LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT IN NAMIBIA'S GHOST TOWN MINING LANDSCAPE

Bridget Kelly
Faculty Mentor: Darrell Norris
Department of Geography
State University of New York at Geneseo

Post-colonial scholarship traditionally focuses on the perpetuation of systems of economic activity, power structures, social frameworks and cultural norms. While these interpretations make crucial contributions to development theory and politics, they often fail to consider the material expression of these legacies in the landscape. Though often pushed aside for more buzz-worthy colonial legacies, the geographic manifestation of colonialism can serve as a valid means to interpreting the persistence of suppressive colonial relationships in developing countries.

Namibia's very recent colonial history and ignominious possession of the world's highest Gini coefficient make it the ideal candidate for an analysis of geographic colonial legacies. By tracing the historical trajectory of Namibia's diamond industry under the successive colonial regimes of Germany and South Africa we arrive at contemporary initiatives to revitalize that industry and associated landscapes through tourism and offshore diamond mining under the slogan "Diamonds for Development". Spatial considerations make it clear that in Namibia's case, the classic question of "Development for whom?" does not have a particularly inspiring answer.

Deutsch Südwestafrika, present day Namibia, was colonized by Germany in 1884. It was not until 1908 that diamonds began to play a key role in their colonial administration. In that year, railway worker Zacharias Lewala discovered the first diamond in Deutsch Südwestafrika. Lewala gave the stone to his overseer, August Stauch, who obtained numerous prospecting licenses from the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft fur Südwestafrika. He consolidated these rights into the Koloniale Bergbau Gesellschaft, which held title to the area immediately surrounding the first diamond find and extensive land to the south. Stauch established his headquarters in Kolmanskop, by the site of the first diamond discovery. Kolmanskop rose from the sands of the Namib Desert to become the largest mining settlement in Deutsch Südwestafrika, in the span of a few short years. Stauch's subsequent acquisition of mining rights to a southern coastal area led to the development of Elizabeth Bay, the only settlement comparable to Kolmanskop's scale in the infancy of Namibia's diamond mining industry.

The equipment on the mining fields of Kolmanskop was the most innovative of its time and the capital-intensive nature of Stauch's investments allowed his company to reach a higher and more easily sustained rate of return than other operations. This high profit created a standard of living hitherto unseen in the inhospitable Namib, and Kolmanskop quickly developed into a German oasis in the desert. The town had a casino, bakery, primary school, and one of the most advanced hospitals in the country at the time, with the first x-ray machine in the southern hemisphere. It was a triumph over the isolation and harshness of the desert and the townspeople regularly held fairs, maintained gardens and used the water reservoir as a pool. They carried on their lives with the latest imported European fashions, regular parties and the finest champagne. No concessions were given to the extremity of their location. They even maintained competitive sports teams, regularly matching up against the tennis and soccer teams from Elizabeth Bay. The place was vibrant, alive and the social life was as multifaceted and luxurious as the gems that sustained it. The lighthearted nature of the townspeople's lives both exemplified and belied their indomitable conquering spirit. It romanticized that spirit, painting them as the model of human innovation, transcending the very laws of nature to live full, cultured lives in one of the world's most inhospitable places. But that imagery ignored the less romantic aspects of their conquering spirit, the inevitable conflict with other people, not just with nature. Building a bastion of German culture in the middle of the desert was not easy and the oppression of natives, though little recorded, cannot be ignored as a crucial factor in the sustenance of this urbane desert town and settlements like it throughout Deutsch Südwestafrika.

A very bloody native uprising had ended just a year before diamonds were discovered. The conflict was focused in the southern portion of Namibia, in the lands of the Herero and Nama people. The brutal German response ensured that there were very few natives occupying these lands once diamonds were discovered, and those surviving natives were in such poor health as to be incapable of physical labor.

In order to close the labor shortage caused by their mass genocide, the German colonial government took increasingly draconian measures to ensure that those holding on to their nomadic lifestyles in the north, primarily the Ovambo people, would be redefined as a cheap labor supply for the nascent diamond mining industry. One of the colonial administration's most outrageous acts was outlawing native cattle ownership in pastoralist societies. By doing so, the colonial administration did not just create a dispossessed people; they outlawed their entire way of life.

