

Diamonds are Forever

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ABSTRACT It is officially accepted that the first diamond in South Africa was discovered on the banks of the Gariiep in 1867. At that point in time the area was inhabited by the San, the Khoikhoi and the Tswana. There are indications that the original inhabitants were familiar with diamonds, had a specific use for them and were already fully aware of their potential value by 1869. Subsequent discoveries led to a rush and thousands of diggers congregated on the banks of the Vaal River. Because of the original inhabitants' knowledge of diamonds and the area, they were the ones who showed the first diggers where to dig. In all probability the majority of the diamonds discovered during the initial years of the diamond industry were also found by members of the indigenous population. By means of their capital and advanced technology the white diggers monopolised the diamond industry and overexploited the region - only to depart afterwards. The original inhabitants stayed behind, but this time without their assets - diamonds, land and stock. A typical culture of poverty developed and almost the only option available was to eke out an existence as small-scale diggers. Diamonds are not a renewable resource. And because the available sources were exploited intensively and almost depleted, the life span of the diggings cannot really be extended through judicious management. In order to survive, the small-scale diggers have already developed a range of indigenous "resource management techniques". These socio-cultural mechanisms are the subject matter of discussion of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Gong Gong is a diggers' community between the Vaal and Harts Rivers (district of Barkly West, Northern Cape Province, South Africa) where alluvial diamonds are mined. No one knows for certain what the meaning of the name Gong Gong is, or how it originated. The two most widely accepted explanations are (1) that it is derived from the Koranna or Griqua word *ko nkong* which refers to stones in a waterfall in the Vaal River which resemble a nose, or (2) that the name is onomatopoeic, being imitative of the gong-like sound of stones bumping against one another as a result of the eddying movements of

the water (Ellis, 1887: 60-61).

According to authors like Kies (1972), Oberholster (1945) and Van der Westhuizen (1937: 1), the San were the original inhabitants of this area. By approximately 1770 a number of Korannas and Grikwas (Khoikhoi) had established themselves in the area, while the Tlaping (a Bantu-speaking Tswana group) also lived there (Kies, 1972 and Van der Westhuizen, 1937: 1). Important role players in the later history of the region were descendants of these groups. Among them were the Koranna chief, Jantjie Mothibi, and the Griqua leaders, Nicolaas Waterboer and Adam Kok.

The general view is that the "first" diamond in South Africa (the *Eureka* of 20 carats) was found near Hopetown along the Orange River in 1867 (Matheys, 1991: 3). The news of the find evoked relatively little interest (Van Niekerk, 1996: 13-15). The discovery of the "second" diamond (*The Star of South Africa* of 83, 5 carats) in 1869, and the subsequent large finds on the banks of the Vaal River and on the diamond fields of Kimberley, Vooruitzicht, Du Toitspan and Bultfontein triggered a diamond diggers' rush which was described in *The Diamond News* (October 1937) as the "Second Great Trek" to the interior.

Some of the first white diggers under the leadership of Major Francis reached the Vaal River at Hebron (currently Windsorton) in November 1869. Chief Jan Bloem's Korannas helped them to find their first diamond near Klipdrift (later Barkly West) on 7 January 1870. According to Shillington (1985: 38) the indigenous Koranna, Griqua and Tlaping, because of their knowledge of the area, became increasingly involved in the search for diamonds and identified several sites that were exceptionally rich (for example Pniel, Gong Gong and Keiskama) for the diggers. W. B. Chalmers, the resident magistrate and civil commissioner at Hopetown (1867-1869),

maintained that only four of the first 20 diamonds discovered in South Africa were probably not found by indigenous people (Van Niekerk, 1996: 16).

