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# **Empowering Namibian Indigenous People through Entrepreneurship: The Case from the Nama People**

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## **Abstract**

The challenge emanating from the colonial and apartheid regimes on the Nama people of Namibia have not only resulted in them losing nearly half of its population, but they also appeared to have lost their social identity. To that end we continually find convergences and divergences in clothing and accessories, food, traditional dances, homes, and traditional beauty cosmetics, between the past and present. This chapter seeks to explore whether the Nama people have always used money to acquire the aforementioned past? If not, what have they done right in the past to acquire all these items? These are one of the few questions this chapter seeks to explore and understand, and the role Nama entrepreneurial activities play for their own socio-economic advancement. Critical discourse can lead to a better understanding and appreciation of entrepreneurship among indigenous people in Namibia. This will in turn result in an enhanced understanding of the role entrepreneurship and culture can play in both a local and international context. After a brief introduction to Namibia and the Nama people, the cultural values and entrepreneurial initiatives of the Nama people are discussed, followed by discussions, recommendations and conclusions. Research methods employed were in-depth interviews and participant observation.

**Keywords:** indigenous people, Nama, self-determination, culture, values and Namibia

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction to the Republic of Namibia and Nama people

Namibia, formerly known as Súd West Africa, is situated in the South Western corner of Africa, in sub-Saharan Africa. This young vibrant nation gained independence on 21st March 1990, following decades of colonial rule under the Germans and subsequently South African apartheid regime.

According to ILO [1], the Nama language is the only surviving Khoe language in Northern South Africa and Southern Namibia. The word “Khoe” means a person. In their own language the Nama people refer to themselves as Khoenkhoen (people’s person). It is interesting to note that up until 1994, the Government of South Africa was not aware of the presence of people who were Nama speaking. From a historical perspective the Nama communities managed to maintain communal land for grazing, which extended into Richtersveld National Park with limited hunting and planting. Nama’s were in constant conflict with the white settlers, and Basters. The Basters maintained their identity and moved from Cape Town to Namibia. The primary purpose was to find safer land. Namibian Nama people spoke Nama and Afrikaans and practiced pastoralism. The Nama people in Southern Namibia on which this chapter is based is subdivided into the following clans namely (see **Table 1** below):

During the colonial period, the Nama people were thought and seen as a threat and barbaric in nature. The colonizers were constantly seeking new ways and efforts to ensure that they are completely wiped out. This attempt was also done to ensure that they convert to Christianity or die. Under the apartheid law, Nama people that were not already assimilated into other native groups were forced to be registered as colored. Failure to comply with this rule was unavoidable and illegal. Nama elders were forced to hide their identities or misinterpret them

- 
- *Khailkhaun (Red Nation)*
  - *!Gamiñnun (Bondelswarts)*
  - *Aonin (Southern Topnaars)*
  - *!Gomen (Northern Topnaars)*
  - *!Kharakhoen (Fransman Nama)*
  - *||Hawoben (Veldschoendragers)*
  - *!Aman*
  - *||Ogain (Groot Doden)*
  - *||Khaulgoan (Swartbooi Nama)*
  - *The Kharo!oan (Keetmanshoop Nama)*
- 

**Table 1.** The Nama clans.

from their neighbors and sometimes even their children. This use of indigenous language bibles, including Nama was prohibited in Namibia.

Jacobs [2] narrated the pre-dominance of this tribe (Nama) in socio-economics and politics of South West Africa, today known as Namibia. The Nama people conquered, discovered, marauder and fierce resistance to colonial occupation of their land. The colonial forces reacted to fierce opposition from this tribe with mounted reprisal. The colonizers had strong weapons and ammunition and they killed, raped, maimed, drowned, fed to sharks, beheaded, departed and more than half of the Nama people were lost. Precious lives were lost including land, possessions and property in the hands of the German occupation forces. These latter mentioned painful experiences were told by the ancestors to their children. The Nama's were the most feared tribe by the Germans, not because of their military strengths, but because of their intellectual intelligence. This fear that the Germans had led to the establishment and foundation of concentration camps on which Drechsler [3] narrated as the "transfer of the Witbooi and the Bethanie people to Shark Island marked the beginning of a harrowing ordeal on what was referred to as the Death Island". The Nama's could not cope with the humidity and chilling prevailing climate and most of them died like flies. Although many Nama people lost their lives, their persistence, perseverance and determination can still be seen among today's generation in the twenty-first century.

