

# The Story Mind : Education for Democracy : Reflections on the Village Schools Project, 1990 - 2015

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## **The Story Mind: Education for Democracy—Reflections on the Village Schools Project, 1990–2015**

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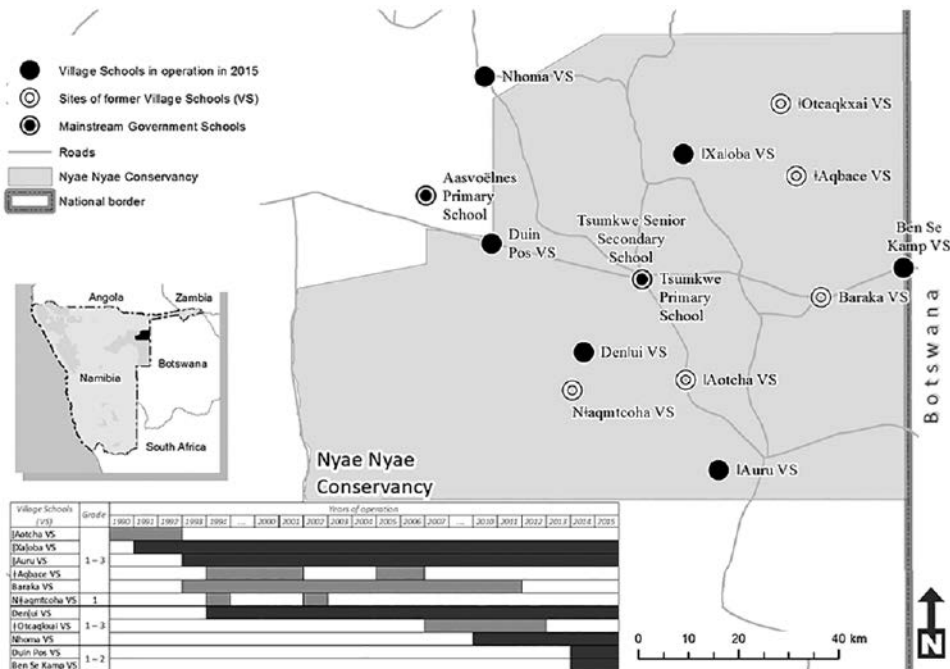
### **ABSTRACT**

Traditional Ju/'hoan education constitutes one of humanity's oldest field-tested curricula. The values underlying their democratic culture are communicated and practiced from early childhood and form the basis of Ju/'hoan education. Ju/'hoan decision-making processes epitomize direct democracy – one person, one vote – and lead to community consensus in decision-making. Mastering these complex social skills requires that child autonomy be an essential daily piece of Ju/'hoan childrearing and education. The importance of this approach in Ju/'hoan culture cannot be over-emphasized. Although a problematic concept to Western educators, who are used to authoritarian management styles, it makes logical sense: to be a thriving democracy, a society must provide the autonomy for children to make decisions and experience the consequences. In essence, democracy requires embedding a rich problem-solving interactive approach into teaching and learning, whether in the bush or the enclosed space of a modern school classroom. With these Ju/'hoan values and practices in mind, the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project (VSP) began in 1990 under a small thorn tree in /Aotcha, Namibia. The initial goal was to introduce Ju/'hoan children, in their mother tongue, to literacy, numeracy, and the lesson-oriented structure of a public school day, so they would be prepared to succeed in the government schools in Tsumkwe and elsewhere. However, this seemingly straightforward goal belied complicated cultural processes taking place. This chapter explores considerations involved with the transition of Ju/'hoan village children to a formal public education system and describes how the Village School educational philosophy developed to address these considerations and to support five fully functioning Village Schools with Ju/'hoan teachers teaching in Ju/'hoansi. Also addressed in this chapter are the multiple challenges still faced by the VSP and Ju/'hoan children and teachers every day.

**INTRODUCTION**

My relationship with the Ju/'hoansi of Nyae Nyae, Namibia, grew out of a passion for their folktales and storytelling traditions. The late Marjorie Shostak, Megan Biesele, and the late Lorna Marshall met with me, generously answered questions, and provided stimulating insights. Megan Biesele's research about storytelling led me to inquire into Ju/'hoan childrearing. In researching Ju/'hoan childrearing beliefs and practices, I was surprised by similarities to modern progressive education. In turn, this discovery sparked curiosity about the role of storytelling in effective teaching and learning. Experience with Ju/'hoansi later prompted the question: how does education play a role in creating and maintaining democracy? In addition to discussing the past and present of the Village Schools, including current challenges, this chapter explores the roles education plays in creating and maintaining Ju/'hoan democracy.

In 1989, Megan Biesele returned to Namibia to facilitate community discussions in preparation for Namibian independence. I inquired if there might be a role for an educator. We agreed that, as Ju/'hoansi prepared for independence, their ideas and plans for the future of education were central to this transition. In 1990, I arrived in the village of /Aotcha in Nyae Nyae, Namibia, to study Ju/'hoan storytelling and begin a small school that became a model for the Village Schools Project. Since 1990, I've remained involved in the Village Schools Project and the



**Figure 1** Study area in Namibia.

community library (I am also a school librarian). In 1991, I began a second school in the Village of //Xa/oba. To date, I have returned sixteen times as a volunteer for the Kalahari Peoples Fund to provide workshops for teachers in different curriculum areas in both the Village Schools and Tsumkwe Public schools (Figure 1). I also created an afterschool literacy program in the library at the Captain Kxao Kami Learning Center and continue to collaborate with the current Ju/'hoan clerk who works in the library.

