

Hai||om Youth Workshop Report

Etosha and Ondera, 8th – 17th of August 2018

1. Background

The Hai||om are one of several San groups in Northern Namibia, counting about 10,000 members. Following colonial land dispossession, the group finds itself today widely dispersed – some Hai||om live on government resettlement farms, others in informal settlements around small towns, still others on agricultural estates earning their living as farm hands. In contrast to other groups in the country, since Namibia's independence in 1990, they have not been granted access to communal lands.

Their ancestral lands are situated in what is known today as Etosha National Park, a tourist destination of great importance to the national economy. The Hai||om were evicted from their homeland in the 1950s, at a time when the dominant nature conservation paradigm dictated that protected areas should be free of people – even of the ones who had cared for these lands since time immemorial and guaranteed its continuing existence. This “fortress conservation” model based on the exclusion of local people has lately been the focus of widespread criticism. Increasingly, there is an appreciation of indigenous peoples as stewards of their lands as well as a growing acknowledgement of their valuable contributions to biodiversity conservation, ideally going hand in hand with land security.

Jan Tsumib is one of the few remaining Hai||om elders who was born in Etosha and who had spent his childhood there. When we met him, he expressed a strong sense of urgency to stop the erosion of his people's culture and historical memory. He yearned for an opportunity to transmit his knowledge to the younger generation. Together we envisioned taking a group of Hai||om youth to Etosha. OrigiNations then supported him and his community to organise and implement a 10-day immersion workshop at the ancestral sites within the national park.

2. Preparations

This pilot workshop, which was a direct response to Jan Tsumib's dream, took place at the facilities of the Environmental Education Centre of Etosha National Park, between the 8th and the 17th of August of 2018. It was the first time a group of Hai||om had used the facilities in this way – lodging, exploring, learning and working together in spaces usually reserved for outside school classes or social groups. Gaining permission to do the workshop within Etosha was made possible by the high level of esteem that Jan Tsumib held among the park employees, who had benefited from his immense knowledge of the Etosha ecosystem during the 30 years he had worked there as a ranger. They had learned from him how to survive in the bush and some claimed he had saved their lives on several occasions. As a clear acknowledgement to the enormous contribution he had made to the conservation of the protected area, these old colleagues, who had over time become park officers, moved heaven and earth to make Jan's wish come true.

These grateful mid-level officers made possible that, in only a few days, we were granted permission to use the facilities of the Etosha Environmental Education Centre. During eight days, the bungalows, kitchen, and lecture room of the centre were put at our disposal. Moreover, the park administration went out of its way to facilitate two of their vehicles to collect all participants from Ondera Farm, and drop them off at the end of the workshop. They also provided a large game-drive vehicle during two full days.

The pilot workshop that took place at Etosha National Park, and subsequently at Ondera Farm, between the 8th and the 17th of August of 2018, was a direct response to Jan Tsumib's aspiration. Its objective was to offer him, and other Hai||om elders, the opportunity to start transferring to the young members of their community the values, knowledge and skills that are central to their cultural heritage. This first workshop also served to assess the situation and gauge the level of commitment by the youth and elders in embarking themselves in a deeper and continuing process focused on the protection and advancement of their culture. More significantly, it enabled the workshop participants to start generating their own strategies and proposals as to what such a process should entail.

3. Objectives

A. Bring together youth and elders

- Offer a safe space where Hai||om young and elders can reconnect, engendering trust and overcoming the increasing alienation that has arisen between generations.
- Create favourable conditions and opportunities for elders to transmit their knowledge, skills, memories and values, and for young people to express their curiosity and interest to learn from them.
- Re-establish the moral and cultural authority of the elders and foster respect for their insights and opinions, encouraging youth to discover the ways in which their knowledge and experience can be relevant in the solution of today's challenges.

