**Episode three - El Dorado**

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

labour, people, africans, transvaal, 12 pence, colonial, work, South Africa’s gold, pass laws, Zimbabwe, travelling, mining, government, wages, community, Johannesburg, diamonds

***Please note a portion of the oral history interview is in Sotho, the translation is after Chief Sonias Vilakazi, chief of the Matimatsatsi community has spoken.***

00:00

Welcome to episode three of El Dorado. The next 20 minutes contains strong material that you may find triggering, so be cautious. On that note, there will be colonial terms which I'll explain.

So, we're on the same page, South Africa’s colonial past is a melody of coveting eyes from both the Dutch and the British. The Dutch settled in what was referred to as the Cape of Good Hope. Jan Van Riebeek was tasked with setting up a refreshment station for the Dutch East India Company in 1652 and with him came the company’s employees. Britain annexed the Cape of Good Hope in 1815, Natal in 1843 before waging wars against the Boers over territory they called the republic of Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The region where diamonds were discovered fell in the hands of the British Crown. In 1900, Britain occupied, Johannesburg, the City of Gold. The discovery of diamonds was very costly to Southern Africans, but the unearthing of gold would prove to be more devastating, as you will hear.

01:04

Tickets please tickets.

01:13

This is the cage it is a double deck cage so it can take two groups at the same time. This used to be a goldmine, but it was closed in 1977.

01:24

In the previous episode we learnt about the two ideas behind the vacant land myth that justified colonial expansion. The first was the idea of land not being in use despite the presence of the First Nation, other ethnic groups, and identities from the Bantu migration before the arrival of Europeans. The second was emptying African people’s humanity with a set of negative stereotypes like ‘us and them’, ‘self and other.’ We then discovered that Southern Africa had its own political systems and structures in place, it just so happened as colonial expansion was happening Mfecane was also occurring.

Ecological change, conflict over land and imperial domination drove African men to wage employment. While diggers from the Western world flocked to the diamonds fields thirsty to make a quick fortune Southern Africans fought to sustain the little freedom they had. Labouring away in diamond mines with hopes to gain enough wages to buy guns and protect their chiefdoms.

Under the awful working conditions another myth was forged to justify stripping Africans from their right to claim diamonds. Thereafter their role was purely for labour and with it came the contracts, endorsed certificates and passes, laying down the foundations for the pass laws.

We then found ourselves in the present listening to my uncle’s friend’s story at first by his food truck in Windsor and then in my studio in Ferndale, Randburg. Today I am visiting the gold reef mine to learn about the story of gold, but we’re going to do our own tour through time before visiting Maandagshoek in Limpopo.

Shh.

Sorry. Come on, let’s go.

03:28

The axe forgets, but the tree remembers.

The dry diggings for diamonds in the Big Hole in Griqualand West ignited a search for gold in the Northern parts of Southern Africa. Prospectors trekked the region looking for a second chance to make a quick fortune. The hysteria for precious metal was similar to the rush in Australia in 1851 and the Americas in 1849.

They soon discovered alluvial gold just south of the Limpopo River in Soutpansberg formally known as Zoutpansberg. Then, in 1873, they came across alluvial gold at Pilgrim’s Rest in the Northern Transvaal.

Note, after the end of apartheid in 1994 Transvaal ceased to exist and was split into four provinces, Limpopo, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and Northwest.

The most significant finds of gold occurred in-between 1884 - 1886. At Barberton near the northwestern border of Swaziland, now known as Eswatini, thousands of diggers flooded the scene and their tented mining camps grew into towns despite findings being modest and limited.

Meanwhile in Witwatersrand gold reefs were appearing on farms, at first on the Vogelstruisfontein farm by Jan Gerrit Bantjes, the Struben brothers would uncover another reef on a farm near present-day Roodepoort, but the discovery of the main gold reef was attributed to George Harrison. Whose findings on the farm Langlaagte in 1886 would birth a metropolis we know as Johannesburg, The City of Gold.

Harrison’s find was abundant and extensive despite his low claim of £10 for his discovery. Witwatersrand became the world’s greatest single source of gold and in the process, Africa’s biggest employer of Black labour. Frederick Ingle, a mine manager, said this in his report to the Transvaal Labour Commission.