Anthropology and education share an essential practice: the art of observation and recording. In education, teachers use it to anchor teaching philosophy and practices to support each student's strengths; this served me well in Nyae Nyae.

## OVERVIEW OF THE VILLAGE SCHOOLS PROJECT

As of 2015, the Nyae Nyae Village Schools, begun in 1990 under a thorn tree in /Aotcha, has six functioning schools. While this is progress, a sobering statistic remains: the Village Schools serve only 10 percent of Ju/'hoan children. The local public schools serve an even smaller percentage. This chapter considers various challenges in the Village and public schools. It examines traditional education in Ju/'hoan culture that include stories, consensus problem-solving, and one-to-one mentoring that promote their ideals of democracy. It also recounts briefly the founding of the Village Schools and examines various solutions for current challenges. Although many Namibians level the critique that Ju/'hoansi do not support education, nothing could be further from the truth. It is not education that Ju/'hoansi find objectionable; education has always been essential to them. The survival of their culture has depended on it.

The Hunter-Gatherer mindset might best be described as creative, flexible, responsive, improvisational, and inclusive. Such traits have successfully preserved and perpetuated Ju/'hoan democracy through countless generations. However, this same mindset does not easily accommodate an educational system rooted in a capitalistic cash economy, with its hierarchical social systems and calendars that accommodate herders, farmers, and other members of a post-Hunting-Gathering world. A conflict of values is at the heart of educational woes in Nyae Nyae and continues to have a destabilizing effect on education progress.

Like one of their well-aimed bone arrows, Ju/'hoansi have sent forward through time habits of mind – a mind shaped by the flexible storage of knowledge in an oral tradition. Forged through intense community bonding, this mind, shaped by thousands of years of oral transmission of experience and knowledge through the medium of folktales, creates the problem-solving-based thinking required to respond to an ever-changing and challenging environment. Oral stories pose problems, questions, and solutions subtly and indirectly to listeners. Stories are told, retold, and reshaped with each telling. Stories indirectly put forth diverse creative possibilities for solving issues of complex social relations or challenges of living in the bush. Ju/'hoan children develop problem-solving abilities as they

mature within extended family communities. Children attend closely as adults hunt, gather, build fires, fetch water, make crafts, heal, sing, cook, argue, tell stories, and make decisions through consensus. To thrive in Nyae Nyae, a child must learn, through experience and stories of others' experiences, how to creatively improvise solutions to marauding lions, elephants, hunger, thirst, black mambas, droughts, and big rains. !Xoma N!a'an, from Botswana, offered this insight about the primacy of their children: 'Our children are the first things in our eyes and hearts'.

The following observation, recorded in my first weeks in /Aotcha, traces the arc of early childhood, from a newborn to school-age children, as they play and mingle with adults. Many such observations guided the development of the Village Schools.

### **/Aotcha Village Observation, /Aotcha, 1990**

Education in the tradition of Ju/'hoansi begins at birth with a simultaneous intensity, ease, and sweetness. From her first moments, baby Khoba was welcomed into a partnership with a mother and community whose presence, attention, and care focused on the baby's needs. The first few days she could be found nestled next to her mother's body, near her breast, the warm hollow of her arm, or just against her back. Older children and adults came to peek at her, to welcome her, to bring her gifts of tiny bead necklaces and bracelets. By the end of her first week, Khoba could be found cuddled near the breast of various fond and attentive grandmothers. By the end of her second week, she came on old =Aisa's breast and sat with us under the shade of the school tree. I never heard her cry . . . she seemed enveloped in a cocoon of warmth and responsiveness. It would seem that a baby's first lesson is "cry, and you shall be heard" or, even deeper and more basic, "be born and you shall be attended." Her needs seemed known and responded to, often before she could voice them herself.

Quickly the infant picture enlarged to include other villagers. At six months of age, Little Kxao could be found on the hips of anyone, girl, boy, man, woman, who happened to wander by and be drawn into the enchantments of this small emerging individual. At this age, it was less clear to a visitor who the mother was . . . nurturing was provided by all, male and female, with a joy and delight almost untranslatable to those used to the relative isolation of the early infant and parenting experience [of] Western societies. There was a sense of relatedness, of deep maternal and cultural bonding that took place in the ongoing intensity of the infant experience. Every baby, every new mother received the total unwavering and focused support of the villagers, young and old.

One afternoon, under the shade of a thorn tree, a group of women and girls gathered around the music of two women playing the //oaci (made out of an old oil can strung with recycled wire). Passed around like some small sunbeam that could not be contained, only shared, Little Kxao made an orbit of all: mothers,

grandmothers, teenagers, little girls, anthropologist, visiting teacher. He fingered and mouthed bead necklaces, cloth, a watch, a cigarette wrapper, a cup that also served as his drum, and the bodies of all who held him. He held onto arms and hands that clapped the rhythms of the //oaci players. As he was held upright, he stamped his feet in perfect rhythm to the music for five, ten, fifteen minutes.

Just outside the small circle of music and baby, a number of boys, ages three to six, tumbled about, riding astride a barrel or zooming the outer edges of our circle pretending to be bakkies (trucks). On another afternoon, this same group of boys utilized variously a toy bakkie, a slipper, or a shoe as a truck. For two hours this cooperative play continued with boys joining in and dropping out. Not one sign of struggle emerged about who had the actual toy: there seemed no marked preference for it. One boy even made a rock into a bakkie that he used while the toy bakkie “idled” in the shade. In the end, several boys simply became bakkies, roaring through circles of people until one little boy’s mother, covering her ears, called out, “Stop, you’re ruining the inside of our ears.” The small “bakkie” gunned his motor and roared out of camp.

