



# STONES OF CONTENTION: A History of Africa's Diamonds

Todd Cleveland

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*Reviewed by Howard Smith*

Africa has supplied the majority of the world's diamonds since soon after the discoveries in South Africa in 1867. While first India and then Brazil had held this position in earlier periods of mercantile trade, the Kimberley mines were the first to be developed in the era of modern imperialism and this book lays bare the awful consequences for Africa's indigenous people. With a real effort to record the conditions and views of the workers affected, history professor Todd Cleveland has written an informative and very readable account of this history.

Anyone looking for reasons to support the current Rhodes Must Go protest movement at the University of Cape Town will find plenty of material here. Within less than a decade of the discovery of diamonds around Kimberley, Cecil Rhodes and his partners had monopolised the extractive industry and export sale of diamonds. From 1884 until 1932, their De Beers mine utilised convict labour under an arrangement with the Cape Colony government – under Prime Minister Rhodes. From 1890 to 1905, the government received a meagre annual fee of £1000, while De

Beers paid no wages to the workers but fed and housed them in its own company prison. Here is the origin of the notorious compound system that became a feature of industrial mining operations in much of Africa. Rhodes' scholarships and other bequests to benefit white South Africa were small disbursements from the fortune he amassed from this systematic exploitation, and the recent redress falls far short of the compensation Africa should exact for the theft of its wealth.

Acquired by Ernest Oppenheimer in the 1920s, De Beers continued to operate within the Anglo-American stable. The company's relentless drive for a worldwide monopoly over diamonds was not confined to control of the trade: diamond mines in South West Africa and Angola, the Congo, Central and West Africa, and Tanganyika were to become part-owned or controlled by De Beers companies. While Cleveland does not hold De Beers responsible for the "blood diamonds" mayhem in Sierra Leone or the role of diamonds in fuelling Angola's civil war, his account clearly identifies the connection between the way the industry was organised and the horrors that unfolded in the independence and immediate post-colonial periods.

The book also addresses the contemporary question of whether diamonds are a "resource curse" or a potential asset for the development of Africa and its peoples. Cleveland contrasts the ordered development

of diamond mining in post-colonial Botswana and its reorganisation in Angola – where, in both cases, De Beers operates in partnership with government – with the recent disorder in the artisanal mining field of Marange in Zimbabwe, linking elite and senior military figures to abuses of governance in the exploitation of that rich find. The Kimberley Process (KP) – an agreement drawn up by governments, the industry and civil society – is also addressed. While it has had some success in stemming the flow of "conflict diamonds" into the market, the KP is limited by its mandate to stop the exploitation of diamonds by rebel movements to fuel and fund conflict, but not the industry's exploitation of workers and often devastating impact on local communities.

The inclusion of selected readings and discussion questions enhances the book's educational value. It is, however, inexcusable that an academic publication fails to identify original sources. To give just one example: one reads that "the nationalisation of the mines is ANC policy" (94) only to find that this 1992 ANC statement is attributed only to Cleveland's secondary source, a 2006 article in a US economic journal (n. 25, 216).

*Stones of Contention* is a useful and comprehensive introduction to a terrible history that is so defining of colonial dispossession and oppression, and the potential future, given progressive policies, for development in the period of African Renaissance. [NA](#)