# Book Review: The Untold Story of Zama Zama Miners in South Africa: Unearthing Hope

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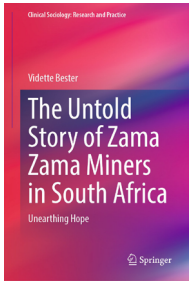


*The Untold Story of Zama Zama Miners in South Africa: Unearthing Hope.*

By Vidette Bester

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## 1. The Opening Scene

Bester starts the telling of her story of South Africa's Zama Zama miners at some miserable holes in the ground outside a dusty little town called Stilfontein. It was here, in 2025, that the issue of Zama Zama mining finally erupted forcefully into the consciousness of just about every South African, and indeed, many others the world over. Before this, the issue had kind of bubbled away just beneath the surface of popular consciousness, sometimes showing us a hint of its existence, but never really materialising fully. I return to this choice as an opening scene, the 'scene of the crime' to all but the most critical of observer, a little later in this reflection. But for now, the point I want to make about this is that, while this was where Bester chose to start telling the story, it is quite clear that her engagement with Zama Zama miners and mining started long

before the Stilfontein frenzy. I emphasize this up front so that there can be no confusion that this book might have been an opportunistic response to the media frenzy that 'went down' outside Stilfontein.

## 2. Bester's Story

And with that out of the way, we can move on from the frenzy that took place around miserable holes outside Stilfontein to Bester's really serious reflection. She uses the first chapter in the book to critically interrogate popular narratives around Zama Zama miners and mining which she does from something of a Foucauldian perspective. She notes how, in these narratives, Zama Zama miners are generally constructed as violent, criminal, illegal, male, and foreign. For her, this dehumanising characterisation of Zama Zama miners lies at the heart of 'the issue' here. Not only does this serve to legitimise the inhumane treatment of Zama Zama miners by the authorities and society at large, but it also, according to Bester, acts to undermine socio-economic opportunities that exist in small scale and artisanal mining.

She uses the rest of the book to work through these suggestions. In Chapters 2 and 3, she begins a process of recasting Zama Zama miners as people by attributing to them a history. And, as she points out, this is not just any history. It is a particularly violent colonial and apartheid history. In this history, hundreds of thousands of African people from across the subcontinent – from Tanzania in the north, to Angola in the west and Mozambique in the East, and everywhere in between – were systematically forced, through every coercive trick in the book, into the rapacious migrant labour market for large scale mining in South Africa. To paraphrase Bester's message in these two chapters: we sit today and say in our stories that Zama Zama miners are violent and foreign and illegal. However, little attention is paid to the fact that these same Zama Zama miners are people who are a direct consequence of a particular violent, *legal* history premised on forced migration. One might easily add rainbowism's rootedness in neoliberalism to this violent yet legal history, although Bester stops short of doing this.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Bester brings her discussion to the present day. These two chapters constitute what might be thought of as the data core of the book. In the case of Chapter 4, although the title is "*Artisanal Mining in the South African Landscape*" the chapter actually covers a lot more ground than this. In attempting to frame Zama Zama miners and mining in South Africa, Bester does her best to weave contextual strands from global perspectives on ASM and the current South African legal and policy environment, together with empirical data from her own field work. Because of this latter element, this chapter is especially rich in first-hand imagery and testimony. In her conclusion to the chapter, Bester uses all of this to emphasise the diversity and nuance that characterises Zama Zama miners in South Africa, both in terms of what motivates their participation, and the actual people involved. But for me personally, whatever else this chapter might set out to achieve, the imagery and testimony force one to take the next logical step in the process of putting a human (as opposed to a violent, criminal, illegal, male, and foreign) face on Zama Zama miners, following Bester's efforts to reconcile them with a history in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 5 is similar to Chapter 4, and yet for me strikingly different at the same time. Here Bester introduces women and children participants into the present day story of Zama Zama mining. Again, this chapter undertakes the task of weaving together global and local discourses with empirical data that Bester has personally gathered. And again, the chapter is rich in imagery and testimony. However, this is a much more difficult chapter, not conceptually, but emotionally. And there is no denying the fact that the subject matter Bester covers here is difficult to reconcile with her apparent general support for Zama Zama mining. As much as Bester tries in the chapter conclusion to 'balance' the violence, exploitation and health risks experienced by women and children in and around Zama Zama mining with a more nuanced story which includes a narrative of economic empowerment, honestly, this is really a difficult balancing claim to pursue. I suspect that Bester knows this herself as is evident from the fact that the heading for the section discussing economic empowerment ends in a question mark: "*A Way Intended for Economic Empowerment?*"

