

OBSERVED DEARTH AND DEATH OF A LANGUAGE: !XOO OF BOTSWANA

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!Xóo is a Southern Khoesan language genetically affiliated to the Taa branch of Khoesan languages. In Botswana, !Xoo habitat stretches from Ghanzi to Tsabong, and from Sekoma to the Namibian border, an area covering nearly 150 000 Km². In this habitat !Xóo is in constant contact with powerful Bantu languages. This contact lends its speakers to adopt the language(s) of the powerful group(s) for daily community social life activities. The school and the national administrative situation also require that the !Xóo use the national language, Setswana, as if they were (its) native speakers. To engage in national matters the !Xóo are required to have competences in Setswana, even English, a situation which severely limits their participation in development and creates a situation of acute endangerment of their own language. This takes place in the context of policies that favour linguistic homogeneity, and have so far not been responsive to recommendations that seek inclusiveness. This article takes the issue of !Xóo on the hypothesis that its situation of double marginalization by the Bantu and secondly by the national language policy in education and administration creates conditions that facilitate its dearth and subsequently death in the country.

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0. INTRODUCTION: CLASSIFICATION AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

!Xóo is classified as a Southern Khoesan language genetically affiliated to the Taa branch of the Southern Khoesan. Other Southern Khoesan languages include the now extinct |Xam, ||Xegwi, †Khomani (Traill, 1974), which were !Ui languages of what is now the Republic of South Africa. Alternative names with which the !Xóo in Botswana call themselves or which their neighbour call them include Tshasi, |Asi, Casi |Xasi, Taa, !aa, Qgoon and Sesarwa (cf. Ibid). Figure 1 shows the classification of !Xóo within Khoesan (Chebanne, 2003).

