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THE LABOUR MIGRATION OF THE OVAMBO WORKERS TO THE DIAMOND FIELDS IN GERMAN SOUTH WEST AFRICA

A migração laboral de trabalhadores Ovambo às minas de diamante na Colônia Alemã do Sudoeste Africano

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MIGRAÇÃO LABORAL E PRODUÇÃO DE COMMODITIES NA ÁFRICA: CONEXÕES GLOBAIS
LABOR MIGRATION AND COMMODITY PRODUCTION IN AFRICA: GLOBAL ENTANGLEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The extraction of several hundred thousand carats of rough diamonds per year in German South West Africa would have been inconceivable without indigenous workers from the Ovambo region. Each year, thousands of migrant workers from the north of the German colony migrated to the diamond fields to engage in diamond mining and wage labour. The Ovambo workers typically entered into short-term employment contracts for six or nine months before returning to their home regions to focus on farming and harvesting for the rest of the year. This article examines the migrant labour of the Ovambo on the diamond fields of German South West Africa from 1908 to 1914. It focuses on the agency of the indigenous miners, the reasons for their migration, and their social profile. Additionally, it explores the interconnections that arose due to the labour migration of the Ovambo between their home regions and the diamond fields, along with their resulting implications.

KEYWORDS

Agency. Wage labour. Diamonds.

RESUMO

A extração de várias centenas de milhares de quilates de diamantes brutos por ano na colônia alemã do sudoeste africano teria sido inconcebível sem os trabalhadores indígenas da região de Ovambo. Todos os anos, milhares de trabalhadores migrantes do norte da colônia alemã migravam para os campos de diamantes para se envolver na mineração de diamantes e no trabalho assalariado. Os trabalhadores Ovambo normalmente firmavam contratos de trabalho de curto prazo, de seis ou nove meses, antes de retornar às suas regiões de origem para se concentrar na agricultura e na colheita pelo restante do ano. Este artigo examina o trabalho migratório dos Ovambo nos campos de diamantes do Sudoeste Africano Alemão entre 1908 e 1914. Ele se concentra na agência dos mineiros nativos, nas razões para sua migração e em seu perfil social. Além disso, explora as interconexões que surgiram devido à migração laboral dos Ovambo entre suas regiões de origem e os campos de diamantes, juntamente com as implicações dela resultantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES

Agência. Trabalho assalariado. Diamantes.

The German Empire became a colonial power relatively late in history, because the *Kaiserreich* established its first colony in Africa only in 1884: It was the territory south of the Portuguese-Angola colony and north of the Cape Colony in Africa (Zeller, 2008). The region was given the rather simple name German South West Africa and became the first official German colony. Chancellor Bismarck futilely hoped that natural resources would be quickly discovered in German South West Africa, allowing the colony to be financially independent from state subsidies. However, these hopes were not fulfilled. The colony instead became a financial burden for the *Kaiserreich*, because it requiring millions of *Goldmark* in subsidies every year.

This situation changed in April 1908 when an indigenous railway employee stumbled upon a colorless crystal during cleanup operations in the desert (National Archives Namibia, Windhoek, NAN, p. 79a-e). He found the stone so beautiful that he showed it to his supervisor, who hoped it might be a raw diamond. This suspicion proved to be true. The joy around the discoveries of the gemstones in German South West Africa and in the *Kaiserreich* was immense. The news of the diamond discoveries from the sites near *Lüderitzbucht* in German Southwest Africa spread quickly. In August 1908, the *Hamburger Nachrichten* headlined "The Diamond Discoveries in German Southwest Africa" stating:

> From a respected source, we are informed from South Africa […] In the south [of German South West Africa], the diamond discoveries of Lüderitz Bay, in the north, the resolution of the Ovambo issue – indeed, two events of far-reaching significance (BArch, p. 47).

At that time, the author of the article likely could not have anticipated the extent to which the indigenous population from the Ovambo region and diamond extraction would be interconnected.

The diamond deposits in German South West Africa were located near the surface, which meant that the diamond-bearing rock did not have to be laboriously mined out of the shafts underground. This characteristic not only made diamond extraction cheaper and faster compared to neighboring colonial South Africa's underground mines but also necessitated extensive labour in German South West Africa. The only region in German South West Africa that was populous enough to provide the necessary labour force was the extreme northern part of, the Ovambo region. The other areas of the German colony were either not populated at all or too sparsely populated, especially after the conclusion of the colonial war against the Herero and Nama, which was fought between 1904 and 1907 and which resulted in the deaths of countless indigenous victims (Zimmerer, 2002, p. 177). After the discovery of the diamond deposits, several thousand indigenous workers from the northern protectorate – the Ovambo region – migrated to the distant diamond fields in the south of German Southwest Africa in search for work. This migratory work significantly shaped gemstone extraction on the diamond fields near *Lüderitzbucht* as well as the origin destination of the indigenous miners.

