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# Locating Spaces for San Mother-Tongue Education in the South African Education Framework

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## ABSTRACT

Twenty five years after the advent of democracy in South Africa, indigenous language education for San communities in South Africa is a goal that still needs to be realised. There have been various attempts, though none of these have resulted in sustained programmes or projects. In particular, attempts to implement the recommendations of a report on Khoe and San language education in schools submitted to the Northern Cape Education Department (NCED) in 2001 are reviewed. Two types of language programmes are relevant, namely language revival programmes to reintroduce languages no longer spoken by communities, and mother tongue education (MTE) programmes to ensure home language maintenance. This paper will focus on the latter, namely the possibility of providing some form of MTE within the context of the two San speech communities of Platfontein township located outside Kimberley. Different scenarios are provided taking into account the South African policy environment.

## KEYWORDS

Mother tongue education; home language maintenance; bilingual education; indigenous languages; language-in-education policy; language revitalisation; San education; oral literature studies

## Introduction

As the United Nations (UN) celebrated the International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019, it seemed an opportune time to take stock of indigenous language education efforts in South Africa, particularly as the celebration coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the 1999 land claim settlement of the †Khomani San. The settlement seemed to signal the new, democratically elected government's commitment to address the historical marginalisation and stigmatisation of the indigenous San and Khoe<sup>1</sup> communities of South Africa, including in education. The Northern Cape Provincial Government (NCPG) indicated similar intentions, when in 2000, the provincial education department commissioned an "Implementation Plan for Pilot Projects for the Khoe and San Languages in Schools in the Northern Cape Province" (Siegrühn and Hays 2001). Yet, when the UN

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<sup>1</sup>The terms Khoe and San are used to refer to the indigenous herder and hunter-gatherer peoples of South Africa, respectively. These multiple communities that comprise the Khoe and San are in transition, with many in danger of losing their culture and traditions, including subsistence abilities, because of factors outside their control. The debate regarding the use of the terms, Khoe and San, is ongoing; however, the authors have chosen to use these colonially imposed terms, which collapse culturally diverse groups into two basic categories, as all these groups face similar challenges, including that of language maintenance/revitalisation, and continue to suffer marginalisation within present day South Africa. (For more information see SAHRC 2018).

Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Indigenous Issues, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, visited South Africa in 2005, as a guest of the South African government, to assess the human rights situation of indigenous peoples in the country and make recommendations, he noted:

There is almost no Nama [Khoekhoegowab] literacy and the language is not taught in South African schools (a pilot project is being introduced in one village). The ancient !Khomani language, N/u, has no standardized alphabet system and most of its surviving speakers are over 60 years of age, thus less likely to grasp literacy skills. Neither !Xú nor Khwedam have standardized alphabets, making literacy initiatives particularly difficult. The stigma associated with the languages (particularly Nama) by young people requires special attention by educators and policy-makers when introducing the languages to the curriculum. All indigenous languages in South Africa are under serious threat of extinction (Commission on Human Rights 2005, Par 66).

In their 2018 report on the state of San and Khoe communities in South Africa, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) writes that, “although some progress has been achieved, the delay and/or complete lack of effective implementation of policies and programmes designed to uplift indigenous peoples and facilitate the achievement of their rights remains highly concerning” (2018, 8). One of the SAHRC’s recommendations was that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) urgently develop, and report on within twelve months, a comprehensive education plan for the revitalisation and maintenance of these indigenous communities and their linguistic and cultural heritages (SAHRC 2018). In 2019, more than a year later, the two main areas of concern for San communities regarding culture and education still remained unaddressed: the precarious state of South Africa’s last spoken San language, the N|u language, and the omission of the !Xun and Khwedam languages from the curriculum at !Xunhwesa Combined School in Platfontein, Kimberley. The situation for Khoe languages was slightly better as the DBE had announced that they were in the process of implementing a new Nama language programme (Maromo 2019).

In the light of recent developments in South African language and education policy, the authors review some of the original recommendations made to the Northern Cape Education Department (NCED) in 2001, and reimagine what a San language education plan in the emerging policy context may entail. In particular, the possibility of formal Mother Tongue Education (MTE)<sup>2</sup> within a multilingual education framework for South African San communities is considered, drawing on international best practices for indigenous education, and guided by discussions within San communities in the Southern African region. The lead author of this paper has worked as an education consultant for San service organisations and co-authored the implementation plan for the NCED in 2001. The second author has been working with South Africa’s San communities since 2005, as a researcher and NGO worker. Much of the paper is informed directly from these experiences.

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<sup>2</sup>MTE refers to the use of the mother tongue (or “home language”) as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), as well as being taught as a home language subject. According to a UNESCO education position paper, “The expert view is that mother tongue instruction should cover both the teaching *of* and the teaching *through* this language” (King 2003, 14).

## San languages in the colonial and apartheid eras

To fully appreciate the concerns expressed by the SAHRC and the UN Special Rapporteur regarding the status of South African Khoe and San languages, it is instructive to first examine the history of San languages, and their relation to formal education. The historical case of the now extinct |Xam language spoken by the San of the Central Cape area, as told by linguist Professor Anthony Traill, may serve to illustrate. In 1882 a |Xam storyteller named Bles predicted: “... our old pure Bushman nation is slowly coming to an end, and those that remain, will gradually no longer speak our language” (quoted in Traill 1996, 183). Thirty years later, in 1911, on visiting the Northern Cape, Dorothea Bleek found only a scattering of individual speakers remaining (Traill 1996). In his discussion of the conditions leading to the demise of the language, Traill suggested that people such as Bles were probably the last generation of speakers to have acquired |Xam as a home language. He remarked, “[t]he death of |Xam was the linguistic response of its speakers to the wholesale destruction of their societies and the subsequent loss of a |Xam identity” (quoted in Traill 1996, 183). By 1882 |Xam hunter-gatherer societies had been engaged for about a century in struggles against land invasions by frontier groups such as the Boers,<sup>3</sup> the Basters<sup>4</sup> and the various Khoe groups, which led to the destruction of San societies and the virtual extinction of the hunter-gatherer way of life in South Africa. The majority of San that survived were either assimilated into neighbouring pastoralist and farming communities, or became servants to Boer farmers (Traill 1996; Penn 2005, 157).