This chapter comes at a very crucial and critical time in the Namibia history of the Nama people as the underperformance of the people impact the positive economy of Namibia as a nation. In addition the Nama young people in Namibia started the "*Landless Peoples' Movement*" recently. The Nama people in the Southern//Kharas region constitutes approximately 11,226 poor people, meaning that they are unable to access basic needs. The poorest areas in//Kharas are Berseba, Keetmanshoop rural and Karasburg.

## **2. Nama traditional culture, identity and values**

### **2.1. How do we identify a Nama person and tradition?**

Malan [4] described Nama people as people of medium height, has high cheekbones, a flat face, dark almond eyes and the Nama tribes and clans are defined by territory. Looking back into the nineteenth century establishment of centers where the chief resided and tribal government was establishment, each tribe had independent governments consisting of chief and elected council. Family life includes the practice of children living at home until they get marriage. Social gatherings are very frequent and usually happen at night around fire. Man and women usually start playing music which usually results into a dance.

As in many cultures, Nama traditions are passed down through generations and are critical in order to fully understand the ethnic group and Nama elders today narrates that, they know what they know, because of what has been carried on to them by the ancestors and that is the knowledge that enables them to distinguish between right and wrong as Nama's. Not just the term Nama, but the cultural practices they follow.

## 2.2. Gender roles

Nama women in the colonial days had important roles such as gathering and collecting food for the entire community, whether they are close knit family or not. The roles of men as hunters were irregular, thus it was important for women to ensure that the family is well taken care of. As revealed by Deacon and Deacon [5], Nama communities attribute women to good happenings; for example – a clear distinction can be made between female and male rain. Female rain is usually gentle and helps plants grow. Male rain is usually destructive and harsh. Another significant celebration on the Nama calendar is the woman's first menstrual cycle. During this celebration which last up to two weeks, in a traditional grass and reed mat house and the youngsters usually sit on an animal skin (see **Figure 1**). Elderly women guide the youngsters about what she is going through and the ceremony concludes with a dance out ceremony attended by local indigenous people.

## 2.3. The Nama dance

As stated by Jones [6], despite the colonial influences, the Nama people have declared these performances, known as Namastap (a step dance) which is a symbol of the Nama identity. The Namastap dance is performed at most significant events of the calendar. Social gathering, weddings, birthday parties' forms part of the list. Wedding preparations can last up to 1 year. The couple normally only gets married 6 months or sometimes more after engagement. From an anthropological perspective, issues such as gender relations, the impact of Christianity on the Nama people and the power of colonial influences can be observed in the dance. It is important to mention that during the dance when the foot is lifted away from the central axis,



**Figure 1.** Traditional Nama mat made from Springbok Skin and usual for girls when undergoing womanhood as well as bedding: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.



**Figure 2.** Nama learners at a school started as a missionary school by Rhenish and AME Churches in Maltahöhe/Daweb!gaos (Namibia): Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.

instead of lifting it away from the ground; they keep contact with it by sliding across its surface. This sliding action is what differentiates the Nama of !Khubus from other Nama groups.

#### **2.4. Church and education**

Church and education are the two major topics most Nama communities are eager to discuss (see **Figure 2**). These issues impacts their daily lives. Although most Nama's are not professionally trained and highly qualified, going to school and becoming a teacher or nurse is important. Teaching and nursing are one of the most highly respected professions in the Nama culture. Many elders had grown up in a time when church and education were the only ideas transferred to them by the missionaries.

### **3. Review of entrepreneurship literature**

Leff [7] defined entrepreneurship from the Schumpeterian perspective as a combination of already existing endowments to produce something which is novel, innovative or original. He further had the notion that entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as essential to economic growth and social development. Societies are not static and the entrepreneurs of today are not identical to the ones which existed before. In any country, some regions produce more entrepreneurial activities than others, because entrepreneurship cultural bound. When we

look at entrepreneurial activities of the Nama, Maori, First Nations or Aboriginal people, we usually talk about “indigenous entrepreneurship.”