Amidst another group of people sitting on blankets while they sewed, rested, talked, a small boy leaned against his mother, slipping large blue beads up and down a thong, one by one. Other children, limbs intertwined, helped bead, or simply leaned into the nearest adult attending and occasionally participated in the conversation. At other fires, small children shared food from the family cooking pot, or drew in the sand, or played with whatever and whoever was at hand.

As I assessed the learning environment of the village, listing the numbers of activities that included the youngest children, it became clear it was a rich brew of learning opportunities. In terms of sensory stimulation it was an ideal preschool experience. There was a high ratio of adults to children, activities constantly in process that never excluded children: cooking, water collecting, food gathering, fire preparation, craft work (including bows and arrows and other traditional well utilized crafts), dancing, music making, storytelling, and conversation. I noted who instigated a child’s involvement in any given activity; in the majority of activities it was the child who sought or rejected participation. While children frequently played their own high-spirited games, they often sought out participation with adults involved in their work. Clearly, children were the authors of their days.

Children were accorded a respect for their feelings and moods equal to the adults. One day a little boy of about three stood out from the others because he seemed so sad. My initial teacher response was to find out why and see how to fix it and possibly coax him out of his mood. However, no adult moved in to do this. The boy went through the day, always at his grandfather’s side. Sometimes the child sat within two or three feet of him, or simply rested against the older man, or sat in his lap. His grandfather seemingly did not encourage or discourage him, try to distract him or cheer him up or otherwise alter his mood. The grandfather was simply present for the child. He seemed to accept his grandson’s mood and his continued need for contact. A day or so later, the child rejoined the other children in

their boisterous play (Heckler 1990: 13).

Ju/'hoansi offer an educational model that provides a basis for a successful democracy: creative problem-solving and decision-making through consensus. Ju/'hoansi offer this wisdom to modern democracies: *the degree to which a culture will succeed is the degree to which it nurtures and educates its children and preserves its environment*. Megan Biesele writes about how story promotes learning in *Women Like Meat* (Biesele 1993: 60):

Motivation to follow, to internalize, to remember the form and content of stories is compelled by the involvement with dramatic conflict. Detailing of environmental and social minutiae can be very full because it has a scaffolding in the unfolding of plot. Seen this way, stories can be understood as effective, ongoing mechanisms both for educating the young for sharing information and creating consensus about attitudes which continue to be important throughout adult life in an oral culture.

In 1990, based on their own boarding school experiences, most Ju/'hoan adults were reluctant to send elementary aged children away. Sending children raised in a non-authoritarian environment, in which learning was an essential and deeply pleasurable activity, to schools run by the oppressive, authoritarian, hierarchical regime of that time, caused innumerable problems. Ju/'hoan children did not adjust well to leaving their nurturing village environment. They were suddenly subjected to brutal tactics, like beatings and verbal berating, which the teachers used to subdue the individualistic tendencies of Ju/'hoan children. Children ran away from school, only to be brought back and punished. Children from other ethnicities stole food and clothing from Ju/'hoan children. Adolescent girls were particularly vulnerable to unwanted advances from non-Ju/'hoan boys. Conditions were no different in the public school in Tsumkwe that served Ju/'hoan students who lived locally. In both the public and boarding schools, learning was highly structured, task-oriented, and punishment-driven and bore no relation to the learning experiences of Ju/'hoan children. Children habituated to initiating active learning activities according to internal and village rhythms were suddenly and inexplicably forced to sit passively for hours. Although few Ju/'hoan students spoke the language of instruction, they certainly received the message: they were not welcome.

### **VILLAGE SCHOOLS' BEGINNING, /AOTCHA 1990, //XA/OBA 1991**

From the 1950's, major cultural shifts occurred in the region: national borders restricted hunting and gathering; from age nine, children were sent to boarding schools; cattle herders invaded with their spreading herds; apartheid ended; a cash economy and tourist trade were introduced; and a traditionally nomadic people settled in semi-permanent villages.

With these shifting sands beneath our feet, the Village Schools Project began under a thorn tree during the rainy season in late February of 1990. Each day, two teachers (/!ʼae Benjamin and myself), a linguist (the late Patrick Dickens), and an anthropologist (Megan Biesele) hiked to /Aotcha Village from our little camp and conducted lessons based on folktales (oral and written) – learning the alphabet in the new Ju/’hoan orthography – and traditional games. Weather also influenced the curriculum, and as it turned out, so did a rain-slicked pan, an elusive flock of flamingoes, towering baobabs, and a lone lion. I mention these variables because an aspect that troubles non-Ju/’hoan educators is how to incorporate the unexpected, which in Nyae Nyae is a constant – daily if not hourly.

Our primary goal in designing the schools was to introduce literacy and numeracy to children within the environment of the village, in order to ease transitions to the Tsumkwe public schools. I volunteered to collaborate in creating a template for the village schools and implementing a curriculum based on Ju/’hoan childrearing practices and cultural values. In order to comply with Namibian education law, Ju/’hoansi would be required to send older children away to school. By creating schools in the village, children and parents might be better prepared for this traumatic separation. The village schools provided children with the experience of a structured school day and important basic skills in literacy and numeracy. In addition, we began an educational program based on the strengths inherent in this ancient egalitarian way of life, rather than replicating the errors of modern Western education.