The |Xam language was the first of the known South African San languages to become extinct, followed rapidly by other San languages spoken in the country. Its fate demonstrated that language shift leading to language death, though not the norm, could happen within the span of one generation, once home language transmission has been disrupted as a result of the disintegration of families and communities (Traill 1996). For the dispossessed San there would be little external valorisation of the language or culture, as outsiders expected the San to assimilate into foreign ways of life, expressed in languages suited to these purposes. The resulting stigmatisation of the San cultures and languages, though not the root cause, was a critical factor in language death, as it negatively affected language loyalty and encouraged language shift (Traill 1996). Stigmatisation was also reflected in the attitudes of educated Europeans such as missionaries, who in many cases were the first transcribers and teachers of literacy in African languages at mission schools (Heugh 2002). These literacy initiatives laid the groundwork for later development and use of the African languages as formal academic languages. In the case of the San though, missionaries used Dutch, with interpreting assistance, in the brief years of contact to conduct sermons and school lessons (Traill 1996).<sup>5</sup> The effect was that none of the South African San languages, nor their oral traditions, were learnt or recorded in a systematic way by missionaries while the languages were still alive. As noted previously, by the time Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd were recording the |Xam

<sup>3</sup>In South Africa, the Afrikaans term Boer, which translates as “farmer,” is predominately used to refer to people of European non-British descent. More specifically it is used when referring to farmers of European non-British descent.

<sup>4</sup>This term Baster generally refers to people of mixed race. Some people today in the Northern Cape still self-identify as Basters. For more discussion on how the term has been used historically see Legassick (2016).

<sup>5</sup>Missionary J.J. Kircherer in 1804 wrote that the |Xam language was “... so very difficult to learn, that no-one can spell or write the same. It consists mostly of a clicking of the tongue” (Traill 1996, 175).

oral tradition in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the language was no longer viable as a home language.

For most of the twentieth century, stigmatisation of the diminishing Khoe and San languages and their speakers persisted. For example, at the time that the Apartheid government was extending MTE in schools for speakers of Bantu languages in the 1950s to 1970s (Heugh 2002), it was imposing Afrikaans on the remaining Khoe and San speakers to create a distinct “Coloured” identity to which the Khoe and San were to become aligned (SAHRC 2018). An informant from the Northern Cape, for example, remembered how the Nama and N|u languages were banned from use at school (SASI 2000). Some people identifying with the Nama language and culture were forcibly removed to Namibia in the 1970s, only able to return to their homes in 1995, after the demise of Apartheid (SASI 2000), while in 1973, Traill, reported interviewing an individual who claimed to be the last speaker of N|u in South Africa (Traill cited in Crawhall 2001). San languages in South Africa were considered extinct until the late nineties when the linguistic and cultural knowledge of elderly N|u speakers was brought to the fore during the #Khomani land claim (Crawhall 2001; Bunting 2002).

It was early in the political transition from apartheid, in 1990, that the !Xun and Khwe communities from Angola and Namibia arrived in the Northern Cape Province, becoming the only San communities in South Africa to still speak and maintain San languages as their home languages. Their resettlement gave relevance, if not urgency, to the question of San home language maintenance, stemming from the fact that children from these communities receive their education through the medium of Afrikaans, without the option of studying their home language as a subject.<sup>6</sup> This is the regional norm though, as the vast majority of San children in southern Africa (like other minority-language speakers) receive their compulsory school education exclusively in the dominant languages of their respective countries.<sup>7</sup> Time spent at school and away from home impacts the depth of transmission of the home language and traditional knowledge and skills, and reinforces existing social stigmas. Under such circumstances, San communities and individuals are pressed to choose between the possibility of greater socio-economic success for their children, and the maintenance or survival of their home language and culture.<sup>8</sup> Over time this type of pressure affects language loyalty and encourages a communal shift to the dominant language(s).

Educational proposals for San communities should thus aim to remove this burden placed on communities of having the stark choice between marginalisation and

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<sup>6</sup>Up to the late seventies Afrikaans was mostly an unfamiliar language to the !Xun and Khwe communities, but became the lingua franca for the San men, and their families, that joined the South African Defence Force (SADF) as soldiers. Afrikaans also became the medium of instruction at the San school established by the SADF. After their relocation to Schmidtsdrift in South Africa in 1990, members of these communities reported some local inhabitants expressing negative attitudes towards the San languages, “People laugh at the click sound of our language” (SASI 2000, 9). In 2000 these communities settled on their own land, acquired with a state grant, outside Kimberley in the Northern Cape Province.

<sup>7</sup>A notable exception is the Ju|’hoansi language that has been used in the early grades at the Nyae Nyae Village Schools and in Grade one at the private school, Gqaina Primary School, in Namibia (Hays 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Communities that have tried to provide an accredited education that balances the home and dominant languages have had to do so largely at their own cost and effort and with donor support, at least initially. The primary example is the Nyae Nyae Village Schools in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy in the Tsumkwe area of Namibia, which was started and run as a community education project for approximately the first twenty years of its existence. The Namibian education department has recently incorporated the village schools. (See Hays 2016 for an in-depth discussion of the village schools.)

assimilation. In this regard, the SAHRC report suggests a remedy: “[i]n recognising that language was historically utilised as a tool of oppression, the preservation and promotion of multilingualism is important in restoring dignity and a recognition of equality and identity to large portions of the country’s population” (SAHRC 2018, 9). Incorporating such a multilingual approach in formal education is congruent with recommendations made by San communities over the years in various forums and, at the 2005 conference, “For the Benefit of All: Mother tongue education for Southern African Minorities” (Hays 2006, 58). Such recommendations promote the use of MTE, while acknowledging the critical importance of learning the dominant language(s), and propose bilingual/multilingual education as an approach that may deliver on these dual needs.

