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## Ju/'hoan Writers and Readers : Developing a Literate Tradition for Long Term Language Preservation

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## **Ju/'hoan Writers and Readers: Developing a Literate Tradition for Long-Term Language Preservation**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Authors of this book chronicle some of the ongoing struggles for human rights of San political activists, as well as the small victories that are writing new chapters in the history of the San. My paper addresses some current struggles and victories of Ju|'hoan-speaking peoples of Namibia and Botswana in gaining control of their own educational and language development activities. At last seen by the world community as human cultural rights, long-term language preservation and locally-defined education are increasingly being undertaken by indigenous communities themselves.

These developments, I feel, are best regarded by anthropologists from the point of view of "ethnography of literacy," a stance characterized by unwillingness to see "literacy" or "education" as a monolithic or necessarily desirable construct of modernization (Hays 2003). Instead, watching what actually happens on the ground as local communities seize the occasionally proffered tools of literacy and make of them what they will, provides a truly meaningful window on the cutting edge of lively cultures. In this approach, involved anthropologists appropriately change roles from literacy promoters to workmanlike facilitators of whatever "literate" tradition then develops.

This paper also places the Ju|'hoan case within a critical look at the "mainstreaming" educational and language policies common to many countries with indigenous minority populations (cf. Bieseles and Hitchcock, 2000). Even in countries where government lip service is paid to educational experience that says literacy is best achieved through a first 3-4 years in the mother tongue, then generalized to the necessary *lingua franca*, all too often there is no provision for further development of an adult literate tradition. Projects detailed in this paper aim to propel literacy efforts for and with Ju|'hoan people towards a truly lasting and meaningful status, one that will grow along with political empowerment and other human rights.

The paper foregrounds education in Nyae Nyae, northeastern Namibia, but also points up the increasingly shared language-development activities of the Ju|'hoan

people there with Ju|'hoan speakers in the Omataku and Omaheke areas of Namibia, as well as the Botswana Ju|'hoansi of Ngamiland. For some years, I have been part of a team in southern Africa doing training and research work involving the production of authoritative texts of many kinds by members of these communities. Some of this work has been supported by academic grants, and some by the Kalahari Peoples Fund, a non-profit organization started by anthropologists on behalf of the San and other peoples of the Kalahari. The scope of my paper thus includes a report on dovetailing academic and practical activities that facilitate Ju|'hoan writing and reading. These activities include training in the use of electronic literacy media and in the production of educational and cultural materials toward the development of a literate tradition for long-term language preservation. They were undertaken under a general request articulated in the late 1980s by the then Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative (NNFC) and reaffirmed several times since 2000 by the Education Committee of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy (NNC), its current successor.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

My own background for this work includes a dual involvement in San folklore and San indigenous politics. In 1970 I began fieldwork with the Ju|'hoansi in Botswana and later in Namibia. I started out with work for an anthropology dissertation on Ju|'hoan folklore and religion, and after I had my degree I continued in Ju|'hoan advocacy and land rights work, fundraising for a people's organization, translating for the UN when Namibian Independence came, and coordinating indigenous-language educational projects. In 1990 I began to turn my folklore collections back to the people in the form of school curriculum materials for the Village Schools Project (VSP), a community-based educational project of the NNFC (now NNC). More recently, I am returning to folklore and linguistic work in pursuit of finer translation and annotation of taped materials — political speeches, healing orations, religious singing, and interpersonal conversation — collected over the years. Due to technological developments in the last decade, it has become possible to do this in ever-closer collaboration with Ju|'hoan adults and children, in simultaneous promotion of their own heritage-preservation and language development.

The Nyae Nyae Conservancy (NNC) of northern Namibia, a Ju|'hoan San people's organization, has since 1987 been making requests to the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF) for Ju|'hoan-language literacy texts. The background to this request was KPF's lengthy involvement in the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project, a mother-tongue education program that has been an important model for educational initiatives among former foraging San communities of southern Africa. The basic need for literacy primers in some minority languages, including Ju|'hoansi, is at last being addressed to some extent by the Namibian government (Gueldeemann 1998). But KPF agreed with the NNC's Education Committee that without reading

materials beyond the primers, Ju|'hoansi would fall out of use as children became literate in English. Thus in the interest of linguistic and cultural preservation, KPF has begun to be instrumental in helping Ju|'hoan community members in developing, publishing, and evaluating enrichment materials to promote Ju|'hoan reading and writing skills over the first three years of school and beyond. Teachers and other local Ju|'hoan-speakers have been involved in each phase of the project, which has an ultimate goal of encouraging publication of works of all kinds by Ju|'hoan authors.