While the joy around the discoveries of the diamond deposits was great in the German colony, it was even greater at the Reich Colonial Office in Berlin. The Reich Colonial Office administered all seven German colonies and served as the direct supervisory authority for the administration in German South West Africa (Kundrus, 2005). The value of the mineral discoveries was immediately recognized by the Reich Colonial Office: the sites where the first stones were found were declared a *Sperrgebiet* (German Federal Archives Berlin-Lichterfelde, BArch, p. 1–2). Additionally, the raw diamonds were taxed, and a mandatory delivery obligation to Berlin was imposed (hrsg. von den Förderern, 1914, p. 32).

In Berlin, the *Diamanten-Regie-Gesellschaft* was established, a company exclusively tasked with selling raw diamonds from German South West Africa (BArch, p. 27-29, 32-34, 44). These far-reaching decisions laid the foundation for the commodity-chain of diamonds from colonial Namibia, spanning from Africa through Europe to the United States of America. In the German colony, the stones were mined and transported to Berlin where they were mostly sold to Belgium. In Belgium, they were refined and ultimately consumed in the United States of America.

The commodity-chain of diamonds was transcontinental, predicated on the division of labour, and highly labour-intensive. In German South West Africa, well over a thousand indigenous workers collected diamonds from the desert every month, while cutting shops in the *Kaiserreich* and in Belgium refined the stones from the German colony. The migrant workers from the Ovambo region were the true 'bearers' of the commodity-chain, because they ensured that the extraction of the diamonds, their trade and sale was constantly driven anew. But it remains questionable who these migrant workers were: to what extent did the migration of the indigenous Ovambo workers alter the respective spaces? Did the migration result in entanglements, and if so, what were the consequences? Lastly, what agency did the indigenous workers possess to resist the arbitrary, exploitive, and abusive practices of the colonial authorities and the mining companies? These are the questions I explore in my analysis, emphasizing the significance of migrant labour for the diamond fields near *Lüderitzbucht* and German South West Africa. In doing so, I demonstrate that the indigenous Ovambo workers were not merely the 'pawns' of the mining companies or the colonial authorities. They rather possessed significant agency to shape the diamond extraction according to their interests.

The majority of sources used for this essay is derived from the National Archives in Windhoek. Supplementary documents come from the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Windhoek and the German Federal Archives in Berlin-Lichterfelde. The documents primarily consist of official correspondences from colonial authorities. However, there is a lack of written testimonies from the Ovambo workers as they are virtually nonexistent. The perspectives of the miners, their working conditions, and their motives for the migration to the diamond fields had to be carefully 'extracted' from the colonial administrative records.

THE OVAMBO REGION AND THE RECRUITMENT OF INDIGENOUS OVAMBO WORKERS

Shortly after the discovery of the first raw diamonds the first mining companies were founded in *Lüderitzbucht* (NAN, p. 72). The mining companies consisted of private individuals, who wanted to mine the stones more cost-effectively through communal financing. Most of the shareholders of the mining companies had no prior knowledge or expertise in diamond extraction. Additionally, the companies were established upon private funds and were thus often underfunded. The rough diamonds discovered in the German colony were not concentrated in the middle of the Namib Desert but were rather spread across the entire desert (BArch, p. 4–5). The most immediate question for the mining companies was, hence, where to find the urgently needed workers to gather all the rough diamonds. The shareholders could hardly collect the stones themselves as they were numerically weak, and more importantly, they were racist and thus showed no interest in picking up the stones (NAN, p. Anlage 1, 10). The only region that was populous enough in German South West Africa to provide the necessary labour force was the far north of the

German colony, the Ovambo region. The remaining areas of German Southwest Africa were either sparsely populated or not inhabited at all.

However, under German colonial rule, the Ovambo region had never been officially declared part of the so-called "sphere of influence." This meant that the Ovambo region had never been officially occupied, and therefore, no colonial posts or other colonial infrastructure had been established there (Miescher, 2013, p. 45–47). Consequently, the mining companies could not force the Ovambo workers to undertake colonial labour; instead, they had to offer them incentives in the form of monthly wage payments.

The Ovambo region in the north and the diamond fields in the south of the German colony were separated by several hundred kilometers. To bridge the distance between the *Sperrgebiet* and the recruitment locations in the north of German South West Africa, the mining companies hired recruiters who positioned themselves at the borders of the Ovambo region (Moorsom, 1997, p. 29). These recruiters welcomed the indigenous men arriving from the north, who had migrated in the "sphere of influence" within German South West Africa in search for work. As the companies urgently needed indigenous miners, they recruited Ovambo workers with the help of four agents: Conrad, Stroka, Krefft, and Seibert (NAN, p. Anlage 1, 10).

