

Vanishing conceptual diversity: The loss of hunter-gatherers' concepts

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1 Introduction

Concepts of the world with individuals and among communities change continuously with altering fashions of explaining and understanding the social and physical environments. “Globally dominant” concepts are increasingly channelled by being spread through rather uniform government-run educational systems (with concepts mostly from scientific frameworks), or through religious mission work (with concepts from various believe systems). Concepts that reflect autonomous traditional views of marginalized cultures are rapidly replaced by globally dominant concepts and these changes result in a qualitative loss of conceptual diversity.

Khwe is a Central Khoisan language spoken by several thousands of former hunter-gatherers in Southern Africa. While their ethnic tongue is still the everyday medium of communication in most Khwe communities, genuine concepts underlying their heritage language are fading out. Despite the omnipresent external influences and subsequent changes, the Khwe language - as spoken by the older generation - still retains some underlying hunter-gatherer concepts. Their worldview reveals a high appreciation of and respect for individuals and items, no matter if these are humans, animals, plants or even inanimate objects. This paper will analyse some of such hunter-gatherers' concepts and their present decline in a few selected domains.

Substantial shares of the present variation in language use among the different generations in the Khwe communities and on an individual level are due to the shift from the former hunter-gatherer concepts to those of the globally dominant cultures. Formal education and religious mission work are among the main forces in transforming traditional views of the world among the Khwe, beside the radical alteration of their living conditions.

2 Change in conceptual strategies

The diachronic changes of concepts underlying concrete linguistic forms have been analysed by Bernd Heine (1997) in his *Cognitive Foundations of Grammar*. He

identifies conceptual transfer patterns by detecting change in meaning via its consequences, i.e. its present-day lexical and grammatical forms. In this way, language immanent processes can be traced back from current languages in order to identify conceptual transfers. The main premises of Heine's study are 1) that all humans have the same faculties to perceive the world, 2) that they have the same general kinds of experiences and 3) share the same communicative needs.

With his focus, Heine investigates universal strategies and conceptual transfer patterns underlying the different concepts found among the world's cultures. He claims that there is a 'unidirectional transfer leading from lexical items that have a fairly concrete semantics to grammatical categories that express schematic meanings; these latter typically have to do with the relative time, boundary structure, and modality of events' (Heine 1997:7-8). However, we feel the need to draw attention to the external factors, which actually trigger the changes in concepts and, in doing so determine many of the language immanent developments.

Heine's premise that humans have basically the same experiences and share the same communicative needs, holds true for only the very basic experiences and communicative needs. Hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari Desert have very different experiences in their daily lives from Wall Street bankers in New York City, and they have fundamentally different communicative needs with the people they are in touch with. Natural and man-made environments differ in most respects, and so do communicative needs in these environments, just imagining face-to-face communication in small scale communities on a hunt versus a tele-conference on stock market issues. However, former hunter-gatherer societies no longer live traditional lives in isolation and they are on the way to sharing our global cultural experiences and will finally match theirs with our communicative needs.

Basic concepts are shared among all societies which are covered by formal education, religious mission work and are reached by mass media. Diverging concepts seem, therefore, to be restricted to small communities that live in remote areas and still maintain - at least for the moment - mainly traditional, oral cultures.

In rural African societies, the mode of production is among the most essential components of culture and, with that, it constitutes the foundation for conceptualisation. All languages spoken some 12,000 years ago were based on a hunter-gatherer view of the world. Dissimilar environments, such as mountainous regions, deserts or the sea, made for quite distinct, specific living conditions, which had an impact on how the communities experienced and conceptualised their surroundings. New concepts of the environment emerged with the rise of agricultural and pastoral economies, and vocabularies and categories developed to accommodate new communication needs.

It is important to note that all languages currently spoken by former hunter-gatherer communities are modern languages and not archaic relics from the distant past of human evolution. Today, no African community as a whole still lives on traditional hunting and gathering. Most communities that, at some point in time, lived on hunting and gathering abandoned their languages when they became pastorals or farmers. Only a few of the languages spoken by former hunter-gatherers still show traces of concepts that reflect the period of a hunting-gathering way of life. For these reasons, we may be able to learn how contemporary hunter-gatherers conceptualize their environment, but not necessarily how our ancestors with similar economic ways of life understood the world.

The Khwe, a former hunter-gatherer community, speaking a Central Khoisan language in Southern Africa, are among the people who are widely neglected in national and regional development. They have only limited access to formal education and communication facilities. These are the main reasons why they still maintain some independence in thought. Khwe elders retain concepts from their recent hunter-gatherer past while the younger generation eagerly adjusts to global culture ideas. These vanishing concepts are the last glimpses of hunter-gatherer perceptions of the world.

The Khwe language is spoken by between 6,000 and 7,000 people living in Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Botswana, and South Africa. The Caprivi Strip of Namibia is the centre of Khwe land, which extends north into Angola and south into Botswana. Up until the 1970s, most Khwe lived in areas which were difficult to access, without any substantial influence by religious missions, and without any schools. Since then living conditions have changed. The Khwe became involved in liberation wars and rebellions; some Khwe were baptised by missionaries, while others confess to local African churches; the governments restricted hunting and gathering; and a few schools were set up for them. Not all Khwe children enrol in schools, few complete primary educations, and very few individuals reach the level of secondary education. But, like the other factors mentioned, formal education has a substantial impact on the concepts applied by younger Khwe communities, even among those who are not exposed to the formal teaching at schools.

Communication in small scale, highly mobile hunter-gatherer communities results in certain communication strategies and communication needs. No large, complex Khwe settlements existed; until recently they were highly mobile. Khwe had no permanent houses but either mat-huts during the dry seasons and temporary small shelters during the rainy season. They did not produce commodities, as they had to carry all their possession along with them. Among hunter-gatherers, communication takes place exclusively in face-to face interaction and among people who shared similar social, spiritual and physical environments. Hunter-gatherers exchange information on

survival matters, such as the availability and location of bush-food (meat, honey, and edible plants), the threats by intruders or harmful animals, or the prevention or countering of live domineering supernatural powers.