### **San language education in the post-apartheid context**

South Africa’s multilingual language policy since 1996, underpinned by constitutionally guaranteed language and cultural rights, initially seemed to give room to negotiate space for indigenous language and cultural programmes in the formal school system. It was within this context that the NCED implementation plan, described below, was based. However, programmes were vulnerable to educational policy changes and a pervasive lack of will to implement. The Constitution in fact did not place a direct obligation on the state to provide Khoe and San language and cultural programmes in schools. As these minority languages do not have the status of being official national languages there is only an obligation to “promote and help create conditions for the development and use of” these languages through the legally constituted Khoe and San National Language Board (KSNLB) (SASI 2000; Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, Chapter 6), an official body of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). The KSNLB was incumbent on its members, constituted of representatives from the Khoe and San communities, to interpret and give effect to this mandate.<sup>9</sup> The lack of clarity on the obligations of the state to provide resources or ensure capacity building, had implications for the KSNLB’s ability to effect programme implementation. As reported by the UN Special Rapporteur, “[o]verall the KSNLB has fallen short of meeting its expressed aims, as acknowledged by its own membership (Commission on Human Rights 2005, Par. 65).”

### ***Northern Cape Education Department (NCED) Khoe and San language programme***

As the Northern Cape is home to the majority of South Africa’s recognised San communities, the provincial education department, in cooperation with the relevant communities, is responsible for the implementation of indigenous language programmes in government schools. In 2000, partly in response to advocacy efforts of organisations such as the South African San Institute (SASI), and following on the success of the

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<sup>9</sup>PanSALB “is responsible under article 6 of the Constitution for the protection and promotion of the language rights of Khoe and San-language speakers. In 1999 it established the Khoe and San National Language Board (KSNLB), the first legally constituted body of indigenous peoples to represent themselves on this issue, which has raised the issue of endangered languages and the absence of indigenous languages and knowledge systems in the public school system and in governance” (Commission on Human Rights 2005, par 65).

ǀKhomani land claim, the NCED commissioned a report funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) to consult communities on existing and potential pilot projects for the Khoe and San languages (Siegrühn and Hays 2001). The intention was that the Department would implement the projects jointly with communities and other stakeholders such as the KSNLB and SASI. Up to that point the only Khoe or San language programme was based at the government primary school, Johan Hein Primêre Skool, in the village of Kuboes in the Richtersveld. The goal there was to reintroduce Nama in the community, and it was initiated by the then principal, with funding from the local diamond mine, Transhex Mining Company, in 1998 (Siegrühn and Hays 2001).

### ***Recommendations to the NCED and programme outcomes (2001–2011)***

The three project areas investigated for the report were the predominantly Afrikaans-speaking Nama communities of the Orange River, the resettled !Xun and Khwe San communities in the Kimberley area, and the scattered ǀKhomani San communities of the Kalahari including Upington. In brief, the main recommendation made in the report was for the NCED to employ a coordinator for the Khoe and San language programmes. The proposed candidate was a qualified Nama teacher who also spoke N|u fluently and was already in the employ of the NCED as a teacher in his home community along the Orange River (Siegrühn and Hays 2001).

Regarding the specific project areas, for the Orange River Nama communities, where Nama had ceased to be a home language during the apartheid era, the expansion of the Kuboes pilot project to a further nine villages was recommended. Support with teacher recruitment, training and curriculum development was to be sought from the Namibian infrastructure through cooperation with the Namibian Institute for Educational Development and the University of Namibia (Siegrühn and Hays 2001). The proposed Nama language programme was partially implemented in 2006, after the visit of the Special Rapporteur. Most of the teachers who were recruited, with one exception, were untrained Nama mother-tongue matriculants from Namibia. These untrained teachers were deployed to each of the ten village schools selected for the programme, without receiving training, curricula and appropriate learning materials. The coordinator and teachers rarely met as access to transport and funding were limited, leaving the teachers without a stable support structure (Siegrühn 2010). In March 2010 the Education Department notified the programme coordinator and teachers that, in line with the revised National Curriculum Statement, Nama as a second additional language subject, was to be removed from the school timetable at the end of that school year.<sup>10</sup> Schools were still given the option to offer these languages after school hours, however, this option was felt to be demeaning. During discussions at a workshop with this group, in May 2010, some of the teachers expressed concern that the schools where they were based did not seem to view the Nama language programme as a priority given the academic demands of the formal curriculum, while it was not indicated if there was strong support for the programme from the communities (Siegrühn 2010). Regardless, the programme ultimately came to an end.

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<sup>10</sup>NCED Springbok Circuit Office circular, 23 March 2010.

For the Platfontein !Xun and Khwe communities the report recommended that a Foundation Phase (Grades R to three) mother-tongue programme be developed using the Molteno Project's well-established MTE programme, *Breakthrough to Literacy method for African languages*.<sup>11</sup> Conditions for formal MTE still needed to be created, foremost a sufficient number of potential mother tongue teachers had to be identified, orthographies and learning materials developed, while work needed to be done within communities to make members feel more comfortable with the school environment. Therefore, the development of an extracurricular language and cultural maintenance programme to supplement the school curriculum was proposed, as well as academic language support in the LoLT, Afrikaans.<sup>12</sup> It was recommended that the NCED collaborate with community structures and the KSNLB to realise these programmes (Siegrühn and Hays 2001). The most measurable outcome of the recommendations occurred in 2009 with the publication of the Molteno Breakthrough materials in !Xun and Khwedam by Macmillan Publishers. The materials remained unused as there was no follow-up to train mother tongue teachers (Jones 2017).

