
THE SPARKPLUG

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Going where fast headlines don't!

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Getting the Last Word

Storytelling in Defiance of Language Death

By X.C.

The cashier looks at us, two *makgoa* (white people), with reservations, but speaks with few. She punctuates unusually forward flirtations with questions about why we need such random things — a 5-kilo bag of sorghum flour, 20 small containers of snuff tobacco, packs of rechargeable batteries, dozens of canned vegetables. 'You are going to the bush, *eh rra?*'

Here in Botswana, a country with a rich Bantu heritage of cattle-herding, such a purchase is not uncommon, as farmhands and cattle owners often stock up in the city before heading to their remote cattleposts for days or weeks at a time. Her question obviously conforms to this reality, but her raised eyebrow, sidelong glance, and bemused smile betray that she cannot reconcile her imagination with the impossibility that two *makgoa* would ever be tending cattle in the bush.

'*Re ithuta Sesarwa,*' (We're studying Sesarwa), I reply in Setswana. The characteristic elongation of each word's second-to-last syllable lends a pensive lilt to this language — a small reward that affords me time to formulate each next word.

The cashier recoils with a grimace, sucks her teeth in disdain, shakes her head. A bag of dried fruit is at her mercy as she waves her hands in agitated disbelief. She has lost her workplace stoicism.

'*Eesh! – Sesarwa!* What can you learn from that savage language?'

The contentious word here, *Sesarwa*, is a catch-all Setswana word for approximately 30 different languages spoken by the indigenous peoples of southern Africa. The English equivalent, 'click languages,' (as in this [2003 NY Times article](#)¹) is an equally exotifying epithet. Linguists call them 'Khoisan languages,' which I will use here, but note that it, too, is problematic. Such names, whether in Setswana or English, lump these extremely endangered languages all together under a single word based on similarity as perceived by privileged outsiders, even though the peoples and their languages may have very little in common with one another.

Needless to say, I do not explain to the cashier that we are in Botswana documenting one such severely endangered, undescribed language which will likely disappear within 60 years. I do not try to convince her of the value of our project. In this moment in the department store, I realize the three of us are intersected by divisive cultural rifts. We pay, and leave for the Khoisan settlement.

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The Trenches between Languages and Nation-building

Igniting dialogue between culture and current affairs.

This inaugural issue of *The Sparkplug* reflects on the impact of mining on displacement, land division and the loss of language. Languages are living fields of experience, embodying the eternal human challenge of being liberated through communication, and restricted by finite terms. The shades and tones of innumerable human languages are precious, conveying to us entirely new ways of living, thinking, and connecting. But what pushes them to the edge of disappearance?

X.C. has helped with language documentation in Botswana. As they write, the study of language is never about language alone. Their submission is a personal reflection on their previous work in the field, which also hints toward the nation-building projects that have contributed to the marginalization of what are collectively known as Khoisan languages.

The article that accompanies X.C.'s submission explores one of the factors that has contributed to language loss in Botswana. Canadian companies play an active role in Botswana's profitable diamond industry, and continue to contribute to the arms trade with Botswana.

Canada took over a decade to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, finally adopting it in 2016. Yet, the adoption of the declaration into law across the country has been slow and widely seen as a publicity stunt for 'Reconciliation' clout. The recognition of the declaration of Indigenous peoples' rights also does not seem to propose thinking critically about the impacts of Canadian industry on Indigenous rights abroad. Beyond empty posturing and sloganeering, it's necessary to look at how Canadian industries and investors are contributing to the displacement and abuses of Indigenous peoples around the world.

At the crux of these two articles, is the displacement of people who do not choose to live by the capitalist norms of so-called "developed" or "rich" countries. The Khoisan have often been exoticized as "remote", "isolated", "untouched" people — all while their ancestral homelands have been encroached upon by big business, investors, and "nature reserves". But their stories are shaped by resilience to the imposed state borders of Botswana and hard-won victories such as the [2006 legal battle](#) that (at least legally) granted the right to return to the Kalahari. And it is in that resilience that hope has been kindled.

LK.