Once the native people had been forcibly initiated into the colonial labor system, corporal punishment was common and showed a precipitous increase with the rise of the diamond industry. There was a 785% increase in recorded cases between 1907 and 1912 alone. By the Governor's own admission, the brutality was becoming "alarmingly frequent" and Africans being beaten to death was not uncommon. However, by a fairly bittersweet instance of fortune, the natives recruited from the north to work the mining fields in the south had the benefit of past atrocities on their side; there were not enough of them to allow for the use of violent administrative tactics without exacerbating labor shortages. Their relatives working the agricultural fields to the north were not as fortunate, and worked under extreme brutality unchecked by fears of what their deaths would do to profit margins.

The heyday of Deutsch Südwestafrika's industrial towns and their atrocities came to a close with the start of the First World War in August of 1914, when Deutsch Südwestafrika declared a state of war in solidarity with its Central Powers colonizer and combat commenced with the much better equipped South African Allied troops. The Schutztruppe, the representation of German military force in the colony, was quickly overwhelmed and destroyed most of the functionality of the mining industry in its retreat in the hopes that their domestic industries would not aid the Allied war effort through their surrender. Combined with the massive slump in diamond prices after the Russian Revolution and the relocation of industry headquarters to richer coastal reserves at the mouth of the Orange River, towns like Kolmanskop never had the opportunity to recover from the WWI transition to South African colonial rule and production stopped for good in 1930. Elizabeth Bay met a similar end the following year.

Despite changes in the location of some mining centers, South Africa kept the colonial institutions of German rule and exacerbated pre-existing power disparities through the application of apartheid. Even when Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1991, the power structures and social inequities created under the combined colonial rule of Germany and South Africa remained in place. Namibia's need for regional cooperation and economic success overwhelmed its need to right social wrongs and the revolutionary party SWAPO became largely status quo in governance, trading revolutionary lines for continued economic success and friendly border relations with its former colonizer.

In spite of the perseverance of inequity on the national level, for several decades it looked like the desert would even out the remnants of social stratification in the Namib, unabashedly reclaiming administrative and worker housing alike. And the desert would likely have succeeded in its commendably equalizing work, were it not for the revelation that these areas could still be profitable through the application of new initiatives in tourism and offshore mining.

The tourism sector has expanded impressively since Namibian independence. Earliest estimates place foreign tourists, measured by international stayovers, at 100,000 in 1989. Now, less than 25 years later, Namibia's economy is experiencing an influx of tourists in excess of 1,000,000 annually. In considering the contribution of former colonists to these numbers it is important that a distinction be made between the nature of German and South African tourists. South Africans are noted to spend significantly less money in Namibia than would be expected based on their contribution to overall tourist numbers. While Germans, who have consistently been less than 10% of the tourist base in Namibia have also been responsible for over 30% of expenditures. This financial clout can explain the partiality for dream-like reconstructions of German colonialism in the tourist experience, especially in ghost towns. In these destinations colonial legacies do not just persist, they are being rebuilt and fortified to satiate tourist interests.

In Kolmanskop, for example, tourism is conducted through the main village, starting and ending at the casino/recreation hall that has been restored to its former glory and focusing on the mine manager's house, which has been refurbished in impeccable Bavarian fashion. Tours are conducted in German, Afrikaans and English in a manner that resurrects Kolmanskop and bemoans the boom/bust nature of development that took such a lively and exuberant place as its victim.

The ghost towns are not the only element of Namibia's mining history providing opportunities for tourism. Even the Sperrgebiet, or Diamond Mining Area 1, kept off limits to the public and protected vigilantly from 1908-2008, has been transformed into a national park and a hotspot for ecotourism. The main draw of southern Namibia for these touristic ventures is the lack of human modification of the landscape. The transition from mining to sustainable ecotourism may not flow very coherently in the minds of those viewing it from an environmental mindset, but when considering it as part of the historical seclusion of the Namibian people from large tracts of their native land it is less laudably an act of environmental conscience and more a continuation of growth for the few.