Not only can one contend that the majority of diamonds were found by the indigenous population in the early years, but also that they were familiar with diamonds before the 'official discovery' and had a particular use for them. Dunn (1871: 6) stated, for example, that the San used shiny stones (diamonds) taken from the Vaal River, to make holes, (because of their hardness) in the round stones that added weight to their digging sticks. Some of the older informants at Gong Gong were familiar with this information, and also said that medicine men (shamans) used diamonds in their *dolos* (bones used by bone-throwers). Van Niekerk (1996: 11-12) confirmed this custom when he reported as follows on the discovery of The Star of South Africa: "It is said to have been found by Schalk Van Niekerk in March 1869 from a black witchdoctor/medicine man who used it as a talisman. The other version is that a Griqua man, Swartbooi, had picked up the diamond and sold it to Van Niekerk".

According to Shillington (1985: 38), by 1869 the indigenous population along the Vaal River had fully realized the potential value of diamonds. By mining diamonds they created opportunities for the development of the poor local economy, while most of the early diamond sales were handled directly by the indigenous leaders. However, the indigenous population soon surrendered their control to the incoming white prospectors and diggers. The latter outnumbered the locals (by the end of 1870 there were approximately 5 000 white diggers along the Vaal River - Erasmus and Sauls, 1995: 138), their claims were acknowledged by the authorities of the day, and international diamond buyers and financial institutions supported them. It was only a question of time before the white diggers and prospectors with their capital and advanced technology monopolized the diamond industry. Shillington (1985: 35) said in this regard that the ease with which it was done wrongly implied that the white diggers and prospectors were pioneers, while the role of the indigenous population is underestimated and un-

appreciated.

In spite of exceptionally rich deposits, the diamond source at Gong Gong is now almost exhausted (*The Diamond News and the SA Watchmaker and Jeweller*, November 1953 and *The Diamond News*, October 1938). It was no longer economically viable for white diggers (read treasure hunters) to mine there. They moved away, the infrastructure fell apart, and an impoverished community of indigenous diggers (descendants of the original inhabitants) remained.

From this information it may be concluded that the indigenous population had specific uses for, and knowledge of diamonds. This was exploited by the incoming white diggers and prospectors for their own benefit.

The indigenous diggers' knowledge has not been lost - they are still mining in a simple, small-scale manner (a claim of approximately 12 m²). Moreover, despite the typical symptoms of poverty at Gong Gong - the indigenous diggers seldom have other sources of income apart from a number of cattle and small livestock; their educational qualifications are low; work, even unskilled labour, is scarce; children are compelled to leave school early and find a livelihood in the city; etc. - the community has succeeded in surviving. The purpose of this contribution is to take a closer look at the knowledge and survival strategies used by the indigenous diggers to survive in a socio-economically deprived area such as this.

METHOD

Apart from the supporting literature study, the data presented in this contribution were gained by means of interviews with spokespersons at Gong Gong. Several visits were paid to the research area from March 1994 to December 1997. The material is both diachronic and synchronic and is often ideographic in nature.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

"You can't just dig anywhere".

Eden Keeble often says: "You must know what you're doing." From this one may conclude that deep-seated knowledge of the soil in which digging is to be done is extremely important. Gong

Gong is situated in the basin of the Vaal River drainage system, which covers an area of about 194 250 km². The semi-arid landscape is dominated by broad, low-angle plains, bounded by the river valley and isolated clusters of koppies (Matheys, 1991: 3-4). Numerous diamondiferous fissures are found in the Gong Gong area, both at the surface and lower down. Fissures (which can be described as channelized, sediment-laden gravelly flows) are regarded by many diggers as typical characteristics which could be linked to the possible presence of alluvial diamonds (cf. Black, 1939: 17 and Van Niekerk, 1996: 16). Luke du Preez, a digger, explains that given the uneven and rolling terrain of Gong Gong, fissures normally "run" from higher places (mountains and hillocks/koppies) down to the river. The coarsest load is carried along the deepest portion of the channel where consistency or density is greatest. Where the fissure makes a bend, the diamonds, because of their higher density and resultant greater weight, are deposited on the outside edge.

Further geological indications of alluvial diamond deposits that the indigenous digger looks for, are the presence of carbon, river garnets (which are very nearly of the same specific gravity as diamonds), greenstones and "bantoms"¹. Another indigenous digger, Moses Bosvark, believes that red soil, together with round, heavy pebbles could indicate good diamond-bearing ground.

