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Learning to aspire, aspiring to subvert: Namibian San youths' narratives about the future as mimetic work of resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Namibian San youths' aspirations about the future. Based on 170 essays, the analysis shows that disadvantaged San students aspire for future lives radically different from the lives of their families. We argue that San students have acquired the repertoire of "the good Namibian citizen" as a form of resistance through mimesis. These assertions create an opening for the projection of a positive and "proud" San identity.

Introduction

This paper seeks to examine Namibian San youths' future aspirations in the context of extreme historical and ongoing sociopolitical marginalization and exclusion. The ambivalent relation between youths' optimistic aspirations and the limited chances of livelihoods that are radically removed from the lived realities of their communities sits at the intersection of several themes in the literature on empowerment, meritocracy, youth agency, and resistance. We examine this tension by analyzing 170 essays "about the future" written by secondary school San students in two administrative regions in Namibia – the Omaheke region in east central, and the Zambezi region in northeastern Namibia. Martin et al. (2016) remark that "studies often speak of, and for, young people without taking their explicit engagement with the future into account" (p. 2). We root our understanding of San youths' ideas about their future in their own words, and build the following argument: We side with scholars, who regard aspiration as a sociopolitical as well as an individual process (Davidson, 2011), and who suggest that statements about the future can be regarded as "moral claims" (Frye, 2012, p. 2), associating "unwavering ambition with a virtuous identity" (Frye, 2012, p. 26). However, while scholars frame aspiration as a "practice of ethics" (Mathew, 2018) or as assertions of personal identity, and not as instrumental rationality (Frye, 2012), we suggest the opposite. We argue that San youth perform virtuous identities and inhabit the empowerment repertoire not as a misguided faith in education's transformative powers but as an act of mimetic resistance. We elaborate on these concepts below.

Empowerment through aspiration

Education occupies a central role in the global development discourse. Through access to education, poor and disadvantaged groups seek mastery of the skills and knowledge necessary for inclusion in the national and global market economy, as well as enculturation into the shared norms and values that would help them navigate their lives and enjoy their full rights as equal citizens in modern democratic nation states. This discourse traces its origin to liberal thought, where the rationally thinking individual invests time and resources for their own betterment (Peters & Marshall, 1995).

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Aspiration plays a particularly important role in this framework. Low aspirations and unambitious goals are assumed to result in underachievement, particularly among people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Flechtner, 2014). High hopes, by contrast, are associated with contributing to growth and development. As Appadurai (2013) writes, it is only through engagement in “some sorts of politics of hope,” that a society can instigate a lasting positive change (p. 293). Yet, “the capacity to aspire” also requires a considerable investment of time, resources and positive role models, that are not immediately available to many disadvantaged individuals and communities the world over (Appadurai, 2004, 2013).

“Progress” and “growth” are closely linked to the notion of “time,” which in turn is conceived of in linear terms. The future is open-ended (Adam & Groves, 2007), and it is the individual’s personal responsibility to aspire and work hard in order to change it for the better. When applied to education, this model has created a plethora of temporal and linear metaphors, which depict children in education institutions on the path to modernity (Martin et al., 2016); young “entrepreneurs of the self” (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 229), who strive to “get ahead” (Jakimow, 2016) in life and in the process transform themselves and the societies they live in. These liberal values are deeply embedded in the global development agenda, and are reflected in the education policies and practices of many developing or recently developed nations. Just as children are assigned important roles as change agents in the nation building processes of emerging nations, so developing nations are thought of as “young nations” who hold the potential (and are responsible) for their self-actualization (Cheney, 2007). Indeed, the Namibian Division of Marginalized Communities created under the Office of the President contends that:

One of the priority areas under the Division of Marginalized Communities is to make sure that San, Ovatie and Ovattjimba learners and students attend school in order to craft a better future for their communities . . . The goal in this regard is to make sure that the new generation from these communities should become agents of change that will transform their communities and compete equally with others in society. (Office of the President [OP], 2015)