Continued:

Getting the Last Word

The Bantu majority of Botswana traditionally amassed wealth and power in the form of cattle; [evidence shows](#)² that they migrated into Botswana around 2,000-3,000 years ago. There they encountered nomadic Khoisan peoples, who, by contrast, hunted and foraged on lands that were gradually taken until the end of the 20th century, when they were formally [moved by the government](#)³ onto 'settlements' for 'access' to water-wells and education.

This political move opened up their homelands for grazing, as well as safaris, diamond mining, and construction.

Thus, centuries-old tensions between Khoisan and Bantu peoples — [compounded](#)⁴ by colonialism, nation-building, and lavish ecotourism — have led to the dramatic and rapid decline of Khoisan populations and their languages. Most of those remaining have been relocated to settlements, which are characterized by extreme alcoholism, lack of resources and development, and utter poverty. The grim parallels between this history and that of other indigenous peoples worldwide is no coincidence.

Sunrise in the rural settlement reveals this reality between a weighty sky and stark earth. There, our days pass getting to know some elders and chatting with anyone who stops by to see us. Each conversation begins with ritual greetings: one person starts with 'tsa ma ka †xai?' (Are you awake?) or 'tsae nam?' (Where are you?), to which the other person must reply either 'cie †xaia hā' (I'm awake), or 'cie hā' (I'm here) and then reciprocate the same.

At its core, our process is deceptively simple: speaking with the elders about their lives, asking how to say different words and sentences, listening as community members recount stories about their experiences. After only a day or two, we are shocked to find that people of all ages still speak the local Khoisan language, even young children before they start attending school. This is a hopeful realization.

In comparison to most settlements, this community is fortunate because the majority of the adults who live here can still remember the old ways of life before they came to the settlement. They still know the plants, the animals, the old folktales, how to make rope from fiber, how to hunt, how to heal, how to cast oracle bones; in short, they still know their land, their language, and their identity.

But silence is setting in as Setswana creeps in to fill the cultural void that it is itself creating: hunting has been outlawed by the government, so people depend on government rations and aid for daily needs, and, in school, teachers are all non-Khoisan and speaking Khoisan is prohibited.

Languages tend to die in three generations: the first generation who primarily speaks the endangered language speaks this language to their children, the second generation, who become unbalanced bilinguals. This means that the second generation speaks the endangered language less frequently than a language of power (e.g. Setswana). Finally, the second generation passes the language of power to their children, the third generation, who have very little, if any, ability in the endangered language of their grandparents, the first generation.

'Documenting a language' in any context can be problematic for many reasons.

Arriving to a remote rural village out of the blue is as presumptuous as knocking on a stranger's door and asking for room and board, and this can strain small, tightly knit communities with limited resources. Then consider that our 'research' is filtered through (*read: funded by*) the Western educational apparatus, which itself is an extension of Western values, law, and governance.

Modern fieldworkers must thus satisfy Western bureaucracy while practicing mindful decolonization and adapting to the local environment in a culturally appropriate and respectful way. But our workflow, heavily reliant on computers, cameras, and microphones, feels like an affront in a settlement that does not even have electricity, and our 'research methods' are inseparable from Western rationalism and reductionism.

She sits across from me on a tire in the sand, her gaze in search of an audience, and mine obstructed by a DSLR viewfinder. Her worn clothing is colorful against the mute bramble wall of a shelter: an orange summer dress, decorated with flowers. She leans forward expectantly, occasionally chatting with the two similarly middle-aged women at her sides. A few kids whisper snickers in mix of Khoisan and Setswana over my shoulder as they study the camera and the woman's image on the screen. She is a storyteller.

'Sae kwa simolla!' (You can start!), I say to her in her language. As if transformed, the storyteller seems to become a character in the story she starts telling. Her body moves to her speech, and she speaks with an ebb and flow punctuated by claps, sound effects, laughs, and a rich inventory of meaningful gestures.