Non-verbal communication plays an eminent role among hunter-gatherers and the extensive use of conventionalized signs. Living in and with nature, and in small scale-communities, gestures and signs are of much greater importance than in urban settings. Game is easily chased off, even by a slightest whisper, and Khwe hunters use standardized signs to refer to the specific animals or their actions. Pointing directions or at something makes no sound and as such far more precise and in that is far more efficient than any vague oral description. Gestures are an essential part of conveying, for example, spatial information.

“Gaps” in the basic vocabulary of languages, as frequently discussed by linguists (Hale 1975), might show up when globally dominant concepts and “modern” communication needs are applied as the overall parameter. People in their own social and physical environment and exchanging information that really matter for their daily survival can express whatever they want in their own languages. Thus, languages do not have lexical “gaps” within their own cultural frames and missing corresponding expressions in a given language typically indicate either that these terms were irrelevant in the specific living contexts, or that underlying concepts divert from globally dominant ones.

Khwe elders, for example, use exclusively gestures when they talk about directions. Having no Khwe terms for the cardinal directions north and south might appear as lexical “gaps” to others, even to younger Khwe. However, Khwe elders insist that four terms for cardinal directions can not compete with their unlimited choice of pointing out precious directions.

3 New concepts though formal education

Until the late 1950s, the Khwe community in West Caprivi had little direct exposure to globally dominant concepts. Some Khwe men went to work in the mines in South Africa and returned home with goods which they had purchased with their salaries. Religious mission work at Andara started in 1913 and included a hospital and a school, but, since the mission was built for and among the neighbouring Mbukushu, very few Khwe ever went there. Most Khwe were afraid of the Bantu-speaking Mbukushu at church and in the hospital. Mbukushu tried to dominate and take advantage of the marginalized Khwe, as some continue to do today.

Formal education for Khwe children started with the Mbukushu teacher Mbumbo and his Khwe translator Mbongi in 1970. Both taught a total of about 20 Khwe students in this first Khwe school at Mũtc'iku, a major Khwe settlement next to the Okavango

River, for almost four years (Köhler 1989:524-536). After that time, the school was closed down by the South African Defence Force, who then declared the West-Capri, the core of the Khwe land, a military zone.

Khwe names for the main activities associated with formal education were most likely established at the time of the first Khwe School in the early 1970s. These Khwe terms all derived from existing cultural community activities.

The Khwe term for ‘learning’ in a formal educational context goes back to the term *lláé* ‘to instruct s.o.’ Experienced elders, for example, instruct boys in how to craft a certain tool or hunting weapons. The reflexive use with the original meaning of *lláé-can*, ‘to instruct s.o. - reflexive suffix’, is ‘do s.th. without being instructed by s.o. else’

ti	lúíá-xa lláé-can-à-hĩ	bóò-di
1:SG	only-ADVZ instruct-REF-II-PAST	axe-POSS
n#um	a	
make	FOC	

‘I taught myself to make an axe’ i.e. ‘I made my axe without instruction.’

In “modern” contexts, however, the meaning of *lláé-can* is no longer ‘do s.th. without instruction,’ or ‘to teach oneself’; *lláé-can* has developed into the general term for ‘to learn’.

ti	lláé-can-a-tè	Khwé-dàm	à
1:SG	teach-REF-I-PRES	Khwe-tongue	OBJ

‘I learn the Khwe language.’

The reflexive use of *lláé-can* ‘to teach oneself’ for ‘to learn’ might reflect the elders’ perspective on what they saw happening in classrooms: boys and girls were no longer instructed individually by their fathers and mothers. In the past, everything necessary to know for the survival in the bush was handed over to children on hunting trips or collecting parties. A father or another experienced hunter instructed a boy and a mother or grandmother shared her knowledge on plant use with a girl. At school, elders now saw children sitting in large groups in classrooms, without being individually instructed but doing things, like writing and reading on their own, of course with the teacher being in the front of the class at the blackboard.

‘To read’ is *#* with the original meaning ‘to call, to mention, to name’. This term is also used, for example, in *#ju* for ‘to travel, to go to places’, lit. ‘to call a land’ or ‘to mention a place’.

The term for ‘to write’ *llgàràá*, relates to an activity the community members perform during healing ceremonies. *llgàràá* is the ‘off-beat clapping’ either by hand or

by the use of clapping wood-pieces. A ‘pen’ or ‘pencil’ is called *ǀgàràá-yí*, literally ‘write-wood, stick.’ Oswin Köhler mentions in his fieldnotes *ǀgàràá-ká-xò* (write-CAUS-thing) as the Khwe term for ‘typewriter’. These latter two phrases are examples which show a general tendency among Khwe, in that they try hard to avoid any loanwords in their language.

With the Khwe term for ‘to count’ *nǀgǀé*, the conceptual transfer seems to be obvious, in contrast to the previous two examples. The original use of *nǀgǀé* is ‘to open the song, followed by the choirs’. The lead singer in Khwe singing starts and then the others follow singing right after.

<i>ma</i>	<i>nǀgǀé-gòè</i>	<i>rè</i>	<i>ǀ</i>	<i>à</i>
Who	start singing-FUT	Q	song	OBJ

‘Who will start the singing? i.e. who will be the nǀgǀé-khoè lead singer’ to start the song.’

Oral enumerations are conducted with both English or Afrikaans numerals and are a recent invention to the Khwe community, and so is the Khwe term *nǀgǀé* for counting. Like the lead singer, who starts and is followed by others, counting always starts with one numeral which is then followed by others. In the 1960s and 1970s, counting with English numerals, according to Köhler (n.d.), had been introduced and was practiced by men sitting in a circle and repeating the numerals which were put forward by one of them. A counting sequence with Khwe numerals never existed before the contact with these European numerals.