B. Generate a space for learning, reflection and empowerment

- Encourage workshop participants to reflect on the present situation of their communities, on the rapid and radical change which is eroding their culture and impacting their traditional way of life, and on the implications and possible consequences this transformation can have in the future of the Hai||om people.
- Motivate young participants to consider the issues that affect their lives today – social alienation and low levels of self-esteem, discrimination, the challenges of the education system, unemployment.
- Enable a young generation of Hai||om to reconnect to their ancestral homeland and to reclaim, with the help of the elders, their own forgotten history.
- Provide situations in which participants can become inspired by and benefit from the achievements of their ancestors and the knowledge of their elders. At the same time, offer them the opportunities for self-empowerment, through the discovery of their own competences, skills and creative talent.

C. Development of future strategies

- Encourage participants to develop strategies aimed at reversing the erosion of their shared memory and the imminent loss of their traditional knowledge and language.
- Motivate participants to start generating their own proposals for tackling the many challenges affecting their community today.

4. Programme

The workshop lasted ten days - the first eight days took place at the Namutoni Environmental Education Centre inside of Etosha National Park, and the last two days at Ondera Farm. Eight Hai||om girls and six boys participated in the event, the majority of them between the ages of 16 and 24 (see list of participants). Three elders, Jan Tsumib and sisters Helena and Maria Khobes, accompanied the process throughout its entire duration. Three other adults and three cooks gave support to the activities. Including the OrigiNations team, we were 25 people in total.

Throughout the ten days, there were morning and afternoon sessions with activities and dynamics that included reflection and debate, transfer of skills and competences, excursions, and creative projects. Additionally, there were evening sessions that included storytelling, song and dance, and the screening of movies.

What follows are some highlights of the ten-day event that might give insight into the type of dynamics and processes that took place during this time:

Born in Etosha

Each participant received a copy of the two *Born in Etosha* booklets produced by the Xoms |Omis project, which centre on the history of the Hai||om in Etosha and documents the memories and knowledge of the elders born and raised there. Jan Tsumib, a core participant of this effort, brought out the set of cultural maps that were produced by the Xoms |Omis project and shared them with the youth, underscoring the importance of this work for the Hai||om people.

This offered the young participants a first opportunity to interrogate the elders about their childhoods in the historical settlements and about the way of life of their ancestors. A discussion ensued about the consequences of dislocation from the homeland as well as about the changes that have taken place since the 1950s and the effects these changes have had and continue to have on their communities. Ultimately, the conversation gravitated to the question of what it means to be Hai||om today.

The Homeland

Two full-day excursions were undertaken to visit the sites of traditional settlements of the Hai||om, the first day around the Namutoni area at the eastern end of the Etosha pan, and the

second day around Halali camp in the central sector of the park. Jan Tsumib was able to share with the youth the history of the several waterholes and cultural sites and recount the stories and anecdotes of events that took place there. The young Hai||om were able to visit, most of them for the first time, the places from where their families originate.

During these two days they learned about the joys and challenges associated with life in the bush. They were also able to sight a vast variety of species, including lions, rhino, elephants, giraffes, ostriches, eland, etc. Many tales recounted by the elders illustrate the close relationship the Hai||om had to these animals. The participants documented all this with photo cameras and a video camera that were put at their disposal.

The Bush as Pharmacy and Pantry of the Hai||om

One of the salient elements of Hai||om cultural heritage is the sophisticated environmental knowledge that was developed over generations living in the bush. As preparation to the workshop, the elders were asked to gather and prepare the various plants that were used traditionally as medicine, as food (veldfood), as cosmetics, etc. They presented several dozens of plant species – roots, barks, seeds and flowers – and they explained each plant's healing and nutritional properties, describing their preparation and general use.

The young participants were quizzed by the elders who challenged them to come up with the right medicinal plant to treat particular diseases. Both the elders and the youth themselves were surprised about how much the young know, fragments of information they have picked up from a parent or grandparent. They were encouraged by this and expressed their wish to learn more about it in a serious way.

