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# EXPLORING ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE - THE KHOISAN

PRINCE MUZUVA<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The article seeks to unpack the status of access to university education by the Khoisan people in South Africa. Access to university education is one of the critical issues that concern the indigenous people, the first nations people – the Khoisan. In South Africa, access to university education is a challenge for the ‘Coloured’ people, who include the Khoisan community, who are relatively behind in terms of accessing university education compared to other groups. The question to be answered is how are the Khoisan people, as the aboriginal people in South Africa, accessing university education as their classification of being ‘Coloured’ does not depict the actual situation prevailing in Khoisan society. Data was solicited using document search and thematically analysed. The major findings of the study are that the Khoisan people are not accessing university education equally with other groups in the country.

**Keywords:** coloured, constitution, aboriginality, indigenous, post-apartheid, decoloniality

## INTRODUCTION

The commonly accepted understanding and definition of the term “indigenous communities, peoples and nations” is defined by Cobo (1986/7:379-382) as:

those that, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Marondera University of Agricultural Science and Technology, Department of Development Sciences. Marondera.

First Nations people across the globe exhibit some commonalities in their quest to participate fully in post-colonial societies they inhabit (Saito, 2020). This exhibits the struggles of the indigenous people in their quest for equal access to social services in the contemporary world, be it in Australia, Botswana, Brazil, New Zealand or South Africa, as colonisation processes, struggles, confrontations, industrial transformations and, more recently, globalisation, have shaped current discourses (Mello *et al.*, 2018).

Debates among and about indigenous, original or first nations people the world over, revolve around aspects such as self-determination, territorial and tradition/cultural preservation (Mello *et al.*, 2018). Minority school education (especially tertiary) if discussed is directly connected to such debates and themes but as a tool of acculturation, self-determination and emancipation (*ibid.*). Indigenous peoples bear the brunt of “historic injustice, including colonisation, dispossession of their lands, territories and resources, oppression and discrimination and lack of control over their ways of life” (Carino, 2009:25).

Statistical information on the conditions and situations of aboriginal people the world over is not readily and easily available as few countries are keen to collect the data by ethnicity. Nevertheless, there is differential progress by the indigenous peoples in the world in their social and economic development aspects, hence depicting specific national legal and policy frameworks that recognise, respect and promote their rights (Carino, 2009). As argued by Carino (*ibid.*), a recent study that used UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>2</sup> in studying the well-being of indigenous peoples, articulated that in both developing and developed countries (for example, in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States),

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<sup>2</sup> According to Carino (2009), the Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index that summarises that country’s average achievements in three basic human development aspects, namely health, education and a decent standard of living. Health is reflected by life expectancy at birth, with education being a function of adult literacy rate, combined primary, secondary and tertiary total enrolment ratio. The standard of living is measured in terms of GDP per capita (PPP USD).



indigenous people lag consistently and significantly behind the non-indigenous general populations in the sense that they live shorter lives (hence low life expectancy at birth), have poorer health care and education and even have higher unemployment rates. Indigenous peoples face huge disparities in terms of access to and quality of education and health *ibid.*

Indigenous peoples are typically characterised by a general lack of access to education due to their geographic and politically marginalised status (Champagne, 2009). Too often, in many countries education systems and “... programs fail to offer indigenous peoples the possibility of participating in decision-making, [and] the design of curricula, the selection of teachers and teaching methods and the definition of standards” (King and Schielmann, 2004:19) exclude indigenous issues - their cultures and practices. This results in education gaps that render indigenous students to have lower enrolment rates, report higher dropout rates and register poorer educational outcomes than their non-indigenous counterparts (Champagne, 2009).

The Maori people of New Zealand, Aboriginal Australians and the Khoisan<sup>3</sup> people in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia generally face similar challenges (Suzman, 2001). The challenges these indigenous people face include limited access to health and education (inclusive of university education) compared to other groups (Wodon and Consentino, 2019) and their original economies were destroyed with a “...good deal of [annihilated] social organisation, precipitous population declines and subjection to tutelary and assimilationist policies antagonistic to indigenous cultures” (Cornell, 2006). The issue of the Khosan people is a peculiar one as a minority class in Angola, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia (Barnard, 1988; Nurse *et al.* (1985) and they have remained on the periphery for centuries in terms of political representations, economic

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<sup>3</sup> The name “Khoisan” is a merger of Khoikhoi and San tribes or two groups of different people who shared similar cultures and languages.

empowerment and privileged policy-oriented access to education as a minority class (IWGIA, 2022).