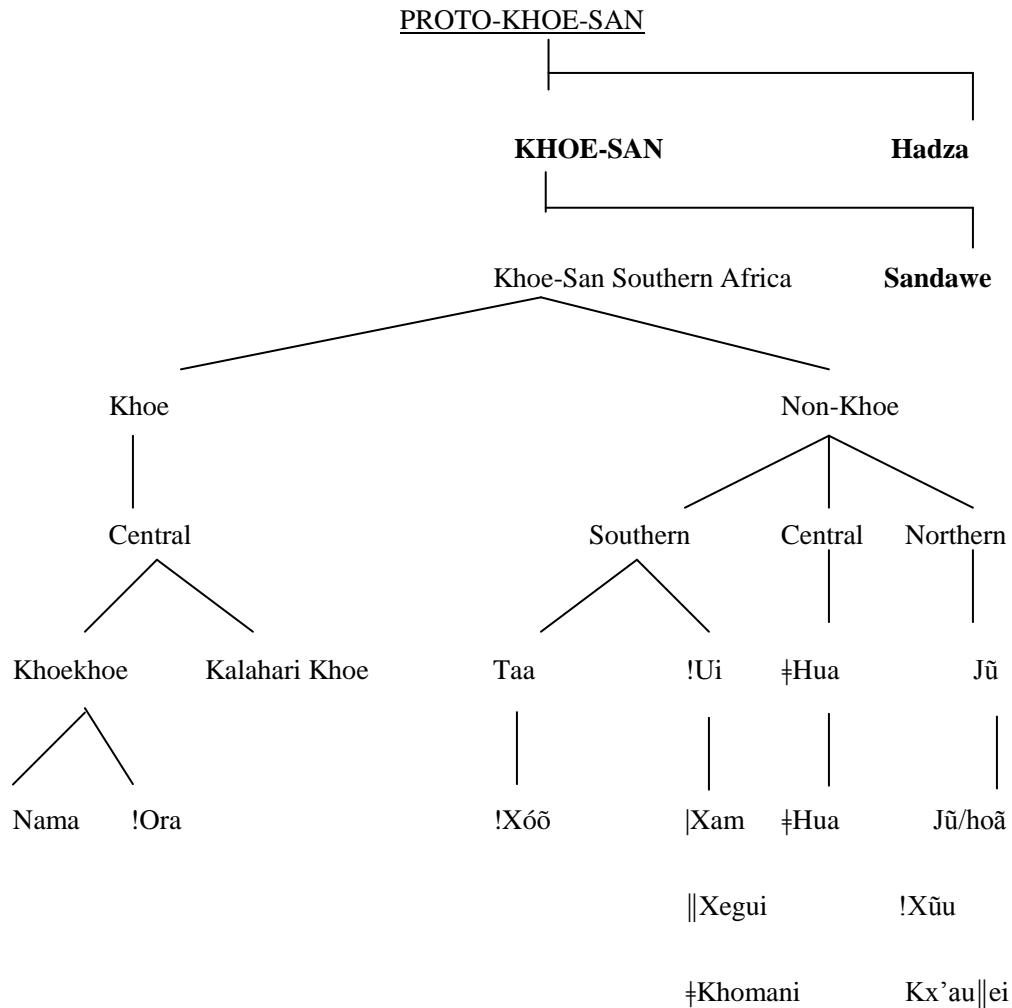


Figure. 1: The classification of !Xóõ within Khoesans (Chebanne, 2003)

The natural habitat of !Xóõ in Botswana stretches from Ghanzi in the north, to the south of Tsabong, and from Sekoma (South Central Botswana) to the Namibian border, an area covering nearly 150 000 Km². This vast area incorporates the Southern District in the villages of Keng, Khakhea, Kokong, Mabutsane, Moswamosu, Sekoma; Letlhakeng East and West districts (formerly Kweneng) in the villages of Dutlwe, Lotse, Khekhenye, Tsetseng, and Tswane; Kgalagadi South in the villages of Bray, Khisa, Kokotsa, Werda, Caa CP; Kgalagadi North in the villages/settlements of Zutshwa, Ukwi, Make, Ngwatle, Hukuntsi, Hunhukwe, Inalegolo, Kang, Lehututu, Lokgwabe, Monong, Phuduhudu, Tshane; and the Gantsi District in the villages of Kule, Ncojane, Kacgae, Ghanzi.

Historically they also inhabited places such as Nossop basin. !Xóǀ may also be found in Namibia and South Africa (Hasselbring, 2000). The distribution of !Xóǀ in Botswana is shown in Figure 2.

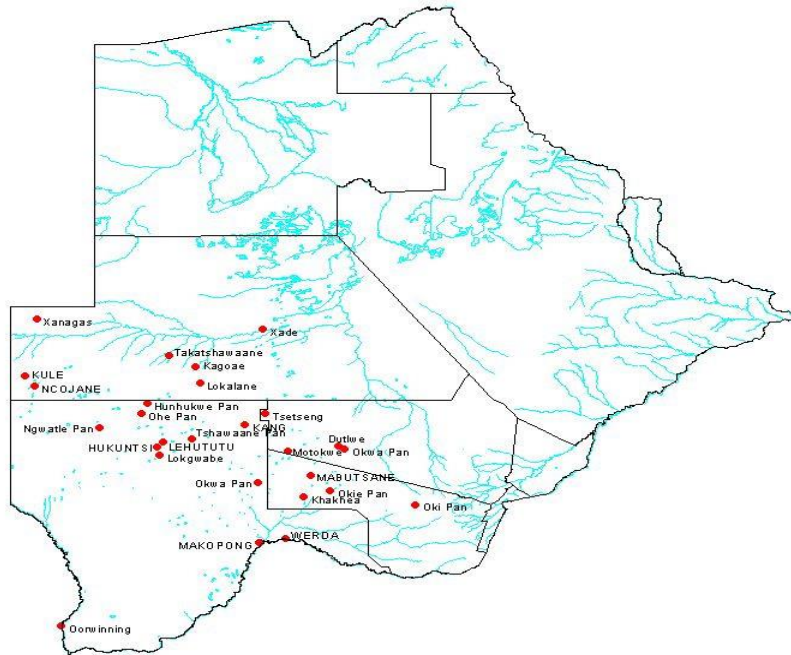


Figure 2: !Xóǀ habitat in Botswana. © Department of Environmental Science. University of Botswana.

