

### **Review: Benjamin Rubbers, Le paternalisme en question: les anciens ouvriers de la Gécamines face à la libéralisation du secteur minier katangais (RD Congo) (2013)**

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Benjamin Rubbers (2013), *Le paternalisme en question: Les anciens ouvriers de la Gécamines face à la libéralisation du secteur minier katangais (RD Congo)*, Cahiers africains, 81, Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale / Paris: L'Harmattan, ISBN: 9782343002385, 315 pp.

Much has been written about informal economies in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While this country offers numerous illustrations of economic activities beyond the realm of state regulation, especially in mining areas, Benjamin Rubbers reminds us that there is also a full-fledged formal mining economy that has been in existence for a very long time. The Générale des Carrières et des Mines (Gécamines) – formerly Union Minière du Haut-Katanga – was founded in 1906 and remained part of the economic backbone of the state until the 1990s. It survived the political tensions and economic crises connected with independence, nationalisation, secession, civil war, and the drop in world market prices for commodities. When international investors started withdrawing from Zaïre after the end of the Cold War, Mobutu implemented a multiparty system at the instigation of international donors. Political rivalries led to violence and to the expulsion of Kasaians from Katanga, which in turn culminated in a political and economic crisis in the 1990s. The war with Rwanda and Uganda did little to alleviate the situation. The combination of war, economic crisis, corruption, and theft severely affected Gécamines. Production fell considerably; the company was heavily indebted and no longer able to pay workers' salaries.

The World Bank, which had withdrawn from the DRC ten years earlier, returned in 2001 to negotiate a rescue operation, which included a revision of mining contracts and a liberalisation of the mining sector. These processes were complicated by the parallel introduction of decentralisation and liberalisation and by the increasing presence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which served to multiply stakeholders and interest groups on various levels. In order to facilitate a restructuration of Gécamines, the World Bank initiated the programme Opération Départ Volontaire (ODV). Voluntary redundancy would be available to all employees with more than 25 years' service as of 31 December 2002. In return for accepting the termination of their employment contract, they would receive a lump sum. After 36 months of wage arrears, more than 10,000 employees accepted and received payments, though less than they were due. At the same time, however, former employees formed a protest movement and an association that cast doubts on the legality of the World Bank's approach and demanded, among

other things, the full payment of wage arrears from Gécamines. After lengthy negotiations and struggles involving unions, NGOs, lawyers, politicians, as well as a transitional government and a new government, the process stalled. Based on ethnographic research, Rubbers recounts this story largely from the perspective of the former employees. In a way, his book is a counterpart to Ferguson's *Expectations of Modernity* about mine workers in Zambia who had been laid off in the 1980s.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first two chapters after the introduction look at the mining sector and specifically at the history of Gécamines in the context of colonial and postcolonial changes. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the aftermath of ODV. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine the effects of this programme on the lives of former employees and their families. Rubbers starts each chapter with a vignette from his fieldwork that offers a glimpse into people's perspectives and on his own position as an ethnographer. The former employees' feeling of having been abandoned is a result of the company's paternalistic stance that encompassed both care and control in the framework of a moral economy that connected the company with its employees for decades. In order to stabilise a workforce in the colonial period, the company had encouraged marriage and family life based on a Christian model that seems to have resonated with pre-existing patrilineal traditions. The company took care of its employees and their families, who were entitled to housing, healthcare, and schooling for the children. In return, families had to comply with company rules, including, for instance, restrictions on the length of visits by relatives. This system was carried over into independence and ended only in the 1990s. In the wake of the economic crisis, this paternalistic arrangement broke down. The lives and social worlds of the companies' employees were shattered. Many people were unable to make ends meet and had to resort to survival strategies such as "one gong" (only one meal per day) or selling houses or furniture.

While the World Bank depicted the ODV programme as a successful "reinsertion" of former employees as entrepreneurs, individual projects amounted mostly to muddling through. Not everybody who had agreed to leave "voluntarily" had the same opportunity to engage in alternative occupations – for instance, agriculture, transport, or services. Differences and conflicts emerged between those who had left and those who had stayed on, and between fathers and children. Men felt that they lost their children's and relatives' respect because they were no longer capable of fulfilling their role as providers or responding to expectations of reciprocity. In contrast to Ferguson's observation in Zambia, many wives nevertheless remained in their marriages and countered the socio-

economic downturn by discreetly contributing to the family budget, at the same time rejoicing over the fact that their husbands were no longer able to keep co-wives or concubines. Ironically, the crisis thereby seems to have contributed to a stabilisation of the colonial family model.

In the conclusion, Rubbers points out that the process of deindustrialisation in the DRC as exemplified by the case of Gécamines shows some similarities with processes in coal- or iron-producing regions of Europe or the United States. However, industrial decline in the DRC is much more a result of political decisions than of resource depletion or more general economic change. The paternalistic mode of mining capitalism instituted by Gécamines contributed to the subject formation of its employees and their families. Those who left the company increasingly started reflecting on the fact that this paternalistic mode had made them dependent and ill prepared for the challenges they faced after leaving.

The book gives a comprehensive picture of the impact of deindustrialisation on former employees for whom a mining company was much more than an employer: indeed, the company represented an entire social world deeply interwoven with their own biographies. Rubbers masterfully contextualises the stories of these former employees within the political and economic history and present-day circumstances of Katanga and the global forces that shape the relations between the international organisations, the government, mining companies, investors, and actors on the local level. The book provides an important and ethnographically rich insight into the complexities of neoliberal capitalism in Africa and contributes to the emerging field of resource anthropology.

■ Katja Werthmann