Despite the efforts of national governments and the international donor community to curb inequality and poverty through education, case studies show an ambivalent correlation between upward social mobility and access to education, particularly for groups of non-dominant racial, ethnic or sociocultural backgrounds (Hays & Ninkova, 2018; Bartlett et al., 2018; Froerer, 2012; Jakimow, 2016; Portisch, 2012). Furthermore, globally influenced neoliberal reforms seem to have increased the gap between aspirations and secure access to white-collar jobs on a global level (Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004). Studies show that young people’s ideas about the future often reflect the tension between their present lived realities, and their possible future actualizations. Yet, this relationship is neither linear nor straightforward. On the one hand, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds project future selves and aspire for grown-up lives that far exceed their communities’ current situations (Frye, 2012). On the other hand, evidence suggests that young people can also be painfully aware of their disadvantaged position, limited opportunities and possible future challenges (Bordonaro, 2009; Frye, 2012; Swartz et al., 2012). By studying youth township culture in postapartheid South Africa, Swartz et al. (2012) provide a vivid account of young people’s dreams of possible futures as a form of resistance and as an attempt for inclusion in the country’s new national narrative. With data from rural India, Jakimow (2016) argues that the hope for a better future, despite its minimal probability, can be understood both as an obligation and as a means of survival. Such findings suggest that despite the fact that national policies and practices have the power to deeply influence the political and moral consciousness of children and youth (Coles, 1986), each individual is positioned in multiple social fields and relations (present and historical) that inform the ways in which they make sense of the world around them, dream of, and make decisions regarding their futures. Therefore, scholars working with young people’s

aspirations have argued for a more nuanced and dynamic relationship between socio-cultural background, dogmatic politics and ideologies, and youths' imaginative engagement with their futures (Zipin et al., 2015).

Mimesis as resistance

In the field of anthropology, mimesis has been applied to account for a wide range of human-human and human-nature encounters, most commonly in the context of radical differences or unequal power (often colonial) relations (see, Koester, 2002; Stoller, 1995; Taussig, 1993; Willerslev, 2007). In simple terms, mimesis is copying, or imitation of powerful or different Others, usually with some personal gain in mind. Taussig (1993) defines mimesis as a “faculty” used by otherwise oppressed groups as a counterhegemonic tool for control over uncontrollable forces. The closer the mimetic work is to the original, the bigger the chances for the acquisition of the original's powers. Furthermore, Kramer (1993) asserts that mimesis is redundant in situations in which the participants are culturally, socially, and ideologically homogenous. When applied to the field of human-human relations, mimesis is usually predated by some sort of a rupture – a dramatic encounter that has created abrupt or lasting changes for those involved with it. Yet, as Stoller (1995) writes, mimesis not only invokes (often traumatic) past encounters. More importantly, it manipulates the present, and reaches out to provoke the future. Through the “embodied opposition” (Stoller, 1995) of “being like, and of being Other” (Taussig, 1993, p. 129), oppressed individuals and groups exert their agency in the making and remaking of powerful global processes that may seem beyond their immediate control.

Authors have also cautioned against static or dichotomous interpretations of mimesis and have argued for a rethinking of marginalized peoples' agency in complex colonial or otherwise oppressive contexts. Taussig (1993), for example, views mimesis as identity performance. From this perspective, imitation does not constitute cooptation and assimilation into a dominant culture; instead, it is a productive mode of that leads to the creation of independent and autonomous identities. It is from this perspective, that we have approached the presented material. As we will describe below, San youth seem to aspire to inhabit lives that resemble those of the dominant groups in the country, and that are characterized by material wealth, high social standing, and highly individualistic values. These aspirations stand in stark contrast to the present situation of the San, who are economically impoverished, socially and politically marginalized, and many of whom continue to conform to egalitarian rather than individualistic values. By engaging with the concept of mimesis, we argue that through the embodiment of the repertoire of what constitutes a “good student” and hence, a “good Namibian citizen” – someone who aspires for a bright future and works hard to achieve it – San youth attempt to subvert the hegemonic power that the state and other dominant groups exert over them. We interpret this phenomenon not as assimilation into a dominant ideal but as an identity making device through which our participants can imagine and assert positive projections of what it means to be a “proud San” in modern democratic Namibia.

Background

The San of the Omaheke region and Bwabwata National Park

Namibia is a multiethnic southern African country that emerged from German colonization followed by South African apartheid rule only in 1990. The post-independence government embarked on an ambitious nation-building process, most notably through comprehensive educational and land redistribution reforms. Despite the initial euphoria and trust in the transformative power of these two initiatives, three decades after independence, implementation has lagged – impoverished communities have struggled to gain secure access to land, and marginalized children's educational enrollment and performance remain limited (see, Dieckmann et al., 2014).

