

Yes, It Glitters. After South Africans Suffer to Dig It.

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ORKNEY, South Africa — A sign says, "No horseplay in cage." The cage in question is an elevator, but of a particular kind. It plunges down a shaft at ear-popping speed, ferrying miners to a depth of 5,100 feet, just short of a mile.

The older a gold mine gets, the farther the ore is from the shaft. The Great Noligwa mine here has been operating for more than three decades. Where the cage stops, another underground journey begins - by rail, on chairlifts, on foot, downward, another 1,000 feet downward, to the reef. All this may take more than two hours.

A mine is a hostile environment. Explosives, heavy machinery and thousands of human beings must be ferried about with a lot of earth above them. Sometimes that earth rebels. A rock falls and a life is lost. A miner died here less than a month ago. Another sign beside the cage says, "Fingers do not grow on trees."

Tsidiso Mosaola has nine fingers (one was amputated after an infection). He has operated a drill for 20 years now. The richest gold reef ever found does not yield its treasure with ease. Tabular in form, the reef is inclined at 21 degrees. So Mr. Mosaola, 52, is crouched in a low gulley known as "the slope." His body vibrates as the pneumatic drills he wields penetrates the ore.

Gold looks pretty at Tiffany. It looks less pretty at the face. Helmeted miners scramble up and down the slope, securing the rock above them. Drills and scrapers and falling ore compete for the upper hand in a cacophony. Mr. Mosaola makes \$450 a month, which he sends home to his wife and three children in Lesotho. That is a decent wage on a continent where more than 300 million people earn less than a dollar a day. But the work is harsh. His son is 3; he hopes the boy finds other employment.

The story of South Africa is also the story of gold. Its discovery in 1886 by an Australian prospector, George Harrison, led to the birth of Johannesburg. From the city, a rich seam of gold spreads across the Witwatersrand. Blacks flocked to the town they often called "eGoli" - City of Gold. For decades, their labor was exploited with scant compunction by the whites who later ran the apartheid system.

Today, a decade after apartheid's collapse, the gold industry provides a fair measure of the transition in a country critical to Africa's future. By 2015, sub-Saharan Africa will be home to half of the world's poorest people. If the continent's most developed country fails to give hope to its black underclass, hope will die a wider death.

During its long years of exile, the African National Congress vowed to nationalize the mines. But since it came to power in 1994, its approach has been marked by a pragmatism that is yielding results.

Great Noligwa is part of the AngloGold Ashanti group, the world's second largest gold producer. Under a charter agreed upon two years ago between the government and the mining industry, AngloGold must demonstrate that it promotes the interests of blacks.

Among questions now asked of mining companies are: Has the company given every employee the opportunity to be literate and at ease with arithmetic by 2005? Has it established a plan to achieve a target of 40 percent participation by blacks and other formerly disadvantaged groups in management within five years? Has it given blacks preferred supplier status?

"Twenty years ago, there was not a single black person in management," said Alan Fine, AngloGold's public affairs manager. "Today, 15 percent of our professional staff is black."

Significant changes have taken place. Several of AngloGold's mines were sold to a black entrepreneur, Patrice Motsepe. Full employment, with health and other benefits, has largely replaced a system based on contractual labor. Hostels for miners have been renamed "residences" and conditions in them have improved. Anti-retroviral drugs are available free for the estimated 30 to 40 percent of employees who are H.I.V. positive.

But as that last figure suggests, the enduring problems are enormous. Mining still depends heavily on migrant or immigrant labor like that of Mr. Mosaola, men who see their wives for one monthlong period a year. With casual sex, or sex with prostitutes, H.I.V. spreads. The average life span in South Africa has dropped into the 40's.

Within the company, attempts to promote blacks at its eight South African mines encounter difficulties. The most talented are often poached by other companies striving to meet racial equity targets. At Great Noligwa, there are 61 whites and 4 blacks in mid-to-top management. Among unskilled and semi-skilled workers, the numbers are: 27 whites and 5,196 blacks.

Below ground, a long way below ground, white faces are the exception. After the shift that drills comes the shift that places the explosives. After the shift that places the explosives comes the night shift that hauls out the ore. A ton of ore yields one-third of an ounce of gold.

Gold looks pretty at Tiffany. It looks less pretty on the reef. No trace of its glow lurks in the weary face of Fanie Sithole, 47. He's from Mozambique. He's a winch operator. His eyes try to smile, but they are weary.

Once a year, Mr. Sithole goes home to his wife and five children in Maputo. But in two years, he says, "I'm going home for good."

The next time you buy a ring, think of him. The next time you buy a bracelet, think of Africa.

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