All mining companies near *Lüderitzbucht* had joined in a newly established Mining Chamber to better organize the recruitment of the migrant workers from the Ovambo region (NAN, Anlage 1, 1-2). The Mining Chamber took full responsibility for the coordination of the recruitment and the payment of the recruiters. At least in theory, the recruitment process proceeded smoothly: first, the respective mining company reported to the Mining Chamber the number of workers needed. The Mining Chamber thereafter telegraphed this demand to the recruiters at the borders of the Ovambo region (Mantei, 2007, p. 153–157). The expenses for recruitment, including the wages for agents, provisions, and travel tickets for the indigenous workers on their way to the diamond fields, were covered by the Mining Chamber through communal funds of all mining companies (NAN, p. Anlage 1, 11). Once the indigenous migrant workers arrived in *Lüderitzbucht*, a representative from the Mining Chamber allocated the miners to the individual companies. The Mining Chamber was also responsible for the repartition of the migrant workers after the expiration of their contracts.

The Ovambo had to cover the majority of the journey to the diamond fields on foot and they were only able to use the railway and later the ship for a few sections– provided they possessed the necessary tickets. During the two-day train journey, the indigenous workers had to endure open freight cars, which resulted in the death of many workers (NAN, p. 123). Other migrant workers fall ill and arrived already weakened at their next destination (NAN, p. 123). The established ship connection between *Swakopmund* and *Lüderitzbucht* in 1912 was only a limited improvement, as many indigenous Ovambo had never been at sea and experienced seasickness (NAN, p. 14). If the recruiters did not provide the travel tickets to the migrant workers as intended, the miners were forced to cover the entire journey to the *Sperrgebiet* on foot. This, sometimes, entailed life-threatening issues for the migrant workers, as very few had enough water for the entire journey. Countless Ovambos died of thirst on the way to the diamond fields or on the return journey to the north (NAN, p. 16).

Some recruiters also held out provisions for the migrant workers, because they wanted to increase their own earnings. Since the recruiters received a bonus for every Ovambo worker, regardless of age or health condition, the agents also signed contracts with children, sick or weakened indigenous men (NAN, p. 4; NAN, p. 203). This practice was facilitated by the fact that the migrant workers did not require training or any prior knowledge to engage in diamond mining. In contrast to underground mining in colonial South Africa, entirely unskilled and inexperienced workers could extract rough diamonds in the *Sperrgebiet* of colonial Namibia.

However, the recruitment process rarely proceeded smoothly or without conflict. The mining companies were not the only employers with a high demand for indigenous workers in German South West Africa. Thus, the mining companies in *Lüderitzbucht* fiercely competed for indigenous workers at the border to the Ovambo region with other colonial employers. Since the Otavi Mines and Railway Company, the copper mines in Tsumeb, and also the marble mines urgently needed indigenous men, there were a total of ten recruiters vying for the favour of the indigenous Ovambo workers (NAN, p. Anlage 1, 11-12). The recruiters were first and foremost driven by the high bonuses they received in addition to their wages for every signed contract.

ON THE DIAMOND FIELDS

In case the Ovambo survived the journey to the diamond fields, they often encountered even worse conditions in the *Sperrgebiet*, because the working conditions on the diamond fields were absolutely catastrophic. The miners primarily received cheap food, which contained far too few nutrients to provide the indigenous workers with sufficient energy for the physically demanding work in the desert (NAN, p. 83-84,87,92). The accommodations offered little protection from the weather and were extremely unhygienic. The lack of improvement in both the living conditions and nutrition of the indigenous workers by the mining companies was because of their racism. From the perspective of the companies, the migrant workers did not "need" better treatment (NAN, p. 150; NAN, p. 128–129). Additionally, the companies had a significant interest in keeping labour costs as low as possible. This latter aspect was a central and recurring motive for the exploitation of indigenous people. The malnutrition of the Ovambo on the diamond fields had consequences: the weakened miners were less productive and thus were not able to collect more stones. Therefore, the treatment of the indigenous workers directly affected the profits of the companies and the tax revenues of the colonial budget of German South West Africa. Even more drastic were the many deaths among the indigenous workers in the long run, because it reduced the number of indigenous people migrating to the fields.

The companies saved money on both, the accommodations for indigenous workers as well as their food supply. The *Sperrgebiet* was so isolated in the middle of the Namib desert, that some companies had to transport food to the fields using donkeys or indigenous workers (BArch, p. 7). Companies in the far north of the Namib-desert established provision depots to store food, because of the distance to *Lüderitzbucht* (NAN, p. 79). From these depots, the food had to be transported to the diamond fields:

> Since it is hardly possible to transport larger quantities of goods by land through the difficult beach formations [...] the provisions are not insignificant. There are also constantly natives on the move to bring the goods to the fields in the smallest quantities through the dune crossings (NAN, p. 79).

The food resupply was time-consuming and laborious and also exacerbated the labour shortage in the *Sperrgebiet*, as mine workers were used to transport the provisions. Additionally, only a few products reached the fields in time, while others spoiled in the provision depots before they could be brought to the diamond fields.