For the N|u language programme, which had two project sites, in Upington and in the Kalahari, it was recommended that the Early Childhood Development (ECD) unit of the NCED support the existing pre-school in Andriesvale, in the Kalahari, where N|u was being taught, as well as to expand teaching time and the number of pre-school sites. Youth who had participated in the short N|u language learning courses offered by SASI at the time, could be employed as teaching assistants. In addition, a language and cultural maintenance programme similar to the proposed Platfontein programme was recommended for the primary schools attended by #Khomani learners. Further, it was recommended for the longer term that the NCED investigate the option of providing bilingual Nama-Afrikaans education to #Khomani learners, as Nama was one of the mother tongues of this community alongside Afrikaans (Siegrühn and Hays 2001). At the time the #Khomani community's management committee was planning to establish a learning centre and cultural village to serve as an educational hub for the Kalahari communities, however this centre has not materialised. Over the past twenty years, there have been numerous small scale non-state funded projects to reintroduce N|u, however, no comprehensive programme has been developed or implemented thus far.

In May 2011 the South African chapter of the regional Southern African San Education Forum (SASEF)<sup>13</sup> met in Upington. Representatives reflected on the status of indigenous language programmes in the country, given the disappointing outcomes of the NCED's programmes. At the meeting, community elders and activists alluded to possible reasons for the lack of progress in language and cultural programmes. They spoke of the challenge of establishing effective communication and cooperation between government departments and communities, in and amongst different communities, as well as the limited participation of community members in general (Siegrühn 2011). These issues were not the only to undermine the NCED's programmes. It is critical to provide

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<sup>11</sup>For more information on the Molteno Project see: <https://molteno.co.za/2020/07/15/breakthrough-to-literacy-btl/> (accessed 09/11/2020).

<sup>12</sup>Learners were proficient in conversational Afrikaans but as academic skills in Afrikaans were limited failure rates were extremely high. (Afrikaans is the lingua franca of the Northern Cape Province where the !Xun and Khwe people had been resettled.)

<sup>13</sup>SASEF was established in 2001 under the auspices of the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) as a means to coordinate San education efforts across the region, but the body is no longer functioning.

a stable yet flexible and inclusive policy environment, to prevent disruption to, or discontinuation of programmes, as happened in the case of the Nama programme.

### **San language education: current status, evolving needs**

Since the 1970s the encounters that the San across the southern African region have had with mainstream education have generally been discouraging, showing high drop-out and failure rates (Le Roux 2000). It is hoped that by incorporating more indigenously relevant education, school attendance and performance can be improved. Before considering the future of indigenous language education, it is essential to determine if there is still a desire and need for such programmes within indigenous communities. We must also consider and establish how needs have evolved, or have dissipated, over the past nineteen years, among existing populations, and particularly within the new generations. Some of these issues have been answered by the SAHRC which, in 2015 and 2016, conducted nationwide in-depth consultations with Khoe and San communities on all aspects of their lives, including the language question. The subsequent report noted that the Khoe and San communities were calling for an education that promotes and strengthens their indigenous cultures and languages while it recognised that the government allocates insufficient resources to support and promote such endeavours (SAHRC 2018). The SAHRC report made numerous recommendations, to back the demands of the communities for greater support from government, whether in the formal education system or with independent community education initiatives and emphasised the responsibility of communities as well, and not just the state, to teach and maintain the indigenous languages (SAHRC 2018).

#### ***The !Xun and Khwe communities***

The !Xun and Khwe communities of Platfontein are concerned about home language maintenance, as the communities are at increasing risk of assimilation into the broader Northern Cape community. Since 2001, when the NCED report was submitted, conditions for the implementation of a MTE programme, primarily the increasing numbers of high school matriculants, have improved and such a programme may now have a better chance of success. At Platfontein there are more than 4500 people who speak !Xun and 2000<sup>14</sup> people speaking Khwedam as their mother tongue (Mhlanga 2006). Each community has an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centre, attended by children from the community between the ages of three and six. Instruction at these centres is in the mother tongue. Children from both communities then attend the local !Xunkhwesa Combined school, where education is provided in the mother tongue in grade R and for half of grade one. After this children receive education in Afrikaans and learn English as an additional language. Several early childhood readers have been written in !Xun and Khwedam (Jones 2019), and !Xun and Khwe dictionaries and grammar reference books exist (du Plessis 2019). Communities struggle to access these, however, as the resources are usually expensive, are held by specialised bookshops or within academic circles.

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<sup>14</sup>This is the most current estimate of numbers of !Xun and Khwe peoples at Platfontein, however, it can be assumed that the numbers are substantially higher, as these figures are from 2006.

Where readers are available, few adults are literate enough in their mother tongue to assist children adequately (Jones 2019).

Currently, many Platfontein inhabitants advocate for more mother tongue education (Jones 2017). A core group of Platfontein youth support this, also arguing that English be prioritised over Afrikaans as a LoLT (Grant 2019). They use !Xun and Khwedam initially at home, then have to quickly become proficient in Afrikaans as the medium of instruction at school; but they argue that English is more important because further study utilises English as the LoLT. They cite a lack of support from community leaders and government as the main reason that MTE has not been extended past grade one, or that English is not being used as a LoLT at !Xunkh-wesa school, despite the fact that it is the LoLT in many Northern Cape government schools. Involving committed youth in the development of a formal MTE initiative may give them access to much needed training and employment opportunities, for example, as teachers, language facilitators, and materials and terminology developers. They will be well positioned to help forge the critical missing link between community and school.

