

Hunter-gatherer education special issue

Introduction

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This special issue focuses on the role of education in the lives of contemporary hunter-gatherers. Though extremely diverse, hunter-gatherer groups share some common characteristics in regards to their social structure and their relations with surrounding groups and state governments. This issue highlights the ways in which these commonalities take shape with regards to education. The issue is also a part of a larger effort aimed at better understanding, and ultimately addressing, the central, multifaceted and paradoxical role that education plays for hunter-gatherer communities today. The sections below explain this background and introduce the papers in this issue.

Within the literature on indigenous education, there is a relatively large focus on (former) hunter-gatherers from Australia, North America and the circumpolar region, and a somewhat smaller focus on Latin America, much of it in Spanish and Portuguese. There has been far less focus on groups in Asia and Africa. Many countries in these regions face significant challenges to the implementation of universal education, especially in highly diverse countries with multiple languages and ethnic groups. Small-scale hunter-gatherer societies are just a few of many groups facing problems of educational access and cultural barriers, and their numbers are so tiny that, from the perspective of governments, it seems unfeasible to prioritise them, as described

in our article in this issue. In addition, many hunter-gatherer groups in Asia and Africa are in the midst of a dramatic transition process that includes participation in formal education. For such groups, this participation is relatively recent and has not yet received the same focus from anthropologists and other researchers as groups in other regions.

The papers in this issue, which provide ethnographic perspectives from these continents on four hunter-gatherer communities, are thus an important contribution to the literature: Noa Lavi describes the Nayaka in India; Jason Sanglir the Moken in Thailand; Man Bahadur Shahu the Raute in Nepal; and Attila Paksi, the Khwe in Namibia. The introductory article, by Jennifer Hays, Velina Ninkova and Edmond Dounias summarises and discusses the common themes that run through these four cases and throughout the literature on hunter-gatherers and their approaches to – and relationships with – education.

Background to this issue

The papers in this issue were all presented in a panel at the Twelfth Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies (CHAGS 12), held in Penang, Malaysia in July 2018. Arranged by the editors of this issue, this panel focused on the role of education in the lives of contemporary hunter-gatherers and attracted several papers. It was divided into three sessions according to geography: a session on Asia, one on the Congo Basin and one on southern Africa. The papers were multidisciplinary and from both academic and personal perspectives. All of the presentations addressed the intersection of formal education and traditional knowledge. This issue presents a selection of the academic papers from this panel, all of which are based on ethnographic fieldwork. The analytical close-ups of the four communities described in these papers – and their interactions with, and responses to, educational institutions – provide important insight into both the specificity of individual hunter-gatherer communities and the commonalities that cross-cut such communities globally.

Part of the inspiration for the panel itself was a desire to better understand this interplay between the highly diverse particularity of hunter-gatherer communities and the strikingly similar patterns that characterise social and political relations, with each other and with states and their institutions. An equally important question was how research on these issues could best contribute to efforts towards self-determination – especially regarding educational choices – for hunter-gatherer communities today. With both of these aims in mind, at the CHAGS 12 meetings in Penang we also launched

the Research and Advocacy Group for Hunter Gatherer Education (HG-Edu), following a workshop also organised by the editors of this issue.¹

The workshop and the panel were also attended by a group of seven San participants from Botswana and Namibia who took part in the discussions and contributed to our understanding of some of the main challenges they and their communities faced in education.² They all emphasised that access to education, including tertiary education, was vital to their participation in the modern world and to their understanding and active engagement with local and global human rights issues. However, a lack of mother-tongue education, distance from schools and serious stigma all create significant barriers or hardships for San students. They also emphasised the importance of traditional knowledge, language, culture and the need for educational options that recognise and value these. A brief synthesis of the main remarks of these San participants is provided at the end of this introduction.

In light of the San participants' perspectives, and in recognition of voiced concerns from the communities that we, and other researchers, work with, the established Research and Advocacy Group for Hunter Gatherer Education seeks to determine how academic research can best contribute to effective advocacy for hunter-gatherers. The particular focus of HG-Edu is on questions having to do with education, but with the recognition that such questions are inseparable from broader concerns, including those to do with land and resource rights.