1. !XÓǀ LANGUAGE DYNAMICS

The !Xóǀ, like most Khoe and San languages communities, is not just in the geographical periphery of Botswana, but also in the country's ethnic and social periphery. Demographically, the !Xóǀ account for a tiny percentage of the country's population. They are therefore a minority. This reality creates a sociolinguistic situation whereby the

!Xóǎ are over-powered as it were, and subsequently marginalized. This situation means also that they become easily subservient and in the consequential sociolinguistics dynamics, they lose out. The !Xóǎ must always be the ones to acquire the language of others. Most, if not all, of !Xóǎ speakers are not literate in their language. !Xóǎ is however still spoken by all age groups in the cultural activities in family, settlement and village interactions, and at community meetings, albeit with some translation into other languages. Like the rest of the marginalized languages in the country, !Xóǎ is not permitted in school premises, and this has adversely affected its vitality among the youth. Most !Xóǎ speakers are bilingual, speaking another language based on whom they are in contact with; zǂGui in the north and east, Nama and Shekgalagari in the south west (Chebanne and Monaka, 2005). Setswana is encountered only in administration and education domains, and is not one of the languages in which the !Xóǎ are bilingual in. However, !Xóǎ multilingualism with other marginalized languages does not provide any sociolinguistic advantages, because of the marginalized nature of these other languages. This bilingualism or multilingualism is also facilitated by the fact that the !Xóǎ interact with other groups from a position of weakness (Chebanne and Monaka, 2005). Generally speaking, and depending on power relations, they would adopt Shekgalagari when they are in contact with the Bakgalagari, and Sekgothu when they interact with Bakgothu. But they seem to fairly retain !Xóǎ, albeit with some borrowings, when they are in contact with the !Gui, a group with whom they relate on equal footing.

1.1 !XÓǎ CONTACT WITH SHEKGALAGARI

The Western Botswana great pans constitute the historical areas of the !Xóǎ. As mentioned above, their natural habitat stretches from Ghanzi in the north, to the south of Tsabong, and from Sekoma (South Central Botswana) to the Namibian border. In most instances where the !Xóǎ co-exist and live with Bantu groups, notably the Shekgalagari speakers, there always occurs a socio-linguistic situation where they would be the ones to acquire other ethnic community's language. Shekgalagari is a Western Sotho-Tswana language which functions as a lingua franca in, among other places, the Kgalagadi, Gantsi and Southern Districts where !Xóǎ is spoken. The two groups differ(ed) in their mode of existence. The !Xóǎ are hunter and gatherers and the Bakgalagari are agro-pastoralists whose encroachment on the land resulted in the gradual drying up of water sources and the changes in the ecosystem. The competition for resources resulted in social conflicts where the !Xóǎ were either pushed away or were subjugated. In a situation of contact, the sedentary Bakgalagari dominate the !Xóǎ and exploit them for labor. This contact lends its speakers to adopt the language(s) of the powerful group(s) for daily community social life activities. There is an evident shift in language use from the local languages to mainly Shekgalagari, but also to the combination with Setswana, albeit marginally. When this multilingualism occurs in certain situations, such as early school stage, it causes children from this community to undergo a linguistic and psychological trauma. But this suffering may also be qualified as involving all the ages and the whole community. Over the years they have suffered under adverse ethnic and socio-linguistic attitudes from other population groups who did not tolerate the use of their language. Their tradition, culture and history have been eroded, and their dialectal characteristics seem to entrench difference than the development of common identity in the face of assailing sociolinguistic forces emanating from dominant groups. Often the dilemma is that even as