Collectively, the San are the most disadvantaged group in the country by any socioeconomic indicator. The historically mobile San hunter-gatherers have been almost entirely dispossessed of their ancestral land by waves of European and Bantu settlement. The most recent assessment report on the situation of the San in Namibia affirms that presently there are at least seven different San groups living in all fourteen administrative regions in the country, comprising at least 2% of the national population (Dieckmann et al., 2014). Some San groups are closely related to one another and have followed similar historical trajectories, while others exhibit a great cultural and linguistic diversity. The two regions represented in this study differ in considerable ways. The Omaheke lies at the western fringes of the Kalahari Desert in east central Namibia and is home to culturally and linguistically distinct Jul'hoansi, !Xoon and Naro San communities. Over the course of the 20th century, most of the region's land was appropriated as either commercial (white) or communal (Bantu) land. In the process, the majority of San families became stranded as free or underpaid labor on commercial or communal farms (see, Suzman, 2000; Sylvain, 2001). Their situation has not improved greatly after independence and their overall socioeconomic situation remains unstable.

Bwabwata National Park (BNP) is situated in the Zambezi region in northeastern Namibia and is part of the ancestral land of the Khwe San, who number around 4,000 people. On the western side of the park, Khwe communities live together with a large number of illegally settled Mbukushu people, who practice agriculture, keep cattle and who have introduced mandatory Hambukushu language learning at the local schools. On the eastern side, the approximately 1,600 inhabitants are almost exclusively Khwe San. The traditional living space of the Khwe became a protected area already in the 1960s, thus considerably limiting own-use hunting and foraging activities. During South African rule after World War 1, the Khwe first became mine laborers, then following the militarization of the Caprivi area in the 1960s, many found employment with and became reliant on the South African Defense Force (SADF; Battistoni & Taylor, 2009; Brenzinger, 2010). After the withdrawal of the SADF at Namibian independence, the Khwe found themselves in an economically precarious situation. Today, the Khwe in BNP east rely mostly on monthly social welfare payments, irregular governmental food aid and the small number of wage laborers in their communities (Paksi & Pyhälä, 2018).

While the San communities included in this study share many commonalities, some differences between the historical and ongoing development of the two regions have influenced their current situation in considerable ways. Consequently, these differences have implications for the findings of our study. The Khwe in BNP East are rather isolated from other Namibian groups and larger settlements, and as a result of this, they have had limited exposure to outside influence and access to diverse livelihood opportunities. This geographical isolation has also resulted in a more limited exposure to agriculture and animal husbandary as alternative livelihood strategies, and fewer opportunities for real (or imagined) paid employment. In the linguistically and ethnically diverse Omaheke region, by contrast, San groups have experienced severe discrimination and competition of access to resources with others. These dynamics are reflected in the students' essays. Students from the Omaheke appear more preoccupied with their status in relation to others; they tend to have higher aspirations and assert a "proud San" identity in larger numbers than students from BNP. We will return to this point below.

The San and formal education

After independence, Namibia adopted one of the most progressive education policies in the region, and San children throughout the country have gotten increased access to formal education. The *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children* (Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture [MBESC], 2000) and the *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013) commit to the provision of education that is inclusive of the diverse sociocultural backgrounds of the country's marginalized learners. The *Language Policy for Schools in Namibia* (Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993) further acknowledges the importance of mother tongue education in the first years of schooling. Despite these positive provisions, implementation on

the ground has lagged. More dominant groups whose languages are reconized in the education system and have a larger number of teachers have benefitted from these positive policy provisions. Most governmental efforts have focused on increasing the number of San children enrolled in primary education. Beyond this, little care is taken of the San people's specific cultural, linguistic, and sometimes even basic physical or psychological needs in schools. According to the latest education statistics, of the 11,317 San students, only 79 (less than 1%) were at senior secondary level (Education Management Information System [EMIS], 2018). Of all San languages, Ju|'hoansi is the only San language officially recognized as a language of instruction in grades 1 to 3. However, the majority of Ju|'hoan students do not have access to learning in their mother tongue, mostly due to lack of qualified teachers and to heterogeneity of the classes (Ninkova, 2017, 2020; Hays, 2016). Among teachers and school persone, San students and their parents are known as "difficult," uncooperative and lacking an understanding of the value of education, due to high numbers of absenteeism and dropping out and challenges with adjusting to the school environment (Author, 2017; Hays, 2016; LeRoux, 1999). Research has also indicated that teachers continue to hold discriminatory attitudes toward San learners thus contributing to their sense of alienation in the system (Ninkova, 2020). Corporal punishment, despite being prohibited by the constitution, is widely reported in schools, as are conflicts between San children and children from other, more dominant, groups. Although corporal punishment is administered to all students, traditionally, San parents do not physically punish their children at home. All of these factors have contributed to a situation in which San children feel threatened and alienated in the system and as a result, underperform and drop out at rates much higher than students from other groups.