Although there were food selection and rationing varied from company to company, all mining companies tried to provide their employees with cheap and durable food. Therefore, the basic food included flour and rice, supplemented with extensive rations of fat and sugar (NAN, p. 83-84,87,92). With these ingredients, migrant workers prepared "a thick, sticky porridge" three times a day, which was mostly eaten "raw" (NAN, p. 92–93) Many

indigenous workers fell sick from this diet. The fact that the workers were forced to "eat quickly between work shifts" and were not given the opportunity to prepare their meals took a toll on their often poor health condition (NAN, p. 87). Although some companies gave their miners canned meat, jam, legumes, or "occasionally some sauerkraut," these rations were not enough to compensate for the otherwise vitamin-deficient diet (NAN, p. 82, 84, 87).

The German colonial physician Dr. Brenner diagnosed scurvy among mine workers on all mining fields in the *Sperrgebiet*. There were particularly many cases at the Charlottenthal Company: "6 natives were incapacitated by their Pontock, all of whom had severe scurvy. Among the rest of the 24 capable workers, I found 8 with mild scurvy" (NAN, p. 84). The situation was even more drastic at the Kyffhäuser Company, as Dr. Brenner diagnosed scurvy in 22 out of 25 cases (NAN, p. 86,88). Brenner noted in his report after his inspection: "among the occurring diseases, scurvy is by far the most common" (NAN, p. 92,94) In addition, Brenner concluded that scurvy was the most common cause of death among indigenous people on the diamond fields. However, the mining companies persistently refused to provide the migrant workers with larger portions or more vitamin-rich and fresh foods, because they wanted so save as much money as possible.

The indigenous Ovambo workers had to build their accommodations by themselves after arriving on the diamond fields in case there were not enough quarters available. As all mining companies sought to save as much money as possible on labour costs, the workers' dwellings consisted of inexpensive materials, primarily tarpaulins, wood, jute sacks, or corrugated iron (NAN, p. 24). Although these building materials were cheap, they provided little protection against the extreme temperatures in the desert. Additionally, the quarters quickly became unhygienic. A colonial policeman characterized one company's accommodations as "small dirty holes without air and light," made of "old rusted corrugated iron […] where one can reach through with hands at all corners and where the rough southwest wind sweeps through" (NAN, p. 28). He found it surprising that considering the "hygienic conditions [...] there are not more diseases" (NAN, p. 28). The lack of hygiene was also contributed to by the constant dismantling and rebuilding of the dwellings: once the foreman declared a mining field exhausted, they instructed the indigenous workers to dismantle their accommodations and rebuild them in another area of the *Sperrgebiet* (NAN, p. 86). In contrast to the Ovambo, the white supervisors lived in mobile residential houses that could be transported by pack animals and placed elsewhere when needed.

The companies regularly overcrowded the indigenous accommodations and thereby increased the risk of infection. On some diamond fields, more than ten indigenous people lived in a single room so that the mining companies could save costs on additional accommodations: "The indigenous housing rooms [...] are made of corrugated iron, 8m long, 3.50m wide, 2.50m high, with wooden bunks stacked on top of each other" (NAN, p. 13,86) The dormitories had neither windows nor a solid floor. While the latter served to further reduce labour and production costs, it led to a rapid spread of viruses and bacteria once a worker fell ill in the accommodation. In general, there was a lack of fresh water and sanitary facilities for the indigenous workers in the *Sperrgebiet*. At the Charlottenfeld Company, the latrines and garbage bins were erected next to the sleeping rooms and the kitchen for the mine workers:

> A urine bucket and a garbage bin are placed close to the Pontock, swarming with flies. A little further away are 3 buckets for natives, the contents of which are buried by the natives in the dunes. The representative of the company manager is not informed about the frequency and control of emptying (NAN, p. 85).

The Charlottenfeld Company placed the garbage bins and urine buckets side by side to the accommodation of the indigenous workers to save money. The company likely placed latrines, kitchens, and garbage bins for the indigenous workers particularly close to each other to further shorten the lunch break of the Ovambo. Additionally, the racism of the mining companies prevented them from spending more money on hygienic accommodations for the indigenous mine workers.

The average monthly salary of adult indigenous workers was between 15 and 25 Mark, experienced miners received up to 35 Mark, while children and seriously ill miners often received only 5 Mark per month (NAN, p. 59). The mining companies especially took advantage of sick miners or children, because they exploited them to an even more extreme degree: “A large company employed a whole bunch of these 5-mark workers [...] I admit that among the above-mentioned little ones, there were some weak individuals, but most of them were sturdy fellows” (NAN, p. 59).