### ***The #Khomani community***

For many of the #Khomani San in the Kalahari area, the core concern is the revitalisation of the N|u language. As Afrikaans and not N|u is the home language of the majority of the 850 #Khomani community members, MTE is not a viable option. Nevertheless there is value in teaching the language and there are strategies already in place to enable language learning. An extracurricular N|u language school has been established and is run by community elder, Ouma Geelmeid (Katrina Esau), in Upington. Further north in the southern Kalahari, on the #Khomani owned farm of Andriesvale, the Eland School and Kopan ECD centre offer twice and three times weekly N|u classes, respectively, as part of their curriculum. Over the years all these projects have received financial support from a variety of NGOs and social responsibility programmes, while academics have provided teaching practice support and collaborated with community members to develop teaching materials. For example, Sheena Shah and Matthias Brenzinger when employed at the Centre for African Language Diversity (CALDi), at the University of Cape Town, worked with Ouma Geelmeid to produce a basic language learning book in 2016 to be used in teaching (see Shah and Brenzinger 2016). Khomsodev also produced a children's learning book with funding from Assmang Khumani Mine in 2014, while a reference grammar and audio recordings are available and a N|u dictionary is in preparation (du Plessis 2019; Shah and Brenzinger 2016). These resources are important and mean that the revitalisation of the N|u language is a possibility, the resources, however, will only be useful insofar as community members have access to them, are literate and have some proficiency in the N|u language (Shah and Brenzinger 2016). Currently the N|u language teacher working at the Andriesvale ECD and the Eland School only has one copy of each of the aforementioned books. Such circumstances mean that the extent to which people will learn to speak N|u fluently remains to be seen, especially since the more proficient language speakers are now all elderly, with only two such speakers remaining in 2020.

In 2001, the NCED report suggested that Nama could be considered as the home language for MTE programmes. This language is, however, currently the home language of only a very small number of #Khomani families. The younger members of these families no longer speak the language—they only understand it—consequently, within this

community, Nama is not a contender for MTE. As Nama is taught in Namibia, educational resources and teaching advice is available, ensuring that the teaching of Nama to community members is a viable option should there be a demand. Unlike with N|u there are no existing community driven projects to encourage the speaking or teaching of Nama.<sup>15</sup> When asked, particular community members, namely the elders that speak Nama, are keen for such a project, but have yet to initiate one. Time and oppression have taken their toll on the ǀKhomani and the opening to use MTE to revitalise their past home languages has past. The only option now is to teach these languages as additional languages. From the above it is apparent that a language and cultural revitalisation programme delivered through community-based preschools, schools and after-care programmes is currently a reality within the ǀKhomani community—albeit one starved of resources. Although N|u or Nama may never be home languages again, by supporting and developing programmes, such as above (and others), the government would be signifying that it values these communities, their languages and cultures. This would start to address the continued stigmatisation of San and Khoe languages and cultures within the broader population while building the self-esteem of San peoples (see SAHRC 2018).

Despite the passage of time, indications are that San communities in South Africa still desire to maintain their indigenous languages and cultures, and would welcome support in these endeavours. Already, we have briefly discussed that the option of MTE is not viable for the ǀKhomani, however, it is an option for both the !Xun and Khwe communities at Platfontein. The remainder of the paper will focus on possible bilingual models for MTE that could be applied at !Xunhwesa Combined School to support indigenous language maintenance. The applicability of these strategies within the South African education framework and their adherence to policy, are briefly discussed as well.

### **San language education in a changing educational context: opportunities for MTE?**

Before considering options for bilingual education, the policy position of the San languages needs to be revisited. In the previous section on implementation efforts over the past twenty years, the lack of effort and thus continuity of indigenous language programmes in government schools stands out. Commitment to teaching non-examinable subjects, as was the case with the NCED Nama programme, declined as curriculum changes favoured core curriculum components—in particular official language biliteracy (home language and first additional language, or FAL) and mathematics, science and technology—and this trend is likely to continue. Without security or status in policy, it is unlikely that government will drive non-examinable curricular initiatives that place additional demands on the school-day, or that communities will choose to initiate projects that reinforce the low status of their languages in the school system. Arguably then, in order to ensure the development and use of San home languages in formal education, these languages should be located within the core curriculum. As these languages

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<sup>15</sup>NGOs have historically been less inclined to encourage or initiate such projects as Nama which is not considered a San language but a Khoe one, nor is it an endangered language. At times, community members who speak Nama are subject to ridicule by other community members who suggest that such families are not San at all but Khoe.

are not official national languages<sup>16</sup>, it may require advocating for a policy accommodation that enables them to fulfil the same functions as the official national languages “for the purpose of learning and teaching at a public school” (DBE 2012, 20). Thereby, without having to be official national languages, they would be able to function as home language subjects, FALs and as LoLTs, justified by their unique status as endangered San languages. So doing, San communities would receive the formal recognition they seek for their languages in education—such a gesture on the part of government may lead to increased trust and cooperation.

### *Language dispensation in the South African curriculum*

What would it entail for the San languages to be accorded the same status and functions in government schools as the official national languages? The South African qualifications system requires that learners study two official languages as subjects from Grade one to twelve, one language should be their home-language and the second the FAL.<sup>17</sup> Nationally, English (or Afrikaans) has been the preferred LoLT from Grade four onwards, although government is presently reviewing this practice as it has proven to be educationally unsound (discussed below). This system is further problematic when learners’ home language is not an official language, such as with the Khoe or San languages. For example, currently, at !Xunkhwesa Combined School, Platfontein, midway through grade one, instruction changes from the home languages of !Xun or Khwe, to Afrikaans as LoLT and home language subject, while English is provided as the FAL. These learners therefore do not benefit from their home languages being used in the classroom for as long as other learners. Table 1 below demonstrates how the current language dispensation in South African schools could be applied to !Xunkhwesa Combined School if the communities’ home languages were treated as per official languages. It shows the time allocation that would be applied to the two compulsory language subjects, and to the non-language subjects in the school curriculum.