She takes me somewhere, but I do not yet understand enough of her language to know where; children laugh, and onlookers listen intently. I am rapt, until she ends in an understated yet decisive manner, 'E ka lo' (It's finished) — only after a long silence can I tell if the end has truly come. A story which will alter slightly with every telling has been captured in a fleeting form on high quality audio and video. The storyteller asks for payment, and then leaves.

The settlement community is well aware of what is disappearing and why. The older adults are proud of their language and identity, and harbor hopes for the future that their children can maintain this somehow.

At the same time, there is a kind of implicit resignation in the air. People know that the odds are stacked against them, and there are more pressing needs: food and clothing, for instance. But by the end of our stay, many community members are eager to share folktales and stories.

For some younger community members, this is their first time ever hearing these stories. The sacred, communal art of oral storytelling gathers all generations to make meaning of the world, and for us, the stories are valuable examples of fluent, natural speech which singlehandedly links language to culture. I am reminded of the Observer's Paradox — that the presence of the observer inherently changes what they observe. In this case, however, I wonder if our presence can become the catalyst for pride in the local culture and positive change.

Like the death of indicator species in vulnerable ecosystems, I believe that language death is a symptom of more fundamental imbalances in modern social systems.

Minority communities like the Khoisan settlement get placed right at the forefront of the conflict between their own ways of life and rapid 'modernization': the advent of consumer capitalism and global market economies. And this is not, of course, an isolated incident: the [same trend emerges](#)⁵ around the world. Language and land seem to go hand-in-hand. Therefore, while I believe language documentation is our priority, it can never be about language alone.

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X.C. was previously involved in documenting severely endangered languages in Botswana and elsewhere. They believe in the centrality of marginalized voices to an inclusive and sustainable future for all peoples.

Note: For privacy and safety, identifying information in various forms has been omitted from this article.

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Who's Entitled?

Diamond mining and internal displacement in Botswana

By Lital Khaikin

“Not Blood Diamonds”

Diamonds represent ‘forever’ — so begins the brand statement of any generic diamond company leaning in on the mythological status of deep time and the alchemical compression of history. From encrusting royal jewelry, to the consumer rite of passage for engaged couples, to adorning the regalia of the entertainment industry, diamonds are at their zenith as ornamental objects, serving as the brand of an elite class. Reacting to decades of pressures, mining companies and politicians are suddenly keen on telling *us* that we must treat diamonds with responsibility. But what does that responsibility look like, and whose calls for responsibility are we not hearing?

As one of the largest diamond producers alongside Russia and Canada, Botswana has been the site of some of the most significant rare diamond discoveries in the world. Individual diamonds are given a kind of celebrity status, like the prized “Okavango Blue” diamond that was discovered in 2019 by Botswana’s Okavango Diamond Company.

Prospecting continues to yield new deposits and discoveries, while companies from Australia, the UK, the US, and Canada have been among the top investors to cash in on Botswana’s riches. Canadian [investment](#)¹ in Botswana’s mining industry was reported in 2017 to be over \$376 million. Apart from diamonds, Botswana is known for its gold, and copper and nickel deposits — all of which are known to produce environmentally devastating pollution through open-pit mining. The private investment arm of the British multinational Barclays Bank, for example, operates the Khoemacau copper mine in the renowned Kalahari copper belt through Cupric Canyon Capital.

But it is diamonds after all that have made Botswana a destination for what are known as “junior” Canadian firms — recently formed mining companies seeking to cash in on the kimberlite pipes off of which heavyweights like De Beers have been profiting for decades since Botswana’s independence.

Pangolin (“our target is wealth!”) is one such Canadian mining company based out of Toronto and Francistown, Botswana, near the border with Zimbabwe. In March 2019, Pangolin was looking at [acquiring](#)² a promising kimberlite pipe in Orapa in northeastern Botswana, where De Beers operates the largest diamond mine in the world. On May 7, 2020, Pangolin Diamonds also [reported](#)³ signs of a diamond deposit from its exploration of the Kweneng Project, which is located about 20 km north of Botswana’s capital, Gaborone.