The NNC, formerly the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Cooperative (NNFC), acknowledges the importance of mother-tongue education for the development of critical thinking and of language preservation for authoritative representation on the national scene in areas such as land rights. A fruitful collaboration of linguists and anthropologists with this people's organization produced since Independence the imaginative and comprehensive Village Schools Project, providing a matrix for a broad range of authoritative language and teaching materials in Ju|'hoansi written or transcribed by Ju|'hoan people.

## **THE JU|'HOAN LANGUAGE AND THE VILLAGE SCHOOLS PROJECT**

Ju|'hoansi has only been responsibly written with a user-friendly, professional linguistic orthography for about 15 years. For the literate education desired by the Ju|'hoan people and endorsed by the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, it has been critical that materials and language development take place in a context of consistent orthography and grammatical convention. Thus the Village Schools Project (VSP), designed to provide an appropriate social and linguistic bridge to national education after the first 3 years, could only be attempted after the Namibian Government accepted the new (Dickens) orthography to replace an earlier, cumbersome, Dutch Reformed Church orthography.

The Village Schools Project's philosophy was to honor and continue some of the very effective ancient means of learning and child socialization long practiced by the Ju|'hoansi. As we know, San societies have greatly valued equality and sharing, and their children's learning has taken place in a hands-on, informal, narrative- and experience-rich environment involving children of all ages with many adults. (The intersection of this vision with the national education systems of both Namibia and Botswana has, as one might imagine, produced ongoing debate. However, there are signs in recent years that international educational experience may gradually bring about a confluence of approaches more acceptable to all — definitely in Namibia and possibly in Botswana as well).

One critical area where the VSP has managed to keep open a space for creativity is in promoting the idea of Balanced Literacy (called Integrated Literacy in Southern Africa). Balanced Literacy is an international reading and writing program that matches the egalitarian values of the Ju|'hoansi and their deep belief in the value of children's work. In particular, there has been a realization that

genuinely creative literature and non-fiction learning materials must be produced for readers beyond the first three years, to enable an actual literate tradition to develop — for adults, as well. To do this, Ju|'hoansi literate in their own language had to be enabled, through tools and practice, to generate their own written materials. Authoritative text production has demanded, thus, the creation of a political, social, and technological environment to foster organic intellectual growth.

## THE TECHNOLOGY OF MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Accordingly, in June through September, 2003, several training and language research activities took place in Nyae Nyae, Namibia. These involved a number of electronic techniques of creativity and preservation, including the word-processing of life histories and contemporary stories, both oral and written, in a creative writing workshop, and transcription from digital audio recordings supplemented by video. Notes on equipment and approaches similar to those used often appear in the journal *Multilingual Computing* ([www.multilingual.com](http://www.multilingual.com)) about similar projects in Navaho and other minority languages. "Best practice" in such projects is now also constantly reported and updated online in The LINGUIST List/E-MELD and by the Preservation and Access Division of the US National Endowment for the Humanities. Those associated with the generation of language materials for the Nyae Nyae Village Schools Project are attempting to use this best practice to best serve the educational needs of the Ju|'hoan people.

In July, 2003, international educators worked with the trainees and teachers of the VSP to develop school enrichment materials based on the cultural legacy and environmental knowledge of the Ju|'hoansi. Their workshop was based on Balanced Literacy, which meshes with the egalitarian Ju|'hoan ethos. Concurrently, training was given by Leipzig linguist Tom Gueldemann on the use of Shoebox, a program that progressively "learns" the syntax of a language and helps those inputting information on usage to understand its structure in diagrammatic form. This exercise is not only useful for external students of this language, but also helps local teachers to systematize the teaching of grammar to young people. Trainees Kagece Kallie N!ani and Dahm Kim Dabe were invited by the Ju|'hoan Curriculum Committee to join it and share this expertise.