From Table 1 it is apparent that the use of the home language would diminish sharply after Grade three, where roughly 85% of teaching and learning still takes place in the home language, to about 22 per cent in Grade four. Such a transition places an additional linguistic burden on the cognitively demanding transition from Grade three to four.<sup>18</sup> This model, known as subtractive bilingualism aims to transition learners from their home

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<sup>16</sup>It is unlikely that Khoe and San languages will be designated official language status given the small number of people that currently use the languages. Official language status was awarded based on the number of people speaking the languages (Sehume 2019).

<sup>17</sup>Exceptions are made, for example, in the case of foreign learners.

<sup>18</sup>This transition has proven to be particularly hard for two reasons: firstly, Grade four presents the cognitively most demanding leap in the school progression even for home language speakers of the LoLT, with academic subjects and their peculiar discourses being introduced for the first time (Sibanda 2017). Secondly, the three years of exposure that learners have had to the new LoLT, from grades one to three, is considered inadequate; five to seven years of quality instruction in the FAL is the minimum requirement before its recommended introduction as LoLT (Heugh 1995; Sibanda 2017). These two factors working in tandem have been cited as an important contributor to the high dropout rates around Grade four, and potentially disadvantages home language speakers of African languages throughout their school career. Sibanda (2017) proposes a strategy for the Foundation Phase (Grade R to three) whereby policy is sufficiently flexible to allow for the transition to take place once sufficient numbers of learners in a class achieve a specified level of proficiency in the FAL. The authors of this paper propose such a strategy should be employed throughout the different phases of school as it allows the school community to evaluate language proficiency levels and pace the introduction of the second LoLT in line with learners’ actual proficiency.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of current time allocations for language instruction, if applied at !Xunkhwesa Combined School<sup>a</sup>.

Training band	General Education and Training (GET)	GET cont.	GET cont.	Further Education and Training (FET)
<i>Phases<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Foundation Phase (FP) Grades R–3</i>	<i>Intermediate Phase (IP) Grades 4–6</i>	<i>Senior Phase (SP) Grades 7–9</i>	<i>Grades 10–12</i>
<i>Home Language</i>	!Xun or Khwedam R-2 31-35% 3 28-32%	!Xun or Khwedam 22%	!Xun or Khwedam 18%	!Xun or Khwedam 16%
<i>First Additional Language (FAL)</i>	English or Afrikaans R-2 9-13% 3 12-16%	English or Afrikaans 18%	English or Afrikaans 14%	English or Afrikaans 16%
<i>Total percentage Language subjects</i>	44%	40%	32%	32%
<i>Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) (non-language subjects)</i>	!Xun or Khwedam 56%	English or Afrikaans 60%	English or Afrikaans 68%	English or Afrikaans 68%

<sup>a</sup>The percentages used in the table were derived from time allocations stipulated in the official South African curriculum, namely the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) documents (Department of Basic Education 2011).

<sup>b</sup>Ideally, learners start Grade R at age 6 and complete Grade 12 to matriculate at age 18. Compulsory schooling ends upon a learner passing Grade 9, or reaching the age of 16. In practice, it is possible to encounter great variations in age across the school population in South Africa, especially in poor, marginalised communities as learners often repeat Grades, and/or start school late.

languages to the dominant language as sole LoLT, as soon as possible. Although generally the language practice in South Africa facilitates a transition to English (See Baker 2001, 194; Plüddemann 2010 for discussions on typology of bilingual education), for the !Xun and Khwe communities the practice results in a transition towards Afrikaans, the dominant language of the region.

The national DBE acknowledges the problematic nature of the sudden language transition in the LoLT from home language to the FAL in Grade four and has recently indicated that it plans to incrementally expand the use of home languages beyond the Foundation Phase (Businessstech Insider 2020), thereby adopting an additive bilingual approach. This decision follows on from a pilot isiXhosa-English Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) programme in the Eastern Cape Province which commenced in 2012, and was successful, particularly in the fields of maths and science (Businessstech Insider 2020; Isaac 2018). The MTBBE programme is in line with the South African language-in-education policy which, although flexible, strongly promotes additive bilingual or multilingual approaches (Department of Basic Education 1997).<sup>19 20</sup> Such approaches aim to add the dominant language (e.g. English) to learners' language repertoire whilst maintaining the home language.

### **Bilingual education and indigenous language maintenance programmes**

Additive or subtractive models of bilingual education are recognisable from the percentage of time allocated to the different languages in the curriculum, as demonstrated in

<sup>19</sup>Given South Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity, government does not prescribe a single language-in-education policy for all schools. Instead school communities set their own policy within the parameters provided by the language-in-education policy. (See South African Schools Act 84 of 1996.)

<sup>20</sup>An additive multilingual model would include all relevant languages and literacies that play a role in the lives of the community (Plüddemann 2014). However, based on the structuring of the current curriculum, additive multilingualism is a less likely candidate for adoption at government schools than additive bilingualism at this stage.