But one of the most active Canadian companies in Botswana’s mining industry is Vancouver-based Lucara Diamond Corp. Established in 2004, Lucara has conducted exploration projects across Botswana, as well as Namibia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Cameroon. Lucara’s current operations in Botswana include the Karowe mine in central Botswana’s village of Letlhakane, and a kimberlite pipe in Orapa. Over the years, Lucara has also led a swathe of acquisitions, including that of Boteti Mining (a joint venture between African Diamonds plc and De Beers) in 2018, and, prior to that, African Diamonds itself in 2010 — the latter of which was co-founded by Pangolin’s own CEO Leon Daniels.

Lucara’s discoveries have included some of the largest and most expensive diamonds in the world, and many of them have come from Karowe. This mine is described on the company’s website as “one of the world’s foremost producers of large, high-quality, Type IIA diamonds in excess of 10.8 carats”. Among the enormous diamonds found at Karowe is the second-largest diamond in history at 1,111 carats, known as Lesedi La Rona, which was discovered in 2015 and later sold for \$53 million (USD). For comparison, the average size of a single diamond is 1.08-1.2 carats. Obviously encouraged by its discoveries of enormous diamonds at Karowe, Lucara announced in November 2019 that it would be expanding the Karowe mine.

In February 2020, Lucara [found](#)⁴ an unbroken 549-carat white diamond that the company claimed to be “of exceptional purity”. But most notably, Lucara discovered a rare rough diamond in April 2019 at Karowe. The 1,758 carat diamond — named Sewelô (meaning “rare find” in Setswana) — was acquired in January 2020 by the luxury French fashion house Louis Vuitton. After its acquisition of the diamond, Louis Vuitton signed a deal with Antwerp’s HB Company for cutting.

Sewelô is now destined to become jewelry for the fashion house, which recently started pushing into the jewelry industry after its parent company LVMH — which is owned by French billionaire Bernard Arnault — acquired the jewelry company Tiffany & Co. in November 2019. This acquisition of the jewelry company only further adds to the LVMH conglomerate’s colossal annual revenues from luxury goods, which reached \$59 billion (USD) in 2019 alone.

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*Familiar
Faces ...
... and
Timely
Hand-offs*

Several of Lucara’s own directors have also been invested in exploitative mining projects that have carried deep impacts on the communities they profited from.

As mining companies go, everyone likes to have “community initiatives”, but no-one likes to pay taxes. Lucara director Lukas Lundin — a Swedish-Canadian billionaire and mining magnate — headed oil and gas operations during the 1980s oil boom, in Dubai — where the Middle East saw the inception of its first free economic zone through which foreign companies could paid little, if any, taxes.

Lucara’s director Paul Conibear was president and CEO of Tenke Mining Corp. — initially incorporated in Hong Kong, a global tax haven, and merged in 2007 with Toronto’s Lundin Mining. Tenke, and later Lundin Mining, used to own the Tenke Fungurume copper and cobalt mine in the DR Congo. Operating since 2006, including under Congo’s dictator Mobutu, the mine was alleged to have engaged in bribery through Lundin Mining’s owner, and Lukas Lundin’s father, Adolf Lundin. In the early 2000s, Tenke Mining Corp. was accused of [violating regulations](#)⁵ for multinational companies in the DR Congo through tax evasion. The Tenke Fungurume mine has since been acquired by China Molybdenum, and recently [came into headlines](#)⁶ again for deploying the Congolese military to “protect” the mine, and threatening to forcibly remove locals from the area designated for the mine’s use. This has in turn attracted criticism from Amnesty International, who raised concerns around the [risk](#)⁷ of the DRC army using “excessive force” in their operation.

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The Sewelô diamond was depicted in Louis Vuitton ads completely removed from its context: a raw, earthly but alien-looking material, held by an airbrushed, porcelain white hand that is unmarked by a single speck of manual labour. Of course this is how the diamond industry wants to be seen. Diamond advertising has often relied on the tantalizing imagery of glaciers and water, evoking pristine purity, indulgence, sensuality — associations with anything but the hard labour of the miners, and the dirt out of which the gems are ripped. So long as there isn't wholesale slaughter of workers that's acknowledged by the entire world, it's a black and white, 'clean' and 'ethical' business.