they renounce their language, their ethnic origin marks them and they continue to be stigmatized and exploited. The situation paints a dim picture of people experiencing socio-psychological trauma. The testimony of this difficult social and linguistic situation is illustrated by the case of the Balala. Traill (1974) indicates that the Balala of Matsheng are a !Ama O?ani offshoot of the !Xóǀ who migrated to the Matsheng area, because they were serfs for the Bakgalagai and ultimately assimilated into Shekgalagari culture and never returned to their indigenous way of life. Another account says that the Balala are the remnants of the aboriginal inhabitants of western Kgalagadi who lived in the area around the beginning of the 19th Century. While the Balala are elevated to a position higher than that of the San, because of their exclusive use of a dialectalized Shekgalagari, they are still not accepted into the mainstream society of the Bakgalagari. Just like the the !Xóǀ, they are poor, and have experienced violated and disorganized social structures. Their means of survival are characterized by foraging of natural occurring means of sustenance. Their typical modes of subsistence include hunting and gathering. It may be alleged with confidence that the foraging and ethno-cultural characteristics are in many ways similar to the historical situation of the !Xóǀ.

1.2 !XÓǀ CONTACT WITH KHOE AND SAN LANGUAGES

In language contact situations involving Khoe and San languages, there is a special type of language use in communication where each ethnic community maintains its own language. This situation is managed mostly by separate co-existence, where direct daily dealings are avoided. In certain instances, where interlocutors understand each other's language, communication can occur without switching to the other's language. This situation is out of mutual respect and means that they want to minimize social conflicts. While there is not yet any elaborate sociolinguistic study targeting inter-Khoe and San language contact, their current respect of each other territoriality means they have historically managed their differences with few conflicts. In the Kgalagadi North District where the !Xóǀ come into contact with zGui, each community keeps its hunting and gathering without any violations. The two communities, !Xóǀ and |Gui, have little common vocabulary to suggest a contact that imposed closer associations for a long time. This may suggest that they have respected each other for a long period of time (cf. Traill 1985). This mutual respect has ensured language maintenance in an inter-Khoe and San contact.

In relocated settlements such as Kagcae and even the East and West Hanahae, even though most of the Khoe and San languages are spoken by a few families who suffer the trauma of relocation, there is no threat among the inter-Khoe and San interaction. Instead the threat to language shift and loss is from Shekgalagari and Setswana. It is therefore the Bantu sociolinguistic factor that brings about negative attitude and negative ethnic and linguistic consequences. The ideal situation for !Xóǀ is when it is in contact with other Khoe and San languages. In this case they have the sense of the need for preserving their languages.

2. THE SCHOOL AS A SOURCE OF SYSTEMATIC PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND DECULTURATION FOR KHOESAN COMMUNITIES

The language policy of Botswana limits school language use to only English and Setswana at all school levels – even at pre-school. Apart from Setswana, all of the other ethnic languages do not have any presence at national and community levels. There is a serious lack of government support to develop this linguistic diversity in the country, even for purposes of literacy – learning how to read and write. This lack of recognition and support means that the other indigenous languages are marginalized, and for most of these, the marginalization has led to a serious endangerment. Such deprivation in essence means that the speakers of marginalized languages cannot express their culture in their own languages, and the education of their children cannot be done in the familiar mother tongue.

Even though they send their children to school, most of the children do not go any further because of the negative attitudes towards them that portray them as inferior. Most importantly, the trauma of the school languages that are forced on them from their first day at school, at such tender age when they are not capable of constructing concepts with any linguistic competence, marks them for life, and makes them school misfits. Some of the reasons advanced by many parents and pupils are that the school environment is not hospitable, and also that teachers do not want to help them when they have learning problems. Some say the school languages (that is, Setswana and English) are very difficult or are taught in a very difficult manner.