**Table 2.** (Note that the figures below are illustrative rather than fixed, as there are many possible variations based on factors such as the available resource base and specific project goals and strategies.) In principle, the new LoLT, or FAL, should be introduced incrementally to ensure that there are no sudden language shifts away from the home language. To qualify as an additive bilingual model, not less than 50 per cent of curriculum time should be conducted in the mother tongue or home language throughout the grades, varying between 50 and 90 per cent. An additive approach has lifelong bilingualism, biculturalism and biliteracy as goal, whereas a subtractive, transitional approach more often encourages assimilation into the dominant culture (Baker 1998, 508). The additive principle, that views the home languages and cultures of learners as classroom resources, commonly guides the design of bilingual programmes that emphasise indigenous language and cultural maintenance.

The early exit bilingual model shown in Table 2 is a version based on current practice for speakers of the official languages, such as Setswana or isiZulu, and the late exit bilingual model is an extension of this model, phasing out the mother tongue as a LoLT by the end of Grade six. If these transitional models are considered inadequate for speakers whose mother tongue languages are strong and spoken widely within the broader South African society—such as is the case with Setswana or isiZulu—then the problem is even more acute in the case of the !Xun and Khwedam, where learners have to transition to Afrikaans in the course of Grade one. In South Africa these languages are only spoken at Platfontein and there is a concern that younger community members are succumbing to the pressures of speaking the dominant local language of Afrikaans while English is also a threat given its media presence (Bodunrin 2019). The additive bilingual model is therefore recommended for !Xun and Khwedam as it maintains the mother tongue as a LoLT throughout the GET band and preferably beyond.

### ***Including non-standardised, oral home languages in the curriculum***

The anchor point for all bilingual models within the South African curriculum framework is the development of home language curricula, in this case for the non-standardised, oral languages of !Xun and Khwedam. This is relatively new terrain for curriculum development in South Africa, however, the recent introduction of South African Sign Language (SASL), a standardised gestural language, as a home-language subject, now provides a

**Table 2.** Breakdown of percentage of time allocated to home language in the South African school curriculum (where the LoLT is not the home language after Grade three), excluding !Xunkhwesa Combined School.

Type of bilingual model	Grades R-3	Grades 4–6	Grades 7–9	Grades 10–12
<i>Early exit transitional (Subtractive)</i> (Based on current time allocations in curriculum)	R-2 87/91% 3 84/88%	22%	18%	16%
<i>Late exit transitional (Subtractive)</i> (Based on time allocations in curriculum, except for Grades 4-6)	R-2 87/91% 3 84/88%	4 70% 5 60% 6 50% (app. figures)	18%	16%
<i>Additive</i> (Home language maintenance/Mother tongue based)	R 90% 1–3 85%	4–5 80% 6 70% (app. figures)	7 70% 8–9 60% (app. figures)	50% minimum

precedent for the inclusion of non-literate languages into the curriculum framework.<sup>21</sup> The SASL curriculum calls for a “bilingual-bicultural approach to teaching and learning,” since the FAL has to serve as the written language alongside SASL throughout the curriculum (DBE 2014, 8). This curriculum may offer useful strategies that can be applied to teaching and assessing oral languages such as !Xun and Khwedam, perhaps through the production and assessment of voice recordings alongside written texts.

Although orthographies and basic literacy materials are available in both !Xun and Khwedam, the development of literacy practices is yet to gather momentum. The inclusion of these two languages in a formal school context will naturally stimulate the development of literacy alongside the oral tradition. A key feature of such a San home language subject would be to involve learners in language and cultural maintenance and development work, as language recorders, transcribers and performers of oral literature. To maintain a balance between oracy and literacy, the additive bicultural principle is recommended whereby literacy is added to, and does not subtract from, learners’ oral repertoire, thereby maintaining the cultural integrity of the oral tradition. This type of approach would require the formal teaching of oracy skills and management of the oracy-literacy interface, with the implication that the oracy-literacy weighting in home language assessment would need be readjusted to place oracy on a more equal footing with literacy.<sup>22,23</sup> In addition to drawing on community resources, curriculum developers will require access to academic resources necessary to create a framework for developing, teaching and assessing non-standardised San languages, as San linguistic and oral literature studies are established at tertiary level.

### ***Supporting language and cultural maintenance at FET level***

At FET level, two additional curricular interventions are suggested to support language and cultural maintenance to contribute to employment and education opportunities within the indigenous community and the broader network. Both interventions would offer meaningful opportunities to expand the use of the mother tongue as LoLT at the FET level, as well as to integrate Indigenous Knowledge (IK) options into the formal curriculum.<sup>24</sup> The first proposed intervention is the development and accreditation of San specific subjects for grades ten to twelve to be taught at schools as electives for matriculation purposes. (See [Table 3](#) below). Making subjects more relevant to learners’ interests and everyday experiences may help stem the “drop out” culture typical of San

<sup>21</sup>The feasibility of such curricular undertakings has been demonstrated by indigenous-language teaching programmes internationally. In the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, for example, national curriculum and assessment policies for non-standardised, as yet non-literate indigenous home languages had been designed and implemented as a cooperation between communities and government.

<sup>22</sup>A proposed weighting of oral-written formal assessments is: 33% oral proficiency; 33% written proficiency; 34% dexterity in managing oral-written interface (e.g. reading aloud, note taking, conducting interviews, transcribing oral recordings, etc.). Compare the current requirement for formal assessment of oral proficiency which from Grade 3 onwards roughly averages 15% of all formal language assessment. (See Department of Basic Education 2011).

<sup>23</sup>See for example Nancy Hornberger’s writings on Spanish/Indigenous language bilingual programmes in Central and South America. Hornberger’s work on the “continua of biliteracy” offers useful curriculum planning tools for, amongst others, balancing the relationship between oracy and literacy.

<sup>24</sup>For those learners who choose to attend an educational institution outside of their community (for example, a technical school or a vocation-oriented FET College) for their FET qualifications, but choose to continue to take !Xun or Khwedam as a home language subject, may still be able to do so by arranging study groups in their home community and/or through self-study.