As a newcomer, there was a great deal to learn. The following observation from /Aotcha is one of many observations that helped create a framework for teaching and learning in Nyae Nyae.

### **Observation from /Aotcha Village School, 1990 Many Children, Many Baobabs, and ‘It will taste sweet’**

Megan Biesele described showing personal photographs to a few of her Ju/’hoan friends. They seemed uninterested in the people, but remarked with great interest on the cow that happened to be present. Megan described how Ju/’hoansi love to talk endlessly about all the aspects of their lives, relationships, hunting, gathering. As a storyteller, I often felt continually in the presence of an ongoing story. This ability to concentrate deeply on their own lives seemed a key to teaching literacy and numeracy. It was.

With this in mind, for our next project /!ʼae Benjamin and I sat beneath a tree and told two nearby children they were welcome to come draw. (Although children often drew in the sand, these were their first experiences drawing on paper.) Older children fetched younger children; soon a group of about fifteen children sat around us. We invited children to draw some event in their day and asked them to tell us the story of the picture. With this group of children a teacher has very little of the traditional Western managerial role. To begin, I handed out cardboard desks, papers,



and crayons to the older children; they took care each child had exactly what was needed. When we were ready to begin, Baqu Tsamkxao, a particularly outgoing and motherly child, gestured to children who had come late and hidden behind the others. She announced, "These children are upset because they don't have paper." No project ever started until every child perceived that every other child was content.

Once /I!ae explained our idea to the children, they bent down over their papers and began. The children brought their finished drawings to us. One by one I held the drawings, and asked questions about them. /I!ae translated. Children expanded and enlarged upon their drawings, by describing objects, people, landscape, or to tell an underlying story. We wrote down each story in Ju/'hoansi and English.

The drawings varied tremendously from child to child. /Kunta /Ui, at nine one of the older children, detailed a small portion of a village with a house, one tree bursting with colors, green, red, orange, and a final halo of turquoise, and two colorful trucks drawn in careful detail. Each wheel of one truck had an interior design of colorful dots. On the body of the truck sat a house-like cab topped by a chimney drawn with alternating colors of horizontal stripes atop a line of brown x's. The rest of the truck was drawn in green and yellow. It seemed like some magical means of transportation. /Kunta dictated, "The small car is just arriving from town. The big car is under the tree. The child is just standing there. Her mother and brother are inside the house. The father was driving the car, he was shopping. He brought maize, mealie-meal and sugar."

N!aici, about five, drew a traditional grass hut in five colors and included a green stick figure. He dictated, "This house belongs to the man. He has been in the bush. He was going out to urinate and came back."

Baqu drew two houses, one with a high triangular roof outlined in yellow with black and blue lines inside, and the other with a trapezoidal roof containing two smaller trapezoid shapes on either side of a central pink triangle. The house was orange with an open red door. An elongated black and red tree stood between the two houses alongside one tiny red and green flower. A starry-handed purple stick figure stood in front of a small purple truck. Another purple truck was parked in front of one of the houses. "This is a home. This is a baobab tree between two houses. The people have been out to the bush gathering and are now home," Baqu told us.

Certain motifs-styles of houses, trucks, or trees, rippled organically through the group of children. They shared ideas easily and continuously, yet no two drawings were ever alike. The children taught me that though they learned through shared ideas they tossed about and examined from every angle, their distinct robust individuality always shone through.

Baobab trees were a motif children portrayed in wonderfully fanciful ways. Baobab trees are gargantuan. They look as though they were on their way to becoming elephantine creatures but thought better of it and became rooted instead. Children outlined them in all their various different shapes and filled them [with]

varying designs. The trees exploded with colors. The baobab motif surfaced repeatedly in the drawings throughout the weeks of our first school. When viewed together the pictures seemed to speak to one another; they became progressively richer and more dynamic as if benefiting from each one drawn before. The drawings were like music, filled with solos, themes, and variations that spoke of the infinite ways, the many beauties and wonders of a single kind of tree. One kind of tree, indeed, but they resulted in many visions resulting from the children's experience of the baobabs in their lives.

Even as children shared ideas, they also frequently struck out on their own. While all the children around her were drawing houses, trucks, animals, and people, =Aisa, a child of seven with a sweet shyness about her, meticulously layered colors in a circular pattern until she had an orange luminous orb of color with a purple stem on it. She drew an orange stick figure, arms, and fingers outstretched. =Aisa's legs stretched straight out in the dust, she lifted her head, smiled, and while shyly looking down, dictated softly, "This is an orange. The man wants to take it. He is going to get it. It will taste sweet."

Xama's drawing was almost Asian in style with spare, light strokes of blue that seemed to suggest shapes. It was Xama who first adopted a personal narrative voice in her story. She dictated, "I am out in the bush hunting. I find a kudu. There were three dogs and the dogs chased the kudu. The kudu ran as fast as he could. I ran back home."

As it took time to write down each story, the children had to wait for their turns. Just as people had dropped in and out of the storytelling the day before, the children dropped in and out of the writing process. Some stayed to listen to a story, then went off, only to come back for their turn or to listen to another story. When a child was too shy to speak, a group of children would gather round like a Greek chorus of encouragement until the child overcame the shyness.