Research has also shown that educational success does not directly translate into traceable career paths for the San. Structural barriers, continued discrimination, and lack of employment opportunities in the remote locations in which most San communities reside are cited as common challenges (see Author, 2017, 2020; Hays, 2016). Examples of San individuals who have secured non-menial jobs because of their completed education are either limited or completely absent for some communities. The few individuals that have found employment, have faced increased pressure from relatives, friends and community members to share the limited resources that they have acquired (see, Hays, 2016).

In the Omaheke, some of the secondary schools are located in or around the administrative center, Gobabis, and others – in rural areas nearby major roads or close to settlements. However, as Gobabis is a very small town, and the region is predominantly rural, the differences between "urban" and "rural" are not that pronounced. An overwhelming majority of the San secondary students attend boarding schools, in which they are in the minority. Although conditions differ from school to school, there is a general lack of safety and care for the well-being of students. In BNP East, the two similar sized secondary schools are located in the largest villages in the study area (approx. 500 inhabitants each). One of the schools has limited resources (e.g., shortage of teachers, lack of electricity and phone network in the area) and accommodates exclusively Khwe San students. The other school, where more services and better infrastructure is available, also hosts a few numbers of Bantu students in the higher grades. The students coming from smaller villages live either in outworn army tents, with family relatives or in makeshift shelters under appalling conditions.

Methodology

The data for our analysis comes from 108 essays from secondary school San students from the Omaheke region (grades 8 to 12) and 62 Khwe San learners from the Bwabwata National Park East (grades 9 and 10). The essays from the Omaheke were collected by the first author from four secondary schools in the months between June and August 2013, whereas the essays from BNP were collected by the second author from two secondary schools in January and February 2018.¹ The age of the participants is between 13 and 28, 82 male and 87 female students.²

In inviting students to share with us how they imagined their future, we used Toren's (2011) method for eliciting data on children's aspirations about their future lives. In all schools, we followed a similar procedure. We explained our objective to the principal, and requested to meet all San students in a hall or a classroom after the school day was over. We used self-identification as a prerequisite for participation and many students with one San parent (usually the mother) opted to participate. In the classroom, we explained our objectives to the students – that we wanted them to write an essay for us. We emphasized that we were researchers from overseas who were not associated with the school, the government or an NGO, that their teachers would not see their works, and that their writings would not be graded. We told students not to care about their language or grammar; and that all we were interested in were their ideas. Mistakes were fine, and they should not worry about their handwriting. Then we wrote “My Future” on the blackboard, and following Toren (2011), gave the students the following instructions: “Imagine yourself as a grown-up man or a grown-up woman. I want you to write for me how you are going to live, and what you are going to do after you have finished going to school.” We specifically did not imply anything about “jobs,” “work” or “family.” We told students that those who did not want to participate or complete the task were free to leave whenever they wanted. We would then give out paper and pens to those who needed them and the students would spend from twenty minutes to an hour and a half writing.

The essays were analyzed by using inductive content analysis, and we used open coding to identify emerging categories. Some of the emerging data appeared to be in line with data presented from similar studies in other geographic contexts, whereas others were new and surprising to us. Both authors have carried out long-term ethnographic fieldwork among San communities in the southern African region. The first author has worked with San communities in east central Namibia and north central Botswana since 2008, and the second author has worked with the Khwe San in BNP since 2015. Previous qualitative data collected from participant observation, classroom observation and open-ended interviews with students, parents and teachers inform our understanding of the conditions under which the San participate in education and in the larger Namibian society. As secondary sources, we have consulted government policy documents and reports.

Both authors held research permits from the Namibian state and were supported in their permit application by the Namibian Ministry of Education. In each visited school, we sought permission from the principal. Due to the large number of participants, we did not seek individual written consent, however, we thoroughly explained our research objective and emphasized that participation was anonymous and voluntary, and participants could withdraw at every stage of the process.