Hindle and Lansdowne [8] argued that indigenous entrepreneurship is the creation, management, and development of new ventures by indigenous people for their own benefit. The desired benefits that are ultimately achieved can range from the narrow view of economic profit for an individual to the broad view of multiple people. Thereto, indigenous entrepreneurship creates socio-economic advantages for communities, and the outcomes derived from indigenous enterprise which extends to non-indigenous enterprise partnerships and stakeholders.

As claimed in Ref. [9], the common perception of indigenous business as a community-run venture is inadequate and renders indigenous entrepreneurs invisible, missing the fact that most indigenous people live in urban areas. It is also the argument of the researchers in Ref. [10, p. 6] that there is cultural legitimacy to some extent and indigenous identity and the desire to positively reflect indigenous values in the surrounding mainstream community.

According to the authors in Ref. [11], indigenous entrepreneurship refers to the entrepreneurial process of an enterprise which encompasses the desire of an indigenous person to become more self-reliant and socially cohesive. Also, as stated in Ref. [12], discussions around indigenous entrepreneurship in the academic literature is prominent in the Canadian and Australian literature, as scholars have done research pertaining to issues of indigenous people and how they sustain their livelihoods through self-employment based on indigenous knowledge. When looking at the academic literature and the definitions from various scholars indigenous entrepreneurship also looks into people’s own traditional customs, knowledge and values.

It is noted in Ref. [8] that people who are indigenous see themselves as a collective group working together on the basis of their common ancestry, history, language and, at times, religion. This observation came to light from a study which was conducted with the Aboriginals of Australia and Torres Strait Islanders. The primary motive behind this latter mentioned study was to search new paths to interpret indigenous entrepreneurship in the context of the indigenous people of Australia.

Indigenous entrepreneurship domain has two main areas which it strives to achieve name: (i) the essence of reconciling tradition with innovation; and (ii) the importance of understanding values and worldviews which are not necessarily part of the mainstream views.

- *The essence of reconciling tradition with innovation:* Generally, modern entrepreneurship is revenue driven and based on innovation. With culture being an identity, indigenous people are driven fundamentally to restore and preserve their own cultural heritage. The aim is to create an understanding of the language and cultural values so it may not be lost, but serve as a means to revenue creation as well ensuring the cultural heritage is not lost.
- Values and worldviews are usually not part of the mainstream but understanding these two aspects are important. Worldviews are regarded as backward; the benefits indigenous people can offer are sometimes missed out on by mainstream society.

It is also confirmed in Ref. [8] that indigenous entrepreneurs can offer many benefits to the mainstream society and the global village. Furthermore, if indigenous people intend to pursue a successful indigenous business activity, cultural heritage must not be lost as that is the good and service that is placed on the market, unique and innovative, a niche on any market.

Ref. [13, p. 563] reported that as part of the migration settlement of the Polynesian peoples in the Pacific the last 500 years indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand were viewed as indigenous to the land. Entrepreneurial activities of the Maori people in New Zealand were viewed as “Kaupapa Maori entrepreneurship.” This relates to the specific ways Maori people practice, think and feel toward activities related to the improvement of their livelihoods. Kaupapa Maori Entrepreneurial activities are focused on the development community rather than individual development and it is that aspect that drives the enterprise.

To the Maori, indigenous to New Zealand, the *whanau*, *hapu* and *iwi* play a very essential role in their survival. The Maori establish businesses for both profit and non-profit, this enhances their *whanau*, *hapu* and *iwi*, and also creates robust strategic organizations that impact the development of the Maori communities [13, p. 547].

An indigenous group of people are defined by the following characteristics as per the World Bank:

1. Attached to ancestral territories and natural resources;
2. Customary, social and political institutions are noticeable;
3. Systems of economic activity which are mostly geared toward subsistence production;
4. An indigenous language different from the language spoken by indigenous people in a particular country;
5. Individuals who view themselves as indigenous and are defined or are identified by other members of a distinct cultural group as indigenous.

As cited in Refs. [11, 14] also acknowledged that the aforementioned clearly places “indigenous people” to be distinct. Indigenous people around the world range between 300 and 500 million people and they constitute at least 80% of the cultural diversity on this planet. Five thousand (5000) different groups of indigenous people are recognized by the United Nations (UN). It is important that the rich diversity of cultural heritage is recognized by these institutions to both restore and protect the identity of these groups.

