Settling in the Mining Town: An Account of Women linked to Migrant Workers in Oranjemund, Namibia

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Introduction

The system of migrant labour practiced in Namibia was designed in such a way that men went away to work for the colonial economy in the south, while women and the rest of the family remained behind, looking after the home. 'How did you end up living in the mining town of Oranjemund?' This was our entry question as we sought to explore how the women who were linked to migrant workers came to settle in Oranjemund and establish homes. By 'linked to', we are highlighting the fact that during most of colonial and apartheid times, women could only settle in Oranjemund with a male affine, primarily as a husband.[1] Thus the first experience of women settling in Oranjemund is directly linked to their husbands.[2]

Migrant workers, especially those from the former homelands of Owambo and Kavango, were transported to Oranjemund to work at the Consolidated Diamond Mines, or *koShiidiema* as it is referred to in Aawambo-speaking households. The migrant labour system has been extensively documented, ranging from explorations of how the system was repressive and discriminatory, to covering issues of ethnicity, age and most importantly, gender.[3] For much of the 20th century, migrant workers were predominantly men – as women's mobility was prohibited.[4] This situation changed from the 1970s onwards, with

1 This chapter covers the period of mining practiced in Namibia from German colonialism up to the South African period. It is important to highlight that although the system was repressive, it kept changing – as influenced by the political environment. The years between the late 1950s and 1980s have been regarded as watershed years for the Namibian contract workers' political consciousness.

2 Although complicated, women could live and work in central and southern Namibia. In a 1998 study, Wallace looks at the mandatory examination of unmarried women Black women with venereal diseases in Omaruru, Grootfontein, Keetmanshoop and Windhoek. Although she focused on a case study in 1939, this indicates that Black women could live in central and southern Namibia.

3 Likuwa 2021: pp. 39–74

4 Winterfeldt 1998

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the relaxation of the South African administration's regulations against the mobility of women. In 1977, the first women linked to migrant workers from northern Namibia came to Oranjemund. These women were chosen to be the first to go and 'experience' Oranjemund – and decide if they would be interested in living there – by a selection process based on their husbands' positions as defined by the Paterson Grading system (PGS).[5]

This chapter provides an account of the lived experiences of the women who first came to Oranjemund in the 1970s. We follow the events that led to their arrival, ask who was allowed to go to the diamond mining town, and recall their life experiences there. Our work is based on interviews with these women, a review of literature on the town, and gender and migrant labour in general.[6] We present the experiences of the women who went to live in Oranjemund through Meme Anna Tshoopara's account, and to highlight specific events, refer to interviews with other women.[7] Meme Anna Tshoopara's account was singled out as she was – after the death of her husband in 1982 – the first woman who was allowed to stay in Oranjemund unconnected to a man. Before that, women were sent back to their homes after the death or dismissal of their husbands.

Formative years and schooling

Meme Tshoopara was born in 1950 in the village of Iiputu in the Omusati Region of Namibia. Her father was one of the founders of the Catholic Church congregations of Oshikuyu, and built so-called *omatsali giihenguti* (classrooms made from stalks) at Iiputu village. Meme Tshoopara began her formative schooling in the 1960s, and here, she remembers that time:

> As a kid I was prescient, I never liked those *omatsali giihenguti*. While others were being taught inside the classes, I used to be outside. I would follow the lessons while I am outside. Still, I was always ahead of others when it came to assessments.[8]

During that time, *aahongi* (loosely translated as missionaries) of the Catholic Church used to come to Iiputu village, and her father told them: 'This girl is perceptive. Please go with her to get her an education'. Thus in 1962, when Meme Anna Tshoopara turned 12 years old, her father sent her to Oshikuku with the *aahongi*, where she stayed at the Catholic mission school until she finished Grade 8. After this, some learners went to Döbra school. Döbra – a settlement just north of Windhoek – was home to a Catholic Mission Station

5 The salary grading system includes five grades, from A-F, where A1 is the lowest and F5 is the highest. See Rüdiger in this volume.

6 The interviews were conducted between February 2020 and August 2021 in Windhoek and Owambo, in northern Namibia. Within these, two of the men who invited their wives to Oranjemund were present and contributed their experiences, especially in terms of events that led to their invitation. In total, we conducted twelve interviews, comprising of eighteen participants (sixteen women and two men). The participants are aged between the early-60s to mid-80s.

7 'Meme' is a term of respect, used to refer to an older woman.