Specific mechanisms were created to convey this and other knowledge. In the past (this was the case until the end of 1993), a prospective digger could only obtain a digger's certificate after two years' in-service training with a licensed digger. Knowledge of mining was conveyed in this way (often from father to son). Abraham Chabalala's eighty-year old mother grew up on the diggings, and was married to a digger, John Chabalala. Since John's death she has been living with Abraham. She is stout, moves with difficulty and mostly sits, wrapped in a blanket, on a bench on the porch and thinks. She is not talkative by nature. Abraham, whose legs are getting weak, keeps her up to date with everything concerning the diggings, and regularly asks her advice on where the "old people" used to dig and where they found good dia-

monds in the past. He uses this knowledge when he wants to stake off a new claim. Abraham often refers - with a wide, vague gesture of his hand - to a piece of land he knows of that was not mined fully by the "old people".

The knowledge gained by these diggers from tradition as well as their own experience, enabled them to survive. Over the years a variety of techniques were developed which are still used today for mining diamonds.

Mining techniques

Open-cast mining is currently the most common technique used to mine alluvial diamonds at Gong Gong. This type of digging involves the removal of the overburden of sand or soil and the excavation of the underlying gravel. This gravel is of lower Pleistocene age (Matheys 1991:17) and the diggings are no deeper than 2 m. Hand tools (picks and shovels) and a minimum number of labourers (seldom more than two) are used. The dry diamond-bearing gravel is sifted in a "baby"², and then the "bantoms" are usually washed once a week in a manually-operated pan.

At Gong Gong diamond-bearing gravel is found up to a depth of 35 m, and it is not possible to remove such large quantities of top soil manually. Consequently shafts were sunk and wooden hoists were used to take the gravel to the surface (Beet and Terpent, 1917: 66 and *The Diamond News* October 1938).

The bedrock of the Vaal River is very uneven and irregular, with potholes, which are typically 0,3 to 1,5 m deep. These potholes were probably formed by the Vaal River itself, while an alternative hypothesis is that they could be pre-existing features formed by glacio-fluvial processes during the Dwyka times (Matheys, 1991: 27). After the rainy season in February the flow of the Vaal River is so slight that diggers are able to build weirs in the bed, behind which they then explore the potholes for diamonds. Large numbers of diamonds have been found in these potholes in the past (Beet, 1931: 123; Beet and Terpent, 1917: 65 and Van Niekerk, 1996: 19).

FATALISTIC ATTITUDE TO LIFE

"Better than knowledge"

There is an additional factor in the lives of indigenous diggers that is even more valuable to them than the knowledge gained over generations. Certain supernatural elements have a measurable, practical value to many diggers. An undertone of fatalism can often be detected.

Luke du Preez tells that many years ago on a Wednesday evening he had only a mug of tea for supper. "Life was very hard." After saying his prayers that night, he went to bed and dreamt that he was standing at the claim. When he looked down towards the river, he saw a yellowish piece of soil through a fork in a *swarthaak* bush. He walked closer, but suddenly he saw a thick puffadder, pied with a pink belly, in the claim. He didn't want it there and threw it out. It returned and he threw it out again - a little further away. Then a silver yellow-fish turned up and he threw it away twice. The puffadder wanted to grab the yellow-fish, and while he was standing there waiting to see what the puffadder would do, a white girl dressed in pure white came along. She told him to look down at his right foot. Then she walked away, round the heap of gravel at the end of the claim.

Luke woke up. It was about three o'clock. He got up and woke his wife. "The Lord has shown me something," he said. He did not wait for her response, but immediately walked along the river road to the claim. At the *swarthaak* bush he said, "Yes, thank you Lord, it really is here". His right leg started shaking, and he sat down and prayed again when he heard a reply: "Exactly here". He said: "Thank you, Lord, your will be done". He took his pickaxe and started digging, but he was struggling. "And really, I was digging like that, when I dug it up, 49 carats."

