadian's work on the trauma of indigenous peoples and culture as treatment (Abadian 1999). I remain deeply indebted to this author for her scholarly research on the destructive 'subculture of trauma' among Canadian Indians in British Columbia, and I remain impressed by her demonstration of compassion and social conscience in remaining with these communities as they attempted to confront and transcend their violent histories. Individuals as well as entire groups went through successive stages of rage, grief and alienation, but over time they were able to heal, shed their apathy, and develop responsible leadership. It is from the work of Sousan Abadian that I derive the dual pillars on which !Khwatlu was established to address San trauma: cultural restitution and job training.

### **!KHWATLU: A BRIEF HISTORY**

The site of the project was purchased in February 1999 with donor money from Switzerland, following a request by WIMSA<sup>1</sup>) and SASI<sup>2</sup>) to assist the San to cope with an ever-increasing influx of tourists in their areas. San leaders from Namibia and South Africa had come to the conclusion in 1998 that tourism resulted in mixed blessings for their isolated communities. While some individuals were able to profit from selling crafts or posing for films and photographs, the communities as a whole felt exploited. They lacked the sophistication, the assertiveness, and the social tools to mediate the interaction with increasing numbers of tourists, film crews, and

researchers. The communities lacked a clear and consistent policy for confronting the rush of demands from outsiders. Kxao Moses ≠Oma (Namibia, Nyae Nyae Conservancy) eloquently pleaded for the San at the 1998 United Nations 16<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (UNWGIP) in Geneva:

The recent introduction of tourism-based undertakings among the San communities has made the San aware that their culture is a valuable social and economic asset. However, those communities which emphasize the income-generating potential of their culture risk the further demise of their culture if they perform cultural practices exclusively for the sake of tourists rather than also for the well-being of their communities (≠Oma and Thoma 1998).

While an immediate need for tourism training was recognized by all stakeholders — the San as represented by WIMSA, local Cape Town human rights activists who subsequently became the !Khwa ttu Management Committee, and the Swiss UBUNTU Foundation — the size of the farm (850 ha) and the number of existing buildings allowed for a more ambitious vision to emerge than that of !Khwa ttu as a mere tourism training center.

Practical inspiration for what !Khwa ttu could become was gained by researching and evaluating various initiatives globally, mainly indigenous museums and visitor centers that are successfully operating in Canada, the United States and Australia. Most of the larger and more effective indigenous projects were supported by substantial government subsidies or gambling revenues. The distinctive South African context and the relatively modest amount of funds available, however, demanded a uniquely local solution. Efforts were made to follow an operational model that would not only help !Khwa ttu to become financially self-sustainable, but that would hopefully enable the center to share resources in the future with less fortunate San communities elsewhere by selling their crafts or involving their members in cultural training programs.

At the WIMSA General Assembly of November 2000 in Windhoek, the San delegates officially renamed the farm, changing the original name ‘*Grootwater*’ (Afrikaans for ‘Big Water’) to ‘*!Khwa ttu*,’ the term for water, or water pans, in the language of the extinct |Xam Bushmen. Water was understood as an auspicious metaphor for the life-giving nature of culture. The choice of a |Xam term signified respect for a kin group that was not allowed to survive to the present.

Since 2000, the project’s legal structure has been given special attention, in order to safeguard its survival and independence. Its physical assets and operational objectives are intimately linked to prevent dilution of resources away from the intended beneficiaries. The land, the buildings and the project are jointly held by the San, as represented by WIMSA, and by the non-profit UBUNTU Foundation, in two Section 21 companies subject to South African law.

The nine existing buildings have been renovated and four new structures built

under the direction of Cape Town architect Geoff George. With the help of local grants, alien trees are being cleared. The typical vegetation of the Western Cape is gradually returning to the land, and with it an abundance of small rodents, birds and snakes. By now, some 300 antelopes roam the land; special care was given to reintroduce a herd of eland, the animal most venerated by the Bushman hunters and painters of the past. In October 2005, !Khwa ttu opened its gates to the public as a cultural and recreational destination.

The original vision had called for !Khwa ttu to open with a large San History and Heritage Museum, complete with indoor and outdoor exhibits guiding the visitors through the complex regional San cultures. The museum would follow a style that has been successfully established by indigenous communities on the Canadian West Coast and in Alaska. This ambitious plan suffered an involuntary delay in early 2004 and had to be postponed to a later date. Great efforts were made to have a San Photo Gallery ready for the opening, so that the public can view historical images of Bushman peoples as well as more recent documentary photography. A restaurant and a Bushman Art and Crafts Store will generate much needed revenue. San guides will accompany visitors to viewpoints via new trails laid out to observe birds or explain plants that were used by the San in the past. A small campsite will provide families and school children with an outdoor experience in the company of young San, and occasionally of San elders telling stories. Facilities to accommodate workshops for up to 20 people have been built and furnished. On the top of the farm's highest elevation, a *boma*-style outdoor grill area is becoming a popular destination for small conferences. Great attention will be given to place the encounters between the San and the visitors in a framework of dignity and equality; the former having the tools to represent their culture with the necessary skills.

## THE CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL RESTITUTION

There is an unquestionable eagerness on the part of many San to learn more about their past and their forebears. A female member of the 2002 WIMSA Culture and Heritage working group was deeply moved after a visit to the Jewish Museum in Cape Town, where she had seen the photograph of a severed Bushman head. Later, in a discussion on the role of museums, she said "The truth about us must be known, the whole truth." But as any scholar of Southern African history, anthropology, archaeology, and rock art research knows, there is an ever increasing, shocking disparity between the abundant information on the San available to an international circle of privileged individuals, and the utter lack of access to similar knowledge by the San themselves.

