Lesle Jansen: “In today’s South Africa Indigenous women are invisible”

Lesle Jansen, an environmental lawyer and Indigenous Peoples rights activist from South Africa is a member of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities in Africa of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights. She belongs to the Khoikhoi Indigenous community of South Africa and has dedicated over 20 years of her professional life to the promotion and defence of the rights of Indigenous and local Peoples in South Africa and the southern Africa region. Lesle spoke to us about the situation of Indigenous Peoples of South Africa and especially about the situation of Indigenous women.

By Nikita Bulanin - July 1st 2022

Nikita Bulanin, Debates Indígenas: Lesle, could you tell us about who the Indigenous Peoples of South Africa are?

Lesle Jansen: By our Constitution all historically disadvantaged South Africans are regarded as Indigenous. Those that self-identify with the global Indigenous movement, who self-identify themselves as Indigenous, are the Khoe or Khoekhoen and the San historical communities. These peoples obviously have their sub-formations, for example the Khoe have five main formations with several further subdivisions. Indigenous Peoples are a numerical minority in the population structure and account for perhaps 5% of the population.

NB: I hear from some Indigenous activists that to some extent the Indigenous movement of South Africa is a revivalist movement. Can you tell me about that?

LJ: Apartheid government divided the population into four categories: White, Black, Indian and Coloured. The latter included everyone who didn’t fit into the first three categories – children of mixed marriages, descendants of Malay labour that was brought to South Africa by the colonists and the Indigenous Peoples of South Africa. It was an enforced identity and although apartheid has been dismantled in 1994, this forced identity persisted through legislation and through the effects of apartheid. Some Indigenous Peoples of South Africa, especially those that managed to preserve their connection with ancestral land, managed to preserve their identity, while others
were totally assimilated into this *coloured* identity. When the African National Congress came to power in 1994 they said - “You (*coloured*) are not African” - after we were struggling alongside them in the anti-apartheid struggle; so we then had to find out who we are.

**NB: How did your family experience this process?**

**LJ:** My father took a DNA test and he discovered that his ancestry was Indigenous. He took the test to my grandmother. My grandmother fell into a two-year silence. She just would not talk about it; until she was ready. There was so much fear – fear of the church, of authorities – because she was from the generation of that transition from the life when they lived their Indigenous culture to this enforced *coloured* identity. So, revival here springs out from the *coloured* community that is starting to remember. It's a process, and a very traumatic one.

**NB: Since the fall of apartheid, there have been lots of programmes for the economic empowerment of vulnerable communities in South Africa. How have these programmes benefitted Indigenous Peoples?**

**LJ:** Actually, we have not benefited from development initiatives. We do have some of our stronger groupings such as Griekwa and Namas; they've got a history of an undisturbed relationship with the land and they are able to access some initiatives. But that is not reflective of a broader picture; those are exceptions rather than the rule. The development projects in South Africa are defined under specific legislation and how they've defined those areas perfectly sidesteps the areas where we [the Indigenous Peoples of South Africa] live. There's a legal basis for the post-apartheid government to exclude the Indigenous Peoples from development initiatives.

**NB: What lays behind such a neglect of Indigenous communities by the government?**

**LJ:** To understand the reasons behind this situation we will have to backtrack a little bit. What’s happening in South Africa is not outside of what's happening in Africa in general. European colonialism supported tribes who were sedentary. And our form of land use was nomadic, as hunter gatherers, and thus it was not seen as a valid or productive way of using the land. Our leadership structures were egalitarian and not as patriarchal. So, colonialism negotiated with other tribes and invested in them and that gave them power similarly throughout Africa.

**NB: And what happened when African states became independent?**
LJ: When colonialism ended Indigenous Peoples throughout Africa weren’t as politically strong as other tribal communities. So, now we are bearing the legacy of that history, left by the colonialists. We became scavengers on our own land. Our land became seen as the “no man's land”. Now when the transition happened from colonialism to the post-colonial era, politically strong tribes were able to include their priorities in the democratic process of South Africa’s development agenda. When the transition happened, they were politically stronger to negotiate the terms of self-determination, which excluded the Khoikhoi and San. But this isn’t a unique story, it is the case throughout Africa: hunter gatherers, nomadic pastoralists we are on the margins of society.

NB: What about Indigenous women? How is their situation different from that of other women in South Africa?