05:47

No one in 1870 would have dreamt of the day coming when there would be 200,000 natives in the labour market. The demand for native labour is somewhat like the demand for fresh air, it is easily got easily supplied. It is a want that has been developed to such an extent that no man woman or child can do anything without having a native labour tacked on to them.

06:09

Within 8 years of the discovery of gold in Witwatersrand there was forty-two thousand and five hundred Southern Africans employed in the mines, this number grew to one hundred and ninety-two thousand and seven hundred and sixty-seven in 1912.

At first migrating to work held promise for local ethnic groups, it was the response to combat colonialism, if you recall from episode two this was where they earned money to buy guns. Their labour contributed to an independent and autonomous way of life. It somehow became common most men. While women, children and elders stayed home in their chiefdoms, they worked hundreds of miles away to protect their independence, before returning home at the end of each contract.

Southern Africans never entered wage employment from choice and the roles they undertook were systemically given, if you remember from episode two their claims to diamonds were suspended on the basis of a stereotype.

Their ability to learn by doing riled up a fear in European diggers. So much so countrymen from Cornwall, Lancashire and Scotland founded the Witwatersrand Mine Employees and Mechanics Union in 1892. They protested for the reduction Black men’s wage, despite the fact that white men’s salaries made up 34.5% of the costs of production for gold in comparison to 24.5% that made up wages and food for African employees.

The most costly expense in the production of gold was white labour. It was almost twice the cost of similar labour in Californian gold mines.

The new mining code of 1896 introduced a colour bar to roles within the sector. The blasting certificate meant a trained reliable, African, or Coloured could assist the certified blaster and under his direct supervision prepare charges, load drills and light fuses. White men were given the right to work as banksmen, onsetters and engine drivers.

Though miner owners objected the colour bar arguing a test of competence should not be based on skin tone, African labourers were denied access to up skill formally. A national education policy was devised and applied to exclude people on the basis of skin colour, primarily Africans.

proficient through experience but would have to battle legislative and institutional barriers to advance from permanently low wage labour.

Travelling to work proved as difficult the working conditions. Employers recruited young men from villages within 500 miles radius from the gold mines. They came by foot or rail and both were equally dangerous.

09:32

For the Shangaans from southern Mozambique and the Venda and Pedi from Northern Transvaal the walk to Witwatersrand was shorter than to the Big Hole, Kimberley. If you remember the Venda satisfied their arms requirement by selling ivory but this was only until the end of the 19th century.

The local ethnic groups would walk with no rest and they would often ran out of food before reaching the mines. If they became sick they fell by the wayside and died lingering deaths. Two observers from 1894 who’s accounts would later be published in the South African Labour Bulletin, detailed the following scenes.

10:14

From the borders to the Rand, on all the main footpaths, can be seen the evidence of this evil, skeletons of those who have died are frequently seen.

10:24

Almost every store and dwelling near the road can be found those with sickness or fatigue compelled to give up on the road to either find a friend or perish.

10:40

The Transvaal Labour Commission was informed that 17 of one group of 364 migrant miners died on the road while 29 had to go to hospital as soon as they arrived at the mining compound.

The fatigue and illnesses would be in addition to fighting labour touts on migration routes. Africans had to first acquire a pass from the district colonial officer or a chief for it to be exchanged for a travel pass from the local magistrate’s office for the price of 12 pence. Note, Black miners were paid £2 a month for the work they did in the mines.

Boers apprehended those who were passing by their farms and charged them 12 pence for taking breaks and even to refill bottles of water. Those who could not pay were forced to labour on the farms without wages before being allowed to proceed.

Migrant miners who travelled from the east coast were often stopped by the police and forced to work on the Transvaal section of the Delagoa Bay Railway being built in the early 1890s.

Travelling without a pass was a risk for arrest or forced labour and labour touts knew this. They confiscated migrant’s passes to issue fraudulent slips of paper for the price of 12 pence. Later on in their journey they would be arrested for not having the correct documents and had to pay 12 pence again to continue or they would be forced to work for whoever the police decided. This dark game of piggy in the middle was also rampant in the train journey to the mining compounds, except the ball was not the travel pass but vaccines for smallpox.

The colonial government insisted that Africans should be vaccinated before they passed through smallpox areas. Some white men would impersonate police officers and doctors demanding payment of £2 from every African who wanted to pass through areas where there had been smallpox. Other European posed as doctors charging 12 pence a head for what they described as vaccinations.