Before my first week in /Aotcha was over, visitors from OXFAM of Canada came to evaluate a medical program and our educational program for potential funding. I wrote a brief summary to give an overall view of the early learning environment in a Ju/'hoan village. It seemed important to demonstrate the individual talents fostered by this environment – a hand bound book of drawings seemed like just the thing. In reading the stories the children dictated, we were moved by their use of language, that with utter simplicity and clarity celebrated their lives and their land. Over and over they named things: "This is a man. He has been out hunting. This is a family. This is a woman." It dawned on me the children had come up with a title in their litany of naming. Their first book was called MI JUSI, MI G!AOH, MI !U: THIS IS A FAMILY, THIS IS A HOME, THIS IS MY NAME.

Later we read the book to the children who had not seen the finished product. They sat clustered around us as usual. As we read, they pointed out features in every drawing, discussed each artist and story as eagerly as if they were just seeing the

drawings for the first time. What Megan had observed seemed borne out – the children and adults were endlessly fascinated by their lives, all parts of them (Heckler 1990: 20–21).

### **THE FOUNDATION OF THE VILLAGE SCHOOLS: ‘THERE IS NO WORD FOR MISTAKE’**

When compared to tens of thousands of years of a highly successful democracy and educational system, the era from 1990–2015 can appropriately be labeled as ‘a beginning’ for the Village Schools. The challenges today are much the same as those faced in 1990 and 1991: how to preserve values of an ancient, family-based democracy, descended from – and still practicing to some extent – a hunting and gathering economy. Today’s modern educational system, descended from a free-market capitalist system, presented a clash of values for Ju/’hoansi. If they are to participate willingly in an education system based on capitalist values, they want evidence that it will provide skills and knowledge to participate in a cash-driven economy – *and* the democratic education that will provide their children with the skills and knowledge to preserve and perpetuate their own culture. And jobs, let us not forget jobs.

The Ju/’hoan concept of a community-based democracy, built on consensus and equity within the family and the village community, does not correspond to Western capitalistic interpretations of democracy (see also Puckett, Chapter 14). It may be argued, from a Ju/’hoan point of view, that capitalism, based on competition and hierarchy, is antithetical to education and democracy. This Ju/’hoan view of democracy became an essential part of the philosophy of the Village Schools.

Reflecting upon this early experience and the one replicated the following year in //Xa/oba (without linguist or anthropologist), what became abundantly clear is how creating schools in the middle of two thriving villages was inadvertently the wisest choice, for three reasons:

1. Adults dropped in to help pronounce words and children’s names and to share traditional stories and specialized knowledge of animals, plants, and weather. They encouraged learning with laughter and curiosity. What adults contributed deepened our thinking about what and how *we* taught. We introduced reading, writing, and math; *they* offered insight into beliefs about how children were taught with tolerance, humor, and play.

2. Adults also monitored (politely) how we treated children. Since many children left boarding school because of cruelty, this reassurance was essential. Ju/’hoansi promote education and *always* have; however, they wanted children nurtured and taught constructively. Perhaps one reason non-Ju/’hoansi have judged Ju/’hoansi as unsupportive of education is that their support is so deeply embedded in daily life that it is unrecognizable to all but the most ardent students of Ju/’hoan culture. For instance, Megan Biesele writes about traditional concepts

of education before schools were introduced:

Any anthropologist who has spent time with the Ju/'hoansi has noticed that their use of the concept translated as 'teach' or 'learn' (n!aroh) does not correspond to ours. 'Teach me to do X', the anthropologist asks the Ju/'hoan person. The person, ordinarily friendly enough, goes right on doing X silently and allowing the anthropologist to be present while it happens, never giving him a verbal 'recipe' or set of articulated procedures to go along with the demonstration. It appears that, in contrast to his modern counterpart, a 'teacher' in hunting cultures may be less an active inculcator than a person who was salient as an example both socially and in terms of the information transmitted in the environment at the time a learning task was accomplished (Biesele 1993: 57).

While teachers do not teach silently, they do communicate, verbally and nonverbally, attitudes towards each child. Generally, non-Ju/'hoan teachers have low expectations of Ju/'hoan children based on a low opinion of Ju/'hoan culture. Effective teachers communicate, verbally and nonverbally, that it is safe to not know something and to make mistakes. Teachers celebrate new learning that results from correcting mistakes. A teacher who enjoys learning, and who understands that every child learns differently, will communicate this and help each child find his/her unique path to learning. Effective teachers model in everything they do that they are salient examples of learners and teachers.

3. School hours fluctuated daily as children joined village activities and later returned to school. To Western teachers, this may seem impractical (if not impossible!); yet, there were reasons it succeeded. Beginning a school in a new culture was a challenge. I only knew Ju/'hoansi from *books*; I did not yet know *them*. For Ju/'hoansi, learning, work, and robust play are integrated. Schedules, classes, and direct teaching do not mesh with the flexible hunting/gathering mindset. Thankfully, my progressive teaching matched Ju/'hoan practices. /Aotcha children taught me how efficiently Ju/'hoansi share information. Children who attended morning lessons, later taught absent friends the alphabet, how to write their names, and the names of animals – all in the new orthography. We wrote, we drew, listened to stories, mapped villages, made books about their lives, and everybody learned. By the end of the first week, all the children could write their names as well as the names of many animals.