8 Meme Tshoopara, Windhoek, February 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

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established in 1924, which included a teacher's training centre and a school. However, Meme Tshoopara was not fortunate enough to be sent to Döbra, as her father did not have enough money. Instead, she went to Oshikuku Catholic Hospital in 1970 to study nursing, leaving for Oshakati Hospital after two years, where she continued her nursing education until 1978. During this time, she married Tate Sebastian Tshoopara.[9]

The familiarisation visit to Oranjemund in 1977

Meme Tshoopara's husband worked at the Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM) of Southwest Africa Limited in Oranjemund. In 1977, she was selected with other women to visit Oranjemund, and recounting this experience, said:

> Our husbands worked in Oranjemund. We went with women like Meme Martha Kalondo, Meme Saima Kalili, some I do not remember very well. We asked, it is part of Namibia, right? They replied, yes. Then we want to live here. They took us there to see if we wanted to live in Oranjemund. Some of the women thought, who wants to live in a desert? But for some of us, we decided that we wanted to live there.[10]

From the Owambo homeland they were transported by bus for about 300 km to Grootfontein in north-eastern Namibia, where they boarded a plane – or *nelomba lyomushindi gwoshipilangi*, as it is affectionately called in the Oshiwambo language – to Oranjemund. The plane landed in Alexander Bay, a mining town in South Africa, on the southern bank of the Orange River. From Alexander Bay, the women were put on buses and transported into Oranjemund. They shared mixed feelings about that trip, being excited but also anxious, as it was their first time on a plane. One woman remembered:

> If there was a video for you to see what we wore that day, you would only laugh. Even how we have dressed our children. Because some people said, you will be nauseous, some will throw up. For some of us that worked in the hospitals we took medicine to help us with nausea. You know the old airplanes were different from todays. You do not feel so many movements these days. You felt everything in those old planes.[11]

The women's familiarisation trip lasted for about three months, after which they returned to their homes in northern Namibia, but with an offer to move to Oranjemund. CDM initially invited 13 women to join their husbands – all of whom worked in different departments of the mine, for example in human resources, metallurgy, or in the medical department. The mining company used the PGS to categorise the workers and their benefits. The higher someone was classified in the grading system, the better were his benefits, such as housing. In interviews with two of the men whose wives were invited to

9 Like Meme, Tate is a term of respect when referring to older men.

10 Meme Tshoopara, Windhoek, February 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

11 Meme Saima Kalili, Onankali, April 2021, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

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Oranjemund, they shared that these men all had some sort of middle-management position (categories C1 and C4 of the PGS). Consequently, the invitation of wives to join their husbands in Oranjemund was not meant for general labourers, but only given to the wives of those husbands at professional levels and in high salary categories. The benefits thus 'catered for the upper bands and skilled labourers'.[12] As a result, this differentiation brought tensions between the permanent workers or the workers with professional titles and the those in low level ranks in the mine. The workers allowed to bring their families to Oranjemund were labelled puppets or '*perpement*' (permanent+puppet) by the workers in low ranks. There was general mistrust between these two groups, as workers in high grade positions were mistrusted by those in low ranks 'as they spent a lot of time with the whites'.[13] In addition to this, the mining administration feared that permanent labourers would influence and politicise other workers especially the labourers in the mine. Therefore, permanent workers were also encouraged to not mix or mingle with other migrant workers.

The influential and political aware migrant workers

The events that led CDM to invite permanent workers' wives to Oranjemund was evidence of how politically aware the Black workers were. The 1971/2 countrywide strike had an impact on Oranjemund, and compelled CDM to relook at labour relations, in addition to the internal challenges and pressure they faced from the Black permanent CDM workers.[14] Although the permanent workers had worked in their respective categories for some years prior to 1977, the benefits that their respective pay grades afforded them were not readily offered to Black workers, as these were reserved for their white colleagues, who were permitted to live with their wives in Oranjemund. Because some of the Black permanent workers worked in the human resources (HR) department, they had access to information about what benefits they were being denied within their pay grade. One of the men, who was working in HR, told us that they wrote letters on behalf of their wives and sent them to their wives, who then posted them to the mining administration, demanding that the authorities allow the women to visit their husbands in Oranjemund. The letters reached senior management – and even the director, Nicholas F. Oppenheimer – creating tensions between management and the permanent workers, who continued to make demands regarding benefits offered only to white workers in the same pay grade. This coincided with the events of the 1971/2 nationwide workers' general strike, where the workers demanded the improvement of their working conditions and the general abolishment of the contract labour system. The strike 'brought the mining industry

12 Nieuwoudt, 2019: p. 9

13 Tate Gideon Iikua, Iipopo, April 2021, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

14 Corbett 2002. However, the other perspective is that the workers in Oranjemund were deemed less keen to join the strike and risk losing their employment. The suspicion of their passive involvement in the strike was based on the fact that they were better paid, and that their compound conditions were way better than other migrant workers in other towns. See C.f Moorsom 1977: pp. 52–87; and Rogers 1972, pp. 3–8.