How research can be directed towards meeting this challenge was a major focus of the HG-Edu workshop at CHAGS 12 and the research and advocacy group established there. The editors of this issue have been working as researchers with hunters-gatherer groups for many years. We have engaged with questions including those relating to hunter-gatherer education, traditional knowledge and its transmission, and land rights. Having become acutely aware of the pressing problems that hunter-gatherer groups face, the role of education, and the difficulty of getting support from governments and donors for the approaches that communities are asking for, we decided to reach out to other researchers and hunter-gatherer community representatives in order to form a larger argument about the global significance of hunter-gatherer groups, with the aim of working together to determine the best role(s) for research

1. The workshop and launch were sponsored by the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA).
2. The participation of San individuals was supported by: OSISA; L'institute de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD); the International Society for Hunter Gatherer Research (ISHGR); the University of Botswana San Research Centre and the University of Tromsø.

to contribute towards communities' own educational goals. One important purpose of this group is thus to provide a platform for efforts and arguments that draw on the global significance of hunter and gatherer communities. Another is to determine the best ways for research to support local efforts towards educational self-determination. What kinds of research are needed? And where is advocacy best focused?

At the first HG-Edu workshop in Malaysia, and a subsequent meeting in Tromsø, Norway (September 2019), it became clear that there are many areas in which much research is still needed, especially at local levels. Some of these research needs are quite clearly defined, such as research on local languages and culture, in particular towards the creation and inclusion of linguistically and culturally appropriate educational materials; better understanding of traditional educational and knowledge-transmission practices among contemporary hunter-gatherers; and the gathering of statistical data and the creation of a database on hunter-gatherers' educational participation – at local, global and international levels. Other issues include the challenges of representation for hunter-gatherer communities, the relation between access to land and land rights and traditional knowledge, and how hunter-gatherers are engaging with new technologies, and what this means for education. Ethnographic fieldwork is a prerequisite for gaining the understanding and participation at the local level needed to determine effective approaches to the educational concerns of hunter-gatherer communities, and researchers working closely with hunter-gatherer communities could be well positioned to contribute to a better understanding of the issues described above.

Papers in this issue

The four papers in this issue are important contributions to this effort, offering ethnographic detail and providing vivid illustrations of various shapes that the relationship between hunter-gatherers and educational institutions can take. The authors address the multifaceted challenges that education entails for hunter-gatherer communities, and foreground the perspective and agency of the groups about whom they are writing: the Nayaka, the Moken, the Raute and the Khwe. These communities have some of the lowest participation rates in formal education in the countries where they live. Such strikingly low participation is very problematic according to the logic of universal education. These authors, however, depict individuals that are making active and conscious decisions about their education based on realistic assessments of the options

available to them, often in very challenging circumstances. These choices are not always understood by outsiders, especially education providers, and these stark differences in perspective come across clearly in all of the papers in this volume.

Lavi examines how Nayaka parents in South India become the focus of development and welfare agents' efforts to get Nayaka children to participate in formal education initiatives. The parents, however, in keeping with Nayaka values, refrain from telling others – including their children – what to do. Lavi argues that *autonomy* plays a central role in the 'social logic' upon which Nayaka learning processes are based, and explores how this affects children's participation in the schools – and parents' – understandings of their roles in the process. She also explores how participation in school alters children's sense of autonomy, thus 'inviting significant social change'.

Sanglir also emphasises the importance of autonomy and the role of parents in their children's attendance at school in his study of the Moken (also often called 'sea gypsies'), one of the few remaining hunter-gatherer communities in Thailand. He highlights key aspects of traditional pedagogical practices of the Moken – observation, imitation and play – that are common to many hunter-gatherer groups, and explores how they are still enacted today by the Moken. Although these approaches are shifting as access to nature decreases and their parents engage in alternate livelihoods, Sanglir argues that alternative approaches to education for groups like the Moken should build on these effective pedagogical approaches.