After the railway line from the Cape to Johannesburg was opened, train loads of Black miners travelling to Witwatersrand were vaccinated for 12 pence by a person at the border post. When they reached Vereeniging in Transvaal, they were vaccinated again for 12 pence. The certificates they received across the border were confiscated and they were issued with new ones for another charge of 12 pence.

The annual report of the Chamber of Mines commented in 1898 that the double vaccination was nothing but a money-making affair on the part of doctors and the colonial government vaccination officer.

Despite all this disarray and manipulation before their arrival on the compound, they were sent underground the following day without training or time to recuperate. The high incidence of deaths and injuries for which no compensation was paid - poor food, inadequate accommodation and the unpleasant work environment gave the mines a bad name.

Sotho chiefs told Sir Godfrey Lagden, the Transvaal first secretary of native affairs under British rule, the following.

14:25

We do not like our men to go to Johannesburg because they go there to die.

14:34

The miners’ only defence was to abscond or change roles which was a legislative and institutional battle. By the end of the 19th century the men that had been sent to labour away in the name sake of protecting their kingdoms ceased to be warriors. Britain had annexed all the independent chiefdoms and disarmed their tribesmen.

Once all African chiefdoms had lost their political independence and were manipulated to serve the economic needs of the white population the migration work system lost its usefulness to local ethnic groups in Southern Africa.

By the turn of the century African families had become so dependent on cash remittances from wage employment it was no longer sensible to talk of tribal economies as a distinct and autonomous mode of living. The Europeans’ fixation with recruiting African workers to keep their labour cheap became an obsession.

Fredrick Ingle would report again to the Transvaal Labour Commission in 1903 saying.

Note, boy is a derogatory term used by colonialists to describe Black men.

15:56

It is in my mind the wastefulness that has been engendered by the so-called cheapness of native labour that has resulted in every miner in this country, feeling that he cannot work unless he is attended by one or two boys to assist him.

16:09

After losing their independence, local ethnic groups were still compelled to work for the purpose of raising money to pay taxes to finance a colonial system which had deprived them of their political freedom and economic independence.

The migrant labour system had created an intolerably level of poverty. It was impossible for Southern African families to live entirely off the land but possible for them to survive through low wage employment in Johannesburg.

What is the legacy of a labour system built to create disparity?

In Maandagshoek lies one of South Africa’s most profitable mines, Modikwa Platinum. It was established in 1999 as a joint capital investment between African Rainbow Minerals and Anglo Platinum. The aim was to bring development in a historically disadvatanged rural community in the form of economic, social, and cultural empowerment.

The Modikwa mine rolled out its Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) programme to create joint ownership of the mine with the neighbouring communities while providing job opportunities.

Oral histories were undertaken in this community to bring to light to post-apartheid experiences in South Africa’s poorest communities. Keep in mind these were recorded in 2007.

Let's hear from Chief Sonias Vilakazi and Emmanuel Mokgoga, spokesperson of the Maandagshoek Development Committee.

17:53

As the traditional leader what was your role when Anglo American and ARM came into the community what role did you play?

18:15

When it comes to the issue of mine, I’m starting to be angry.

18:21

Okay, can you please express what it is that he's angry I want to, we want to hear what he's angry about.

19:09

In 1999 a guy called Jeffrey White visited here in 1999 and ask Kgosi to make the prospecting and Kgosi called the community to tell the community that there is a guy who wants to prospect here, and they just want to check if there is a something under and then they will come back and then to see how we can work.

19:34

So, continue if you can continue that story. What happened after that?

19:53

He started to survey and then he come back to me and said Kgosi there is a lot of platinum here. And then this is what I want.

20:11

That is why I'm saying when we start this issue of mining, I’m getting angry is because they're not employing the people from this village. There are children here who are not working but we have a mine in our village.

20:57

Say respect for other law and order, you know, people running around killing each other with weapons, the high crime rate all of these other kinds of negative things that you're talking about. How do you think that's connected with the economic policies that have been happening in the last 10 years? In of the new government? Do you think there's any connection between what you're talking about on an individual level? And what you experience? And what's going on the big level? At the kinds of decisions that are being made about for example, allowing mines to come and do things in communities without consultation or without the proper procedure? In other words, do you think that there's connections between what's going on at local and between individuals and what's going on at the political level and your life as well and to try to make that in, in what you've experienced?