While the price paid by Louis Vuitton to Lucara for the Sewelô diamond has not been revealed by either company, it is [estimated](#)⁸ to be worth up to \$19.5 million (USD). According to Lucara's CEO Eira Thomas, Louis Vuitton and HB will [apparently](#)⁹ give 5% of profits from the jewelry collection to Lucara's own "community-based initiatives" in Botswana. The Canadian mining company pats itself on the back for contributing "direct benefits to our local communities of interest", but nowhere is there critique that Botswana's communities should be at the charity of luxury French fashion houses and Canadian mining companies.

Like his predecessors, Botswana's current president Mokgweetsi Masisi has depicted the diamond industry as good for the country's business, stating at a 2019 [jewelry conference](#)¹⁰ in Las Vegas that that it "propels [Botswana] toward a knowledge economy".

The diamond industry makes up at least 80% of the country's exports and, [according](#)¹¹ to the World Bank, is the "single largest contributor to government revenues". This dependency of the government on diamond revenues, and further financing of Botswana's education and road construction by private mining companies like Lucara, has created an over-dependency on the mining sector. Masisi has also referred to how the diamond industry has been crucial to combatting the HIV and AIDS crisis in Botswana.

This central role of the diamond industry in funding Botswana's government creates a dangerous over-dependency on the whims of private, foreign companies.

This over-dependency also carries potentially devastating risks, as seen with the coronavirus crisis currently taking a toll on the country's economy. Botswana's Finance Minister Thapelo Matsheka [projected](#)¹² this past April that the country's GDP would drop by 13%, attributed to the inability for diamond buyers to visit Botswana to make their purchases and for mining companies to continue their operations at full capacity. This strain is already visible on the private sector, as by May 8, Lucara had lost \$3.2 million for the first three months of the year, compared with a net income of \$7.4 million from the same period last year.

Yet with so many extraordinary mining discoveries in Botswana that bring unfathomable benefits to multi-billion dollar French luxury brands, Botswana must still contend with rampant income inequality — despite years of [questionable claims](#)¹³ that poverty levels are decreasing. As Louis Vuitton's designers indulge their elite customers with the promise of luxury watches, rings, and other embellishments, Botswana's unemployment rate hovers around 20 percent, and access to education in rural areas [has been shown](#)¹⁴ to do little to affect poverty rates.

With such dependence on the diamond industry, employment opportunities are ultimately shaped by luxury companies and markets far outside of Botswana.

Prior to Masisi's re-election in October 2019, this inequity proved to be a campaign issue for Masisi's opposition Duma Boko, leader of the socialist coalition known as the Umbrella for Democratic Change. While Masisi's Democratic Party has faced critique for increasing authoritarianism — including from his predecessor Ian Khama — Boko and the UDC have [called for](#)¹⁵ more fair economic agreement with De Beers, as Botswanans find that few outside of the elite class actually benefit from the country's diamond industry.

De Beers, which is owned by London-based mining conglomerate Anglo American plc., is a giant in Botswana's diamond industry, having established itself in the country shortly after Botswana achieved independence in 1966. The company owns four diamond mines in the country and operates through a joint venture with Botswana's government called Debswana. This includes the Jwaneng mine, which is considered the world's richest diamond mine.

While the bulk of De Beers' global diamond production is in Botswana, the company is notorious for being historically embroiled in the blood diamond industry — and continues to function like a cartel, dominating the diamond mining industry and determining global prices. The company built its wealth on the back of South African apartheid, and was known to profit from smuggling rings run by warlords, fueling conflicts fought by child soldiers. Since the public controversy and diamond boycotts of the early 2000s, De Beers has continued to make statements about having a plan to deal with conflict diamonds on the global market — but current industry regulations are found to be [ineffective](#)¹⁶ in protecting human rights, and Belgian authorities have [continued to find](#)¹⁷ blood diamonds passing through Antwerp's lucrative diamond market through companies and bank accounts registered in Switzerland.