LJ: The life of every woman in South Africa is a daily struggle to different degrees. They are looking after their children, they have to make money to support their families, and the conditions are bad. What makes Indigenous women’s situation nuanced is their general invisibility. There is no such thing as an Indigenous women movement in South Africa and even in the broader South African women’s movement they are not visible. We are a minority in these processes. Often it is not about conscious exclusion, but either way we're impacted.

NB: How would you describe the situation of Indigenous girls and young women?

Our drop-out rates from school are many times higher than those of the majority communities. According to conservative estimates around 70% [of Indigenous school students] are not finishing school education. Many young Indigenous girls have aspirations to have a good education and to succeed, but in their daily life they are surrounded by drugs and violence, including violence in public schools where teachers are not really in control; where teachers are often afraid of their students. There is a lot of sexual violence. Teenage girls are unfortunately exposed to sexual violence at quite a young age. There are various reasons for this: the disruption of Indigenous education systems, patriarchy and the whole situation around public school system is deeply problematic. So, Indigenous Peoples are overrepresented in teenage pregnancy statistics.

Domestic violence is also a problem. Areas where Indigenous communities live in South Africa the foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is six times higher than the world average, due to the legacy of the
**dop system** where farm workers were paid part of their salary in alcohol, thus encouraging alcoholism among them.

So, while, when they are young, Indigenous girls want to have a good education, and succeed in their lives, but this very violent context and exposure to what teenage girls should not be exposed to changes their plans and makes them invisible.

**NK:** But surely there are also many inspiring stories of Indigenous women...

**LJ:** When Indigenous women do get a chance, they do amazing things. If you look at Ouma Katrina, it's just inspiring how she's teaching young kids the Indigenous language N|uu, of which she is practically the only remaining speaker. Or the case of indigenous activists including Indigenous woman leader Chantal Revell who went to the Constitutional Court last year. At the Court, they challenged our political system so that now a citizen can contest the elections as an individual and not just as a political party. That was quite significant. Or my mum. I'm always inspired by what she's done. She grew up as a coloured and nobody told her about her plant knowledge, yet she knows it. She uses our indigenous plants as a form of healing as she has done with my own son many times. But there are many, many Indigenous women who are doing excellent things when they get the opportunity.

**NB:** You talk a lot about invisibility of Indigenous Peoples of South Africa and specifically about the invisibility of Indigenous women. What do you think should be done to combat this invisibility; to change the situation?

**LJ:** Until recently South Africa had 11 official languages. Recently they introduced the 12th one. It is a Sign Language. But not Indigenous languages. So, to answer your question, the first thing that should be done to combat invisibility is to give official status to our ancestral languages. My son is 15 years old now, and for 15 years I have been struggling to register him under his Indigenous name because his name now is anglicized and that changes the meaning of his name. We had to do it to register his birth and ensure his citizenship. Secondly, our women are facing many historical stereotypes. For example, that we are falsely labelled as being promiscuous; that we are violent. This goes all the way down to Sara Baartman. She is a symbol of our suffering. [Sara Baartman was an Indigenous Khoikhoen woman who, in the 19th century, was trafficked to Europe]
where she was kept in slave-like conditions, displayed at freak shows, physically and sexually abused and whose body was used by racial anthropologists to prove long discarded racial theories. Even today you have institutions that still continue spreading these stereotypes. This has to stop.

And then, of course, our land, our ancestral land, should gain specific attention. There’s been legislation, court judgments all feeding against us retaining our land, or getting it back. We’re not properly at the table in the land reform and restitution process. We need South Africa to start allocating resources specifically for our development.

**NB: Would you recommend a book, film or a podcast to those who would want to know more about the Indigenous Peoples of South Africa and about the Indigenous women of South Africa?**

**LJ:** I would recommend film [Rooibos Restitution](#) about a key victory I was involved in as a lawyer. The film recounts the struggle of the Khoi and the San to claim part of the benefits of the Rooibos tea industry through the use of their traditional knowledge of this specie. I would also like to recommend a book [Keeper of the Kumm](#) by an award winning Khoikhoi journalist, [Sylvia Vollenhoven](#), she was also the Rooibos filmmaker. Sylvia’s book in my view is exceptional, she wrote as indigenous people think. And finally the book [The Cultural Heritage of South Africa’s Khoisan](#) by Dr. Willa Boezak, one of our indigenous historians.