In South Africa, the first people to be colonially oppressed were the coastal Khoisan communities in 1488, first by the Portuguese and later by the Dutch, who first camped at the Cape in 1652, seizing Khoisan land and farms in 1657. The seizure sparked the 1659-60 and 1673-77 wars of resistance by Khoisan warriors (Johnson, 2007; Boezak, 2017). The Dutch (1652-1800) and the English (1800-1910), two successive colonial regimes, used oppressive Roman-Dutch law and violence to dispose the indigenous people of their precious land (Bredenkamp, 1986). The Khoisan tribes, despite being the first inhabitants of Southern Africa (Secorun, 2018), were given derogatory, insensitive and ill-informed names like “Bushmen” and “Hottentots” by the European settlers to classify and simplify them (Bredenkamp, 1986; Elbourne, 1992; Robins, 2000; Boezak, 2017;).

Collectively known as the Khoisan, the various indigenous African communities in South Africa are known as the Khoisan, comprising the Khoikhoi and the San and the San groups include the Khomani San (found mainly in the Kalahari region) and the Khwe and Xun, residing mainly in Platfontein, Kimberley (IWGIA, 2022). On the other hand, The Khoikhoi comprises many groups, namely the Nama (Northern Cape Province); the Koranna (Kimberley and the Free State Province); the Griqua (Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces); and the Cape Khoekhoe (Western Cape and Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Free State Provinces) (IWGIA, 2022).

In South Africa, the Khoisan are generally not considered black; they were designated as ‘coloured’ and it is estimated that as of 2017, 8.8% (5 million people) of the country’s population were ‘coloured’, though it is a bit difficult to trace them to the Khoisan indigenous ancestry (Boezak, 2017; Secorun, 2018) as argued by IWGIA (2022), Indigenous groups in South Africa are approximately 1% of the 59 million total population. However, indigenous African San and Khoikhoi peoples are not formally recognised in terms of national legislation, but the South African Traditional and Khoisan Leadership Act, enacted in 2021, is enabling many previously “coloured” people to exercise their right to self-identification as San and Khoikhoi (*ibid*). The amorphous categorisation of the Khoisan as coloured in South Africa condemned much of their history to oblivion and facilitated their

social and economic exclusion (Van der Ross, 2015). Furthermore, the Khoisan, as coloureds in post-apartheid South Africa, are categorically among the lowest number of people with post-secondary education, standing at 2.4% compared to the Indian/Asian at 5.6%, White at 4.5% and Black Africans at 4% (STATS SA, 2016).

It is upon this background that the study is seeking to explore the extent to which the Khoi-San, as the First Nation of South Africa, are accessing university education, *vis-à-vis* other groups. The study highlights the reasons behind the superficial lack of access to university education by the Khoi-San.

### **THEORIES UNDERPINNING THE STUDY**

The study employs two theories, the Decolonial Theory and the Critical Race Theory. The Decolonial Theory emphasizes the need to correct past errors brought by colonisation, whilst the Critical Race Theory explains how racial inequalities can shape the form and development patterns of a community. These theories become relevant in the context where the Khoisan have been recipients of racial segregation through colonialism in South Africa and the effects of colonialism are still defining their social status.

#### ***DECOLONIAL THEORY***

Decolonisation is about “cultural, psychological and economic freedom” for indigenous people to achieve indigenous sovereignty — the right and ability of indigenous people to practise self-determination over their land, cultures and political and economic systems (Belfi and Sandiford, 2021). As argued by Mignolo (2011), decolonisation questions or problematises the histories of power emerging from Europe, a relevant claim in the context given the experiences of the Khoisan and colonialism by the Europeans in South Africa.

The Decolonial Theory is relevant in this study as its tenets of anti-Eurocentric hegemony (Quijano, 2007) best explain inequalities and lack of opportunities for education in an independent South Africa and Africa at large. Access to university education from the oppressed people’s point of view is a result of prohibitive Westernised policies and procedures (Ranjeni, 2015). In line with the above, Mignolo (2011) describes decoloniality as a form of epistemic disobedience. The disobedience comes in the context of disobeying and challenging the status quo brought by the Eurocentric

supremacist exclusive policies to the local people and the failure of the government of the day to make corrections to past exclusive errors. The Khoisan are part of the locals who have been on the receiving end of this discrimination and exclusion in the general social sphere (HRC, 2016). The above justifies the need for the question of access to university education by the First Nations people in South Africa to be answered as it is evident that they have been relegated from the general social front.