Drawing from the diverse insights and writings of the scholars above, and for the purpose of this chapter, indigenous people are defined as “the first inhabitants of a particular nation. Indigenous People worldwide still maintain their social cultural norms, language and institutions [11].” The next section will look at Entrepreneurship in a Nama cultural context.

### **3.1. Entrepreneurship in the Nama cultural context**

Entrepreneurial activities among the Nama people were from the early days about trading goods (barter) rather than that which involved currency. The community would usually exchange tea for sugar or Holsum fat (see **Figure 3**).

In addition in the early days they also traded their land for guns. Other items which were traded included shoes, accessories, livestock. Namas' traded items with one another depending on what they don't have. It is important to mention that the principle of sharing did not warrant Nama people to be involved in entrepreneurial activities till their time of trading with goods ended sometime in the twentieth century as goods became expensive and acquiring them would mean they must have money. Indigenous enterprises among Nama people which requires money is relatively very new and there is a lot of untapped potential for sustainable growth. Key entrepreneurial activities which the Nama people are involved in are Clothing and Accessories, Traditional Medicine, Perfumes and make up, Dances and Food.

- *Clothing and Accessories:* The Germans would cut of one leg of the trousers of the laborers, so that they would easily know that it is a Nama person. The dresses are designed with printed fabric material and the cut is very unique and distinctive (see **Figure 4**).
- *Traditional Medicine:* The Hoodia plant natural plant has now become a protected plant, which has been used by the Nama people since the olden days. Currently some Nama people hold licenses and sold this plant to create revenue. Other medicine and food products that has now become commercial from which the Nama people generate relative revenue is the !nara root and fruit that is used for medicine, oil and skin products as well as products which are eatable.
- *Perfumes and make up:* Although not sold in large quantity or to other tribes, the Nama people still use and sell their powder perfume made from trees and stones and are stored in small tortoise shells with small animal skin with fur is used as a brush, this perfume is known as Sa and its storage of the shell is known as !uros.



**Figure 3.** Holsum fat very useful for cooking porridge and Karakul Lamb: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.



**Figure 4.** Traditional Nama dresses and accessories: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.

- *Nama Stap Traditional Dance:* Nama people in this twenty-first century perform the Nama Stap and Langarm at festivities to generate extra income and to sustain their livelihood.
- *Food/Delicacies:* As pastoral farmers the Nama people usually did not sell their livestock to generate revenue, but livestock was sold when necessary to put food on the table for family. Other food items which the Nama people use to do for business includes meat (donkey, cow, sheep etc.), rooster brood, goat and sheep intestines, goat and sheep head, ash bread, bread baked in black pot and butter made from cow milk (see **Figures 5, 6, 7, 8**) for Nama food delicacies and drinks).

Except for the monetary benefits these above entrepreneurial activities are meant to generate and also sustain cultural identities of the Nama people and livestock. Numerous studies have looked into the indigenous community based enterprises and these businesses usually have a more communal purpose and not focussed on profit for the individual. According to Ref. [15],



**Figure 5.** Traditional Nama Potjiekos: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.



**Figure 6.** Famous Nama delicacy known as “Jom” made from bread flower and cooked in black pot: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.



**Figure 7.** Traditional Nama lamp for light in evening and calabash to keep sour milk creamy: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.

although these businesses embrace the basic business functions, they differ from most conventional businesses as they are not operating on the business doctrine models used by everyone else but have a much broader political, social, cultural, environmental and economic goal in which they resolve pressing social problems.



**Figure 8.** Traditional Nama bread baked in a black pot: Photo by: JP Van der Westhuizen.

Although the indigenous entrepreneurial activities of the Nama people are evident when the researchers drove through Namibia, these indigenous entrepreneurial activities are under researched.