Similar experiences took place the following year (1991) in //Xa/oba when my own children, Annabelle and Paul (ages 12 and 8), joined me. Another young family from /Aotcha, the late G#kao Martin /Aice, his late wife, N/haokxa, and their baby /Aice, accompanied us to our new village of //Xa/oba. G#kao and N/haokxa had relatives in this village, which helped us quickly forge bonds with the community elders. G#kao was involved in developing the new orthography with Patrick Dickens, making his teaching support invaluable. N/haokxa's support in caring for my children made everything else possible. Yet another connection took

place after we arrived in the village. A Ju/'hoan tradition is to give a name to a visitor. This establishes a multi-layered relationship and confers membership in the community. My Ju/'hoan name is N!ai. Annabelle had already received her 'big name' from //Uce, Chief Tsamkxao †Oma's wife, while Paul had not received a name. When we arrived and had set up our tents, a village elder arrived, the late †Oma Boo, and gave his name to Paul, instantly relieving the sibling tension building up between my two children, one with a name, one without. As †Oma Boo was brother to my big name's husband, /Kunta Boo, we now possessed our own relatives in this village. †Oma Boo kept his sharp eyes on my mischievous, fire-happy little boy – he and his new friends only burned down one hut (fortunately abandoned)! People just laughed at the two boys, a response that underscored a typical Ju/'hoan point of view: 'Children have no sense'. While a seemingly offhanded remark, it underscores Ju/'hoan beliefs about children and learning: they need to be responded to with humor, and experience is essential to developing wisdom.

With the success of the /Aotcha school, I was more confident as a teacher in our new home. Annabelle and Paul created connections by doing what children do best, making friends through play. What worked in /Aotcha – flexible schedules, involving adults in developing the curriculum, and leaving some of the teaching (or re-teaching) to the children – worked well in //Xa/oba. School took place most of the day with occasional small breaks. It would have gone on in the evening, too, if I hadn't needed some quiet time for my own children. We were fortunate during that time to have several young Ju/'hoan men interested in teaching work with us. One young man, having heard about the school at /Aotcha, hiked 30 kilometers to join us in //Xa/oba. Jo/o could read and write English (as Annabelle discovered) and learned quickly how to read and write Ju/'hoansi from stories written in the new orthography. Tsamkxao Rolf Daqm, who was an essential member of that teaching team, later became a Village School teacher.

In 1991, the Land Rights Conference in newly liberated Namibia was being held in Windhoek. Even in remote //Xa/oba, people were aware of the importance of this conference and spoke of it often. The outcome determined how land ownership would be handled. The conference subtly influenced our curriculum by drawing strong connections between the power of literacy and politics. On the main road that passes //Xa/oba hung a sign placed outside the village by an expat trophy hunter that read, "WELCOME DANCING ARTIFACTS". The //Xa/oba people felt powerless to take down the hated sign, as the expat provided employment for the young men at his hunting camp and, to further complicate matters, was married to a //Xa/oba woman. In addition to teaching, several key people within the project suggested that, during our evening discussions around the fire, I encourage villagers to take down the hated sign. Tourists often pulled up in rugged, overloaded land rovers, demanded to take pictures and buy artifacts, and asked the villagers to perform their traditional healing dance. Tourists offered a bag or two of tobacco for the whole village in payment for the dancing and

photographs, and they underpaid for handmade crafts. Because few in the village could read or write, this was an opportunity to convey the power of literacy.

Over the following weeks, multiple discussions took place around our fire about Ju/'hoan rights for self-representation. Villagers expressed frustration at having to put on skins, perform healing dances, pose for photographs with hunting and gathering gear, and pretend to be living in the past. They were angry about the sign that, without any advance notice, invited tourists to drive in and gawk. Tourists haggled over prices charged for crafts. As part of the math curriculum, we developed, with Kxao Moses of the Nyae Nyae Development Foundation (NNDNFN), a fee schedule for tourists purchasing crafts and dancing. Before this, the expat hunter regulated and set the fees (and took a profit). I emphasized that the Land Rights Conference would likely recognize Ju/'hoan rights to manage their own land, including the right to advertise services to tourists.

One afternoon, when most of the men were out hunting, three separate carloads of tourists arrived. Upon seeing a white woman, they approached me. I shrugged, informed them I was a teacher, and said that they would have to speak to the 'owners' of the village, who weren't present at the moment. The villagers who were gathered firmly stated, no, they weren't selling artifacts or performing traditional dances. To one group they announced that, no, two small bags of tobacco would not suffice as payment. Each carload of tourists was outraged: 'But the sign says . . .'. When the hunters returned, an impromptu meeting gathered at our fire. Elders decided they'd had enough. Not only did the sign come down, but a letter was dictated by a village elder to one of the young teachers and sent to the expat hunter, explaining why he was no longer welcome to careen in his big truck into the village and demand that everyone drop whatever they were doing to help him at his camp. Yes, there were repercussions – including an attempt at retaliation by the expat – but the //Xa/oba folks were steadfast in their resolve. Today drive by //Xa/oba and read the sign that replaced the 'dancing artifacts': 'Welcome to the Living Hunter's Museum. Drive in and someone will greet you.' The living museum is separated from the actual village so people retain their privacy and daily autonomy. As for the sign the villagers removed, it was carried down the road and placed in the hut (a tin affair, painted with pink hearts) belonging to the expat hunter.

Among the lessons learned in 1990 and 1991 were the following:

- Successful teaching resulted in children integrating new learning into a playful activity.
- Competition was not present in any child-initiated activity.
- Teacher praise caused embarrassment and withdrawal from lessons.
- The group was highly attuned to any inequity in distribution of materials and set out to correct the oversight.
- Using stories as the core of any lesson engaged not only the children but also the adults, who then contributed more information about the animals or

characters.

- Children who attended class taught the lessons by ‘playing school’ with children who did not attend.
- Adults were usually on hand to help and often enjoyed learning new skills themselves.
- Flexible scheduling of lessons to accommodate other village activities increased attendance.