Limitations

A project of such nature is prone to a number of challenges. Ontological and epistemological notions of time differ across individuals and cultures. The Jul'hoansi, who make up the largest San group in the Omaheke, for example, conceptualize the past and their ancestors “before” them, resulting with young individuals “following the footsteps” of their elder namesakes (Author, 2017). Yet, with the San's encapsulation into the wider regional economy, and after years of schooling, the study participants appear to have adopted the understanding of time as a linear progression with the future being situated at the forward end of it.

Despite our efforts to disassociate from the school institution, our background and appearance, as well as the setting in which we collected the data, inevitably placed us in a category that most students would associate with “teachers.” This might have influenced some of the participants' perception of what we expected of them to write. On a practical level, English remains a challenge

¹Schools in Omaheke: Johannes Dohren R. C. High School, Wennie Du Plessis Secondary School, Epako Junior Secondary School, Mokganedi Tlhabanello High School. Schools in BNP: Ndoro Memorial Combined School and Kandunda Kaseta Combined School.

²The participating students attended grade 8–12. In these grades the students' age ranges between 13 to 20 years. In several cases, persons who have dropped out of school were allowed to return to the classroom; hence the older age of some participants.

for many in the Namibian education system, both students and teachers alike. The language does not have a colonial history in the country, and was adopted as an official language after independence as a move to break from the colonial legacy of Afrikaans, and to connect Namibia to the global community. None of the San students have any knowledge of English before they begin school. Many of the essays are ridden with spelling, grammatical and syntactic mistakes, however, the overall level appears sufficient enough for our purposes. In the quotes below, we have corrected some mistakes for readability purposes, however, we have opted to keep the students' statements as close to the original as possible.

The good Namibian citizen

The overwhelming majority of students envision bright futures that are starkly removed from the everyday realities of their impoverished families. Most essays outline a similar road to success: a person must have faith in education as a vehicle for change; show steadfast ambition; identify a clear career path and other “goals,” “targets,” and “rewards”; commit to achieving them through hard work and sustained effort; and avoid bad influences and “dropping out” of school. While the endeavor is characteristically individualistic, once succeeded, an individual pledges to give back both to their immediate community, and to the Namibian society and state at large. This model for success has been actively cultivated by the Namibian government over the past three decades through policy documents, curricular materials, and reports and has made its way to classrooms in the form of textbooks, posters and other print materials on school walls, as well as in dramas, songs and other performance and speech events that take place in schools (including in the presence of parents). Not surprisingly, most student essays are filled with learned phrases that can be roughly divided in one of four categories: those that affirm the benefit of schooling (“Education is the key to success,” “Education is the key to tomorrow”); those that value high goals and ambition (“Shoot for the moon, even if you miss, you will land among the stars,” “The sky is the limit.”); those that emphasize the individualistic nature of the endeavor (“My future is my choice,” “My future is in my hands.”); and those that point to the importance of hard work (“Hard work deserves great rewards,” “Hard work never kills, but it pays,” “You sleep when you are dead.”).

On the following pages, we unpack the model for success outlined above as evidenced in the students' essays.

Faith in education as the key to success

Faith in the transformative power of education to instigate lasting societal and economic changes permeates all Namibian national policy documents. Most recently, the “5th National Development Plan” acknowledges that “[a] key to unlock the opportunities inherent in our natural resources and our people is to develop our human capital by investing in training, health and education” (2017/18-2021/22, p. x). Since most San parents are considered by government and school officials to be uninterested in their children's education, or unaware of the benefits of schooling, the government promotes this stance at all kinds of meetings with marginalized communities across the country. Likewise, teachers and other school personnel constantly remind students that completing basic education is their only chance of becoming “someone in life.” The association between education and (any kind of a possible) future is firmly established in the students' essays:

My future is my choice. First, I need to get ready for my future. I must study hard in school so that I can open the road for my future. (Omaheke Region [OR], female, 13 y.o.)

I want to be seen as a person in front of the people and in front of the government. I don't want to end up in bad future. That's why I'm focusing myself [on] school and [I want to] get the career that I wish and make my future or put my future in good condition because without an education you would never get a good job or you will never achieve good future in your life. (OR, male, 16)

Life is difficult if you don't take education as a serious thing . . . I want to live life as a person who is well educated. (BNP, male, 20)

One of the main promises of education is access to the labor market. Currently, the majority of the San in the Omaheke region are unemployed and are heavily dependent on state welfare for their survival. Employment is limited to manual farm labor that is accessible to men only. Women can accompany their husbands on farms, and if there is need, they can work as domestic servants, but their position and remuneration is tied to their husbands' (see Sylvain, 1999). The employment opportunities for the Khwe in BNP East are even more limited, as there are few options for piece work inside the Park. As a result, the Khwe face a high unemployment rate, and the majority of households depend on the social welfare system. In contrast to their limited employment opportunities, in the collected essays, most of the students aspire mostly to white collar jobs – from teacher and doctors, to scientists, engineers, pilots, and to the “president of Namibia.” Additionally, we did not find any significant gender differences, and both male and female students have expressed aspiration for similar professions.