There is a serious divide at the heart of Namibia's landscape that has historical grounding and holds implications for future development. The northern portion of the country is comprised of communal lands, which are still largely the tribal reserves where commercial development was discouraged under German and South African colonial rule. The southern region on the other hand, is dominated both economically and territorially by whites, and consists largely of productive commercial lands. These commercial lands in the south include 74% of arable lands in the country and account for almost all of the formal economy (including 90% of crop production). Ecotourism is not an option in the primarily black communal land to the north because of overpopulation, a lack of infrastructure and an absence of skilled labor caused by colonial patterns of neglect and the relentless pursuit and persecution of native people in the Herero and Nama wars that pushed them to take refuge in the north. Several Namibian governmental agencies and foreign agents have cited ecotourism as the main hope for continued economic growth for Namibia in the face of diminishing natural resources. The fact that this hope for the nation's continued success lies on the further development of the white-dominated southern commercial lands means that although ecotourism is being heralded as a new sort of economic initiative that will aid natives and increase local employment, the specific nature of qualifications for ecotourism destinations rules out the possibility of development for the groups within Namibia that need it most. Ultimately, Ecotourism will serve to intensify the concentration of power and infrastructure in the colonial core, while neglecting the natives in the communal periphery.

Although Elizabeth Bay was just as impressive a mining town, the tourist interest there has not been as pronounced as in Kolmanskop. Rather, it has found itself at the heart of a transition to offshore drilling by NamDeb, a joint partnership between DeBeers and the Namibian government. Rudimentary seabed mining has been attempted since 1910, with some of the first attempts taking place off the coast of Elizabeth Bay. But it was not until the 1990s with major advancements in extraction technology that marine mining began to operate under NamDeb on a significant and profitable scale.

NamDeb is not only the largest private sector employer in Namibia, it is also the biggest taxpayer and exporter. The weight this company holds within Namibian society cannot be overstated and although its titanic presence in Namibia's export industry is all but assured, the nature of its role in domestic unemployment may be undergoing a period of transition. It still employs over half of Namibia's diamond industry employees but due to the low labor, capital intensive growth that has defined the transition to off shore mining in the last decade, that employment now accounts for only 1% of Namibia's workforce. Despite this transition, the demographic composition of the mining industry's workforce has changed little since colonial times, with 90% of contract workers still coming from the Northern territories, primarily members of the Ovambo tribe. The workers send large portions of their salaries back to their homes where they essentially sustain the faltering subsistence agricultural communities. So interestingly, although mining has been centralized in southern Namibia, it will be the rural Northern provinces, dependent upon remittances from NamDeb workers, that will bear the brunt of NamDeb's conversion to low labor, capital-intensive offshore mining. It will also be the area that we are likely to see the development of more ghost towns. These small farm towns, not the southern mining region, are the true mining towns, because despite their agricultural nature it is mining alone that keeps them afloat.

Unlike Kolmanskop and Elizabeth Bay, these are not boomtowns filled with people who have other places to be if mining prospects fall short. These are people born in Namibia's impotent agricultural sector and kept alive on the strength of the mining industry. The potential for a devastating collapse of communities here is far greater than it ever could have been in the colonial mining towns. The diamond industry has created a people completely and totally dependent upon it for survival. And now that industry is phasing those dependents out because the same colonial administration that supplied them as cheap labor, established patterns of systematic neglect of the northern regions from which they're recruited. Unable to attain higher education or basic financing for entrepreneurial initiatives the residents of the region have become devastatingly dependent upon the diamond industry's demand for unskilled labor, with no pathways to becoming skilled labor themselves.

Despite the fact that the tourism sector has shown tremendous growth and the diamond mining industry is as profitable as ever, Namibia has reached over 50% unemployment.

Although the tourism sector and offshore mining initiatives have been consistently identified as key to addressing Namibia's rampant unemployment, they have failed to deliver. And that failure is directly related to the industry's conformity to pre-established power structures within the country and the maintenance of the established landscape. So long as the rural and indigenous peoples continue to be excluded from the development process, true development will not be achieved in Namibia, regardless of economic growth.