There is much more to write about this period, so many more stories yet to tell. One last story: In 1990, I was about to leave, but posed a last question to the late Kxao Moses, with whom I worked and whom I deeply admired. ‘What,’ I inquired, ‘is the Ju/’hoan word for mistake?’ Kxao Moses was deeply involved and supportive of the /Aotcha school. He gazed at me, seemingly amused, and astonished me with his answer: ‘Kxoara; we have no word for mistake’.

I was not able to return to the Namibian side of the Kalahari until 2001 and can only write of the intervening years from second-hand knowledge. As might be expected with such a radical undertaking, there were many ups and downs in maintaining progress in the Village Schools Project. One constant in those intervening years emerged: progress occurred when the teacher trainer, and later the San Education Director, willingly engaged in learning from adults and children about their culture. The role of the director/teacher trainer was to locate potential teacher candidates among the Ju/’hoansi, help them learn to teach the Namibian National Curriculum, and provide ongoing professional development. These positions were funded by NAMAS, the Norwegian agency involved with Namibia that worked to eliminate apartheid and later provided support for the poorest and least-served ethnic groups, like the Ju/’hoansi.

In light of the depth of time Ju/’hoansi are believed to have occupied the Kalahari, their traditional educational practices can be described as one of the oldest field-tested curricula on the planet.<sup>1)</sup> In addition, Ju/’hoansi decision-making processes epitomize direct, participatory democracy – one person, one vote – and result in discussions that lead to consensus. The values underlying this system are communicated and practiced from childhood and form the basis of their approach to education. These include the idea and practice of *child autonomy* – the importance of this approach in Ju/’hoan culture cannot be over-emphasized. Although a deeply alien aspect to most Western educational practices, child autonomy makes logical sense: to be a thriving democracy, a society must give children independence to make decisions and experience possible outcomes. In essence, democracy requires a *problem-solving approach* to childrearing and classroom practices.

These ideas and practices were the basis of the early formation of the Village Schools Project. Given the gulf between Western and Ju/’hoan teaching methodologies, Ju/’hoan teachers were preferred as teaching candidates. Yet, a challenge the project faced was structuring teacher education so that it bridged the

gap between a culturally based, mother-tongue approach and westernized educational demands trending in the public schools. In addition, a good deal of ‘re-teaching to teach’ was needed for Ju/’hoan candidates, as each one had been taught in rigid Apartheid-era schools, where Ju/’hoan culture was not valued or promoted.

The Village Schools were initially called ‘preschools’ in the sense of preparing students of any age for westernized education. As stated earlier, one goal was to ease the transition to the public school in Tsumkwe by ensuring students possessed a working knowledge of its structure – for example, a day scheduled into discrete modules of ‘lessons’.

Other goals for the Village Schools were to validate Ju/’hoan values and knowledge by incorporating them into daily lessons. These values were and are the following:

- Mother-tongue education;
- Problem-solving through play-exploration and storytelling;
- Avoiding competition and praise;
- Allowing children to learn at their own rate;
- Small multi-aged classes with access to multiple teachers, including elders;
- Curriculum that helps children live in the bush and prepare to deal with a job-driven cash economy.

Today, with few jobs locally available, Ju/’hoansi clearly express that survival of their children (and their culture) is dependent on learning the vast working knowledge and highly technical skills of hunting and gathering. In conjunction, children must develop the deeply rooted relational social skills that are the basis for consensus required to live cohesively as a group, while developing individual strengths and talents – an approach that would strengthen any culture.

With these goals in mind, non-Ju/’hoan educators and politicians must understand that there are currently two kinds of schools:

- ‘Town School’ includes the public schools in Tsumkwe as well as the Village Schools. Delivery of instruction takes place in a classroom environment and is modeled on Western-styled teacher-directed lessons. Lessons are based on the Namibian National Curriculum, sometimes lacking in cultural relevance.
- ‘Bush School’ is the informal schooling resulting from living in the villages. Learning takes place on a daily basis and consists of the multiple physical, mental, and emotional skills required for a life of hunting and gathering. In the bush school model, learning is initiated and motivated by student interest. Children accompany adults and interact with them as they go about various village activities. The Hunting-Gathering curriculum



evolved from the resilient hunting-gathering mindset. In July 2015, in multiple meetings with the Traditional Authority and representatives from the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, concerns were expressed that, with so few jobs on the horizon, their children must be prepared for living and surviving in the bush. (An additional note: Many Ju/'hoansi prefer the gathering/hunting life, even when, of necessity, it is practiced in a modified way (see also Lee, Chapter 8). Many remain anchored to a hunter-gatherer identity and, given the option, choose to remain in their villages.)

The destabilizing conflict of educational values is clearly manifest in the problematic relationship between the Village Schools and the Tsumkwe Public Schools. As a result, the Ju/'hoan community has lost confidence in public-school education that neither prepares students for a hunting-gathering future nor provides the necessary skills for a job-driven cash economy. Ju/'hoan students see little reason to attend Village Schools, when the Tsumkwe Public Schools do so little to provide a constructive learning environment that values their considerable strengths. To stabilize education in Nyae Nyae, there must be a system of teacher and administrative accountability in the Tsumkwe Public Schools. In 25 years of observing in the public schools, it is clear that the drop-out rate of Ju/'hoan students is caused by the destructive, institutionalized attitude of teachers and administrators. These are the same attitudes that caused Ju/'hoan students to drop out of boarding schools during the Apartheid era and were the genesis for establishing the Village Schools. The Village Schools were created to provide a constructive, nurturing environment, aligned with Ju/'hoan childrearing values, for their learners. Public school teachers, then and now, physically hurt Ju/'hoan students; teachers and administrators, then and now, display and promote a negative attitude towards Ju/'hoan culture; teachers and administrators, then and now, ignore the theft by other students of food and possessions from Ju/'hoan students.