I will study hard and pass my grade 12 exams and go for future studies to become a nurse. I will work hard in all my subjects, also in maths and physical science to pass, and study to be a doctor out of Namibia. (BNP, female, 22)

Particularly in the Omaheke, where the San have been incorporated as manual labor under other more dominant groups, many associated completing education with breaking the San's dependency from others:

I want to live in my own big house and I also want to have my own farm, not [live] on another person's farm. (OR, female, 15)

I also want to study further while I am a private doctor to improve my living standard, living style . . . The reason that I want to work for myself is that I don't want to work for others or I don't want to rely on other people. I want to show that I can also do my best. (OR, female, 16)

When I will start working, I would also like to advance my kids life so that they do not become slaves for other people. They also should go to the school and after school they will become better people in the future. (BNP, female, 18)

One of the main legacies of apartheid in Namibia is the connection between access to land and resources and social status. Material possessions such as a car and a “proper” house or a farm, are other perceived as important markers of one's social status. Many of the students recognize the connection between wealth and status:

When I finish my education I want to have my own house and buy myself a new car. I also want to support my family and my kids as well as my wife. I want to buy clothes for my kids and pay for their school fees and buy for them food so that they must not die from hunger or go around on the streets looking for food or turn them to become thieves. (BNP, male, 21)

In my future when I am a grown up woman I want to be a person that will work by myself, earn my own money, benefit from my money that I am working for. I also want to stay in my own house, drive the car that cost my own money. That's why I don't want to play with my education because people say education is the key to success. That's why I want to succeed from my education. (OR, female, 16)

High ambitions and clear goals

An important component of one's successful future is a clear path that leads to it. This includes having high aspirations, establishing firm goals and committing to steadfast ambition to achieve these goals. Students are expected to show interest in their future, and to envision a roadmap that leads to it.

The reason that I prefer to study further is if I fail doing one [job] then I can continue with [another job]. It's always good to have two options because if you just have one then if you fail then there will be no other way to be successful. This was about my long term goal and my short term goal is that I want to finish my grade 12. (OR, female, 16)

Commitment to hard work

Meritocracy, the advancement of the individual based on personal merit and effort, plays a central role in the students' formulations of their duties and possibilities within the school system. The system does not recognize the structural barriers that hinder marginalized communities from achieving their potential, and instead teaches students that it is their own responsibility to fight against all odds and break the poverty cycle in which they currently find themselves. This commitment is particularly prevalent in the Omaheke region and can be partially attributed to the fact that the San are often pointed to the fact that other groups have "advanced" as a direct result of their hard work.

This is my future . . . I really want to finish school but if you don't do it by yourself it is really difficult . . . For you to be successful, you should be self-confident, hard-working, self-disciplined . . . I don't want to underestimate me. I will like to pull up my socks and work hard. (OR, female, 22)

I only have one aim, and it is to study hard . . . I will study hard to get my career in hand, and I will not play . . . [S]o my message will be like this: Hard work never kills but it pays!!! (OR, male, 18)

Whatever it will be difficult for me, I won't give up. I will still struggle and reach what I targeted in my life. I will be proud of myself. I won't lose hope in everything that I will do for my life. (BNP, male, 22)

Avoidance of bad influences and perseverance

Students identify the impact of bad influences both for their educational success and future career opportunities. Dropping out of school before completion of basic education affects many Namibian students, particularly from impoverished backgrounds. For the San, dropout numbers are higher than those for any other group in the country (see, Dieckmann et al., 2014; EMIS, 2018). Students are particularly sensitized against the dangers of alcohol, early pregnancy and of "street life" in general. Many students recognize that if they are to fulfill their dreams about the future, they must avoid these negative influences:

Through education all doors will be open for you. And what I promise to myself is I won't leave school and won't even date while I'm young because I might end up being pregnant, drop out of school and no one will look at me. (OR, female, 15)

I don't want to drop out of the school because school is the key of tomorrow. And I don't want to become pregnant while I am in school because I won't be able to support the baby because I don't have money for my baby. That's why I want to finish my school and do whatever I wish. (OR, female, 17)