All Khwe terms mentioned for expressing activities associated with formal education are still used with their original meanings. They refer to concrete cultural activities which continue to be performed by members of the Khwe community. Older Khwe tend to primarily associate these cultural meanings with the terms under discussion. As expected, the younger generation, in contrast, thinks predominantly of the “modern” meanings, with the possible exception of *#* ‘to call, to mention, to name’ and ‘to read’. Khwe are familiar with both meanings and they also know of their recent reinterpretation to accommodate innovated activities. They cannot, however, recall the contexts in which these reinterpretations took place.

The following example may illustrate how quickly changes in the environment can occur, disguising the underlying concept of a semantic shift. ‘Driving a car’ is called *kúru*, which has the original meaning ‘to work the bellows’. Gravel roads used to be very bad when the first cars reached Caprivi. At that time, the bumps shook the steering wheel constantly so that the hands of the driver moved up and down. This same up-down movement of the hands can be observed in working traditional bellows. Bellows

are needed when in iron work high temperatures of fires are needed. Since 1997 the tarred Trans-Caprivi Highway crosses the Khwe land and the steering wheel in modern cars does not move up and down much anymore. Young Khwe, therefore, can no longer explain why *kúru* ‘to work the bellows’ is also used for ‘driving a car’.

Up to now, there has been only few individual Khwe who can read and write their own language. A Khwe alphabet was introduced in two community workshops which were facilitated by members of the University of Cologne in 1996 and 1997. These young literate Khwe community members are among the most active in developing their language, not only as a written medium. The Khwe who are literate in their own language are also acquainted with writing English or Afrikaans. For that reason, there is a heavy influence of global cultural concepts on the Khwe language in all domains as used by these literate Khwe. With regard to the meanings of traditional Khwe terms, they will still consult the community elders as authorities. However, in the growing number of Khwe expressions which relate to “modern” aspects of life, they feel empowered themselves and use the global cultural concepts which they have acquired mainly through English and Afrikaans.

4 The impact on concepts through religious mission work

The impact of religious mission work on the Khwe perception of the world is very difficult to assess. Even though most Khwe today seem to believe in a single God, the position this God holds in their beliefs is not necessarily the same as the one taught by missionaries. Khwe know of a super natural power, *tcóò*, which governs their lives and which may materialize as medicine, poison, blood, deadly invisible arrows, etc. Even though God might be called the creator by most Khwe, it is *tcóò* they need to consider and adjust their activities to in daily lives, for example by respecting taboos and performing cleansing ceremonies.

Because of the lack of infrastructure and the difficult, unhealthy environment, missionaries entered into the area next to Khwe land as late as the 1910s. While the missionaries baptised members of the neighbouring Mbukushu people, they failed to convert the Khwe. When the South African Defence Force established bases in the West Caprivi and employed Khwe as trackers in the war against the Namibian freedom fighters, many Khwe were baptised by army chaplains. The majority of the community had never been directly exposed to missionaries before that time, but some Khwe men had been to the mines in Johannesburg in the 1940s and may have had contact with Christianity there.

Khyáni is the general name for God today. For the 1970s, Oswin Köhler (1978) reports that Khwe distinguish between a male God *Khyáni-mà*¹ and a female God

¹ The use of PGN (person-gender-number) suffixes with nouns is optional in Khwe.

*Khyáni-hè*². In contrast to this observation, my own recordings from 1996 onwards are consistent in that, if gender is indicated, the older Khwe use third person feminine singular, while all young Khwe attach the third person masculine singular PGN suffix. Young Khwe strongly reject the use of the feminine marker of the elders and those of them who are baptized regard this usage of the feminine marker as blasphemy. In Khwe, God, therefore, changed gender from feminine to masculine in the 1970s and 80s.

How deeply the change of God to the masculine gender has already been established among the young generation became obvious when I played a story recorded from a respected Khwe elder. A young Khwe woman got confused on his use of the feminine suffix with God, i.e. *Khyáni-hè* and suggested to me that the old man might refer to the Virgin Mary with this term. It was beyond the scope of her imagination that a Khwe could think of God as being female.

5 Khwe strategies in naming the fauna and flora

Among young Khwe a trend can be observed, wherein they increasingly seem to invent Khwe terms on the basis of global concepts, which they acquire at school, for example within the animal kingdom.

In Khwe there is no generic name for the English term ‘animal’.³ The most inclusive category in the animal kingdom is the collective term *kx’óxò*, which means ‘meat’ and might be used also to refer to ‘edible animals.’

Joseph Greenberg observes that ‘the use of the same word for ‘meat’ and ‘animal’ is found very commonly in Africa and apparently never or at least not commonly elsewhere’ (Greenberg 1983:16). Greenberg states that ‘meat’ is the unmarked meaning and ‘animal’ the secondary, marked meaning. His argument for this direction of semantic shift is that in many African languages innovations arose for ‘animal’, while the original root for ‘meat’ has been maintained.

The Khwe language provides another argument for Greenberg’s claim. *Kx’óxò* in its present usage is halfway between ‘meat’ and ‘animal’: it has extended its meaning from ‘meat’ to ‘edible animal’ but not yet to ‘animal’.⁴ With *tc’áó-kx’óxò* ‘bush-animal’ and *cáà-kx’óxò* ‘water-animal’ it is still primarily ‘bush-meat’ and ‘water-meat’ that

² Prof. Dr. Oswin Köhler worked throughout his 35 years of intensive fieldwork with a small group of Khwe who settled outside of their homeland and lived next to a Catholic mission since the early 1960s. Influence from the mission and the surrounding Catholic Mbukushu hosts may account for the observations made by him.