There are various other examples of practical value being attached to magic:

- Frans Daniëls described "diamond divining" similar to "water divining". (When he walked over a diamond with a diamond in a preserved-fruit bottle on the palm of his hand the bottle tipped to the side.)
- Ben Fourie used a stick and a piece of steel wire. He explained how he bent the wire to form an eye, and then he put the diamond into the centre of the eye, making it secure with a piece of fine copper wire. When he

walked over diamond-bearing soil, the wire bent. Then he knew this was it.

- Luke du Preez was convinced that after his dream his right leg would start shaking whenever he walked across diamond-bearing gravel.
- Residents are convinced that Eddie Fortune's success is linked to the fact that he is a Muslim.

"Lady Luck never grows old"

Like many other diggers of Gong Gong, Abraham Chabalala has been "blank" during the past few months. He stated that the situation was better previously, but hope keeps him going. He is working for hope: "Maybe next time", because as long as there's a heap, there's always a glint of hope. Because there's always someone in the area who has made a recent find, new hope spurs them all on. And so it happens that Lady Luck is the oldest inhabitant on the diggings.

"Diggers don't die - they fade away"

The following is a general opinion among diggers: "Diamond digging is in your blood. You can't stop. Once a digger, always a digger." The compulsive addiction to the excitement of gambling with Lady Luck each time the sieve is turned over, has a great deal to do with this. And when the sieve doesn't produce anything, the next expectation is: "One day, one day the big one will turn up."

Some of the present diggers at Gong Gong are already the third consecutive generation mining there. However, "diamond fever" is not in the blood of all young people. On the one hand, there are those "who saw the hardship and dust" and who decided that they were not prepared to go through that and moved away to the cities. On the other hand, there are those who become involved with the activities of the underworld.

THE UNDERWORLD

The underworld has been part of the diamond diggings from the early days (Ellis, 1987: 63 and Van Niekerk, 1996: 95-98), and Gong Gong also has its darker side. Residents believe that withdrawal of digging certificates by the

Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs has contributed greatly to this. Digging certificates were issued only if the applicant had an unblemished character and had completed two years' training. Now those who have R50 can obtain a digger's permits, regardless of whether they have digging knowledge or tools. "It is only a cover-up for criminals," Abraham Chabalala maintains.

Brotherhood of buyers

Rumours of organized pan poaching are common. Members of a syndicate work for diggers, and secretly search the washed diamond gravel in the washing pan for diamonds. As soon as a pan poacher has a parcel, he notifies a family member in the city who contacts an illicit trader. The shebeen of the notorious "Missus Meadocks" (pseudonym) is the gathering place for pan poachers and illicit buyers. Reckless spending, licentious women and alcohol abuse are the order of the day. During a research visit the author was told that a seller who received R4 000 had such a spree that one of his "little bibles" (a wad of notes amounting to R2 000) was gone the next morning!

Odour of lavender

Young unemployed sex workers flourish at Gong Gong over weekends. The place reeks of cheap perfume, and the latest chain store fashions are shown off ostentatiously. Those who are not at the shebeen, wander around aimlessly amongst the houses, wait for taxis from Kimberley and make passes at passers-by. This upsets church folk like Petrus van Graaff, while Sustertjie Fourie needs no encouragement to voice her disgust loudly and clearly.

The vase

Tales about swindles abound, like the one about Lodewyk Jones, Gertjie Steyn, Thomas Mitchell and the diamond the size of half a tennis ball. Jones could not believe that a diamond could be so big and asked Mitchell what it was. "No, man," he said, "I'm going to give the thing to the missus to put in the vase, there on the table". "Now what is this?" was asked again. "No, it is a crystal. You must look for a crystal for me again here among the jonas stones (dolo-mite)". "What he got for the diamond," said Luke

du Preez, "God alone knows, but he's in the Cape now, he's a millionaire."