In comparison to Botswana's neighbouring countries South Africa and Zimbabwe, Botswana's diamond mining industry is represented by its government as "clean", with no acknowledged human rights abuses. The Marange diamond fields in eastern Zimbabwe (state-owned by Zimbabwe Consolidated Diamond Company), for example, are still plagued with human rights abuses.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) [reported](#)¹⁸ in 2018 that Marange's private security was involved in human rights violations including beating women, injuring children, and setting dogs loose to maul on "unauthorized" miners. The diamond mine itself has used forced labour and torture. HRW found that the Kimberley Process, intended to control export and import of rough diamonds, was ineffective in stemming the rampant human rights abuses in the Marange diamond fields. Such reports only conclude that the violence around Zimbabwe's mining industry has continued, largely unchanged for over a decade since the 2008 [massacre](#)¹⁹ of over 200 people ("illegal miners") at the Marange diamond fields. Of course, there was little concern about labeling and murdering locals as "illegal miners", and multinational conglomerates as rightfully entitled to Zimbabwe's diamonds.

With clever branding, mining conglomerates have tried to detract from critiques of the industry, and of their neo-colonial expansion. De Beers' parent company Anglo American plc goes by the motto "Re-imagining mining to improve peoples' lives". Lucara flaunts its participation in initiatives like the "Responsible Jewellery Council". But while participation in such initiatives is supposed to present a "responsible" agenda, it certainly does not excuse these companies from the systemic exploitation within the industry. Human Rights Watch has also [reported](#)²⁰ that despite supposed efforts by jewelry companies, like Chopard, on tracking chain of custody for jewels, these companies do not have sufficient transparency measures to identify countries of origin on individual diamonds, and routinely provide inadequate reporting regarding their supply chains.

Asbestos? Who cares.

Excerpt from: "The Legal Aspect of Insidious Diseases in the Workplace: A Case Study of Jwaneng Diamond Mine in Botswana", by Comfort Matthew Tanko. *Texila International Journal of Academic Research*, Volume 4, Issue 2, Dec 2017.

"In Botswana surveillance of occupational exposures and insidious diseases are very weak notwithstanding efforts of Debswana Diamond Company. [...] The miners often go underground to get the Diamond with inadequate masks, most of the diamond are sitting on asbestos.

De Beers who are partners with Botswana government to carry out mining activities denied that asbestos was not any problem. They also argued that most of the aged elderly miners that worked in South Africa, brought their insidious diseases to Debswana.

[...] Diseases due to respiratory airborne dust such as silicosis, asbestosis and chemical inhalation remain very harmful to the miners' health."

The Pillars of Democracy, or a Front?

Perhaps calling a political party "Democratic" is enough to dissuade critique from Botswana's business-friendly Democratic Party? After all, Eritrea's despotic ruling party is similarly called "The People's Front for Democracy and Justice". Discover more on Eritrea's regime, the meaning of words, and more, in a forthcoming issue of *The Sparkplug*!

Continued:

Who's Entitled?

Dividing the Land

Despite the mining lobby's depiction of Botswana as the paragon among African states driven by the mining industry, no transnational mining company acts within an idyllic vacuum. Diamond mining companies operating in Botswana have taken advantage of the country's reputation for not having a 'blood diamond' industry, to detract from the companies' implication in displacement within Botswana's landlocked borders.

Colonially-imposed borders across Africa have long stoked civil conflict, resulting in what has been described as [partitioned ethnicities](#).²¹ State borders cross the traditional territories of communities that are now separated between states, and whose relationship to their territory differs from colonial concepts of nations.

Such was the case, for example, with a slim slice of land known as Caprivi that is located along Botswana's northern border. Namibians have long fled regional instability and military conflict between Namibian and secessionist forces who did not consider Caprivi to be part of Namibia — the modern form of the state having been heavily shaped by early 20th century German occupation and genocide of ethnic groups, which included the San. Botswana, in turn, faced scrutiny in September 2019 for [evicting](#)²² 709 Namibian refugees from the Dukwi Refugee Camp.

But within state borders, the hand of the mining industry has left a heavy imprint in the division of land, and continues to push the tide of displacement.