Creating authentic written texts of the Ju|'hoan language, authoritatively generated and transcribed, and in some cases translated into English, provides not only a reservoir for curriculum materials but an archive of cultural heritage for the Ju|'hoan people. But perhaps as important as the above materials facilitated in 2003 was the setting up of educational and electronic channels to facilitate the ongoing return of previously collected oral cultural materials to them.

## RETURNING CULTURAL MATERIALS AND DEVELOPING LITERACY MATERIALS

Both development of literacy materials and the return of such materials previously collected by anthropologists and linguists is long overdue (including my own). KPF has long believed it important to empower Ju|'hoan individuals, including the VSP teachers, in both the technical tools for literacy development and in an analytic, grammatical understanding of their language so that those who chose could not only teach their language more effectively to young people, but could become scholars of it, as well. This aim reflects a growing worldwide movement in the linguistic and technical empowerment of young indigenous people, particularly those whose languages are only recently written down, for documentation of oral history, relationships to ancestral environments and lifeways, and organic language and intellectual development for advancement of local heritage. An important subsection of the materials for this project is the Nyae Nyae tape Archive, which consists of audio tapes (some now digitalized) of meetings of the NNFC, the forerunner of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. These tapes were recorded during the years just prior to and after Namibian Independence (1988–1992) by myself, acting at that time as Project Director and then Director of the present Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia. Copies of audiotapes of the archive were made available to the NNFC in the mid 1990s; now it is time to complete their digitization and transcription.

To develop and return such materials in authoritative written form, it minimally takes:  
 The creation and adoption of orthography, grammar, etc  
 The founding and development of a community-based education project as a matrix for literacy  
 Technical advances (email, laptops, digital recording and transcribing equipment)  
 Community consultation and training  
 Comprehensive provision of computer-literacy training, and  
 Constant technical updating for best practice.

These activities have been carried out over the last fifteen years through a complex infrastructural and funding collaboration that has included the following:

Nyae Nyae Conservancy (NNC, formerly NNFC)  
 Nyae Nyae Development Foundation of Namibia (NNDFN)  
 Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA)  
 Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF)  
 Namibian National Institute for Educational Development (NIED)  
 US National Endowment for the Humanities (grants to Biese/Gueldemann), and  
 Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (grants to Biese/Haacke/Namaseb)

Future work, it is hoped, will be carried out using a grant from Documenting Endangered Languages, a joint program of the US NEH and the US National Science Foundation. The Kalahari Peoples Fund, moreover, has just received notice of impending major infrastructural support to be given via KPF during 2005 to educational work in Nyae Nyae by one of its corporate sponsors, the Redbush Tea Company of London, to be administered by a British VSO volunteer.

After a long period of difficulty in arranging for the production of school literacy materials in Ju|'hoansi and other San languages, 2003 and 2004 saw some promising developments. In June, 2003, a teacher workshop in the development of classroom materials was held at the Windhoek College of Education under auspices of WIMSA, the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Namibia. This was followed in July by the above-mentioned workshop KPF carried out specifically for Ju|'hoan teachers and materials, held in Baraka, Nyae Nyae by the Coordinator of the VSP, Beverley Carpenter, along with Early Childhood Educator Melissa Heckler and writer-educator-publisher Lesley Beake. Also in 2003 an enormously important initiative was undertaken by NAMAS, the Namibian Association of Norway, to fund and develop a teacher-resource center for Tsumkwe, Nyae Nyae, as the "cluster center" for schools in Otjozondjupa District. Following on the enrichment-materials teacher-training workshop held by the Kalahari Peoples Fund in July, 2003, KPF has contributed information towards the development of further Ju|'hoan school materials for the use of NAMAS under Norwegian Aid Agency (NORAD) funding.

Except for a small grant from the H. Auerbach Memorial Fund, KPF's inputs to materials development in 2003 were done entirely on the basis of volunteer inputs by professionals. Similarly, the computer literacy training carried out in connection with computer and digital equipment donated to the VSP by Sony and BP Solar was made possible by the volunteer efforts of Catherine Collett and Donna K. Bawden, students respectively of Megan Biesele and of Richard Lee. Small personal grants to Tsumkwe School by Polly Wiessner and myself enabled the provision of a computer literacy teacher at the school for periods in 2002 and 2003.