### ***CRITICAL RACE THEORY***

The theory was first applied as an analytical framework to assess inequity in education in the United States in 1994 (Decuir and Dixson, 2004). The theory is premised on attempting to make a strong case on patterns of exclusion, which is usually absent when analysing race and privilege in society (Parker and Villalpando, 2007). Further to the above, as argued by Hilirado (2010), the Critical Race Theory can play an important role when higher education institutions work toward becoming more diverse and inclusive. This assertion is relevant in the current study, where diversity and inclusivity could be the missing link toward enhancing access to university education by the Khoisan people in South Africa. In line with the above, Adonis and Silinda (2021) have argued that the Critical Race Theory can interrogate why transformation has remained elusive in higher education post-apartheid South Africa. This fits well into the scope of this study as the issue of transformation post-apartheid is a key component to be interrogated in the apparent aloofness of the Khoisan people in the contemporary mainstream university education of South Africa.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

From various authors, the study reviewed literature related to the Khoisan, particularly to do with their access to social development services. The literature covered the historical aspect, a comparative analysis with other indigenous people in other countries and how the Khoisan in contemporary South Africa is faring in terms of access to social services in the country.

Indigenous people the world over, are an extremely important resource to mankind in terms of their diverse “belief systems, cultures, languages and ways of life [but they] continue to be threatened, sometimes by extinction”. These people suffer discrimination, marginalisation, extreme poverty, undermined livelihoods and conflict (Zukang, 2009: v). Even though governments, multi-lateral bodies and international law are converging on

rectifying the ills faced by indigenous people, the state of the world's indigenous peoples and issues relating to them, for example, poverty and well-being, culture (land, language, identity, spirituality and belief systems), environment, education, health, human rights, violence, militarism and many other emerging issues, have featured in thematic areas within various debates and writings in the last 60 years (DESA, 2009). Notwithstanding the unprecedented, extraordinary and unparalleled progress,

there remains a lingering frustration that the [indigenous] poorest of the poor, the most marginalised and discriminated against, still do not enjoy their basic human rights, development or security” (DESA, 2009:1).

The world over, at all levels, it seems indigenous peoples have lower levels of literacy, experience fewer years of schooling and are among the most to likely drop out of school (DESA, 2009). Thus, the First Nations people have the least access to education of all the groups in various countries (Suzman, 2001). In New Zealand, only 13 of every 100 indigenous Māori school leavers achieve a bachelor's degree, compared with 33 non-Māori. The Maori, as argued by Gagné (2013), are suffering from alienation in participating at higher levels of education due to persistent institutional and structural alienation against the indigenous people and in favour of European settlers. In the USA, only 7.6% of Native Americans have a bachelor's degree, compared to 15.5% of the total population (Tsai and Alanis, 2004). This depicts an education gap and deficit among natives in both New Zealand and the USA. Studies and statistics of such a nature are lacking in Sub-Saharan Africa and it is the crux of this research to close such gaps in the literature.

Several international instruments treat education as a fundamental human right, for instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Dakar Framework of Action (2000), entirely echo the commitment and sentiment of world leaders and the international fraternity to provide access to quality education to all (children, youth and adults) (Champagne, 2009). However, worldwide, high levels of illiteracy, dropouts, low enrolments and lower academic performances are prevalent in and among indigenous communities in many countries due to educational exclusion owing to poor access to education, lack of funding, “culturally and linguistically inadequate education and ill-equipped instructors” (Larsen, 2003; Hays, 2004; Mellor and Corrigan, 2004; Lasimbang, 2005; Champagne, 2009).

Even though literature is awash with concerns about indigenous peoples' education, for example by authors like Larsen (2003), Mellor & Corrigan (2004), Lasimbang (2005), Cornell (2006) and Champagne (2009), ; much attention has been afforded to other continents as compared to Africa. For Africa, a few authors like Hays (2004) have written on indigenous rights in education. This is commendable but still, there is need to expand the narrative to include the privileges of access to university education in South Africa by the Khoisan, even though the author focused on the San people in Southern Africa (Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa and Botswana).

As argued by Hays (2004), the South African government is working very hard to make formal education easily accessible to the San people but, just like in other Southern African countries, there are high drop-out rates, low success rates and communities everywhere are frustrated and disappointed over lack of educational options availed to them. Studies are scanty on educational issues combing the Khoikhoi and San communities.

Furthermore, research related to the Khoisan has focused on culture , languages they speak and spoke (Barnard, 1988; Boezak, 2017), place names (Pettman,1931: 13-17; Nienaber and Raper, 1980; Raper, 2014), land, identity (Robins, 2000; Gabie, 2014;Boezak, 2017), leadership and social structures and religion (Barnard, 1988; Elbourne, 1992; Boezak, 2017). However, there is a standing lacuna in the literature on the issue of the Khoisan's access to education in South Africa, especially their access to university education.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study takes an interpretivism paradigm as it seeks to embrace the notion of subjectivity (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). A qualitative research approach purely guided the research. Data for the study was collected from secondary sources retrieved from existing databases and published scientific works including Google Scholar, Bok.org, local newspapers and international news media, among other sources. The literature search was guided by research questions that focused on the themes addressing the scope of the study. Content analysis was then used to analyse this data which was coded and then grouped into themes eventually used for the write-up of the study.