The Khoisan are traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherers whose ancestral homelands cross national borders between Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. They are among the earliest inhabitants of southern Africa, and even the term used to refer to them, "Khoisan", is a modern invention that functions like an umbrella term to encompass multiple tribes.

As such, the displacement of the Khoisan by state borders, as well as internal territorial divisions within southern African countries, cannot be seen as isolated from the displacement being experienced in Botswana's neighbouring countries. Not only are the Khoisan experiencing state-imposed restrictions to movement, but their lifestyles and worldviews — so incompatible with the ravages of neoliberalism and the values of Big Capital — are threatened with disappearance by encroaching industry and so-called "development".

Survival International, a London-based NGO campaigning on behalf of the Khoisan, has [described](#)²³ Botswana's diamonds as "conflict diamonds", attributing much internal displacement to diamond mining. The Botswana Centre for Human Rights, Dishwanelo, has campaigned against the [forced relocation](#)²⁴ of Khoisan into cordoned camps where they cannot practice their lifestyles.

Game parks and nature reserves have also imposed their own restrictions. The Khoisan are often not permitted to hunt in their traditional lands because some are designated as 'nature reserves'.

The Khoisan's ancestral living and hunting grounds in Botswana are situated at the heart of what is now the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. A court case from 2002 [details](#)²⁵ how land was forcibly taken from the Khoisan, and restrictions were placed on their entry into the Kalahari reserve. According to Survival International, Botswana's government — which was under the Democratic Party's President Ian Khama at the time — chose to ignore a landmark court ruling from 2006 that deemed the Khoisan's eviction to be illegal, and granted legal right to return.

Years after the ruling, however, Botswana's government continued with its [evictions](#)²⁶ from the Kalahari, and did everything possible to [prevent access](#)²⁷ to the Khoisan's lands, including pouring cement over water boreholes, sweeping arrests, and a restrictive permit system for Khoisan to visit family. Khoisan peoples are [not protected](#)²⁸ with Indigenous status, as Botswana considers all citizens to be Indigenous, without special status.

For societies that take wildlife and natural habitats for granted, 'natural parks' are a feel-good solution to environmental preservation.

They trace the boundaries of the Great Outdoors, of distant and untouchable nature that is supposedly unspoiled by human consumption (totally unaffected by the ranging contamination of waterbeds, soil, or air). They offer an 'alternative' to unbridled urban sprawl and, with much pageantry, are used by mining companies and developers as a compensatory form of land-reclamation after their depleted mines have laid waste to their surroundings. But natural parks are ultimately a product of the neoliberal imagination that sees all land as proprietary, and perpetuates the delusion that humanity, and the consequences of urban and industrial development, are all somehow separate from the rest of the planet and its 'natural resources'.

Through Debswana, the mining company jointly-owned with Botswana's government, De Beers established the Jwana Game Park on its former mining licensing areas. The park is adjacent to the Jwaneng diamond mine, which has produced the bulk of Botswana's diamonds since 1982. De Beers has also partnered with the Botswana government to extend the Orapa Game Park, which conveniently includes an airport.

But none of these actions flaunting the creation or expansion of nature reserves account for the Khoisan peoples, who are Indigenous to the lands but who are not protected by Botswana's government from foreign corporations deciding what to do with their land, and where they should live.

Restrictions on the Khoisan's movement are regularly enforced with the threat of violence. Paramilitary police patrol the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, and laws have notoriously permitted the execution of people found in violation of hunting restrictions. These "shoot-to-kill" permits are one aspect of the militarization of park patrols, in no small part arising out of a legitimate concern for criminal networks of ivory and horn poaching.

Nevertheless, simply for hunting for food on their own land, the Khoisan have experienced [beating](#)²⁹ by paramilitary police, under the pretext of this "anti-poaching patrol". Survival International has also reported on [police violence](#)³⁰ against the Khoisan for many years, and numerous [illegal arrests](#)³¹ have also been documented. In some cases, Khoisan have also [been shot](#)³² from helicopters.