Shahu explores how the sedentarised Raute of Nepal respond to and resist state-imposed education. Although some Raute do choose to attend school, Shahu suggests that the high drop-out rate can be attributed in part to a conscious refusal to be 'domesticated' – preferring to have freedom to move as they choose and to maintain their autonomy by remaining outside of mainstream society. A lack of education in their own language, and a lack of teachers from their own culture are also barriers, as is the intense stigma aimed at the Raute. Shahu emphasises both the Raute's pride in their own culture and their very active response to the situation.

The Khwe in Namibia described by Paksi have limited access to land and resources to practice their traditional skills, although some opportunities remain. Paksi examines the impact of formal education on traditional knowledge associated with these practices by analysing the community's perception of the relative importance of *school knowledge* as compared to *traditional knowledge*. He finds that traditional knowledge was valued much less than by those that *were* in school; many of those *not* in school depended upon it to some extent for subsistence and valued it highly. While the youth

in Paksi's study often aspired to enter a job market that could be accessed through education, most were not able to attain it, and traditional knowledge and skills were an important safety net.

Although the situations vary dramatically, all of the authors describe communities that, while actively engaging with school, are *also* actively using traditional knowledge. These are communities in transition, and although access to traditional sources of livelihood is often diminished (or in some cases mostly lost), the knowledge and skills remain a part of their cultural and social identity – and often an important part of their subsistence strategies.

Furthermore, many of the deep social values common to hunter-gatherer groups remain in place and continue to profoundly influence their educational experiences. All of these papers emphasise, for example, the high level of respect for individual autonomy within the communities they are working with, and describe how that relates to current school culture. One aspect of this emphasis on autonomy is that not all individuals from any given group make the same choices regarding their engagement with formal education systems. Recognition of this diversity within a group in terms of the choices people make is very important. Ultimately however, their options are profoundly affected by their identity, which in all cases is closely associated with living 'in nature' (in the forest, the sea, the bush). Culture and ethnic identity often create enormous barriers to access and participation, as described in our introductory article to this volume. Although some individuals do choose to engage with formal education, and a few of them achieve completion certificates, for the vast majority the promises of employability and equality that formal education is supposed to bring remain elusive.

At the same time, even limited participation in formal education can in turn shift social practices, knowledge transmission and values. For some, this shift is the very point of formal education – to adapt to living in a 'modern' world; see, for example, quotes in the article by Paksi. Others, such as the Raute described by Shahu, see this shift as detrimental as it leads to the devaluation and ultimate loss of traditional knowledge, skills and values. As Lavi points out, however, the long-term effects – both social and environmental – of this participation still remain to be seen. What does this shift mean, how does it happen and how are hunter-gatherer communities negotiating it? What other changes are connected to participation in formal education? Longitudinal ethnographic research such as that initiated by these authors will be important to understanding these processes.

Although as noted above, all of these communities are closely associated with nature, they have also recently experienced a dramatic reduction in

access to land and resources, and this loss is closely linked to participation in the education system. Sanglir describes how the Moken have been increasingly restricted in their movements because of armed conflict between other groups, national borders, national parks and protected areas, among other pressures, and are thus unable to practice their traditional sea- and land-based subsistence activities. The Khwe of northern Namibia, as Paksi notes, were cut off from access to the territory where they once hunted and gathered by the establishment of a national park. For both groups, increased participation in school comes along with a sedentarisation process as other options are diminished. The link is perhaps most clear in the case described by Shahu. The Raute are divided into two groups, the *nomadic* Raute and the *sedentarised* Raute; Shahu's focus is on the latter. The nomadic Raute, he says, do not attend school at all; they see it as a step towards sedentarisation, which they explicitly reject.

These cases, especially when taken together, highlight the fuzzy boundary between exclusion and assimilation and the interpretive challenges this poses, as described in the introductory article to this collection by Hays, Ninkova and Dounias. In what cases, and in what ways, is low participation due to a lack of educational access (and what does that mean)? When is it a rejection of imposed schooling? To what extent is sedentarisation a result of efforts to access schooling, and to what extent does forced settlement create a need to access schooling? All of these papers connect the concept of education with broader issues, including realistic livelihood opportunities, land rights and self-determination. They also emphasise the critical importance of understanding local culture, languages, values, strategies, goals and options in the search for better educational options for hunter-gatherer communities. We hope that this special issue will inspire further research, discussion and contributions to this effort.