Some have also identified the negative impact of social ills, particularly alcoholism, later in their adult lives:

I can not drink alcohol and misuse my money which I get per month. (BNP, male, 28)

I don't want to be a smoker or a drinker because those can lead a person to death. (BNP, male, 17)

Having high moral values and giving back to family and society at large

Since Independence, Namibia has committed to building a strong, unified nation beyond racial and ethnic lines. The process has been a strenuous one, particularly in the context of continued socio-economic inequality. Yet, the rhetoric is firmly established in the discourse of national development. Students are actively taught of their role as agents for development and change in the nation-building process. This is reflected in some of the students' works:

I will not easily give up and this would be good to the economic development of our motherland Namibia. I would be the one who is going to develop our country. So during this process I would learn very hard to become a ATC (air-traffic controller) in order to take good care of our aeroplanes who are also in the process of developing the country. (OR, male, 15)

When I finish my education I want to become NDF (Namibian Defence Force) because in our family there is none who is working. I want to feed my family and I want to fight for my country. When the time for war [comes] I want to defeat the foreign country that comes to attack our country. (BNP, female, 18)

I am willing to make Namibia an industrialized developed country by the year 2030. (OR, male, 16)

In an effort to overcome the legacy of apartheid segregation, the national discourse is permeated with tropes about fraternity and equality, regardless of origin, color and class. The theme of racial, ethnic and socioeconomic equality is particularly discussed in the heterogenous Omaheke region:

Discrimination leads to poverty and starvation. I want to develop my country and its people. I want to make my country proud of its people and I want to increase the living standard rate of people. (OR, male, 18)

I want to be a respectful person. Respecting others whether small, big, ugly, white, or black. (OR, female, 19)

And also in my life I will love every person I see. I will save the people that are in bad road. And I will also love everything in the country. Either a person or an animal. I will help the people that are poor to become rich. And that will be my future in life. (OR, male, 16)

Many acknowledge their impoverished background, and the difficulties their families have gone through in order to see their children enrolled in school. Against this backdrop, most commit to providing for their families financialy, and making sure that their parents, grandparents and siblings are well taken care of:

When I finish my school, I will look for a job and reduce poverty in my life because I am from a poor family. So I will do something to improve my family's life to change it to another level. (BNP, male, 28)

When I am finishing my school I want to support my mother, my father, sisters and brothers. I will just help them with a lot of things. I buy for them food, clothes, and I just give them money so they can buy what they want to buy. (BNP, female, 20)

Beyond their immediate families, many see it as their responsibility to contribute to the larger San community:

My dream is to help my own people so that they can realize how important it is to have better education and life. I want to work for my community. I want to bring my people to a certain position. (OR, female, 21)

When I will be a minister I will start visiting my people place to place to see what they do not have in their village and ask from the government to help the villages. (BNP, male, 23)

And if I become a lawyer I will build a school with my money for San learners. And I will look for teachers for different languages, so that every learner can learn more about his or her traditional [hi]story. It will not be paid, there will be food and stationaries for the ones that don't have [any]. They will wear any clothes they want because maybe some do not have parents. (OR, male, 16)

Improving the San community's situation for some also includes serving as role models:

I am from a poor family and poor tribe. I want my tribe to move out from the box of poverty. So as an ambassador I travel the whole country to advise people that in our community as the San community we shouldn't think of ourselves that we don't have a given talent of doing things. (BNP, male, 20)

I will tell the students about how I completed the school and how I became a teacher. I always tell them to be like me in their future and do what I do. (BNP, female, 17)

Being a proud San

As previously described, the marginalization of the San in Namibia manifests itself on multiple levels – from their day-to-day interactions with members from other ethnic groups, to the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate their economic, political and social exclusion. In some instances, teachers have expressed annoyance toward some of the special provisions made for San learners (Author 2017, 2020). On a more general level, in the national imagination, the San are still conceived of as people belonging to the bush, and no matter how educated they become, their “wilderness” remains an intrinsic characteristic (see, Suzman, 2000). Not surprisingly, many San students are embarrassed of their origin and belonging. In some schools in the Omaheke, teachers have reported that San youth attempted to change their identity by pretending not to speak or understand their mother tongue. Others have recounted that they had difficulties recruiting San participants in the cultural performance groups that most schools organized (Author, 2017).