Who migrated from the Ovambo region to the diamond fields? What was the average age of the workers? Why did indigenous men leave their home region and engage in wage labour in the *Sperrgebiet*? And were there indigenous women among the recruited workers? Answers to these questions had to be “filtered” from the archival documents because the focus of the official colonial correspondences was not on the experiences of the indigenous workers. Even when the sources provided information about the indigenous people, the statements were strongly racially connoted. Nevertheless, colonial sources represent the only reliable testimonies that allow insights into the diamond extraction of the indigenous workers, as very few written documents or self-testimonies from the Ovambo themselves exist.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS: MIGRATION MOTIVES OF THE OVAMBO WORKERS

Numerous models and theories exist within the history of migration that help reconstruct potential reasons for migration. One of these models is the Push-Pull Theory, which illustrates motives for labour migration: “The basic idea is that there are factors that cause people to leave their place of residence (push), and others that attract them (pull)” (Schwenken, 2019, p. 73–74). Hence, pull factors refer to all the reasons in the destination region that were decisive for people to migrate, while push factors denote all the causes in the origin region that were significant for labour migration.

Four push factors and two pull factors can be identified with regard to the migration of Ovambo workers to the diamond fields. An essential push factor was extreme weather events in the northern part of German South West Africa. The indigenous populations in the Ovambo region were settled and primarily engaged in agriculture (NAN, p. 32–33). Due to the average field size of about two hectares, manual cultivation of the fields was time and labour-intensive. The Ovambo cultivated their fields in close proximity to their homes whenever possible (NAN, p. 33). During the winter months, indigenous Ovambo predominantly grew maize on their farmland and collected figs, melons, and peanuts in the surroundings to ensure their sustenance. All these tasks were assigned based on gender: while men performed physically demanding work, especially in agriculture and livestock farming, women focused on fruit harvesting and basket weaving (Moorsom, 1997, p. 47–48). However, the Ovambo region was regularly hit by extreme weather events: floods, drought periods, and resulting locust plagues led to food shortages, why indigenous men often tried to secure their livelihood through alternative means. Thus, extreme weather events constituted a significant push factor.

A second push factor was represented by wars or military conflicts within the Ovambo region (Moorsom, 1997, p. 35). There were 13 indigenous settlements in the Ovambo region around 1913, with only nine of these settlements located within the German colony. The remaining four settlements were situated on the colonial Portuguese territory in neighboring Portuguese Angola. Regardless of their location, each settlement was led by a chief, whose court consisted of a ten-member council and a military force called *elenga*. The *elenga* had three main tasks: first, to protect the chief; second, to collect taxes from the indigenous residents of the settlements; and third, to actively participate in warfare in case of military conflicts (Moorsom, 1997, p. 8). There were frequent conflicts in the Ovambo region between individual chiefs or entire settlements, especially when chiefs competed for local dominance in the Ovambo region (NAN, p. 78). In such cases, the *elenga* attacked other settlements, looted food supplies, and killed or abducted indigenous men, women and children. Some chiefs strategically used their *elenga* to raid neighboring settlements after crop failures to ensure the food supply in their own settlement. The indigenous inhabitants at the outskirts of settlements were particularly vulnerable during raids, as they were often the first victims. Those living on the margins of indigenous settlements were primarily families who did not belong to the closer or extended circles of the indigenous elite, were poorly integrated into the village community, and usually lived in precarious conditions (Moorsom, 1997, p. 8–9). Faced with these violent conflicts, indigenous men in the outskirts had a strong motive to leave their region to protect themselves from attacks or raids.

Closely linked to this aspect is the third push factor: conscription for military service. Chiefs recruited young men from their settlements for wars, raids, or looting through the *elenga* (Moorsom, 1997, p. 28–29). These men were expected to reinforce the *elenga* in times of war or conflict and also serve in the indigenous army. Ovambo men were reluctant to be recruited for military service, as they faced a high risk of injury and death during their military service. The diamond mining in the *Sperrgebiet* provided a way for eligible men to avoid military service for a certain period.

A fourth and final push factor was represented by the slave trade between German South West Africa and Portuguese Angola. Even long after the official abolition of slavery, traders in the German and Portuguese colonies continued to acquire slaves. Enslaving indigenous Ovambo people was a highly lucrative business for traders, because there was a high demand for cheap labour on the cocoa and sugar plantations of the West African islands of São Tomé and Príncipe (Moorsom, 1997, p. 4,7). Some chiefs in the Ovambo region exploited the slave trade in their region to their advantage and actively supported slave traders by providing them with indigenous people. In exchange for horses, cattle, weapons, ammunition, or alcohol, chiefs offered European merchants indigenous workers from their settlements (Gustafsson, 2005, p. 41; Moorsom, 1997, p. 7). The diamond extraction near *Lüderitzbucht* thus provided workers with the option to escape enslavement and abduction by their chiefs.

