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'You cannot make a camel drink water': Capital, geo-history and contestations in the Zambian Copperbelt

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ABSTRACT

After prolonged economic decline, Africa is being seen widely as having turned the corner. Relatively high rates of economic growth have been witnessed since the early 2000s, in part due to the China-driven global commodity boom. In addition to older established enclaves, investment has flown into new mineral reserves. Zambia's North Western Province (NWP)—now popularly called the New Copperbelt—has been one of the nodes of the mining boom in that country. Two large foreign-owned mines started operation in NWP's Solwezi District between 2004 and 2009, employing more than 7000 workers. Concomitant to this, thousands of migrants also arrived seeking jobs and a share of the myriad business opportunities thus created. The mining-induced transformation of the previously subsistence-based region was, however, accompanied by autochthonous claims on its supposed developmental benefits. Keen to be seen as socially responsible, these claims were recognized by one of the two mining companies, which put in place an affirmative action system for the local Kaonde people, who were identified as the beneficiary community. But the system faced opposition from other job seekers, who alleged that it was an instance of tribalism, an accusation of considerable force in postcolonial Zambia. Using archival, historical, and ethnographic material, this paper argues that neither the delineation of the beneficiaries nor the contestations around tribe are self-evident processes. They emerge from the articulations of extractive capitalism with a specific geo-historical context, one where the legacies of colonialism continue to inform the state, economy and citizenship.

1. Introduction

"*The Kaonde, they are not very developed*"
–R. Sinyambe, Non-Kaonde from North Western Province, Solwezi 19 January 2008.

"*You cannot employ people from one family to such a big company like Lumwana. I mean Kaonde people; they are more like one family. As a family, a company does not last long*"
–M. Musonda, Immigrant from Copperbelt, Solwezi 29 April 2008.

"*Like the walls of the Biblical Jericho, tribalism [is] falling down before the forces of nationalism and industrialization*"
–Kenneth Kaunda, Independent Zambia's first President (1966, p. 43).

Observers of Africa are likely to have noticed a recent shift in media representations of the continent. It seems that, in a dramatic turnaround, Africa is set to become the next economic 'tiger' (Kristof, 2012; The Economist, 2011). As an element of this broader shift, Zambia looks set to regain its position as one of the ten biggest economies in Africa by 2021, a position that it had lost during the 1990s (Business Monitor International, 2011). In large part this is due to the rise of China as the node of global capital's expansion at the turn of the century—helped of course by other so-called 'emerging' economies—and the consequent increase in demand for and prices of various natural resources, including copper (Carmody, 2009). Chinese investment in Zambia has topped $2 billion,[1] which is to be seen alongside the fact that the largest investments in mining industry there have actually been from other sources. Zambia, then, has been one of the 'rising stars' of the neoliberal global mining scenario (Bridge, 2004a).

This mineral boom is, however, overlaid on a specific geo-historical context, one that shapes its discursive presence and therefore, political situatedness. Part of the Zambian story has been the expansion of capital into spaces hitherto at its margins, of which North Western Province is an exemplar. The region is part of the mineral rich Central African Copperbelt that includes the Katanga Province of DR Congo and the historical mining towns of

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[1] Figure mentioned in speech by the Chinese Ambassador at the University of Zambia, 3 April 2012. http://zm.chineseembassy.org/eng/sgzxdthxx/t920669.htm.

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the Copperbelt Province in Zambia. In NWP, two large mines—Kansanshi and Lumwana—started operation in the Solwezi District (earning it the epithet New Copperbelt) between 2004 and 2009, directly employing 7000 workers, but more generally, leading to the sudden transformation of the region.[2] NWP has been historically related to capital as a reserve of migrant labor working in the mines of the Copperbelt Province, while retaining forms of subsistence agriculture akin to what in the case of South Africa Harold Wolpe had termed the 'articulation of modes of production' (1972), or the simultaneous and persistent mutualism of pre-capitalist and capitalist economies. In most of NWP, property is under a customary form of tenure, and the state-recognized traditional chiefs mediate access to land and other resources. Moreover, rural subjects in Zambia, following the legacies of colonial indirect rule, are considered to possess tribal affiliation in addition to a national one (Mamdani, 1996). This intersection of extractive capital and seemingly 'non-modern' forms of property and citizenship form the locus of this paper.