³ *Xó* means ‘thing, being’. It can be used to refer to ‘human beings’ as *xó-na* (xo-3.Pl.C), or *tcí-xò* ‘growing-xo’, i.e. which includes humans, animals and plants, or *xó-dji* (xó-3.Pl.F.) which includes things, animals and plants, but not human beings.

⁴ Dixon 1980:102-3: ‘One pervasive characteristic of Australian vocabularies is the use of a single lexeme to refer both to some cultural object and also to the natural source from which it is obtained. Thus the commonly occurring noun *minya* means ‘meat’ but is also a general classifier applying to any edible animal; ...’

Khwe think of when using these terms. The original Khwe term *llhéù-xò* ‘to feed – beings, things’, however, is today frequently replaced by *llhéù-kx'óxò*. Both terms refer to ‘tame, domestic animals’, which include *ápà* ‘dog’. Dogs would never have been eaten by Khwe, thus the new usage of *llhéù-kx'óxò* for domestic animal can only be translated as ‘tame animal’, and no longer as ‘tame meat’.

The main reason why *kx'òxò* has not yet extended its meaning into the collective term for ‘animal’ is that the lexeme consists of *kx'ó* ‘to eat meat’⁵ and *xó* ‘thing, being, matter’. Khwe will not accept *kúni* ‘crocodile’ and *ápà* ‘dog’ being referred to as *kx'óxò*, because Khwe do not eat crocodiles and dogs. Young Khwe, however, feel increasingly uncomfortable with this limited usage of *kx'óxò* and hesitate when asked for its English meaning. In out-group contexts, the lack of any term to convey the concept ANIMAL already fosters the use of *kx'óxò* as the collective noun for ‘animal’ with the young generation.

Among elders in natural conversation, the overall criterion to categorize animals is edibility. To them, this seems to be the only meaningful criterion to apply when animals as a whole are considered. They do not go beyond the basic distinction between *kx'óxò* ‘edible animals’ which is equivalent to ‘meat’ and *kx'óxò vé* ‘no meat’ i.e. ‘animals which are not eaten’. While a concept ANIMAL does exist among all Khwe (which resembles the global concept ANIMAL in colloquial usage), it remains unnamed, at least for the moment.

Animals may be assembled into groups on demand. When asked for the Khwe equivalent to the English ‘predator’, for example, Khwe will make up a group of hunting animals, by starting with the ‘lion’ *xámè*, as the best example. These animals may even be called by using *n#gí/õã* ‘annoying children’, which is one of several taboo names for the ‘lion’. The animals considered as belonging to the *n#gí/õã-dji* ‘lion-3:F:PL’ group or not, vary among individuals. The *óè* ‘leopard’, *wuú* ‘hyena’, and *llxévà* ‘wild dog’ are always members of such a ‘lion-like’ grouping, however, there is disparity, especially on smaller predators.

llí-kx'óxò ‘parent-edible animal’ is one of the taboo names of the elephant, and members of a ‘elephant-like’ grouping can be asked for. Because of their large size, the giraffe, rhino, and buffalo may qualify to be included, and, less often, the hippo does as well.

In general, the members of such groupings vary considerably and agreement among different Khwe might in some cases be restricted to only the best example, which is also the namesake for the grouping. It is obvious that such groupings are not part of a hierarchically organised taxonomy of the animal kingdom. The same animal

⁵ The other Khwe terms for eating - such as *lláé* ‘to eat vegetables, to chew leaves’, *#í* ‘to eat fruits, but also hippo meat’ - are not clearly defined. Khwe use them with varying meanings.

may be a member of several groupings, and such groupings are not used consistently as common references.

How external influence modifies the concepts by which Khwe classify the fauna can be demonstrated with *#íyò* snake, which is one of the very few collective terms in the animal kingdom. The most obvious deviation from ‘globally-prevailing’ understanding of what snakes are is the exclusion of *lòv̀à*, ‘python’. Older Khwe explain persistently, by applying the edibility criterion, that the python is not a *#íyò* and that, because of its delicious meat, it is one of the favoured *kx'óxò* ‘meat, edible animal’. This explanation, however, does not seem to provide a logical argument, because other snakes, such as the *lxèé* ‘puff otter’ and *tcíkì* the various ‘cobras’ may also be eaten. But with these latter reptiles, it is indisputable that they are *#íyò* despite the fact that they are eaten. The underlying concept which motivates the exclusion of the python from *#íyò* snakes, seems to no longer be known, not even to the Khwe elders.

An interesting aspect of the classificatory treatment of the python *#íyò* is that young Khwe in general consider the python to be *#íyò*. In their view, the elders fall short of a meaningful explanation for the exclusion of the python. Together with the increased influence from global concepts, young Khwe adjust the category *#íyò* to match the dominant concept of SNAKE.

The limits of the influence of formal education on conceptual adjustment are reached with *kùí-ngòrò* and *lám-tám-tc'í-gòv̀à*. Both species are usually mentioned when Khwe are asked for the different types of *#íyò* ‘snakes’. The first creature is said to live in a deep hole and to be able to swallow people. The second may be found in termite-hills. Two heads, one on each end, are the main characteristics of this latter *#íyò*. With regard to these mythical creatures, formal education had no impact so far, and even young Khwe are quite aware of the existence of these giant snakes. Their belonging to *#íyò*, the group of snakes is taken for granted, obviously a quite substantial deviation from a grouping with biologically defined snakes.

Among young Khwe, edibility is no longer the main criterion in looking at the animal kingdom. They seek to operate with the scientific taxonomies they are taught at school. Where they encounter “gaps” in the Khwe lexicon, for example in collective terms, they try to fill them. When asked for a Khwe term for insects, they may provide *lgíní*, the ordinary ‘house fly’, as a term to cover the concept INSECTS (Schladt 1997:19). In analysing the actual use, one quickly finds that *lgíní* ‘house fly’ is not an established term for insects at all. No Khwe will refer to, for example, the various important honey-producing stingless bees, such as *dínì*, *tcínde*, *kúmbè*, *xóm-dínì* and even more so *tc'ípa*, the ‘honey bee’ by using the term *lgíní*. The simple reason for that is that a *tc'ípa* ‘honey bee’ is not a *lgíní* ‘house-fly’; thus *lgíní* still means ‘house-fly’ and not yet ‘insect’.

