

Who's Entitled? Diamond Mining and Internal Displacement in Botswana

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“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?

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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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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.

The Sewelô diamond was depicted in Louis Vuitton ads completely removed from its context: a raw, earthy 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](#) to be worth up to \$19.5 million (USD). According to Lucara's CEO Eira Thomas, Louis Vuitton and HB will [apparently](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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.

Image on the right: Louis Vuitton diamond padlock pendant (Source: Pinterest)



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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) in protecting

human rights, and Belgian authorities have [continued to find](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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.

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](#). 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) 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](#) from the Kalahari, and did everything possible to [prevent access](#) 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](#) 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](#) by paramilitary police, under the pretext of this "anti-poaching patrol". Survival International has also reported on [police violence](#) against the Khoisan for many years, and numerous [illegal arrests](#) have also been documented. In some cases, Khoisan have also [been shot](#) 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](#) 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.

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 criticism](#) 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 recognizing](#) 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.

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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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