#### **4. Methodology**

This chapter made use of primary and secondary data. Primary research was done among the Nama people, to capture the rich cultural experiences from the respondents. Twenty people from the Nama community took part in the in-depth-interviews. Oral storytelling was also used to capture meanings from the Nama people in terms of the daily battles they face and oral story forms part of the night ritual around the fire in Nama people. The authors also observed the behavior and the interactions of the Nama people on a daily basis. Secondary sources ranged from scientific journals, books, theses, conferences papers and internet sources. This chapter made use of the purposive sampling technique whereby the authors interviewed people which were very familiar with the Nama culture and identity.

#### **5. Discussions and findings**

The findings of this research gave the readers a clear direction of entrepreneurial activities among the Nama people of Southern Namibia. This study is one of the first of its kind to be conducted by Namibians from both an insider and outsider research perspective: The chapter in particular wish to answer the following key research questions:

- Have Nama people always used money as a form of exchange?
- Did Nama people have well-paying employment in colonial area?

- How did the Nama people use indigenous knowledge to make a living?
- How can indigenous entrepreneurship be defined in a Nama cultural context?

To answer these questions above it becomes important at this point in time to explore some of the responses from the interviewees.

It was interesting to note that one of the interviewees see the Nama people as very lazy and they have no work ethic. This is evident from the quotes below:

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Sara not her real name noted that: *“We are from broken homes, substance abuse, poverty and people who are very inferior.”*

Thomas not his real name noted: *“As a Nama I avoid risk at all cost as I do not want to fail.”*

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**Box 1. SARA and THOMAS.**

These two excerpts in Box 1 from Sara and Thomas are just one of the many challenges the Nama people in southern Namibia has to face with on a daily basis. Entrepreneurial success in the mainstream academic literature considers risk, tenacity and confidence as a major driving force for any entrepreneurial venture to succeed.

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*Another respondent Saul on the other hand felt that success in entrepreneurship is not guaranteed and they as a family will try by all means possible to run away from challenges and problems. For him personally he feels that there are simply no aspirations among the community, but he loves the culture and still has hope that there is a possibility to find something entrepreneurial in it*

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**Box 2. SAUL.**

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*A church leader (Bonja not his real name) amongst the local community has the notion that most of the young ladies become victims of teenage pregnancy (even at times from the same pastors) and alcoholism is king amongst the communities. The Nama youth look old, they appeared to be 70 years of age at 20.*

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**Box 3. BONJA.**

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*“Monica (not her real name) noted that Nama people are very judgemental people, they assume that they are always better than the next person. They will at times view their own teacher as intellectually challenged and give off that sense that nobody can teach them anything, while they are unable to do anything. This can also be regarded as self-destructive behaviour.”*

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**Box 4. MONICA.**

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*“Absalom a local youth activist said that 27 years into Namibian independence a lot of effort has been made by the government to preserve employment for the Nama people, but people simply do not show up for work and most job opportunities are given to other tribes (e.g.: Oshiwambo). The work ethic of my people is relatively very low.”*

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**Box 5. ABSALOM.**

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*“Tukulan (not his real name) noted that staying in school is very difficult for me as a young person, as my parents never had proper education. What can possibly change for me differently compared to their times? I have no father figure and whenever he visits he beats up my mom. As a Nama man we were mostly regarded as hunters. We would hunt wild animals and use the skin after the animal is killed to make clothing. Any clothing we received from the white settlers were usually torn, so we have to make patches and that is what created our own clothing identity.”*

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**Box 6. TUKULAN.**

This expression from Tukan relates to the issue of social identity. The way he was raised and that change can be at times beyond his personal reach. One thing Tukan is certain that his ability to make clothing from animal skin, which is entrepreneurial in itself, it we go back to the initial definition of entrepreneurship in the thirteenth century.

From the research methods used for this study it became clear that in the olden days currencies were use namely Shillings and Tikkies. These currencies could buy a lot of commodities. So the Nama people were aware of currency used by the settlers, but the barter system was also very prominent during those days, when they were trading with the Germans and among one another. The Nama people did not necessarily have well-paying employment as they were mostly shepherds and hunter gatherers. They were working mostly for the white settlers, but because the employment was in line with what they have normally been familiar with most of their lives, it was easier to integrate it into their daily lifestyle.

It is clear that the Nama people used their indigenous knowledge to make a living during the olden days. They could use their intellect, and they lived in extended families where they could learn and share ideas in a team. This later created an appreciation for each other among them as a unit.