Synthesis of remarks by seven San participants to the hunter-gatherers education workshop held during CHAGS12 in Penang, Malaysia on 24 July 2018

Compiled by Velina Ninkova and Jennifer Hays

The San participants at the CHAGS 12 conference in Penang, Malaysia, were individuals that have successfully made it through the education system, and at the time of the conference they were either university students or employed

by organisations working for their communities, or both. The participants from Botswana were Job Morris, Leburu Molatedi Andrias, Mary Kxami, Dineo Peke and Baakantse Satau. All of them were or had been affiliated with the San Research Centre at the University of Botswana; some are now employed by development organisations or in other capacities. In addition, Tsimogo Leepang was unable to participate because of work responsibilities but he sent a statement to us, which is also quoted below. The two participants from Namibia were Kileni Fernando and Tertu Fernandu, who were working for the San NGO ||Ana-Djeh San Trust, which they had played central roles in establishing, and the aims of which, among other things, were to promote education among San youth and to preserve San culture.

Having done well in the education system themselves, these participants recognised the potentially positive impact of education. However, they all also acknowledged the urgent need to include San languages and cultures in the curriculum and to make school more friendly for San children and their communities. They also highlighted the importance – and relevance – of traditional knowledge and skills, and the need to recognise these as of equal value to formal education. Participants also relayed some of the problematic aspects of ‘being a San’ in mainstream education institutions and the abuse and stigma associated with revealing their identity. They also emphasised the importance of collaborative research, of including San individuals and communities in research projects that are designed with their interests in mind and of appropriate reciprocation and compensation for their participation in research. The following sections include some quotes from conference participants highlighting their perspectives on these issues.

Benefits of education

San communities have long demanded access to quality and equitable education that recognises their cultures and treats San children with care and respect; this was clearly expressed by San at the conference. Education is an important step towards San communities’ increased awareness of their rights:

Formal education is important so people get to understand their rights, and how to interpret these rights. Job Morris

Another important point they made was that the emancipation of the San depends not only on political changes but also on communities’ abilities to embrace existing systems, such as education, and use them for their upliftment:

We should be aware that the emancipation, social and economic evolution of the San people does not only depend on whether policies change or not but on whether they critically embrace the existing systems, and use the existing systems to develop themselves... Education is a great tool that the communities should be encouraged to embrace as it has very sustainable impacts. (Tsimogo Leepang)

Some San NGOs are encouraging this approach:

The work of the Trust is to motivate and empower the San youth to take their education and any positive opportunities seriously, and to stand up for themselves. (Kileni Fernando and Tertu Fernandu)

Participants in the discussion also recognised the importance of access to education at all levels, including tertiary education.

San people are still faced with poverty and unemployment not only because of discriminatory policies, but also because of lack of access to tertiary education. Access to tertiary education is one of the answers to the questions we have been asking all these years when we have been dealing with indigenous issues. (Tshisimogo Leepang)

Challenges relating to education

Despite the recognised positive aspects of education, access to equitable and quality education for the San remains deeply problematic and this was reflected in many of the San participants' statements.

Formal education in Botswana is available for everyone ... But when it comes to the San people it becomes difficult and access is a problem. (Job Morris)

The journey of education is a challenging one, for us as San. Our traditional education is deemed inferior. The students feel they are not good enough for the outside world, and they lose their self-confidence, leading to school drop-out and excessive alcohol abuse. (Kileni Fernando and Tertu Fernandu)

The stigma attached to being a San was a recurrent theme in the discussion as was the related anxiety and pain San learners experienced when they went to school:

They are judging us and defining us as people who are not responsible. I wondered, how am I going to handle the negativity? It is so painful. (Mary Kamxi)

If there is a San person in class, and she is not doing well, she will be identified as 'a San'. They have that fear that if they go to school, they will be called these names... How can we overcome that fear? (Dineo Peke)

Sometimes this stigma leads San youth to try to hide their identity from others:

When I did my first year at the University of Botswana, our lecturers asked us to introduce ourselves. I was too shy to say I was from a San village. I had this fear... and I didn't want anyone to know that I was a San. One of the lecturers asked if there were any San in the classroom. I couldn't raise my hand. I was scared to identify myself as a San. (Dineo Peke)