Only some very few collective terms are established in Khwe: *djaára* ‘bird’, *léu* ‘fish’, *#íyò* ‘snake’ and *lámá* ‘beetle’.⁶ Common to all of them is that they are traditionally rather unimportant as sources of meat.

Observations which also reflect the above-mentioned utilitarian perspective on the environment in which ‘meat’ is the primary and ‘edible animal’ the secondary meaning can be made with the linguistic treatment of the flora. PLANT as a concept is not named in Khwe. The only collective terms for plants are *dòá* ‘grass’ and *yìi* ‘tree’, and, obviously, there is no way one could construct a hierarchical taxonomy with only two collective terms. While it is difficult to reveal the underlying concrete utilitarian concept for the term *dòá*, it is apparent with the term *yìi* for ‘tree’. The term *yìi* refers first of all to ‘wood’, and only in its secondary meaning its producer, the ‘tree’.

In Khwe the names for fruits and nuts also refer to the plants they grow on. Another example in which both - product and source - share a single lexeme is *pî* with the meanings ‘milk’ and ‘breast’. More complex is the lexeme *gùí*, which covers a whole sequence of meanings. This single term refers to the ‘fiber’, the plant ‘*Sansevieria aethiopica*’ from which the fiber derives, the ‘rope’ which is made of the fiber, and finally to the ‘snare’, which is made by using the rope.

Similar findings for Australian languages are described by Bob Dixon. He analyses the underlying strategy as ‘the use of one single lexeme to refer both to some cultural object and also to the natural source from which it is obtained’ (Dixon 1980:102). This according to Dixon ‘pervasive characteristic of Australian vocabularies’, is found in most African languages. The Khwe examples, however, let us conclude that it is not the natural sources, as Dixon seems to suggest, but rather the useful products, that were named first. Trees in general are called ‘wood’, names for fruits or nuts are also used for the plants, and edible animals are simply called ‘meat’.

Khwe follow the well-known strategy of semantic shifts, in that a concrete and useful item or feature is named, and more abstract meanings then derive from it. The extraordinary situation in Khwe is that we can still see the diachronic process of the semantic shifts taking place. *Dáó*, for example, still covers the entire range of meanings ‘footprint – animal/human track – trail – path – road - highway’. While old Khwe may still use this term with the more original meanings of track and trail, the younger generation predominately thinks of roads when they define the usage of this term.

In the latter example, the semantic shift has been motivated by changes in the physical environment that the Khwe live in. With our examples from the fauna and flora, changes are triggered mainly by global concepts that spread through formal education, with reference to scientific frameworks. The analysis of contexts of many

⁶ The term *t’í* ‘honey producing insects’ merits further investigation, as honey is a very important food to Khwe.

other transformations of conceptual strategies, however, is far more complex, as may be exemplified with the currently co-existing naming strategies and name types in personal names among members of the community.

6 Conceptual strategies in personal names

Each member of the Khwe community bears several names, different names that were given and are used by various people. A Khwe may receive and be called by distinct names from each, the parents, relatives, friends, priests, teachers, government officials, army personnel, or employers. These name givers follow contrasting naming strategies and select names from different sources. As a result, name repertoires of Khwe individuals are composed by names of different types.

Khwe choose among their various names according to contexts and specific objectives. Gertrud Boden (2003: 354-356) describes some aspects of Khwe name use practices and their relevance in the daily struggle for survival. In selecting from within their names repertoire, Khwe can choose among different identities; neglect or confirm affiliations and put forward claims or counter accusations. These social dimensions of Khwe name use patterns will only be mentioned marginally, as the main focus in this discussion is on the analysis of genuine Khwe naming concepts and their replacement by globally dominant naming strategies.

6.1 *The individual name repertoires of Khwe*

Apart from additional names, Khwe bear a “true” name, by which they are commonly known within the community. These “true” names, like the strategies underlying the Khwe naming of aspects of the environment, reflect a deep-rooted respect for the individual: “True” Khwe names are individual names, in that each name is associated with one specific name bearer. These “true” names are of central interest to the analysis of naming strategies and concepts.

Not even good friends and close relatives know all names of a person. Name repertoires of a Khwe may include several names given by non-Khwe, such as issuing officers of identity documents, commanders in the army, teachers at school, and priests in church. These official names of Khwe as citizens, soldiers, students or members of a church are unfamiliar and generally not used outside of their particular domains. Within the community additional names for individuals come up, such as nick names or mocking names. There are also other Khwe naming customs, such as the so-called *mbuca*-namesakes, in which friends may call each other by the same name, a secret name which is only known to them (Boden 2003:244).

Proper “true” Khwe names, the ones which are commonly known, used by most and also assumed by the name bearer, are given by the parents, other close relatives or

age mates. Any Khwe lexeme can become such a “true” personal name. There is no pool of personal names from which Khwe select; thus, there are obviously no gender-specific sets of names for girls and boys. A lexeme or compound becomes a Khwe name simply by its use as a name for a particular person. Since compounds can also become names, existing Khwe terms from regular use, as well as newly-coined, i.e. invented expressions may serve as personal names. Khwe names can be produced without any limit, and today, there are thousands of such names. By far most Khwe hold such individual names and many have even several of them. This is in sharp contrast to the very limited set of personal names of other communities speaking Khoisan languages, such as described for the !Kung (Richard Lee 1986).⁷

External influence has created different types of personal names, all of which coexist in the Khwe community today. Long-term contact with Bantu speakers, followed by extensive contact with Portuguese- or Afrikaans-speaking armies, and more recently English-speaking people have contributed to the present range of personal names found in the Khwe community.