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to a halt and seriously affected farming and commerce, as well as the communications and transport systems, demonstrating the potential of workers to take organised action in defence of their rights'.[15]

While the majority of the workers at CDM did not participate in the strike, it is reported that the strike did spread to CDM, where about 250 workers walked out.[16] Other workers also 'informed management that they were in full sympathies with the strikers'.[17] A combination of the events of the 1971/2 strike and the demands from the workers to have their wives come to Oranjemund contributed to the mining administration allowing and selecting thirteen employees from different departments to bring their families to Oranjemund.

The professional status of the invited women

The thirteen women invited to Oranjemund included nurses – like Meme Tshoopara – and teachers, as well as women without formal employment or education. Some were integrated into the Oranjemund economic system, where they worked in the hospitals and local school, which were both run by the mining company. For instance, in 1979 Meme Tshoopara got a job at the Oranjemund hospital. However, some of the women were not at ease with the idea of living in Oranjemund, fearing job losses and unemployment, or not being able to get the same jobs as those they used to do in northern Namibia, while others opted to stay in Oranjemund as housewives. Some of the invited women refused the offer to live in Oranjemund asked questions like: 'Who would have cultivated my field? Who would have taken care of our home?' Still, amongst the women who did not move, a number of them nevertheless sent their children to benefit from the better education and health system in the diamond town. All of the women interviewed commended the education, health and non-racial integration system in Oranjemund.

However, some women's husbands refused the offer of inviting them to Oranjemund, even as they met the requirements. This can be made sense of within a patriarchal context of unequal power relations, where all decisions are made without involving women. The women who decided to go to Oranjemund, with the consent of their husbands, arrived between 1978 and the early 1980s.

From 'the little heaven on earth' to criticism

Meme Tshoopara was one of the women who decided to move to Oranjemund in 1978, and said:

15 Jauch 2018

16 American Committee on Africa, 'Strike in Namibia', 1972, http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/t0/10.5555/al.sff.document.acoa000368_final.pdf.

17 United States. Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Africa, 'Labour Developments in Namibia', in *U.S. Business Involvement in Southern Africa: Hearings, Ninety-Second Congress, First Session, Part 3*, 1972.

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> We stayed in the little heaven on earth. Heaven on earth *(Otwa kala nee kokagulu kopevi. Pevi puna egulu)*.[18]

Her description of Oranjemund as heaven on earth is shared by other women. She recounted that

> We were given houses…A car used to make rounds dropping food at each house. We never used to pay for water, electricity, or gas. This was until the end of the grace period when we started cooking our own food. We got used to Oranjemund, got to know where the shops are. But even so, we found most of the utilities and kitchen utensils in the houses. All we had to do was to buy food and clothes. Our children used to go to school…with white children. We used to go with other women to fetch our children from school.[19]

'Orange oya li oshilongo oshiwanawa' (*Oranjemund used to be a very nice town)*, added another woman.[20] From the beginning, they never cooked themselves, as food was brought to them 'from the Mensa', as the women remembered.[21] There were also domestic workers assigned to the households.[22] These were Aawambo men directly recruited from northern Namibia – within the ambit of the migrant labour system – to carry out household chores including tending to the gardens, doing laundry and cooking for the families in Oranjemund.

Of all the benefits, the women praised the education system the most. The children's education was fully paid for by the mine, and in some cases, the mine even covered the cost of schooling in Cape Town, South Africa.

While the women praised the benefits and the opportunities afforded to them by settling in Oranjemund, there were also voices that were critical of the system. While the women themselves might not have been able to critique a system that enabled them to live to Oranjemund, it is imperative to question the system itself. The PGS pretended to overcome racialised labour conditions, but of course did not consider that Black workers were still oppressed and disadvantaged, and therefore could hardly compete with their white colleagues. According to Corbett, in the 1970s the mining industry was becoming more sophisticated, and tertiary and university qualifications were required, hence the PGS was put in place to grade employees with different skills.[23] This was, however, a systematic and structural exclusion, as higher education was inaccessible to the majority of Black people. Consequently, within this system, a Black man who dropped out of school or had no opportunity to go beyond lower schooling grades cannot compete with a privileged white university graduate who automatically qualifies for a higher position and

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18 Meme Tshoopara, Windhoek, February 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