Besides the push factors, several pull factors can be identified. The most significant pull factor was the wage earnings on the diamond fields, which allowed indigenous men to realize their own interests in multiple ways (NAN, p. 44–45). With their salary, they could, for example, afford the dowry required for marriage or acquire land, crops, and livestock to better secure themselves against crop failures (Moorsom, 1997, p. 7). The financial means also provided the Ovambo with the opportunity to purchase essential or luxury items, thereby ensuring admiration from friends, relatives, or acquaintances. The second pull factor is closely related to this aspect, as wage employment in the colonial territory was considered particularly courageous in indigenous settlements and brought men much prestige upon their return (Zimmerer, 2002, p. 214). This also applied to the acquisition of livestock, as

livestock was expensive and reserved for wealthy individuals. Therefore, wage earnings upon their return allowed men to achieve a social advancement within their settlements.

SOCIAL PROFILE OF THE MIGRANT WORKERS FROM THE OVAMBO REGION

But what else can be said about the indigenous migrant workers? Most indigenous Ovambo who migrated to the diamond fields were between 14 and 18 years old. Only a few workers were older and between 30 to 35 years old. These miners were experienced migrant workers, who had been working in the *Sperrgebiet* before and had been recruited again (Moorsom, 1997, p. 52; NAN, p. 47). Experienced Ovambo often served as so-called headmen and guided new or less experienced indigenous workers to the recruiters, negotiated salaries with the agents, and then escorted all miners to *Lüderitzbucht*. Indigenous women from the Ovambo region rarely embarked on migratory work to the diamond fields. However, colonial authorities prevented most indigenous women from entering the German colonial territory right at the border to the "sphere of influence", especially if they stated their intention to engage in diamond mining (Moorsom, 1997, p. 15,22-23; NAN, p. 9,13). The mining companies considered the indigenous women to be undesirable workers and thus vehemently refused to employ women in the *Sperrgebiet*. In case one of the recruiters singed a contract with an indigenous woman from the Ovambo region, the mining company denied the recruiters their commission (NAN, p. 9). The companies justified this strict approach with the alleged lower physical capacity of women and the argument that indigenous women would distract men from diamond mining (NAN, p. 9).

The archival documents from the National Archive in Windhoek also provided insights into the religious affiliation of the employees. Names like Petrus, Paulus, and Johannes indicate that some miners were Christianized either before migrating to the diamond fields or after joining the Christian faith in the *Sperrgebiet (Archive of the Evangelican Lutheran Church in Namibia Windhuk, p. 392)*. Given the presence of German missionaries from the evangelical *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* in both the Ovambo region and on the diamond fields, it is likely that many of the Christianized workers belonged to the evangelical faith. Missionary work made it challenging for colonial authorities and mining companies to locate indigenous people. Governor Seitz, among others, complained that the identification of indigenous individuals was hindered when missionaries renamed them after baptism (Archive of the Evangelican Lutheran Church in Namibia Windhuk, p. 392). Thus, Christianization of the indigenous workers limited official control over the indigenous population.

Lastly, the sources indicate that the indigenous workers remained closely connected to their home regions (NAN, p. 47). The Ovambo rarely singed contracts lasting longer than six or nine months and precisely embarked on migratory work in March or April and in September or October. In between these months the migration from the Ovambo region significantly slowed down (NAN, p. 47). This can be explained by the harvest season in the indigenous settlements, during which men had to harvest and then sow their fields again to ensure the livelihood of their families or relatives. Consequently, indigenous men predominantly migrated in the months when the crops in their fields ripened and when there was less agricultural work. During the absence of the miners, women in the indigenous communities took on the responsibility of farming.

AGENCY OF INDIGENOUS WORKERS

The mining companies exploited the Ovambo, yet the indigenous workers were not entirely helpless against the arbitrary actions of colonial authorities and the mining companies. They possessed a considerable degree of agency, meaning the power to assert their interests and shape the conditions on the diamond fields according to their wishes.

Agency is a theory concept that has become established in various research areas, including history, sociology and philosophy (Ahearn, 2001; Davidson, 2011). While definitions of agency vary in these studies, they commonly explore forms or manifestations of the scope for action, power, or competence of individual actors or entire groups of actors. The growing popularity of the agency concept has also led to increasing criticism of the theory, often with the aim of expanding and making the concept more adaptable. Lynn Thomas, for instance, criticized in her essay "Historicising Agency," an analytical flattening of the concept and advocated using agency not just descriptively but as an analytical starting point for further considerations (Thomas, 2016, p. 324–326). This paper follows this plea by exploring nuanced forms of agency, shedding light on manifestations of indigenous agency which was often overlooked in research.

The indigenous workers from the Ovambo region had a strong sense of community. This provided them with significant opportunities for action on the way to and from the diamond fields, as well as within the *Sperrgebiet*. Before the migrant workers embarked on migratory labour, they formed groups of up to 35 people under the leadership of an experienced headman (NAN, p. 203). This collective grouping of indigenous migrant workers increased the survival chances of each worker during the challenging march southward. They shared provisions, water rations, or clothing and sometimes collectively stayed behind if tickets were lost (NAN, p. 46–48). Additionally, they benefited from the headman's experience in choosing the safest route to the diamond fields or a suitable location for a campsite. As not all indigenous workers possessed the same skills and knowledge, they benefited from each other's expertise, when it came to kindling a fire on cold nights.