Recognizing the low status and poor image of the San in the country, some students envision their future self-actualization bound to achieving a greater visibility for the San on a national level:

I want to hear a Bushman that is having a great job. I know it's hard to go through these stages but trying is the best to better life. I have nothing to complain about but I want to see a Bushman interviewing in the radio like other members. (OR, female, 16)

Nowadays people don't take San people into consideration because they think we are not worth to become somebody in life. They discriminate against us but I am going to show and change that. (OR, female, 16/08)

I want to become someone else that lot of people point fingers to as a role model, not mentioning me with criminal names, but with respectful names. (BNP, male, 25)

In the olden days, the San people never went to school because they didn't have that opportunity. Now that I have that opportunity, I am making use of it. And when I become a teacher I want to encourage the San people in the community how important it is to be educated. I don't want to be rich but I want to live a simple life. I want to show my followers that San people can also do something in life. Nowadays people are discriminating us so I will like to prove them wrong. We the San people can also do it. (OR, female, 19)

In this context of extreme racial and ethnic discrimination, a number of students from the Omaheke acknowledge how proud they feel to be San, and point to various positive characteristics of their cultural background:

The San people are the most interesting people and I believe in my culture. I am very proud to be San. (OR, male, 16)

I am a proud San and nobody will discourage me by trying me many ways. Nobody will be able to do that, whatever a person says about my tribe he/she is motivating me more and more . . . As I already said, I am a proud San and nobody will take advantage of me. The end!! (OR, male, 17)

I am a very proud San and I want to become a doctor. (OR, female, 18)

Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed 170 essays about the future written by secondary school San students in two administrative regions in Namibia. We found that students have adopted a scripted aspirational model for personal and societal development. This development model is written in the Namibian policies and is heavily promoted to students through various channels. San students, who come from impoverished rural communities, aspire to achieve economic independence and increased social status through their educational efforts. So far, however, educational success has brought little benefits to San individuals and communities. If previous qualitative and quantitative data on school completion can be an indicator for future outcomes of educational success – the majority of the students who participated in our study have not completed senior secondary education and, more likely than not, they have returned to live with their communities, where employment opportunities are limited, if any.

The discrepancy between students' high future aspirations and impoverished socioeconomic background is consistent with findings of studies conducted in other geographic regions. In interpreting these findings, authors have engaged with different themes, including survival (Jakimow, 2016), desire for inclusion in the national narrative (Swartz et al., 2012), and assertions of virtuous identity (Frye, 2012). While we have drawn inspiration and learned from these studies, we have opted to analyze the findings emerging from the San students' essays through the concept of mimesis as a means for autonomous identity making. This has allowed us to acknowledge the agency of young San individuals who find themselves at the precarious intersection of conforming to the demands of the state for good citizenship, on the one hand, while upholding their San identity, on the other hand. Resistance can take many forms and meanings. In the challenging context of a state institution, such as education, the adoption and performance of the imposed repertoire of good citizenship may be the easiest way for marginalized students to blend in and then use the opportunity to assert a vision for their own development. We have argued that by accepting the national development narrative, San students have also made space for acknowledging the needs of the wider San community, and the challenges and aspirations for an equal and "proud" existence.

Our data also showed some differences between the students' essays in the two regions. In the heterogenous Omaheke region, students seemed more concerned with other groups and with their social and economic standing in relation to them. In Bwabwata National Park East, where the Khwe live in relative isolation from other ethnic groups, students were less preoccupied with comparisons with others and more concerned with their and their families' own wellbeing. These differences point to the importance of understanding San communities' socioeconomic impoverishment both on its own terms and in relation to others. The study also points to important questions about the role of education as a means for empowerment. Despite the widely accepted national stance that the San do not care about education, our study shows that San youth care and aspire to succeed in education. What the government and school institutions in the country must acknowledge, are the pervasive structural barriers that continue to hinder the Sans' success in education. Stigma, discrimination, lack of inclusion of San languages and cultural material in the curriculum are some of the primary areas that must be addressed in order to allow for the just inclusion and representation of San students in the system.

This and other studies on San education point to a perplexing paradox. The question is not *why* San students do not succeed in education. The real question is *how* they manage to participate in the current education system at all given the overwhelming barriers they encounter on the road. Our study has shown that San exhibit a commitment to educational achievement together with and a commitment to the betterment of their communities and the strengthening of their San identity. If schools in Namibia want to include San students on an equal basis, they must also make space for a fuller inclusion and expression of their cultural identity.

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