Finally, the participants discussed about the present threat of losing this knowledge and about the need to find ways to preserve it. For inspiration, OrigiNations shared the work of a comparable group of indigenous BaAka youth from the Central African Republic, who had researched and collected information from knowledgeable elders and went on to produce an illustrated book of medicinal plants.

New Technologies

After a discussion regarding the urgency of documenting the knowledge and skills of the elders before it is too late, the participants concluded that it was a priority to learn how to master audio-visual recording techniques. Consequently, they were introduced to basic notions of photography and video recording. This was done during the first days and from that moment, they shared three simple photo cameras and a video recorder to document their own experience throughout the workshop. They proved to be very adept at it, producing fine photographs, and a series of videos for the exercise described below.

Preserving Memory

The young Hai||om had an opportunity to apply their newly acquired documenting skills while at the same time start countering what they themselves had identified as the biggest challenge to their community: the irreversible loss of the memory and knowledge of their people. The workshop participants were divided in three groups, each with the task of carrying out a video interview of one of the accompanying elders.

The participants were introduced to general interviewing techniques, which they complemented with some culturally appropriate devices of their own. Each group prepared its questions according to the life trajectory and assumed knowledge of the elder assigned to it. One member of each group operated the camera while the rest sat around the elder and carried out the interview. The questions ranged from their childhoods and different aspects of life in the bush to a variety of cultural topics such as dietary taboos, healing ceremonies, marriage, initiation and burial rituals, among others.

Later, all three interviews were screened and commented by the rest of the participants who highlighted the positive aspects and made recommendations for improvement. The young were very proud of this achievement and were pleased with the openness of the elders and their willingness to share. From their part, the elders appreciated the depth of the youth's respectful curiosity and eagerness to know more.

Visioning

During the workshop, the young participants had the occasion to reflect and deliberate on fundamental and complex questions concerning their life experience and the situation of their community. Among the topics they approached: the deeper implications of rapid cultural change; the difficulties of assembling the fragmented historical information into a shared memory; their struggle to permanently reformulate their identity as modern Hai||om. Against this background the youngsters were invited to participate in two creative exercises and express their newly-gained insights and evolving thoughts in a concrete and graphic way.

Past, Present, Future:

For the first exercise, the participants were divided into three groups: The first group had the task of drawing a historical Hai||om settlement, trying to recreate the way of life of their ancestors. This first group benefitted not only from the memory of the elders, but also from the information and photographs contained in the *Born in Etosha* booklets. The second group was asked to illustrate the present of their community, Ondera Farm, depicting the things they like and those they dislike about it. The third group was invited to envision the ideal Hai||om village, as they would like their children to live in the future. Each group presented their drawings to the rest of the participants, explaining their decisions and answering questions. Each illustrated proposition elicited new discussions and intense debate.

Cultural Centre:

The participants had a second opportunity to use their imagination and creativity. During previous discussions and analysis concerning the erosion of Hai||om culture, some strategies were suggested by the workshop participants. Both elders and youth had agreed on the urgent need to establish a cultural centre for the Hai||om people. Therefore, for the second creative exercise, two groups were formed and each developed designs for such a cultural centre. Both groups generated proposals which expressed a desire to contain and safeguard several endangered aspects of their culture, and which also offered the Hai||om diaspora a place for first-hand learning and direct experience of their traditional practices. At the same time, the projected cultural centres were treated as an opportunity to present the Hai||om culture to outside visitors.

It was significant that, through the spaces they created, the young Hai||om attempted to articulate the wish of bringing together traditional elements of their culture and specific aspects of the modern world. For example, one group's proposal featured a dual healing centre, where patients could be treated either with local medicinal plants or with conventional contemporary medicine, as appropriate. There were museum spaces and documentation centres using modern technologies and story-telling spaces for the oral transmission of knowledge. Drawing on the meaning of the word Hai||om, "tree dwellers", one group proposed accommodation for tourists which were designed as tree-houses.