Of utmost importance have been, however, the closely involved local communities, organizations, and committees themselves, including the (Namibian) Ju|'hoan Curriculum Committee (JCC), which brings together the three Ju|'hoan dialect areas in Namibia; and the Namibian Government's Intersectoral Task Force on Educationally Marginalized Children (ITFEMC) which brings together the government and NGO entities involved in education for San and other marginalized children. These two groups provide instructive examples to similar San literacy projects in Botswana. In turn, from the Botswana side, the Trust for Okavango Cultural and Development Initiatives (TOCaDI), in conjunction with PANOS Institute (London), the Bernard van Leer Foundation (The Netherlands), and the University of Botswana San/Basarwa Research Project, has enabled community-based oral history projects and publications in San and Khoekhoe languages in Botswana that now serve as models for similar projects in Namibia (cf. Chumbo and Mmaba 2002). A fascinating study could be written on the various political

chronologies of educational and language policies in the two nation-states, which share a common border bisecting the Ju|'hoan, Nharo, and other San language communities. In late 2004, a publication San communities prepared from their own oral traditions, *Voices of the San*, was published to celebrate the ending of the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Peoples (LeRoux and White, 2004).

For Ju|'hoansi literacy in northwest Ngamiland, Botswana, where national language and education policies have enforced mainstream learning in Setswana and English only, the participation of community-based organizations has been essential to recent progress. Starting in 2003, TOCaDI has budgeted for Ju|'hoansi language work to be done in the Dobe, Qoshe, Cgae Cgae and Tsodilo areas (spellings follow current Botswana map conventions). This work will be based on the model and mentoring of the Khoekhoegowab project of the Khwe people (under leadership of David Naude) further north, already successfully underway. A language development project in each area is to be started as part of the CBO (community-based organization) development there. This project will be supervised by a Language and Education Committee chosen from the participating communities. The committees appoint one or two literacy specialists tasked to hold community workshops and train others to train their own children and families on their own schedules. Texts are developed for use in literacy work and to prepare community history books from testimonies already collected. In future this project will include some land mapping in the Tsodilo area as well as a "cultural audit" with the Ju|'hoansi. Two literacy workers already taken on by this group of projects are Dahm |Ai!ae and N!aici Kommtsa, both of whom received early literacy training in Ju|'hoan with the Village Schools Project in Namibia.

## SUMMARY OF CURRENT JU|'HOAN PROJECTS AND GOALS

Hundreds of Ju|'hoan texts have been taped and translated (some digitally) and some have been linguistically interlinearized. Tapes made earlier are in process of being digitized for sound quality and greatest accessibility. A published Ju|'hoan orthography has been adopted (Dickens 1991). A dictionary has been published (Dickens 1994) and is undergoing updating by Cornell linguist Amanda Miller-Ockhuizen and the Ju|'hoan Curriculum Committee. A grammar is in press (Dickens 2005) and two successive classes of Ju|'hoan teachers have been trained to teach Grades 1–4 to read and write in their own language. New material to be collected by trainees includes digitally captured sound and video recordings of Ju|'hoan people still using the language. The project may be described, in terms of current linguistic terminology, as one of transforming a legacy collection of audio textual material and associated notes into a format for effective collaboration with other electronic archives, including community archives. It is at once a rational transformation of existing material for widest public use; the most appropriate method for return of cultural materials to their communities of origin; and a vehicle for training indigenous communities in the science and technology needed for



conserving and developing their own language heritage.

## INTERACTION WITH NATION-STATE POLITICS

In Southern Africa as in many world areas, the politics of indigenous groups like the Ju|'hoan San is becoming salient. Important in the San insertion into nations like Namibia and Botswana are self-representation in media regarding themselves, along with cultural heritage preservation and control of local language development. Themes from a recent conference (Research for Khoe and San Development, Gaborone, Botswana, September, 2003: see Naude 2003) and an ongoing research and training project funded by NEH and Wenner-Gren (Voices of Ju|'hoan Women and Men: Texts from an Endangered Language, 2002–2005) exemplify the increasing role of indigenous peoples — in the twenty-first century — in the ownership and development of local cultural materials.