ORGANIZED ACTION

It is a well-known fact that the apartheid did not give the small-scale, indigenous miners much mining opportunity or access to financial institutions. When Gong Gong was declared a Coloured area during the sixties, for example, the original Tswana residents were re-located in the former bantustan, Bophuthatswana (at places like Pampierstad, Kgomoetso and Memutla) in terms of the Group Areas Act (Act 41 of 1950, as amended). Their digger's licences were withdrawn (because they were "black" and not "Coloured") - regardless of the fact that their ancestors had already started mining at the diggings a century before. They were no longer allowed to live or mine at Gong Gong. However, people ingeniously circumvented this system: Tswanas either married Coloured women or Afrikaanerized their surnames (for example Kolobeasekgwa became Bosvark and Tjou became Olifant), or started speaking Afrikaans, whereby they succeeded in having themselves classified as "Coloured", in keeping their digger's licences and in not being re-located.

Over the years several steps were taken by the authorities against the residents of Gong Gong: the area was fenced, and stock found grazing outside it was shot; two schools and a church burnt down in suspicious circumstances; family members visiting at Gong Gong were arrested by the Diamond Branch of the South African Police because they did not have a permit (read "pass") to be in a mining area.

During a meeting held at Barkly West on 18 December 1993, the small diamond diggers recognized the importance of forming a more united front to tackle their problems. Following this, the African United Small Mining Association (AUSMA) was established in 1994. The objectives of AUSMA are: to unite all disadvantaged small miners into one body; to find a market for their minerals; to attract foreign trade; to create wealth; and to give the small miners a role in the economy of the country.

AUSMA has since been instrumental in the following:

- The establishment of a fund of R2 million in the Northern Cape by the provincial government in collaboration with ABSA Bank to assist small-scale diggers (*Diamond Fields Advertiser* 1995-12-18).
- The official granting of permission to approximately 200 small miners to mine on a site at Canteen Koppie near Barkly West.
- Negotiations with the De Beers company for the re-washing of their old mine dumps. It is estimated that approximately 40 per cent of the potential diamonds were left behind in these gravel heaps.

CONCLUSION

The diggers' community of Gong Gong forms the subject of this research. The basic objective was to describe the various cultural mechanisms they have used to survive in a specific environment. The underlying approach to this, namely that a community interacts with and enjoys a particular relationship with its environment, is obviously not new in Anthropology (cf. Lowie, 1937 and Penniman, 1965).

From the data presented, it can be concluded in the first place that the community of Gong Gong:

- developed their own functional way of associating with the environment (technical readjustments like weirs to change the course of the river, were introduced to suit their needs);
- established a system of logic and knowledge in mutual causality with the supernatural, as well as aspects of the underworld; and
- organized a specific social structure (father and son together become involved in the diggings, or where children leave the diggings and move to cities, smuggling networks are organized and operated between the diggings and the city).

Secondly, it is interesting that the community of Gong Gong does not return anything directly to the environment. Although cattle and small stock are kept and plenty of water is available from the Vaal River, waste from the animals is not used as organic fertiliser for vegetable gardens. For incomprehensible reasons vegetable gardens are not in operation, and the ma-

nure is used as fuel.

Thirdly, it should be mentioned that all the views, goals or behaviours discussed in this contribution are not shared by the entire population of Gong Gong. Conflict and competition is therefore not excluded. Young people, for example, are becoming increasingly less inclined to spend their lives as diggers, and an organisation such as AUSMA is accused of politicking, and is losing support as a result.

The diamonds of Gong Gong cannot last, and have not lasted for ever. But diamond fever has maintained a community for the past 100 years.

NOTES

1. According to Van Niekerk (1996:39), an American, J.L. Babe, who came to South Africa, invented a dry sifter for diamondiferous gravel which is called a 'baby' or 'Yankee Baby' in 1870.
2. In the washing process the heavier material is pushed to the side of the pan by the centrifugal force generated by the rotating movement of the washing pan. This material is known as "bantoms" (it is a Dutch derivation from "band around stone") and is regarded as a good indicator of the presence of diamonds because its specific gravity is almost the same as that of diamonds.

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