This threat of state violence faced by the Khoisan is important in the context of Canada's trade with Botswana.

Canada's Global Affairs notably loosened a number of regulations around military exports by adding Botswana to the Automatic Firearms Country Control List (AFCCCL) in 2001. This allowed for the export of CF-5 aircraft to Botswana (a NATO ally) and has more recently allowed the export of assault rifles manufactured in Canada. In 2018, Canada approved the [export](#)³³ of 250 assault rifles (Colt Canada C7) to Botswana, a deal worth almost \$2.3 million (CAD). The transfers are described by Global Affairs as intended "for police or military" use.

Far from acting as an arms control measure for accountability, the AFCCCL more cynically acts like a floodgate, making it easier to approve previously restricted arms trade.

And this opportunism in arming Botswana with Canadian-made assault rifles should raise concern around whether Canada is enabling police violence and abuse of militarized patrols against Khoisan in their own lands.

Continued:

Who's Entitled?

The fate of the Khoisan should resonate deeply with the colonial displacement and the impacts of mining industries experienced by Indigenous peoples across Canada. The displacement of the Khoisan recalls the struggle of First Nations against the Diavik mine in Canada's Northwest Territories. The Diavik mine contains the largest deposit of diamonds found in Canada. The mine has been contested since 1999 by the Akaitcho Dene and Tlicho First Nations for violating self-governance and resource rights on Indigenous-owned land, and dumping kimberlite and other tailings into nearby water.

Disputes such as these are often superficially addressed with forms of 'self-governance', charitably bestowed onto the original inhabitants of a land by a more powerful occupying government. South Africa, for example, introduced the Bantustan Bills which have received criticism³⁴ for imposing a "coercive" system on traditional governments, providing traditional leaders with "impunity to profit from, and keep secret, lucrative mining and other investment deals on people's land". In Botswana too, the government has been selective about recognizing³⁵ tribal governance outside of eight Tswana tribes — and even then, state-recognized leaders are often appointed by higher levels of government, rather than elected by the people.

Representation is often given to unelected chiefs who hold the power to sell land rights to mining companies. Certainly this symbolic 'self-governance' resonates with the contentious legacy of Canada's selective recognition of First Nations governance in Canada, where state-recognized representatives run against traditional governance that may be opposed to mining infrastructure, by cozying up to state and industry officials, voting in favour of extractive projects, and pocketing their dividends.

Similarly, the use of nature reserves to displace Indigenous peoples from their homelands is a common colonial practice — as Canadians would be due to remember in the Ipperwash Crisis of September 1995, when the Canadian government sought to evict Stoney Point Ojibwe from their homes in what Ontario designated as the Ipperwash Provincial Park.

Much like the South African Cullinan diamond (or "The Great Star of Africa") — found in 1905, the largest ever discovered — now sits in the Crown Jewels of the British royals, Botswana's 'not-blood-diamonds' play a part in a transnational form of colonialism. State borders are shown to be arbitrary and permeable only for the right class of people. Mining executives move freely across oceans and continents, following the siren call of favourable investment conditions. Government officials build glass castles of economic futures that collapse at the puff of a pandemic. All the while, people who have called their trampled lands home for millennia are treated as a charity case by the mining companies that displaced them, and hounded and murdered by their governments. While Botswana's diamond projects may not have the same reputation as those of its neighbours, the nature of their profits transcends state borders, and the price is a universal cost paid by all humanity.

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Yesterday's diamond consumer was a frumpy old lady whose ticket to fulfillment was getting hitched. Today's consumer is the liberated millennial who buys diamonds as a form of Self-Care. (Generation X? PR execs knew ahead of time to skip over those slackers!) Hip-with-it diamond companies use the market-proven tactic of distraction to appeal to Those Millennials' stunted senses: from the Pantone palettes that populate Ikea catalogues and Kardashian wardrobes, to high-concept Textural Contrast situations involving marble countertops and unbaked clay, today's diamond companies know that all it takes to Make You More You ... is a rebrand. #yasqueen #fashion #ring #whitering #diamondring #diamonds #jewelry #diamondjewelry #follow #like

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