Upon arriving in *Lüderitzbucht*, some groups of indigenous workers refused to be distributed on different diamond fields. Instead, they insisted on being assigned to a mining company as a group (NAN, p. 47). This refusal disrupted the mining companies' ability to meet the labour demand adequately, leading some companies to have too many workers, while others had too few (NAN, p. 184). Consequently, the Ovambo influenced not only whether but also to what extent the mining companies could meet their own labour demand.

The headman played a crucial role in various aspects, because of their experience in the German colonial territory. The headman was familiar with the working and living conditions in the *Sperrgebiet* and the earning opportunities (NAN, p. 9257). Moreover, some headmen even understood or spoke some German, as they negotiated contracts with the recruiters. Since the Ovambo entered the "sphere of influence" in larger groups, recruiters had a great interest in engaging with the headmen in negotiations. This allowed them to conclude multiple contracts at the same time and thus collect multiple premiums (NAN, p. 8,23-24). Due to their group size and the language skills of their headmen, the migrant workers increased the chances of higher wages, as they could persuade recruiters to make financial concessions. The migrant workers particularly benefited from the language skills of their headmen because the contracts were written in German and could only be read by the headman. Thus, the headmen reduced the often arbitrary actions of recruiters towards Ovambo workers, who were often promised higher wages than were fixed in the written contracts (NAN, p. Anlage 1, 11-12).

The subtlety of indigenous agency is illustrated by the example of word of mouth. A lot of information circulated about diamond mining and daily life in the *Sperrgebiet* in the Ovambo region. Indigenous migrant workers who returned to the north of the German colony

could reinforce negative impressions of diamond mining through their stories and experiences. Reports of mistreatment, unpaid wages, illness, and deaths could dissuade undecided indigenous people from migrating to *Lüderitzbucht*. The colonial authorities were aware of the poor reputation on labour recruitment in the Ovambo region; however, they failed to persuade the mining companies to treat migrant workers better in the long term (NAN, p. 57; NAN, p. 52). Accordingly, indigenous workers returning to their origin destination exerted agency by warning other men against from engaging in diamond extraction. Hence, word of mouth determined the "durability of the migration movement" and reduced the "vulnerability" of the Ovambo on the diamond fields (Oltmer, 2016, p. 15).

ADMISSION OF INDIGENOUS RUNNERS IN THE OVAMBO REGION

The Mining Chamber had been pressuring the German government in Windhuk to allow so-called runners in the Ovambo region since 1910 (NAN, p. 5). These runners were indigenous Ovambo who were hired by the recruiters to cooperate with them. The runners had several advantages for recruiters and the mining companies: they spoke the indigenous languages, knew the routes to and between the settlements, and could guide the recruited Ovambo to the recruiting points. Additionally, the runners could provide valuable information to the indigenous people about wage labour, because the knew the monthly salary on the diamond mines (NAN, p. 225). The runners often played a decisive role in whether an undecided worker opted for or against wage labour. Since the runners were indigenous Ovambo, they enjoyed the trust of the local populations in the settlements. The recruiters and the mining companies had therefore been advocating for the so-called "runner service" for some time, but the German colonial authorities hesitated to allow indigenous runners for the Ovambo region. The Grootfontein district office feared that indigenous runners could shift the "conflicting interests" of the competing recruiters to the Ovambo region (NAN, p. 210). This fact was the reason why Governor Seitz had forbidden recruiters to collaborate with runners at the border to the Ovambo region.

After all other initiatives to attract more migrant workers to the *Sperrgebiet* had failed, the government in Windhuk finally allowed cooperation between recruiters and indigenous runners (NAN, p. 25). However, the colonial authority in Windhoek set a condition: recruiters were only allowed to collaborate with runners secretly, because the internal competition between the different recruiters should not be further fueled. Shortly thereafter, the Outjo district office reported that the "runner service" had "proved" itself and had not led to any "shortcomings" (NAN, p. 225). However, it remains questionable how much influence the runners actually had on migration.

The runners served as intermediaries: they held a crucial role between the colonized and the colonizers in German South West Africa, because they served as link between both groups of actors. This position was highly hybrid: on the one hand, the runners pursued their own interests, but on the other hand, they also supported colonial officials and the enforcement of colonial goals. Accordingly, they benefited from German colonial rule and simultaneously stabilized it, as they contributed to the maintenance of colonial structures. The runners could financially and materially benefit from German colonial rule, since they received a fixed salary from the recruiters (NAN, p. 225). Additionally, the runners exercised agency, because they shaped the recruitment efforts and thus also diamond extraction in the *Sperrgebiet*.