19 Meme Tshoopara, Windhoek, February 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

20 Meme Awala, Oniipa, April 2020. Interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

21 Mensa was the term for the communal kitchen.

22 Meme Hileni Mbeeli, Elombe, April 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

23 Corbett 2002: p.78

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does not have to work his way up in the company. Additionally, working in management was race- and gender-biased. There were no Black people or women of any race in management, so the PGS catered for white and male management staff only. The frustration was further fuelled by the PGS spilling over to the allocation of benefits, such as housing, the furnishing of homes, and company cars.[24] All of the above was ignored by CDM; the company praised the Paterson Grading system as one that 'integrated all races with a fair job evaluation'.[25] A 1978 memorandum notes that: 'At Consolidated Diamond Mines a man's job is ranked and his pay is set according to a common, non-discriminatory system known as the Paterson System….'[26]

However, the opposite was occurring at CDM, as the majority of the large Black workforce – estimated at 5,300 in 1978 – did not have wide opportunities to climb up the ladder in the workplace.[27] By implication, only a handful could qualify to live with their families, unlike the majority of the white workforce. This could also imply that CDM was following the trend of the South African administration that abolished petty apartheid policies and sought to create a small, elite and localised Black middle-class, only 'appearing' to be move towards a non-racial society.

Demonstrating this, at Oranjemund there was spatial segregation. The Black families that first settled in Oranjemund lived in a section meant solely for them. In 1978, the company started to build a new suburb, a short distance removed from the white town to house Black families in the west, and by 1980, 70 Black families already lived in, or were in the process of moving to, Oranjemund[28]. The Black families felt excluded, and their children were not allowed to visit their friends, even though they went to the same school. According to the PGS, one of the employees, Mr Kalondo, was entitled to a better house and in 1980 he challenged CDM and his was the first Black family allowed to move into a 'white part of the town'.[29]

When the women moved to Oranjemund in 1978, Black people had their own shops and were not allowed to enter shops meant for white people. If a Black person wanted something from the 'whites only' shop, they had to write a note and the product would be brought to them while they waited outside. Additionally, white and Black migrant workers had their own sport clubs and separate leagues.[30] Although Black people were allowed to play various sports, such as soccer, squash, and tennis, the Black men had a designated place to play *owela/uuholo* – a popular game among the local people of Namibia.[31]

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24 Ibid. p. 98

25 Rüdiger 2019

26 Ibid. p. 20

27 Frontline: Helping to change the Face of South Africa (1978–1991) http://www.coldtype.net/front-line. Accessed on 25 March 2022.

28 Ibid.

29 See Corbett 2002: p. 91. Meme Martha and Tate Salom Kalondo, Windhoek, July 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

30 Rüdiger 2019: p. 10

31 This is the mancala game played in Southern Africa. In Namibia, it common among the locals and known by different names, including in Oshikwanyama *owela*, *in* Oshindonga *uuholo*, *in* Otjiherero *onjune*, *in* Khoekhogowab *//hus*, and in Rukwangari *wera*.

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While the women welcomed the benefits they had, and the opportunities presented to their families, they were also aware of the segregation in Oranjemund. One of the women interviewed for example described this treatment as:

> *Uukoloni wa gwayekwa ondjema. Ta tu gwayekwa ashike omahoka komilungu. Oto lolo ashike ito li.* (This was colonialism smeared with jam. Sugar-coated segregation. You are just made to taste but you are not getting the real deal).[32]

Women's activities in Oranjemund

During the first year of her stay in Oranjemund, while waiting for a job placement, Meme Tshoopara decided to look for fabrics to start a tailoring business. However, she did not own a sewing machine, and worked with another woman who owned a manual sewing machine, telling us:

> I had no tailoring skills, but I learned from my friend, who also lent me her machine. I started sewing children's clothes and sold them to the men in Oranjemund, who sent them to their children in the north. Even when I started working in the hospital, I sewed after work.[33]

The sewing business grew, so much so that Meme Tshoopara invited other women from the north to come to work with them in Oranjemund. While the women invited did not necessarily have husbands in Oranjemund, they were invited on the ticket of Meme Tshoopara through her husband[34]. Other women got sorghum from the north and started making Oshiwambo traditional brew, which they sold to the mine workers. In addition to these kinds of activities, women participated in social and church events, and even political events as political awareness in Oranjemund increased.

Meme Tshoopara and the other women who settled first in Oranjemund took on the role of orientating new women who were arriving in the town. They assisted them in settling down and helped those that became mothers, as they did not have other family networks in Oranjemund. They also gave them financial education, among other forms of assistance offered. These women became a close-knit unit, as their children became friends as well – a relationship network that continues to this day, even after they have left Oranjemund, the research participants shared.