Indigenous entrepreneurship according to the Namibian Nama people is what they are able to do with their hands regardless of the limited resources they possess. The entrepreneurial spirit and drive of the Nama people is strongly rooted in their cultural values and believe systems. It is more about what they believe in strongly and what they have been raised with.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations**

This chapter explored how the Namibian Nama people can be empowered through entrepreneurship. This research revealed that entrepreneurship was prominent among the Namibia Nama people, if we reflect back to the original definition of entrepreneurship to take your hand and do something. Research revealed that in the olden days when the Nama people of Namibia came into conflict with the colonisers or settlers they were constantly seeking new ways to defeat them. This certainly showed their tenacity, perseverance, persistence and patience. These latter mentioned qualities are very critical for any successful entrepreneur. The lifestyle of the Namibian Nama people is deeply rooted in culture and tradition. The uniqueness of the people lies in their strong ability to survive from hunting which is both a means to feed the family and also a very prominent. It became clear that indigenous entrepreneurship as defined by most prominent scholars refers to the use of indigenous knowledge by a certain tribe or group for their personal development or economic advance. This research forms part of the very few exploratory experiments which has been conducted in Namibia in terms of indigenous entrepreneurship. It is important to reiterate that the Nama people do not operate within isolation and that they are part of the bigger Namibian population. They have got a very unique yet significant role to make the economy better. It became clear from this study that the Nama people first need to develop a sense of trust and become more socially

and economically intelligent. Stumbling blocks to creativity and innovation can be the colonial psychological mind-set which is still evident among the Nama people. Since Namibian independence in 1990, numerous entrepreneurial development projects and job opportunities were brought forth for the people, but they are simply not interesting to the extent that they see their lives any different than it is today. For any entrepreneurial program to flourish or make a significant change to the lives of the Nama people, they have to buy into it. They must want it more than anything.

This research has shown that the Nama people used both currency and barter as a form of exchange in the early days. For indigenous entrepreneurship to prosper new programs which encouraged a change of mind-set and harmony is required. The entrepreneurial values of the Nama people need to be in alignment with their culture. New development frameworks which understand and accepts that the Nama have stagnated, mentally, physically and at times emotionally needs to be developed for the future advancement of the people. It is important to make the Nama people aware that they have to deal with the traumatic past, regardless of how difficult it is. Nama people need to be reassured that their uniqueness and perseverance brings something special to the country. Mentoring and role modeling programs of Nama people whom have succeeded against all odds needs to be showcased.

Nama people feel that they have no sense of meaning, because their parents are or were not educated. It will be good to teach character development interventions in schools. Nama people should be educated about the importance of technical skills such as farming, technical subjects. In addition is important that the land of the Nama people be restored as that is a very critical component for any Nama person. The ability to have land of one's own. It became clear from this research that the sense of and cultural identity of the Nama people to impart knowledge to other tribes and clans needs to be restored, by reassuring the Nama people that they can achieve great things. Self-awareness is a major component which needs to be addressed also that the Nama people develop an appreciation of their culture and develop a strong drive and motivation.

The Namibian National Policy of entrepreneurship development with particular reference to indigenous people needs be developed. Once people have a policy document that guides their existence and the role they are able to play in the community, taking ownership becomes much easier. In New Zealand and Australia there are specific programs for indigenous people and how they can take pride of their culture, which also making a significant contribution to the economy. In New Zealand the Maori people also talks about Maoripreneurship. This gives the researchers great hope that the possibility of "Namapreneurship" is feasible. It could be a relatively new dimension, but a possibility of exploring a new theory cannot be ruled out. Once Namibian policymakers understand the importance of indigenous entrepreneurship and implement policies which are cultural sensitive entrepreneurial activity will certainly thrive among the Namibia Nama people. Currently there are no successful entrepreneurship programs based on indigenous people from the Nama people. An entrepreneurial mind-set, spirit and culture need to be established first. Each tribe or clan in Namibia

needs to be reassured that they all have something very unique yet distinctive to offer. This study taught us that we must not only give food and money to beggars, as they will be forced to return and beg for more. However, if we teach them to be more self-sufficient, they will no longer be dependent, but they could help others too.

## Author details

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