The situation is most tragic particularly for !Xóǀ and other Khoesan languages whose socio-economic characteristic of aborigine becomes an added risk element in language maintenance processes. In some areas like the Gudigwa Primary School which is made up of 100% Bugakhoe pupils, teachers insist, even during playtime or break, that pupils use the aforesaid school languages. In some cases the pupils are even refused registration on the first day of school if their name is not a Setswana name, the argument, from the teachers and administrators who are almost always Bantu, being that their indigenous names cannot be spelt. Such pupils will only be registered if they come with names which can be spelt. In most cases such names will be Tswana names, which the parents are forced to think of in order to have their children registered at school and start the process of acquiring the all important education. Not only are pupils psychologically persecuted by such measures, they are also systematically dehumanised by the system in that they lose not only their mother tongue in the process but also, their identity and their ethnicity. This linguistic and psychological trauma that the !Xóǀ (along with other Khoesan) children are going through in the education set up in Botswana have been detailed by Saugestad (2001), Letshabo (2002), Nyati-Ramahobo (2003), Motshabi (2003), Polelo (2005) and Motshabi (2006). Amongst the findings reported are high failure rate and large numbers of school drop outs. Some of the contributing factors to this situation are communication problems which are due to the foreign languages of scholarship, a foreign curriculum that not only does not take !Xóǀ culture and indigenous knowledge into consideration but does not appear to be planning to do so in the foreseeable future either, negative attitudes from both the teachers and learners from Bantu ethnic groups and lack of interest in consulting !Xóǀ parents for teacher-parents conferencing. To further buttress the impact of the foreign languages of education on !Xóǀ

education, Motshabi (2006) examined the influence of the English language on the performance of !Xóǀ learner of Northern Kgalagadi in 2005. Apart from English, the subjects under study were Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The only indigenous language was Setswana. He observed that:

...performance in the 2005 Primary School Leaving Examinations for all the subjects are below 50%, which parents and teachers should expect and regard as the pass rate. The overall mean for all the candidates is 25.8% which is quite low. Low scores are also observed for all the subjects; Setswana 43.06%, Science 38.9%, English 36.2%, Mathematics 26.8%, and Social Studies 25.8% PSLE are written in English and the results show a positive correlation between performance in the subjects and English. This shows that English is an important factor influencing performance in other subjects (Motshabi, 2006: 12, 14).

Although performance in Setswana was slightly better compared to the other subjects taught in the medium of English, it was still nevertheless below the pass mark. The better performance in it derived directly from the fact that, between it and English, the !Xóǀ generally shift towards Setswana first, and acquire competence in it before they come into contact with English. In more cases than not Setswana would be the third, fourth or even fifth language. Overall, the poor performance of !Xóǀ learners in education is testimony to the fact the '.... The strict application of the current (language) policy (in education) is detrimental to the teaching and learning process' (Motshabi, 2006:15). Whilst education for learners from the other marginalised groups in the country is made unnecessarily difficult because of language barriers, for the !Xóǀ and other Khoesan groups, these language barriers are multiplied. The psychological trauma is also exacerbated by the fact that the experience of rejection of his/her language could for a Khoesan speaker ultimately mean the rejection of his/her person (Monaka & Moumakwa, 2005). This rejected language is also the core of the culture with which s/he is identified. A rejection of the language is therefore a rejection of the people. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that in most observed cases, most !Xóǀ learners who manage to go to Secondary School and return to their home settlements hardly ever participate in school activities, even in remedial classes, for their younger siblings still struggling with primary school education. Additionally, the teachers do not seem to be keen on utilising these Secondary School !Xóǀ students in the teaching process. The Ministry of Education has not shown any interest in using them either, or in training (the predominantly Bantu) teachers to deal with learners from a San cultural background, or any other cultural background other than Tswana. Additionally, the school curriculum is generally insensitive to learners of (Khoe)San extraction. 'There is lack of relevant curriculum material for Basarwa ... as the curriculum is more Setswana orientated and urban focused A culturally insensitive curriculum compounds student learning difficulties' (Polelo, 2005:94). The fact that this situation has remained the same for decades has ensured the perpetuation of the status quo for the foreseeable future.