21:52

There is no networking connection, we are we are not consulted by the government or everybody who's at their top position in our country. You mentioned the issue of the mine. And we agree that they are not consulting with us, the government, they like to sing to say, the people shall govern. So, they like to say the people first. But that is not taking place at this moment. Bhururu, if you want somebody to come to mine in my yard or to dig something in my yard, as the government, as you know that South Africa is belong to the South Africans, not individual, not for minority, you must understand that Dale is a human being and I have to respect him as a human being. If this company, they want to take something to you, they must consult with you. They must call you and sit together. If you don't understand what they are saying they're talking about business, you are allowed in this country to call somebody to come to help you like a lawyer or your brother who knows about what they were talking about.

So, we are not consulted by our government. I can give you another examples. One day I had the Premier Sello Moloto on the on the radio on the Human Rights Day on the 27th. He was saying we as South Africans, we are supporting the people of Zimbabwe because their rights that they are oppressed by the government of Robert Mugabe. He said the people were beaten, Morgan Tsvangirai he was beaten, his people they were tortured, they were arrested. Immediately he said that to the radio, something clicked to my mind. And I said our traditional leaders they were arrested. The leaders from

Maandagshoek from uNkopane from Twickenham mine from PPL where Anglo platinum is mining the people they were shot. The traditional leaders they were arrested. The community they were arrested they were beaten by the police is the same what happened at Zimbabwe, but you don't want to say anything about us. And we, as the people of South Africa, we are not supporting what he's saying individuals at the media, because the resource that he is using is our resource. Before he can say anything, he must listen to the people what they are saying about the issue of Zimbabwe. Why you don't want to talk about the problem that we are facing in Maandagshoek. The problem that we are facing at mine the problem that we are facing at PPL at Nkopane. Where the people there, they were arrested and tortured, beaten, and locked up in their cells without the reason. So, we are not consulted by our government, instead of talking about us, he's talking about the people from Zimbabwe.

Those who are at the big position. Yeah, there is a cabinet in our country now. Even at the Premier's office, there is the people who are working with the Premier's office. And when there is a problem, he must sit down with his followers to discuss the problem of this province. But immediately he started to talk about the Zimbabwean. I don't know When Morgan Tsvangirai I don't know exactly the date. But on the 27th he was announcing that they are supporting the people from Zimbabwe, and we started this strike on five years, five years back, fighting against the mine. But he has never said something about our lives. The people that were relocated, the graves that were removed by the mines, the ploughing fields they were taken, they were bulldozing our people, but the last person the big men in this province, he has never said anything about our lives, so we need a straight consultation from our site. When he's talking about supporting the people of Zimbabwe, we didn't have something from the province to maybe to ask us what we are saying about the issue of Zimbabwe. He just stands up about our resources using our resource to say no, we are supporting the people of Zimbabwe. How about our traditional leader How about his parents just next to him? Before you can talk about cleaning my yard, you must start about your yard first, you must check your eyes if you are clean before you can tell me to clean my eyes. You can’t tell me about the stick in my eye but how about the wood in your eye.

28:05

The level of disparity in South Africa is visible, it is stark. The government's promise of freedom from poverty and the establishment of economic independence has not been fulfilled. Perhaps because the hollow glorification of a nation cannot deliver such.

One of South Africa's acclaimed sociologists Xolela Mancu expressed that decolonisation at first had noble liberatory aims but it did not prevent the emergence of repressive nationalist replacements for colonial regimes.

Tensions are rising high because one oppressive system has been replaced with another oppressive system. At the core of this is the government's failure to eradicate racial capitalism.

same barrel. The problem is not migrant labour.

Frankz Fanon warned Africans and the diaspora of what would follow if colonised people’s humanity and dignity was not restored. With an agreed handover to native rule whose interests lied in profit from investment and the labour of others, the colonial country would only become a new country in name.

But what is the way forward? Join me next time, as we talk with Xenowatch, a research centre based in the university of the Witwatersrand to better understand South Africa’s 's present relationship with other African identities from recent data. Their findings will prove complimentary in our investigation on the parallels of South Africa’s colonial past and its equally violent present. Perhaps there will be a glimmer of hope in their proposed solutions.

Until next time, thank you for listening.

El Dorado is a family and communal production, this podcast series would not have been possible without the help of my uncles and cousin. Thank you to all the locals that shared their stories with us.