While the San have formally expressed a desire for !Khwa ttu to remain a 'research-free zone,' i.e. a place where they are *not* being researched and questioned, !Khwa ttu's mission is to be a place where the San can themselves ask questions and come to terms with what has been said and written about them. WIMSA and the KFO<sup>3</sup>) started a Regional Oral Testimony Project in the late 1990's. !Khwa ttu seeks

funds to establish an archive within the future museum to house documents acquired about San peoples.

Back in 1992, Alan Barnard listed close to 600 titles (books and papers) in English dealing with the Kalahari Debate alone (Katz, Biesele, and Denis 1997). We can probably safely assume that in the last two decades additional publications in numerous languages have doubled that number; even more so if one includes rock art research and archaeology in the wider discipline of San studies. This staggering volume of literature puts a heavy burden on the team working for !Khwa ttu, on the San (WIMSA) side as well as on the non-San partners, who face a bewildering array of choices on how to represent San cultures. Even if a steadfast, dogged regional approach is chosen for the future !Khwa ttu museum, even if elegance or originality are sacrificed in order to present unadorned narratives for the San 'to take home,' the present speed of post-modern knowledge production will make some shortcomings unavoidable. The contents of a museum that wants to be representative will have to be worked out step by step with diverse San groups. In order to make informed choices, however, the San must be acquainted with a full range of options.

In an ideal world, scholars would see themselves as stewards of indigenous heritage, and be eager to share it with the communities that they have researched. In reality, however, research has become a commodity with all the inherent aspects of other forms of materialist production: competition, novelty, branding, career building, and financial benefits. This can be deplored, yet it cannot be changed. A small, widely dispersed group of semi-literate individuals, who speak several languages but share many common cultural traits, as well as carrying the oldest genes of humanity, are understandably confused in this supermarket of knowledge production. Several scholars, such as the editors of this volume and some others, have dedicated their work and often their very lives to find ways and means of sharing their data with their San partners. Scholars such as Hugh Brody and Nigel Crawhall have developed a relatively new technique, cultural land mapping, in direct cooperation with communities. This approach is characterized by drawing new maps with the people's old names, integrating history and nature, the past and the present, into one complex rendition of a geographical substratum. It is a promising effort to leave the Western 'compartmentalizing' mindset and to come to the encounter of the San reality.

## **THE VISION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION**

Beyond adult education and the training in tourism skills, !Khwa ttu strives to become a center for San cultures of the past and present. Education is seen as the most promising contribution to a better future for the many remote, desperately poor San communities. !Khwa ttu is embedded in a larger group of projects in Southern Africa that are dedicated to the cultural survival and development of Bushman peoples.

In practical terms, this means that WIMSA chooses and pays for adult San

trainees and their spouses to live and work at !Khwa ttu for a few months on a rotational basis. So far, most San have come from Namibia or from small South African San communities grouped around Upington and Schmidtsdrift, but it is hoped that the visa situation will also allow for Botswana and Angolan San to visit !Khwa ttu. New trainees are first given a health check by the nearby Darling clinic. Information on the prevention of AIDS, on the effects of smoking, on alcohol abuse, and on general hygiene and balanced nutrition is offered. These issues come up regularly at the weekly trainees' meetings as individuals lose their initial shyness and share each other's stories. Literacy, English classes, general life skills, and basic computer operations are taught informally between the hours spent with regular work. Most trainees have previously been unemployed; their time at !Khwa ttu provides them not only with a modest salary, but also with a daily structure, with new skills, and over time with some expertise that should benefit them once they return to their homes. Apart from skills in building, farm management, and tourism, !Khwa ttu strives to install a sense of entrepreneurship and community development in its trainees.

By late 2005, the arduous phase of the Center's physical and operative buildup had come to a conclusion. More than one hundred San have received training on the site since 1999 and have worked hard to transform the former derelict farm to a training center and public destination. Michael Daiber, who brought ample experience of living and working with San, manages the very complex project. His wife, Bets Daiber, is in charge of the !Khwa ttu School, where she teaches some 20 children originating from San communities in Namibia and the Northern Cape.

## CONCLUSIONS

I suggest that we accept that culture is a necessary ingredient for the healing of traumatized communities, and that returning cultural information to people who have been severed from their own heritage by colonial violence is a mere act of restitution to the legitimate owners, and not an act of particular generosity. The role of the anthropologist, the historian, the archaeologist and linguist as stewards of the past represents a practical, dignified and no-nonsense approach for a period of transition, until the first San historians, lawyers and social scientists are rewriting part of the research from their own perspectives.

Finally, confidence in the San people, a non-partisan hand in editing received dogmas, and a sound dose of humility on the part of committed scholars may bring results that satisfy both sides. It has all been said previously, and then so well:

There are many questions about the representation of other peoples' realities that have troubled us and have caused us, on more than one occasion, to doubt ourselves and the worth of the endeavor. Literate and relatively privileged people must become more and more aware of the power implications of 'inscription' — the written representation of oral, kinetic, or otherwise nonwritten manifestations of cultural reality. Articulateness can in itself be a misrepresentation. An outsider can

so overstate the case for the ‘plight’ of ‘disappearing’ peoples that the genuine contemporary efforts of such people can go unnoticed. Many ‘vanishing’ or even ‘vanished’ people thrive today as they recreate their traditional wisdom’.

## NOTES

- 1) Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), Windhoek, Namibia, [www.san.org.za](http://www.san.org.za)
- 2) South African San Institute (SASI).
- 3) Kuru Family of Organizations (KFO).

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