As mentioned above, for most of the Khoesan students language shift is hardly ever immediately towards Setswana. The immediate shift is often towards the immediate Bantu language with which the Khoesan communities are in contact. In the case of !Xóǀ, the immediate shift is towards Shekgalagari. But, with the school limiting language use to

English and Setswana, not even Shekgalagari, which is also a marginalized language in the country, is of any help, as it is limited to extra mural interactions between the children. The cumulative effect of all this is that the education system becomes the most daunting challenge for the !Xóǀ as well as for other Khoesan learners.

They must, from the first day at school, start to build competence in the languages of education, and this means that for quite sometime, ranging from six months to two years, the children are building competence in Setswana. This situation or challenge compromises some of the other (literacy) skills that need to be acquired within the early primary years. (Chebanne and Monaka, 2005:8).

The school situation additionally presents the most formidable acculturation situation as, in the process of language shift to, ultimately, Setswana and English, there is also a cultural shift. The current learning atmosphere for the !Xóǀ at lower primary school is made through Setswana, and comes with a predominantly Setswana culture: language, environment, norms, beliefs, religion, customs, food, clothing, means of subsistence, etc, culture items which are in almost all cases foreign to them. This foreign Tswana culture becomes an additional element to overcome in the learning process, and, "... by the end of primary school duration, most of the children shift completely to ... Setswana" (Chebanne and Monaka, 2005:8). And the problem transcends the school environment, as learners carry the new languages with them home to their parents and siblings and speak to them in these languages. Therefore, "In the family setup, this means that !Xóǀ language is replaced in its role in the family domain by Setswana" (Chebanne and Monaka, 2005:9). Chebanne and Monaka (2005:9) summarize this situation for !Xóǀ as follows.

<i>Std</i>	<i>Percentage of !Xóǀ students in school</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
1	80	The first two years of shock and disillusionment, and the hostility of teachers who have no knowledge of the !Xóǀ language or the experience of dealing with the ethnic group as well as no means to help them to adapt. Teachers ask other (Bantu) students to interpret information to the !Xóǀ students
2	60	
3	20	Those students who remain are acculturated and refuse to come back to speak !Xóǀ. But only 3% of these make it to Community Junior Secondary School.
4	20	
5	20	
6	15	
7	10	

Table 1: School Drop-out and acculturation amongst the !Xóǀ of Botswana (Chebanne and Chebanne (2005:9)

This situation shows instances of the sources of language shift and loss, but also death. There is no integration where !Xóǀ gets any linguistic or cultural consideration. The

majority culture is open to swallow it. The majority language and culture are not negotiated but imposed at school, in the settlements and in any socio-cultural and economic dealings. Even where the !Xóǀ are in the majority in the settlement, their language is never considered for any communication. Instead, there is a remote orchestrated force to assimilate them. Thus, many of them are ready to abandon their language. The fateful social experiences that emerge are:

- a) Negative social factors and loss of self-worth;
- b) Economic pressure – not only are the !Xóǀ the poorest but they also do not have the means to freely use natural resources to sustain their lives;
- c) They lack means to undertake a meaningful linguistic and cultural promotional activities to help maintain their language;
- d) Pressure to use the official state and majority language as a means of communication for out-group communication;
- e) The large numbers of different languages within a settlement promote the use of lingua franca, thereby undermining the maintenance of their languages.

The foregoing points are indeed indicative of extremely difficult situations for ethnic groups such as !Xóǀ. Languages of other communities, especially Setswana and Shekgalagari encroach into the !Xóǀ community and family's spheres of life. This is an indication of serious instances of endangerment. The younger !Xóǀ generation is gradually becoming culturally and linguistically estranged, and in this situation, there is no way that languages such as !Xóǀ could be readily passed on to the next generation without some influence from other languages.

3. THE NEED FOR SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR KHOESAN IN BOTSWANA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM AND LANGUAGE PLANNING.