## RESULTS

The major findings point to the issues surrounding the legacy of colonialism, education, apartheid and the use of the coloured identity to denote the Khoisan as the major stumbling blocks. It has been found that the amorphous categorisation of the Khoisan as coloured in South Africa condemns much of their history into oblivion and facilitates their social and economic exclusion (Van der Ross, 2015). Furthermore, the Khoisan as coloured in post-apartheid South Africa is categorically among the lowest number of people with post-secondary education, standing at 2.4%, compared to the Indian/Asian at 5.6%, White at 4.5% and Black Africans at 4% (STATS SA, 2016). This reflects that the Khoisan are behind compared to their counterparts.

The findings of the study also indicate that Khoisan activism and debates in the form of advocacy and demonstrations have drastically increased in recent years. This could be attributed to persisting disparities and deplorable socio-economic circumstances the First Nations people find themselves in compared with their advantaged counterparts (South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), 2018).

The legacy of colonialism is still negatively impacting the general well-being and particularly the education affairs of the First Nations people, the Khoisan. Since the arrival of white settlers which resulted in forced migrations, assimilations and local cultural erosions, the group continues to be absent in the mainstream affairs of the rainbow nation. The exploitation and exclusion from the affairs of the country from pro-democracy to post-democracy explain why the Khoisan people are still in the same status in terms of access to university education.

The study found out that there is an education ‘apartheid’ in South Africa, particularly looking at the accessibility of university education by South Africa’s Khoisan people. The playing field is not level for all groups in the country to access university education as groups like the Khoisan have more structural and social barriers compared to others. These disparities in education access remain a threat to the sustainable development of the country. Efforts have been put in place to promote an inclusive rainbow nation. However, in practice, the Khoisan are lagging behind in terms of access to university education.

## DISCUSSION

As argued by Benatar (2010), South African universities and other institutions of higher education are giving students preferential admissions based on race. He, however, argues that it is “morally indefensible” to have such a platform. Matsepe *et al.* (2020), noted that these universities

progressively tackled the “race problem” in enrolment strategies, even though their main target group remains students from rich or affluent communities. However, they are still excluding potentially good students from marginalised groups, particularly those from poor township and rural schools. This resonates well with the Critical Race Rheory employed in this study which emphasizes the need to include all races, particularly the minority in the social affairs of communities.

South Africa has a high number of marginalised rural minorities and the educational needs of these populations often exceed the resources available to address them (Hays, 2004). Hence, the topical challenge in formal access to higher education in South Africa is no longer on the racial card but is of social class as merit cannot be reconciled with equity and social justice concerns (Matsepe *et al.*, 2020). This further explains how the Khoisan people are finding themselves on the periphery of social development in South Africa.

The birth of South African democracy is widely renowned as a remarkable milestone in different dimensions in Sub Saharan Africa. However, the new administration post-1994 took over the reins with an unequally educated population (Asmal and James, 2001). As argued by Grant and Hallman (2008), the effects of apartheid are still available in the nation’s education system, for disparities in education still have the pivot tilted against the formerly disadvantaged communities, including the Khoisan. Even though policies are there that aim to regulate and govern higher education, including universities, to ensure quality and equality of services within the system (Higher Education Act, 1997), it remains evident that the Khoisan, the First Nations people of South Africa, are being excluded from mainstream social dispositions of the democratic republic. The Decolonial Theory guiding the study speaks to the above assertion, given that it is evident that the end of apartheid was not a panacea to the First Nations people of South Africa’s woes, but the situation remains, hence the need to decolonise the education system to be more inclusive.

Despite the advent of democracy and the fall of apartheid in 1994 in South Africa, empty promises have characterised the address of Khoisan’s grievances (Holmes and Loehwing, 2016). The “Coloured” conflation is one of the key factors excavating the social status of the First Nations people, given that the marginalised group is not distinctively recognised. Along the same line, existing literature over the same period has failed to address reliably the issue of access to university education by the Khoisan, even though in South Africa, the constitution stipulates that all people must have the right to be educated even in their mother tongue.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The emancipation and correction of past exclusive policies, relegating the First Nations people to the periphery of the country's socio-economic key participative roles, remain more on paper than practical, particularly looking at access to university education. It is recommended that the government should take it upon itself to ensure that the emancipation of the Khoisan people is radically expedited in South Africa. Since the term 'coloured', in which the Khoisan are included, is playing to their disadvantage, it is critically essential that the group be distinctly identified so that they are not conflated with Coloured which is way better than the Khoisan in terms of social emancipation.

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