The privatization of the mining industry in Zambia through the 1990s, and the above-mentioned boom of the next decade form the context to this investigation. Today, revenues generated from mining in contemporary Zambia find their way into the place of their operation through workers' wages, the place's share of taxes collected by the central government, and through the companies' charity-like contributions that go by the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Negi, 2011). Indeed, in the neoliberal era such a redistributive mechanism linking mining and society through CSR has become the global norm. It is though a relatively new phenomenon in Zambia and emerged from the ruins of state-led mineral extraction, which gave way to privatization as part of a wide-ranging structural adjustment program. Prior to that, the mines' relations with localities were of a 'thick' kind (Ferguson, 2005), where the state-owned company operated what has been termed a 'cradle to grave' connection with the workers, and with them, the larger community (Fraser and Lungu, 2007). In addition to permanent jobs, good salaries and benefits, mining towns saw significant investments in social life of the workers, including the creation of cultural centers, women's clubs, and football teams; things that now seem to belong to a different era. Yet, coming as it did after two decades of economic decline and also fiscal 'austerity' enforced by multilateral agencies and undertaken by successive national governments, there were genuine 'expectations of modernity' (Ferguson, 1999) in Solwezi in the 2000s. State and popular discourses alike conceived of the place's transformation through the contextually mediated trope of development. It was believed that as a result of new investment and economic growth, and given enough time, Solwezi would resemble the urbanity of the cities of the Copperbelt Province to the southeast, which is what modern life in Zambia is popularly believed to resemble (Ibid, pp. 207–233).

It was at this precise juncture that the matter of who the beneficiaries of development should be gained salience. Mr. Musonda's quote (above) presciently lays out the stakes of the debate. It alludes to a politics in Solwezi that turned around competing claims to the material benefits of the mining boom. Calls to make the new investment count for the indigenous and historically 'backward' Solwezi Kaonde people came up against the expectations of immigrants who moved in numbers to the area to chart an escape from poverty and unemployment, while also being pulled-in by the lure of the region's economic transformation. These tensions were made concrete and reinforced by the tribal-logic of labor recruitment in one of the newly opened mines. It put in place a system that worked through three local chiefs and reserved several thousand, mostly unskilled, jobs for local Kaonde people. This was in part a preemptive response to the increased and vocal presence of transnational activist groups advocating 'responsible mining' of a kind that benefits the local 'community'. In response, job seekers—for whom mining employment is a ticket to relative prosperity—were displeased with this system, framing their opposition by pointing out the supposed inability of Kaonde workers to perform wage labor and by alleging the tribalist—hence, divisive—nature of affirmative employment.

The paper contends that neither the identification of the Kaonde as a beneficiary community nor the tribe-focused contestations are as self-evident as they may seem. Using archival material and historical accounts, it reveals the *conditions of possibility* for the tribe-focused political contestations that surfaced during the mining boom in Solwezi. It then draws on insights from 8 months of fieldwork carried out in 2007–2008 to examine its *expressions* and *implications*. The fieldwork involved over forty semi-structured interviews with various agents in and around Solwezi, and the observation of social life in the region during the process of its transformation. The causal structures identified here would be of interest to scholars interested in grounded, geographical analysis of Africa's economic growth and, in particular, the extension of capital to places beyond the established enclaves.

2. Capital and tribe

Scholars of Africa have noted an upsurge in autochthonous discourses in the era of globalization (Boone, 2007; Geschiere and Jackson, 2006; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000). With it, the study of the tribe has returned to the agenda. A previous generation of progressive scholars was inclined to disavow the tribe because it had been historically equated with 'primitive' social configurations, especially within colonial epistemes (Ekeh, 1990; Mafeje, 1971; Southall, 1970). A response to the dilemma was to consider the tribe as a specifically *cultural* construct, uniquely African and therefore to be celebrated despite its otherwise problematic connotations (Mitchell, 1970, p. 84). I contend, however, that neither the disavowal nor a culturalist-bent is very useful when one approaches categories empirically. To be sure, and just like nationalism, the tribe is a synthetic concept, one in the 'creation' (Ranger and Hobsbawm, 1983) or 'invention' (Vail, 1989) of which colonialism is fundamentally implicated. But this critique does not *explain* the continued purchase of the construct on the continent or its political significance. Indeed, in contrast to Kenneth Kaunda's quote (above) about the predicted modernization-induced obsolescence of the tribe in public life, it is the capitalist transformation of Solwezi that has triggered politics hinged on tribal belonging. Writing about Cameroon, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000) argue that capitalism is "about the 'freeing' of labor as a necessary condition for creating a mobile mass of wage-laborers; yet in many instances it has also brought with it determined efforts to compartmentalize labor, imposing classifications—ever changing, but all the more powerful in order to facilitate control over the labor market" (p. 426; see also Konings, 1996). Certainly, even in Zambian history, mining companies have segmented labor on tribal lines since the earliest days, and attempted to use—with varying degrees of success—the authority of chiefs and elders to control labor on the copper mines (Henderson, 1975).

I believe that in Solwezi, however, the tribe-based process of recruitment is not so much about labor control or workplace dynamics as it is about the reconfigured relationship of contemporary extractive capital with its 'publics'. The last three decades or so have seen an emergence of new so-called stakeholders in extractive capitalism as in other industries (Pidgeon and Rogers-Hayden,

[2] Since the completion of fieldwork (June 2008), the construction of another large-scale new copper mine, Trident, has been initiated in Kalumbila in NWP.