Aside from the negative teaching-learning culture, public school teachers are not prepared for the fundamental shifts that teaching students from different cultures requires, although cultural diversity and mother-tongue education are central to the Namibian National Curriculum. Having visited the public school classrooms on multiple occasions, provided teaching workshops, and donated dozens of African-themed books to build a school library, it is distressing to see teachers with so few teaching skills. Students sit passively while teachers write assignments with five or six questions from a teacher's guide on to the board. Teachers direct the students to open their notebooks, copy the questions, and answer them. The teacher often walks out of the room, having failed to adequately teach the necessary skills needed to answer the questions or to check for understanding. Students are punished and humiliated if they fail to answer the questions correctly. Ju/'hoan students, sensing a road of failure ahead, 'vote with their feet' – they drop out. If public education is to succeed in Nyae Nyae, a

positive, constructive learning environment must be established. The negative impact of the Public Schools on the Village Schools is clear: why attend the village schools if there is no future in the public schools?

In the late 1980s, Tsamkxao #Oma spoke somewhat metaphorically when he stated as follows:

One problem is that we have no scribe. We have no one who is ‘the owner of the mail.’ So let the children help us. Let the children go to school, learn, and know. Let’s make a plan. Let’s let everyone know that we have someone with a writing stick. Let’s have a scribe, a writer, a translator. Let’s not be without these (Bieseke 1990: 17).

### **CONCLUSION: THE PATH AHEAD**

What ideas, past and present, might illuminate the future? A return to the original model of ‘preschools’ that introduce pre-literacy and numeracy skills to children in villages without schools would potentially increase confidence as these children transition to the ‘town schools’. In collaboration with The University Centre for Studies in Namibia (‘TUCSIN’), young adults, parents, and children could attend the TUCSIN learning center for short courses in teaching pre-literacy and numeracy skills to young learners. Upon returning to their villages, adult participants would be provided ‘learning boxes’ filled with teaching materials, such as books, paper, pencils, art supplies, and manipulatives. Program participants would learn how to organize small playgroups several times a week to familiarize young children with structured, playful learning activities. Cell phones could become useful teaching tools by downloading programs for children. ‘Tablets’ could be purchased and loaded with educational programs for village children. Group dynamics – including the ability to share and teach each other – are a great unsung strength of Ju/’hoan children; as my experience taught me, any new learning that takes place will be shared. The effective oral communication systems within and among villages of Nyae Nyae allow all ages to learn together, as they have for tens of thousands of years.

It is critical to restore funding for a Director of San Education based centrally in Tsumkwe with access to the remote villages and schools. Between 2010 and 2015, the Village Schools were fortunate to have Bruce Parcher, the former director of the San Education Project. With the withdrawal of funding for the Namibia Association of Norway, this position was tragically eliminated. In this role, Bruce Parcher was an ambassador for constructive, progressive practices aligned with the Namibian National Curriculum, as well as a liaison between the Village Schools learning community (teachers, principal, students, and parents) and the Public Schools learning community. Mr. Parcher provided teacher education to both the Village and Public Schools’ teachers and worked tirelessly to change negative attitudes of public educators and administrators toward

Ju/'hoan culture. The entire Ju/'hoan community was disheartened to hear that funding for his position was withdrawn by the Norwegian government. In July 2015, in a meeting with the Traditional Authority, Chief Tsamkxao Bobo #Oma called Mr. Parcher, 'Our man'. He went on to say,

Bruce is a hard worker. Since I've known Bruce and he started working here, Bruce collected all the children and took them back to school. Bruce does not sit in one place. He is always watching which children are in school and the children love him. Bruce also knows how to treat Ju/'hoan children. He knows how to treat children who are ashamed because of what they don't know and he knows how to help them come back to school. In every year he made sure to know how many children are in school and which children have dropped out. Then he collects those children and helps them come back. Bruce's work is like too many people's work [he does the work of many people], and he never gets tired of helping other children. If it were not for Bruce, many children would drop out of school. If he leaves, many children will not stay in school. We must write this letter now. We do not want Bruce to leave.

With the loss of a San Education Director, the Village Schools no longer have a qualified, master educator and cultural ambassador to maintain and ensure progress. The Village Schools face grueling challenges. This community, in one of the most remote regions of the country, is economically one of the poorest. Help is urgently needed to reinstate this position. Anthropologists have the power to help frame discussions and petition governments, who currently are withdrawing international funding, to support education of indigenous peoples. Providing educational support is a matter of equity, justice, and the preservation of cultural wisdom about land use and the perpetuation of democracy through education. Ju/'hoan children *must* be allowed to shape their future; let them integrate Ju/'hoan culture with Town- and Bush-School learning. Let them tell the stories of the old people and use writing sticks to scribe old and new stories that their children will hear and tell. Let the stories be carried on word arrows to tomorrow, and to all the tomorrows we may not see. As Tsamkxao #Oma proposed, 'Let's make a plan' – to preserve the Village Schools, which his words and dreams inspired.

## NOTE

- 1) Recent genetic evidence indicates that modern San, including the Ju/'hoansi, are descended from the oldest human lineage (Schuster, S. C. et al. "Complete Khoisan and Bantu Genomes from Southern Africa" *Nature* 463: 943-947).

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