6.2 *Typology of Khwe names*

Different types of personal names according to their sources and the applied naming strategies (Table 1) may be distinguished. While the first three types of names share the main conceptual name feature of Khwe names, i.e. each name has one bearer only and for that are “true” Khwe names, the fourth type of names increasingly dispenses with this nonconformist concept (Table 2).

Table1: Typology of Khwe names (sources and strategies)

Types 1 – 4	source languages	lexical pool	strategy	examples
1 genuine	Khwe	any existing lexical item and innovated compounds	Khwe	Kx'ám-goe ‘mouth-cattle’, Kx'āi ‘liver’, Ndó-ŋǔ ‘hate-world’
2 borrowed terms	English, Afrikaans, German, Bantu lgs.	any existing lexical item	Khwe	Supa ‘soup’ (Engl.), Kipi ‘chick’ (Afrik.), Heutu ‘car’ (Ger.)
3 borrowed names	Bantu lgs.: Mbukushu, Nyemba, ..., Afrikaans, German, English	limited sets of existing names	Khwe	Mbongi (Mb.), Spreek (Afrik.), Kohler ‘Oswin Köhler’ (Ger.)
4 foreign names	English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, German	limited sets of exiting names	globally-dominant	Johannes, Mathias, Stefanus, Abraham, Suzanna, Anna

⁷ Only thirty-six men's names and thirty-two women's names were in use by residents in the Dobe area in 1964. Lee counts more than 20 bearers for several names (Lee 1986:86ff.). The total !Kung population of the Dobe area at that time was approximately 400 (Howell 1976:139).

Table 2: Conceptual features underlying Khwe names

Types 1 – 4	own lexicon	innovated/ unlimited	gender-neutral	individual	tabu
1 genuine names	+	+	+	+	+
2 borrowed terms	-	+	+	+	+(?)
3 borrowed names	-	-	-	+	+(?)
4 foreign names	-	-	-	-	-

Type 1: Khwe names from Khwe lexical sources

The first type of names may be considered as the genuine Khwe names, in that they have all of the characteristics of Khwe names noted above.

Khwe above a certain age usually answer the question ‘Is this a Khwe name?’ with either ‘Yes, the owner of this name lives in so and so!’ or ‘No, this is not a Khwe name! There is no Khwe who is called by this name!’ These statements are based on genuine experience and knowledge: Khwe, when they have reached the early 20s, feel that they know most of the approximately 2000-3000 adult Khwe by their individual Khwe names, despite the fact that they are scattered over five countries. One may ask this question by choosing any Khwe lexeme randomly, as Khwe may be called anything: *Dáó* ‘road’, *Thùú* ‘night’, *Djàó* ‘work’, *Gyamì* ‘to throw’,... This clearly illustrates that there is no defined lexical pool of Khwe names, all Khwe names are invented and any Khwe term may become a person’s name merely by its use as a name.

Frequently, names are said to be given to a child by the mother as a result of events that happened or conditions that she experienced during her pregnancy and delivery. Explanatory stories associated with names seem to be of marginal importance to most Khwe. A mother named her son *Xúnú-tcò* ‘snoring-tcòò’ because she was snoring during the time of her pregnancy. *Ává-tcò* ‘carrying the child on the back-tcòò’ became a name because the mother had back pain during pregnancy from carrying her older child on her back. New names might come up later in life, for example, after accidents *Kúú-vé* ‘walk-not’ or illnesses *Gúbú* ‘leprosy’. For most personal names, however, naming stories are unknown.

It happens that children may be named after a cherished person, such as an ancestor or a well-known person. An uncle or a grandfather may be the namesake of a girl as there is no gender bias with Khwe names. In these cases, two or more Khwe share the same name, however, this is not very common and if a name is perpetuated in this way, it is the namesake remains the ‘owner of the name’ that will always be associated with that name and use the name as a “true” name. Another name is used to identify the same named individual in order to distinguish her or him from the true ‘owner’ of the aforementioned perpetuated name.

Brenzinger (1999) conducted research on personal names by examining names that have *tcóò* ‘supernatural power’ as a component. As already mentioned above, *tcóò* is a central concern for Khwe in their daily life. This is also reflected by the large number of names with *tcóò* as a component. The supernatural power *tcóò* includes negative aspects and may therefore cause illnesses, but it may also be positive, as a healing power and medicine. Most illnesses are caused by *tcóò* and, at the same time, can only be cured by the use of *tcóò*. *Tcóò*, negatively used, can be sent by ancestors or sorcerers as *l/xàó* ‘spear’ to harm or even to kill people. Certain plants and animals possess *tcóò*, and blood is permanently loaded with this supernatural power.

In this sample of names, the semantics of the modifiers of 101 *tcóò*-names in which *tcóò* is the head of the compound were analysed. Verbs of action modify 26 instances of *tcóò* in that sample, followed by fourteen for verbs of cognition and utterance. Body part nouns constitute thirteen *tcóò*-names and verbs of motion make up nine more. Health and disease, with nouns such as fever, illness, and madness, and verbs such as shiver, suffer, and cough, add up to thirteen *tcóò*-names.

Among the eleven adjectives that occur in initial position in *tcóò*-names, no significant bias for either negative or positive meanings can be established. In fact, the reduction of meanings of *tcóò*-names to either positive or negative aspects can not be considered appropriate. Being the supernatural power, *tcóò* possesses both negative and positive features at any time. Analysis of the underlying concepts of meanings of Khwe names through discussion of only the *tcóò*-name sample cannot produce representative results for Khwe names in general.