**Table 3.** Supplementary course development for San students at FET level.

FET Band	Grades 10–12 (School-based, academic stream)	Skills programmes: NQF levels 2–4 <sup>a</sup> (Delivered via a combination of distance education, resource centres and in-service training)
	<p data-bbox="235 258 668 352"><i>Aim: Develop academic San specific subjects for the National Senior Certificate (Matric, with university pass) to complement mainstream elective subjects. Core curriculum (four subjects):</i></p> <ul data-bbox="235 377 563 470" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• !Xun/Khwedam Home Language</li> <li>• English or Afrikaans (FAL)</li> <li>• Mathematics/Mathematical Literacy</li> <li>• Life Orientation</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="705 258 1152 352"><i>Aim: Develop modular skills programmes for certification at NQF levels 2–4 for out of school youth. Example: NQF Level 2 Certificate (Grade 10 equivalent) Core curriculum components:</i></p> <ul data-bbox="705 377 1152 495" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language and Communication (Home Language and FAL)</li> <li>• Mathematical Literacy and Technology</li> <li>• Life Skills</li> <li>• San Studies</li> </ul>
	<p data-bbox="235 521 668 568"><i>Electives (three subjects):</i> In addition to mainstream electives, possibilities for San specific electives include–</p> <ul data-bbox="235 592 623 664" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• San History and Heritage Studies</li> <li>• San Living Sciences/Environmental Studies</li> <li>• San Arts, Culture and Technology</li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="705 521 1152 568"><i>Elective skills components (select 3):</i> Possible areas for skills training include:</p> <ul data-bbox="705 592 1152 759" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tourism and Hospitality</li> <li>• Nature Conservation</li> <li>• Heritage Management</li> <li>• Arts and Crafts Production</li> <li>• Small Business Development</li> <li>• Media and Information Technology</li> <li>• Community Education and Development</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup>This skills programme proposal is influenced by work done at !Khwatla San Culture and Education Centre. In 2011 the lead author was contracted to assist with the formal accreditation process for a San nature and cultural guide training course. At the time Magdalena Brörmann-Thoma was the training coordinator and main course developer, including of a San Studies module which was later accredited at NQF level 2. Also influential are the accredited tracker training courses of Cybertracker Academy, and these could serve as a useful reference point for future development of San-Based Nature Conservation or Living Sciences/Environmental Studies courses.

communities. The second intervention at the FET level, primarily aimed at out of school youth, would be the creation of modular skills programmes at NQF levels two to four (grades ten to twelve equivalents). From a language teaching perspective, the skills programme curriculum calls for an alternative approach to the current school curriculum where languages are taught separately. An integrated bilingual programme, based on a communicative approach, can complement and enrich teaching practices at school.

Educational efforts should be coordinated at a community level; i.e. through the establishment of a learning and resource centre where language and curriculum development as well as teacher training can take place (Hays 2016, 107–108; Jones 2017, 273–274). Such a centre could become a focal point in the broader community revitalisation by providing additional facilities and services that increase overall quality of life, for example, youth development and academic support, adult education and livelihoods projects, and access to social services.

## The way forward

Within the broader South African society, apathy persists towards the revitalisation and maintenance of San culture and languages, with the pattern of neglect towards these indigenous languages in formal education being firmly set, requiring a conscious and cooperative effort to overcome it. Despite the passage of time, indications are that San

communities in South Africa still desire the implementation of indigenous language learning strategies. At the SASEF-SA meeting in 2011, the late !Xun community leader Rev Mario Mahongo made an urgent call for a comprehensive education plan to be put in place. As a leader of the Platfontein San community, he was specifically concerned about the future of the !Xun and Khwe languages, and challenged government to demonstrate their commitment to help realise such a plan (Siegrühn 2011), a challenge subsequently echoed by the SAHRC (2018).

Before government implements any programmes, however, it is advisable that multigenerational community consultations take place. To ensure free, prior and informed consent, such consultations should include information sharing to support communities when making decisions on the most suitable language-in-education options. This paper has demonstrated that in the current education policy climate, the !Xun and Khwe communities are favourably positioned to make their case to have their languages brought into the formal education system, and to help determine the shape and outcomes of these interventions. MTE language options, however, are no longer suitable for the ǀKhomani community but alternative options to revitalise their languages have been outlined.

In regard to the !Xun and Khwe communities, the authors of the paper advocate for an additive bilingual approach to language maintenance, especially in the primary phase, as it is the most educationally sound strategy for minority language learners. Policy should not set a ceiling on MTE, i.e. end of Grade three, rather programme outcomes should be evaluated regularly and the programme developed as far as is feasible or culturally desirable. Three project areas on which to focus regarding MTE/MTBBE programme development are (1) Foundation Phase; (2) Home language as subject from grades R–12; and (3) San-based FET elective school subjects and skills training programmes.

Should the Platfontein community wish to implement a MTE/MTBBE programme, a strategic approach would be to build the programme gradually from Foundation Phase up by developing capacity: training bilingual teachers and language practitioners, and producing curricula and learning materials. To ensure that curricula are both relevant to San learners and suitable for accreditation purposes, a multi-disciplinary cooperative effort supported by communities and government departments is needed. This should also utilise the resources available through PanSALB, KSNLB, academics and academic institutions.

To conclude, it is now, twenty years since the ǀKhomani land claim was settled and almost thirty years since the arrival of the !Xun and Khwe communities in South Africa. San communities need to make a clear decision regarding how they desire to revitalise and maintain their languages, cultures and heritages while government departments must provide consistent support to San communities to enable them to maintain and revitalise their languages and cultures—before the window of opportunity closes.

## Disclosure statement

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