For a San it's very challenging. The moment you get exposed to the world that you are a San, people say: How come you have come so far? (Mary Kxami)

San communities live mostly in remote areas and children attend boarding schools where they may remain without contact with their families for months. The detrimental impact of this practice was made clear:

I was separated from my mother from the age of 8. The system took me from my parents and I was sent 200 km away. I stayed there without seeing my mother for months at a time, when I was only 8, 9, 10, 11 years old. Then the government built a school in my village. I don't want other kids from my community to go through this! (Mary Kamxi)

Another major challenge that San children face in mainstream education institutions is language. In Botswana, for example, no San language is included as a language of instruction in the education system – students must learn the dominant language of Setswana, and English. In Namibia only two San languages have been developed for educational purposes but these are only in the earliest grades and are not in use in all schools with speakers of those languages; San students must learn in the dominant local languages or in European languages. San participants described the challenges this poses and the stigma associated with not being able to speak the official language:

You are forced to speak the mainstream language... I only became fluent in Setswana and English in secondary school; before that I could not speak them well and they thought I was very stupid. (Job Morris)

Adjusting to learning in a foreign language can be a long and demanding process:

My parents had limited or no interaction with Setswana speaking communities, the only language I knew was G||ana. This made learning a very difficult, painful and demanding exercise... learning and 'cultural diversity' was a 'one way street'. (Tshisimogo Leepang)

San speakers emphasised the importance of inclusion of indigenous languages as a critical step towards the recognition of the 'cultural value' of San communities.

Importance of traditional knowledge

San communities have been largely dispossessed of their land and access to resources has become increasingly limited. Encroachment of pastoralists, lack of recognition of rights, extractive and development projects and conservation efforts have all contributed to the San's restricted access to land and resources. San cultures and knowledge systems are also not recognised in schools which further adds to the alienation and stigmatisation of San children:

The education in Botswana is mainstream... It does not appreciate our own traditional education systems. And this comes at a real high cost. (Job Morris)

The inclusion of indigenous community members in conservation projects, for example, is crucial not only for the survival of the communities themselves but also for the success of these initiatives. Some of the effective practices used in conservation have been passed down in San communities for generations:

Our anti-poaching unit uses indigenous peoples for tracking – these are people who get their knowledge outside of the formal school system. Hunter-gatherers have rich knowledge in medicinal plants... Maybe this traditional knowledge should be included in schools. (Leburu Molatedi Andrias)

Research with San communities: ethics and advocacy

Indigenous communities in southern Africa have received much academic focus, and San participants emphasised the importance of addressing the burden of research on indigenous communities, the lack of uniform guidelines for ethical research and the exclusion of communities in decision-making processes and access to research materials produced. San participants also reiterated the importance of including communities in all stages of the research process and of being transparent about research agendas and obtaining prior and free consent from participants. They also stressed the need to include indigenous members as equal partners in research projects and to disseminate findings in appropriate manners afterwards.

The traditional authorities and our NGOs should be aware of research projects, documentaries and all other activities... these should be well communicated and coordinated to create sustainable projects. (Kileni Fernando and Tertu Fernando)

However, this participation in research projects, whether as research assistant, a language consultant or in another capacity, should be properly compensated; this

is not always the case. Such practices are steeped in a colonial paradigm and have further contributed to the disempowerment of San individuals and communities:

Despite the fact that I was doing most of the work, I was paid very little, which did not motivate me and made me believe that we as San people are not seriously considered as consultants. We require a decolonization of research methodologies at all levels. (Tshisimogo Leepang)

It is important that researchers working with hunter-gatherer communities such as the San take all of these concerns seriously, and that they direct research towards efforts that the communities themselves deem important, as well as towards a deeper understanding of problems of access, assimilation, stigma, recognition, loss of language and culture, and the value of traditional knowledge – among other issues – as described by the San participants and by researchers working with them and with other hunter-gatherer communities. The primary aim of the Hunter-Gatherer Education Research and Advocacy Group is to provide a network of researchers and activists seeking to engage in this work.