It is clear from the above discussion that !Xóǀ, along with other Khoesan communities need special consideration in the school system and that language planners need to take cognizance of this fact. The current language in education system has not been of any benefit, either for the !Xóǀ community or for the government which has poured large sums of monies into educating !Xóǀ learners through foreign languages and cultures, and has almost always lost them in the end. This clearly shows that linguistic problems in schools must not be seen as problems for academics only. They could, and do often, lead to great economic loss on the part of the government, and with the !Xóǀ and other Khoesan groups, the loss is quite substantive as large numbers of learners always drop out of school (Polelo, 2005),

4. KHOESAN PROSPECTS: CODIFICATION OF KHOESAN LANGUAGES AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LITERACY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC MATTERS

Most of the Khoesan languages in Botswana exist and have existed for a very long time as oral traditions only. Apart from the general negative attitude they have received from Bantu speakers and researchers in the country, these languages are characterized by click phenomena which many Bantu researchers find difficult to distinguish and represent orthographically. !Xóǀ in particular, is the only language in the Khoesan family with the

most elaborate click phenomenon which can have very many combinations, and which presents daunting challenges in the development of its writing systems among ethnic languages of Botswana. This is an indication of its perceived complexity. Indeed its codification remains a daunting challenge. The development of the written form and the associated developments such as that of literacy materials has to be done literally from scratch¹ and there is also a need for huge motivation and dedication from the respective communities for this project, a factor which is a great challenge in itself. This is because not many !Xóǀ speakers manage to get higher education to acquire the relevant education to aid in the development of orthographies for their languages and participate in the development of literacy materials. Another issue relates to the fact that !Xóǀ language is critically endangered, having gradually lost speakers over the years (Batibo, 2005). Also, in some parts of the country, most of the community members are demoralized and disillusioned by other socio-economic factors affecting their lives; e.g. the current relocation process from the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve, a process which dispossess them of their ancestral land and makes them aliens in the land of their birth. This becomes issues of immediate concern to them and matters such as language development are of little significance if any. But it is of necessity the development of a standard orthography for the !Xóǀ language that will enable it not only to be written and thus documented, but also to offer it the chance to be available or used in school.

5. CONCLUSION

The education system that has been presented here regarding !Xóǀ has shown that it estranges the !Xóǀ people and rather seeks to completely assimilate them into foreign cultures which in turn is disempowering and rendering them fragile. The system additionally reduces their language to a condition of critical endangerment. In many situations the reverse can no longer be possible. Nevertheless, for !Xóǀ and other Khoesan languages, special consideration in Botswana's education system might help. This could be done by way of a school language policy that would favour the intervention of Khoesan languages within a bilingual education model at the early stages of primary school to minimize linguistic and cultural shock and shift. This can only be fruitful within a context that seeks to promote linguistic diversity and embraces equality of the different ethnic groups within a country. Botswana is not known to promote any of these ideals. It rather seeks to promote hegemony and assimilation to Tswana culture at the cost of the diversity in the country. All this means that the situation of the Khoesan, who are usually considered to be at the bottom of the social and linguistic hierarchy, really remains, for the most part, a hopeless one. The !Xóǀ language as spoken by minority in Botswana is not in itself a problem, but the policies of the state that deprive such languages of any status in the language use policies are. The official and administrative languages, i.e., Setswana, and English, with their exclusive use in all domains, render minority languages dysfunctional. Also, the !Xóǀ people's socio-economic condition compounds the situation by making them easy victims of exploitation by more organized and powerful groups. They have been subdued and even continue to be under economic abuse. In this situation

¹ It should be mentioned that !Xóǀ has the most elaborate click combination that has contributed to its being the least developed of Khoesan languages in Botswana. For instance, its writing system is still at the first stages development as this paper is being written.

of abject misery and despondency they have also suffered assimilation. Their language and culture have met with negative attitudes from the majority groups who despise them and continue to exercise hegemony over them. It is therefore clear that their marginalization presents ethnic and linguistic death. This is the real threat to the survival of !Xóǀ.

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