AGENCY OF INDIGENOUS ELITES

Each settlement in the Ovambo region was led by a chief who governed the indigenous inhabitants of the respective settlement. One of the largest settlements in the Ovambo region was Ukuambi, managed by chief Ipumbu. Ipumbu recognized the migratory labour of indigenous men from his settlement as opportunity to enable him trade relations with the German colonial authorities.

In a letter written in *Sütterlin* to the "Honorable Imperial Government," he inquired whether the money he had handed over to two colonial officials during their journey through the Ovambo region for the purchase of a horse had been sufficient (NAN, p. 183). He also requested in his letter:

> [t]o inform three of my people, Schahama shAkapugulu, Nuusikuua Lindi, and Schipanga shAmunue, who are on the diamond fields in Lüderitzbucht, [...] that [...] all Ovambos from Ukuambi should give all their money to Mr. Captain Streitwolf [...] for the mule wagon that Mr. Captain Streitwolf and Mr. Tönjes promised to buy for me. Here, I have no money for the wagon (NAN, p. 183).

Ipumbu's letter is noteworthy not only as one of the extremely rare written testimonies of an indigenous chief but also because it is written in nearly flawless German. His language and writing skills suggest that he received education from German missionaries of the Rheinische Mission Society or the Finnish Mission Society in the Ovambo region. Moreover, Ipumbu obviously knew that men from his settlement engaged in labour migration and migrated to the diamond fields near *Lüderitzbucht*.

The government in Windhuk made intensive efforts to build and maintain peaceful relations with the chiefs in the Ovambo region (NAN, p. 89). This interest was due to strategic considerations, as the chiefs were expected to encourage indigenous Ovambo in their settlements to engage in wage labour in the colonial territory. The German government, hence, paid some chiefs a bounty of two Goldmark for each recruited worker from their respective settlements (NAN, p. 43). Other chiefs fulfilled personal consumption desires or tried to alleviate supply shortages in their settlements. In exchange for the commitment of chiefs to actively support labour migration to *Lüderitzbucht*, the government in Windhuk provided them with grain (NAN, p. 18). In some cases, the German colonial authorities also gifted chiefs with tobacco, hats, shirts, fabric handkerchiefs, pipes, or suits, hoping that they would advocate for the recruitment requests of the German colonizers an the mining companies (NAN, p. 84). The chiefs had the opportunity to promote, remain indifferent to, or counteract recruitment measures. Thus, they possessed agency, which allowed them to influence diamond mining and realize their own material interests. Moreover, their actions could positively or negatively impact the colonial economy by participating or prohibiting labour migration to the diamond fields.

However, German colonial officials could not verify whether the indigenous workers had actually embarked on labour migration at the behest of their chiefs or were intrinsically motivated. Similarly, they could not control whether the chiefs supported labour migration to the *Sperrgebiet* at all. It was, therefore, at the discretion of the indigenous chiefs to decide whether and to what extent they complied with the request of the German colonial authorities. These findings indicate that, in the context of German colonial rule, a simplistic characterization of colonial "oppressors" and indigenous "oppressed" should be avoided. Instead, it seems more appropriate to consider German colonialism in a more nuanced manner, as demonstrated by the fact that some indigenous people benefited from German

colonial rule and thereby contributed to the persistence of colonial structures in German South West Africa.

CONCLUSION

The investigation into diamond mining has also shed light on the agency of indigenous workers. While previous studies on German colonial history primarily focused on simple forms of indigenous agency such as escape or resistance, the focus on the commodity-chain of diamonds revealed a much more nuanced aspect of agency. One example of this differentiated agency was the migrant workers networks. The migrant workers could directly influence their wages with a headman. These headmen had experience with migrant labour and sometimes even had rudimentary knowledge of the German language, enabling them to demand higher wages from the recruiters. Similarly, the indigenous workers managed to shape recruitment structures and living conditions on the diamond fields according to their needs. Consequently, the miners utilized their agency to resist the arbitrariness of the mining companies.

Most importantly, the diverse forms of indigenous agency demonstrate that the mining companies could not entirely pursue their economic interests without the cooperation or against the will of the migrant workers. Since the companies depended on indigenous labour, they had to make concessions. As a result, indigenous employees had a say in the employment conditions. Hence, the indigenous workers from the Ovambo region influenced diamond mining through their agency.

The mine workers from the Ovambo region also revealed the incapacity of German colonial administrators to control the German colony and its indigenous populations. The colonial authorities remained heavily reliant on the densely populated Ovambo region for diamond extraction. As the majority of the monthly well over 1,000 workers in the *Sperrgebiet* originated from the Ovambo region, diamond extraction would not have been feasible without the migration of indigenous workers from the northern territory. The labour migration from the Ovambo region and the dependence of colonial authorities and mining companies underscored the limitations of German colonial rule and the disparity between colonial claims of authority and the actual reality. Although the Ovambo region was never formally under direct German colonial rule, indigenous actors from the northern territory were closely with the colonial economy: labour migration from the Ovambo region not only shaped the economy of German South West Africa but also had a significant impact on German colonial rule.

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