There seem to be hardly any restrictions with regard to the semantic fields from which Khwe names may be adopted. Animal names, body parts and infrastructure seem to be among the more common sources for Khwe names. Some examples are: *Cándá* ‘honey-badger’, *Kx’ám-goε* ‘mouth-cattle’, *Góává-goε* ‘Mbukushu-cattle’, *Kx’áĩ* ‘liver’, *lÉú-ŋũ* ‘big-world, big-country’, *ŋũ-dáó* ‘world-road, country-road’, and *Ndó-ŋũ* ‘hate-world’. Compound names with *ŋũ* ‘world’, *dáó* ‘road’ and *goε* ‘cattle’ are numerous, but those with *tcóò* ‘supernatural power’ seem to outnumber all others (cf. Kilian-Hatz 2003).

Type 2: Khwe names from borrowed terms

A second type of name has arisen wherein the underlying Khwe concepts of names have been retained, but other languages, such as English and Afrikaans, have been exploited as lexical resources. These second type of names share all conceptual features with genuine Khwe names, except that they are not of Khwe origin. They do not exist as proper names in the source languages: Khwe turn borrowed terms into “true” Khwe names.

Quite a number of Khwe names have been created by applying the Khwe naming strategies, in which each lexical item can serve as a name, to English and Afrikaans as source languages. Such names from English include *Winders* ‘winter’, *Cámá* ‘summer’, *Códjà* ‘soldier’, *Supa* ‘soup’, *Winna* ‘winner’, *Spatera* ‘hospital’, *Dora* ‘Dollar’, *Ballas* ‘balls’, *Fanny*, *Black*, *Ferry*, *Mista*, *Judge* and *Cowboy*. Khwe names from Afrikaans are, for example, *Kipi* ‘chick’, *Sondag* ‘sunday’, and *Wulf* ‘hyaena’. In addition, a few such Khwe names show German influence, such as *Heutu* (from “Auto”) ‘car’. Other names have been taken from a wider African context, such as *Zaire*, *Mbundu*, *Unita*, *Zulu* and *Tokoloshi*.⁸ Most of these names have stories, such as the one given for *Tokoloshi* in the notes. Such stories may explain why a borrowed term became a name of a specific person.

Type 3: Khwe names from borrowed names

Names of a third type are borrowed proper names, i.e. proper names of other languages. Bantu languages spoken by neighbouring groups are main donors of such borrowed names. In the source languages, such names belong to the limited set of gender bias proper names, from which parents may choose names for their children. In their usage as Khwe names, however, they become individual names, with one single bearer of each such a name, or better with “owner of the name” as Khwe prefer to say. In that they are used as “true” Khwe names, and all know *Ndumba* or *Mbongi*.

Many Khwe, mainly those born in the first half of the twentieth century, are known by names which originate from Mbukushu or other Bantu languages. Names like *Kafuro*, *Mbongi*, *Ndumba*, *Moyo* and *Dihutu* refer to individual Khwe, and even though they all passed away long ago, they are still remembered individually by those names.

It is the surname of the German scholar ‘Oswin Köhler’⁹, which became the “true” name of a Khwe. *Koler* is a proper Khwe personal name, but in German, it is a surname only, and for that reason might be classified as being in between type 2 and type 3.

Type 4: Foreign names

Finally, the fourth type comprises proper first names of English, Afrikaans and Portuguese origin. These names spread and, in doing so, jeopardize the very basis of the

⁸Tokoloshi received this name during the time of his contract work in the mines of Johannesburg, South Africa in the 1950s and has since then been known by only that name. Sigrid Schmidt studied the history and legends of Tokoloshi in Namibia and states that they first appeared in Namibia in the early 1970s. ‘Then, however, they seemed to be something new, and at that time all the elderly people assured me that they only had learned about the Tokolossi (sic!) during the last years’ (Schmidt 1998:409). ‘Tokoloshis’ appear in different forms, very often as little men who are associated with witchcraft. The Khwe with the name Tokoloshi is not only short in size, but is also well-known for his knowledge of supernatural powers.

⁹Among the Khwe, Köhler (see note 3) is widely known as Khwedam, lit. ‘Khwe-tongue’, the term used for the Khwe language.

Khwe naming concepts, in that these names are no longer necessarily “individual” names. Still only few Khwe assume such names for everyday use, mainly for the reason, that mistakes in referring to individuals are almost unavoidable.

Nevertheless, Christian names from English, Afrikaans, Portuguese and German have become popular among the younger generation. Such names are *Johannes, Mathias, Paulos, Antonio, Stefanus, Abraham, Suzanna, Sofina, Rebecca, Regina, Anna, Coetzee, Theuns, Spreek*, etc. Still most of these names occur rarely within the Khwe community and Khwe might still claim to know the owner of, for example, the name *Antonio, Spreek* or *Sofina*. But with the numerous same-named *Johannes* and *Mathias*, to identify one “owner” is impossible. There is not yet an established system of family surnames in place, and in order to identify a Khwe with such a more common Christian name, Khwe mention the settlement, the “true” names of the parents or more often, specify such names, like *’eú Mathias* ‘the big Mathias’.

6.3 *Cultural dimensions of conceptual loss in Khwe names*

These four types of names coexist among the members of the Khwe community, but by far most Khwe still assume also “true” Khwe names. “True” names are not easily revealed to others, especially not to non-Khwe, as this may put the name bearer at risk. Not with criminal accusations, such as in reported crimes to the police or game guards. “True” names are hardly ever used in such alien contexts involving strangers. Instead, real threats are experienced within the supernatural spheres, as “true” names can be misused in spells and charms. Knowing a “true” name of a person may allow the total control over all aspects of life and death.

Calling names of plants, animals, people, even of inanimate objects may evoke and set dangerous powers in motion. Khwe handle even plant names with greatest care, as the consequences in providing such a name unpredictable. Just looking at the white flowers of a particular climber may cause madness; touching one of the various poisonous plants may be fatal or at least cause severe sickness, and most dangerously, the supernatural power *tcóò* may reside in any plant. By revealing the name of a plant, a person may be exposed to threats from life governing supernatural powers.