The resulting designs were projected and proudly presented by each group. These two exercises, although cursory, served for the young workshop participants to start discovering their own talents and skills that had not been previously acknowledged.

Around the Fire

On several evenings during the workshop, participants gathered around a campfire in order to share traditional stories. Initially, it was the elders who did the storytelling as the young listened attentively. However, little by little a few of the young gathered the courage to tell stories themselves. The elders were pleasantly surprised at this. But it was only a few youngsters who were able to do so as they had had the opportunity to grow up with a grandparent and learned from them. In one case, a young woman had only started to learn the stories after marrying the son of a prominent Ondera storyteller who was happy to have found a keen learner in his daughter-in-law.

On some evenings the storytelling was interspersed with traditional singing and dancing. It was an opportunity for the elders, especially the ladies, to transmit some long-neglected group songs and dance-forms.

Self-esteem

Each participant was provided with a blank shoulder bag to carry the utensils and materials they received during the workshop. Towards the end of the workshop, they were facilitated textile paint and markers so they could personalize their bags with text and drawings.

It was inspiring to see most of them write in phrases like “Proud to be Hai||om” or write their Hai||om names instead of their more familiar English or German names. Often the bags were also decorated by elephants or other animals they had just seen during the earlier excursions to the waterholes.

Under the Tree

The last two days of the workshop took place at Ondera Farm. On one of these days, a community activity was organized, both as a way to inform the population about the objectives of the initiative, and also as a first effort to amplify the experience of the workshop and bring together the generations around the common goal of preserving and promoting the Hai||om cultural heritage.

For this purpose, over a dozen elders were invited to a session of traditional dancing. The elders, dressed in their finest, joined the workshop participants under a very large tree, a spot which used to be a traditional setting for cultural gatherings. After a timid start the atmosphere turned exuberant, the elders thrilled by the occasion to be able to have an audience of interested youth eager to learn the songs and dances disregarded for so long. It was clear that it had been a long while since such an event had taken place. The general interest was manifest by the many people that assembled, many of them young. The elders expressed their gratitude to the young and requested that the occurrence be repeated regularly. They still had “so much more to teach them”.

5. Results and Conclusions

Fortunately, all the original objectives were largely achieved, the results even surpassing initial expectations in some cases. This was possible because of the commitment of the elders and the enthusiasm of the young. Clearly, there is a desire to continue generating opportunities such as this one and both elders and many of the youth expressed their readiness to commit to a continuing process.

On the last day, after evaluating the workshop and suggesting priorities for future work, the young participants proposed a series of activities as the first steps of a larger longer-term programme of cultural revitalization. Among their suggestions were the following:

- Organize and consolidate as a group, meet regularly on weekends and assemble a larger number of interested youth to join them in their efforts.
- Create opportunities for learning and practicing their culture. Organize regular outings to the bush where children can be taught by the elders about medicinal plants,

management of the natural resources such as sustainable harvesting of veld foods. Also facilitate for young parents to learn from the elders so that they can teach their own children.

- Document the traditional knowledge, accompany elders to the bush and record their knowledge through text, photographs and video, but also committing it to memory. Do the same with other cultural expressions such as storytelling, song and dance.
- Support Jan Tsumib, who is illiterate, in his ambition to write a book registering his vast knowledge of Etosha and life in the bush.
- Organize classes in Hai||om language, enlisting knowledgeable elders to teach children outside of the school curriculum.
- Establish a provisional cultural centre in the bush where cultural activities and small workshops can take place. Ask the village head to grant them a site, ideally near the Ondera water point, that they can clear and arrange – a place where the elders would feel comfortable and transmit their knowledge to the younger generations.
- Facilitate meetings with the young members of the community in an effort to discuss social issues that concern them and start tackling specific challenges such as alcohol and drug abuse, high dropout levels in schools, unemployment, etc.