Fostering Ju|'hoan ownership of cultural development has meant diagramming the language for more effective teaching, and enabling production of authoritative texts in Ju|'hoansi, with people writing their own life-stories and creative pieces and becoming in effect scholars of their own language. It has meant the promotion of a literacy-rich environment, complete with technical tools for the present and future. It will enable publications modeled on books like *My Eland's Heart*, which presents oral histories from Schmidtsdrift, near Kimberley, South Africa, related by San soldiers twice removed from their homes in Angola (coming via Namibia, where they were pressed into the service of the South African Defense Forces against SWAPO [the South West African Peoples Organization] (in Namibia's liberation struggle). These contemporary statements refer to a whole world of negotiations about human rights with nation-states in which San today find themselves.

## A BRIGHT NOTE: THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

The Bleek & Lloyd Collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century |Xam San folklore at the University of Cape Town, referred to as a “Rosetta Stone” for meanings in the |Xam language and culture, is nearing completion of the digitization of its holdings. These will be available through an interactive subscription website for scholars and the public. UCT has also recently unearthed wax cylinder recordings of |Xam speech recorded about 1905–1936. Some San languages have disappeared in South Africa and these may provide the only record of the spoken (or sung) language. The Kalahari Peoples Fund is seeking funding to help the Bleek & Lloyd Collection employ the National Sound Archives at the British Library to make stable copies of the wax cylinder recordings. As an addition to the enormous contribution the Bleek & Lloyd Collection has made to San literature in written form, KPF is interested in helping the Collection to enable San literature to be spoken or sung again by the long-departed |Xam people themselves. Literate Ju|'hoansi and other San will be

able to access both written and oral texts and songs online for study and comparison with their own traditions (cf. Bieseke 2004). It is estimated by the librarians at the Collection that approximately US\$10,000 is needed for the project. Colleagues who would like to assist with this exciting moment in the return of cultural materials are asked to let KPF know of potential sources of financial support for this endeavor.

I end with a selection from a creative writing workshop I conducted with the Village Schools Project teacher trainees in 1992. Group-transcribed and translated from the Ju|'hoansi of a young woman named N!hunkxa |Kaece, it has now gone through the Ju|'hoan Curriculum Committee and been processed for publication as school material for Grades 2–4 (Bieseke 1992; Pfaffe 2003). This is an account of a true event in 1991, one that had a strongly politicizing effect on the |Aotcha community in Nyae Nyae:

*“The Day the Tourists Pretended we were Flamingoes”*

*One day, on the Sunday before Christmas, we went down to swim in /Aotcha Pan. While we were swimming, some white people came in two cars. We went towards them. Then one car drove this way, and the other car drove that way, and they tried to chase us with the cars. When we wanted to get out of the pan, they would block our way so that we had to run back into the water. When we were in the water again, they would stop. When we wanted to get out again, they would do the same thing again. So we went back and forth, back and forth, over and over again.*

*When they tried to drive into the pan with one of the cars, its tyres slid and it got stuck. So we were able to get out of the water and run back to the village with nothing on but our underpants. When we told the other people what had happened, Tsamkxao went down to the pan with all the people from the village. Tsamkxao asked the white people, “Yau! What is this about chasing our children while they’re swimming? And the white people said, “ We only wanted to chase the flamingoes.” So Tsamkxao said, “Why is it that the children have always swum in that water but never chased the flamingoes, and now you are trying to kill the children but say you are just chasing the flamingoes?” Then the white people wanted to hit Tsamkxao. They said he was like the sand under their feet.*

The current chance to produce and preserve texts like these is a priceless one that must be taken at all costs. All participating groups and individuals should be able to collaborate in the production of intellectual heritage and educational materials (cf. Winberg 2001; WIMSA 2003; Crawhall 2004). There should be a rich written, as well as oral heritage for Ju|'hoan and other San learners and community members to call on in subsequent years — one that is increasingly under their own control rather than that of outsiders.

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