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32 Meme Justina Auala, Oniipa, April 2021, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

33 Meme Tshoopara, Windhoek, February 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

34 From the late 1980s, permanent workers had a choice to get a domestic worker assigned to them, or they could opt for a domestic workers' allowance and employ their own. They were then at liberty to employ either men or women. These domestic workers had to therefore be approved by the mine to enter Oranjemund and be linked to a permanent worker to be there. They were issued with permits with expiry dates, and if the permanent worker or the domestic worker lost her/his job or the permit expired and was not renewed by the employer, the domestic worker had to leave immediately.

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Meme Tshoopara became politically active as well, alongside many other women. Oranjemund had a strong South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) branch, including an arm of the SWAPO women council, within which Meme Tshoopara served as the Secretary for Information. Despite the initial tension between the Black residents and the contract workers, they managed to convince them that they had to unite. Unlike other parts of the country, Oranjemund was a safer place to practise politics – as a closed town, they were safe from the state police and army harassments. As the political pressure mounted and with a strong trade union branch in Oranjemund, the mine allowed political activities to take place unhindered.[35] Husbands were supportive of their wives' involvement as well, with the women travelling to nearby towns such as Luderitz to mobilise other women.[36]

Living in Oranjemund without being connected to a man

In 1982, Meme Tshoopara's husband, Sebastian, passed away. At the time, when a man died or lost his job, the woman and her children were no longer allowed to stay in Oranjemund. It did not matter whether the woman was Black or white; employed or unemployed; or whether the children were in school or not – all had to leave. The determining factor was a man's job, and a woman could not remain in Oranjemund without being linked to a man. CDM's policy was that each house was linked to a specific position or job description on the mine, and not to a person, and as a result that particular house would be reallocated to the replacement worker. Exception could only be made if the husband died, and on condition that there was accommodation available.[37]

However, after Meme Tshoopara's husband's funeral in the north, the mining administration called her back to Oranjemund with her children. She recalls this saying:

> When I came back, everything was changed to my name. I was the first woman to do that. The winds of change for independence [had] begun to blow. I was the first to be given that opportunity[38].

Meme Tshoopara made history by becoming the first Black woman to stay in Oranjemund after the death of her husband. She could not explain with certainty why she was called back and assumes that this was due to the winds of change that were sweeping across the country at the time. Other people interviewed attribute her stay to the significant work she was doing in the health sector, especially in the 1980s when AIDS was becoming prevalent. She remembers:

35 The trade union in Namibia is strongly affiliated to SWAPO.

36 Politics is traditionally a men's space. The tone given by women interviewed who were involved in politics tilts towards acknowledging that their husbands allowed and supported their political involvement.

37 http://www.oranjemundonline.com, Accessed 26 March 2022.

38 Anne Tshoopara, Windhoek, February 2020, interview done by Martha Akawa and Romie Nghitevelekwa.

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> We stayed with my children in Oranjemund: Leevi, Ndilimeke and Chops. They continued going to school. I did not stop with my sewing business. I was working and sewing at the same time.[39]

Although CDM was providing all the necessities, Meme Tshoopara found it tough to cope with three children. Consequently, she deemed it necessary to supplement her salary to best provide for her children.

Conclusion

Despite all these advantages, Oranjemund was a place of colonial labour exploitation. As the participants in this research shared, diamonds were valued more than a human life (*Okawe oke vule omwenyo gwomuntu*). Women that were in the nursing profession experienced this firsthand. A former nurse cited incidents where a patient who was taken to the hospital with illness was first checked by the Diamond Detective security, to determine whether they were smuggling diamonds in their bodies – this included bowel emptying to check stools. Irrespective of how serious their conditions were, nurses were not allowed to assist patients until the inspection was completed. These types of strict and inhumane searches also applied to corpses.

The colonial economy was based on exploiting the workers by buying cheap labour to maximise profit. This was equally embedded in the racialised apartheid system that was the order of the day. The political climate in the country in the 1970s was a time of (some) transitions. The mine came to terms with the fact that the workers were a force to reckon with and were ready to negotiate. While negotiations were not always successful, a Department of Personnel Office was formed to deal with industrial relations issues.

It was within this framework, which allowed for the creation of a small Black middle class and the concept of *okugwayekwa omahoka komilungu,*[40] that Black women settled in Oranjemund.

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39 Ibid.

40 The literal translation here is: 'Smearing lips with gravy without giving real meat' – referring to promising little things without having to really give something of substance.

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