Names of dangerous animals should never be mentioned while hunting and gathering. In the bush, hunters and gatherers are vulnerable, in fact easy prey to predators. Just whispering *xámì*, the proper term for “lion”, may call this dangerous animal to come. For that reason, Khwe use cover or taboo names for such animals on hunting trips.

Similarly, to call a “true” Khwe name of a person may have a strong impact on the name bearer’s life. “True” names are said to have been even a greater concern in the past. One of the cultural restrictions associated with names is still retained, that is the

general taboo to mention the names of in-laws. If a person violates this taboo, they usually have to compensate the in-law by paying a fine. This cultural practice is still followed with “true” Khwe names (type 1-3). The taboo of not mentioning in-laws’ names, however, is increasingly abandoned with the foreign names of type 4.

At least in Namibia, many Khwe do not yet possess any official documents and with the others, official names have entered the IDs that are mostly unknown within the community or at least unfamiliar. Most Khwe have decided to provide Christian or Bantu names to the issuing officers as their Khwe names very often cause spelling problems: they are unfamiliar, unwritten and may include clicks and ejectives. In this way, ad hoc assumed names entered the official papers that are not known to other Khwe, even to close relatives and friends. There are even holders of the documents themselves, who don’t know what names have been recorded, as most can’t read.

Khwe are increasingly forced to adopt the official globally dominant system of first and surnames, i.e. personal and family names. Children are asked for such names at school, patients in the clinics have to provide them and elders need to register with such names for their old age pensions. Khwe may use the first name of the father in cases where a family ‘surname’ is required. With the exception of a very few families, in which the first name of the grandfather is used, there are still no perpetuated surnames. The growing exposure to administrative contexts will lead to the replacement of the nonconformist Khwe naming concept by the globally dominant standards. Cultural practises associated with “true” Khwe names will disappear along with this adjustment to global views of the world.

7 Outlook: the way to uniform globally shared concepts

As we struggle to learn more about nonconformist conceptual structures in the languages of marginalized societies, we realize that these habitual thoughts, the ones diverging from the globally dominant concepts - are the most vulnerable assets of these languages. Even though children may still acquire and speak the language of their grandparents, many no longer share their underlying concepts. The specific experience possessed and the wisdom generated by the ancestors is no longer the prime reference in most traditional communities. Such societies are rapidly changing in almost all domains, including their living conditions. Most young people regard the factual and ideological knowledge conveyed in formal education at school as more relevant in facing everyday challenges than the heritage wisdom offered by their elders. Young members of ethno-linguistic minorities, even those who still live in remote areas, already share globally dominant concepts. Religious mission work spreads the monotheistic idea of the world religions, mainly Christianity and Islam, and replaces and transforms traditional belief systems. Formal education, mass media and trade

address all aspects of life and increasingly homogenise the perceptions of what is essential for satisfying basic needs.

For decades, culture-specific thinking in non-industrialised communities has been studied with various focuses such as flora, fauna, colour, space and time. In the search for universal conceptual categories, very often fundamentally differing cognitive systems have been overlooked. Nonconformist concepts diverge fundamentally from concepts underlying so-called “World” languages and cultures. Such concepts have been widely ignored and, more often, unwittingly adjusted to familiar norms by the documenting scholars in their language descriptions. In recent years, however, the importance of culture-specific views on the environment in shaping the concepts underlying languages has been increasingly acknowledged in cognitive linguistic science.

Stephen Levinson (2003:15-16) states that ‘The diversity is not just a matter of distinct forms of expression – the very underlying ideas are distinct. These different semantic notions correlate with different non-linguistic codings of special scenes. In all probability, these correlations reflect the power of language, in making a communicational community, to construct a community of like thought.’ A rich conceptual diversity in the world’s languages as revealed in more recent studies challenge some of the blunt claims on language universals. The universally postulated principles of hierarchical classification of the physical environment, for example, have become a matter of dispute. Some scholars take a non-discrete perspective as a framework for analysing the underlying principles of classification and apply a prototype model for explaining membership in classes. They find a rather flexible, fuzzy and a-hierarchical way of classifying the environment as an underlying concept in quite a number of languages of non-Western societies.

Hunter-gatherer cultures and concepts are at the verge of extinction and, as a consequence, a wide range of nonconformist concepts will soon be lost. Some of such nonconformist concepts of Khwe, a language of former hunter-gatherers, have been described above. Language use among young Khwe shows that many of Khwe concepts diverging from those found in the expanding world culture have been replaced by them already. The living conditions of young Khwe differ fundamentally from those of past generations. Calendars show them years, months, weeks and days; watches tell the hour of the day; distances between places are measured in kilometres and no longer in walking-time-distance; and coins and bills from national currencies are counted. Considering these as driving forces in Western-value systems, it seems that, as of now, a uniform conceptualisation of time, distance, age, and counting, exists in most societies throughout the world.

In documenting the concepts of endangered languages, the controversy of radical universalism vs. radical relativism will soon become meaningless, when diverse concepts and their linguistic consequences disappear. Unique concepts, that is, those that differ from “globally dominant” concepts, are lost at an even higher rate than languages themselves. In most cases, the unique concepts of speech communities disappear with the extinction of their ethnic language, because cultural assimilation coincides with or even precedes language shifts. Thus, basic concepts have very often already disappeared when reduced to a cultural relic, the language itself also vanishes. The loss of ‘conceptual’ competence among the younger speakers of endangered languages therefore is a warning sign foreshadowing the loss of language proficiency. The window which permits us to look into some unique concepts of the world, such as those still vivid with the Khwe elders is rapidly closing.

Abbreviations:

ADVZ	adverbialiser
CAUS	causative
F	feminine
FOC	focus
FUT	future
M	masculine
OBJ	object
PAST	past
POSS	possessive
PRES	present
REF	reflexive
SG	singular
II	juncture II
1	first person
2	second person
3	third person

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