But Bester does not abandon her project of balancing the narrative here. In Chapter 6 she persists with building this as she discusses "*The Bright Side, the Dark Side, and the Ramifications of Mining*". The appalling health and safety standards, child labour (during the Stilfontein frenzy stories of minors being forced to work in mines emerged), violence, gang warfare, protection rackets, and the alarming environmental impacts associated with Zama Zama mining are all presented. But each of these presentations are rounded off with the suggestion of a "backdrop of undeniable complexities" (p. 87). Significantly, Bester moves to put all these ills associated with Zama Zama mining into perspective by comparing them to their equivalents in large scale mining operations. I must say that, while this is indeed telling, I do worry a little that comparing something to the worst in society is not setting a very high bar. In any event, from all of this, in her conclusion to this chapter, Bester circles back to the issues of economic opportunities and livelihoods for Zama Zama miners.

The rest of the book really attempts to think through solutions to problems associated with Zama Zama mining. Although it seems that here too, complexities are the order of the day. Chapter 8 engages with the matter of formalisation primarily by exploring case studies of ASM formalisation initiatives, not just in South Africa, but from around the continent. In doing this, Bester introduces a distinction between what might be labelled 'control formalisation' and 'developmental formalisation'. The former would include things like licensing, regulation of practices, and taxation, while in the latter, ASM is supported in its development, seemingly without too many burdens of control. Bester leans rather strongly towards the latter of these forms for Zama Zama mining based on the argument that Zama Zama miners do not have the means to operate under the constraints of 'normal' controls.

Her final port of call before drawing her conclusions is a consideration of the current and potential relationships between large scale mining and Zama Zama miners and mining. Once again, using case studies, she highlights the uneasy and complex character of these relationships. In trying to pull something constructive out

of her reflections on this, she seems to advance the case for large scale mining stepping up to support Zama Zama miners and mining. She invokes both self-interest and responsibility-based rationales for this proposal.

And finally, in Chapter 9, Bester draws her conclusions. I can see three broad themes which she seems to settle on here. The first really constitutes a direct response to the issue of the popular narrative that she highlighted in her very first chapter. Here she again emphasizes the dehumanising character of this narrative which blanket characterises Zama Zama miners as violent, criminal, illegal, male, and foreign. In response to this, she calls for much more dialogue so that nuances and complexities can be unearthed and made public with a view to "*Changing Mindsets*" (p. 141) as she puts it. The second theme I see her conclusion engaging with, is the complex and contested issue of formalisation of ASM generally, and Zama Zama mining in particular. And whereas in Chapter 7, Bester seemed to lean rather heavily towards a developmental type of formalisation, in her conclusion she appears to partially retreat from this, and to instead emphasise the virtues of the informal sector. I say 'partially', because the third theme that emerges in her conclusion is that of support for Zama Zama miners both in terms of protecting them from the gross exploitations to which they are currently subjected (as highlighted in Chapters 4 and 5 in particular) and in terms of improving health, safety and environmental practices of Zama Zama miners. It is difficult to see how this can really be achieved without some degree of formalisation. Wrapping all of this up in Bester's own words, this chapter brings us to "the crucial point of addressing the historical and social injustices and re-evaluating Zama Zama mining within a developmental framework" (p. 139). That then is the ground that Bester covers in her book.

## 3. A Different Opening Scene

However, this would not be a scholarly review without some critique. With this in mind, let me start this little critique by saying that, if I had set out to write this book, I would not have prefaced it looking down some miserable holes in the ground outside a dusty little

town in the North West Province of South Africa. The location for my preface, the 'scene of the crime', would have been altogether more luxurious. With the book's strong emphasis on gold mining specifically, I would probably have started it in a country whose per capita GDP is consistently located in the top five in the world; in a country that, by some accounts, is responsible for refining as much as 70% of the world's mined gold; but which, strangely enough, doesn't have a single gold mine – Switzeraland.

## 4. What Bester's Story Missed

The link between my preferred opening scene and Zama Zama miners is of course far more abstract than the miserable holes outside Stilfontein. In fact, it is possible (given that South Africa has its own significant refining capacity) that there may be no material link at all. But for me Switzerland's mysterious location in the global gold market is emblematic of what I think is critical ground that Bester does not cover in this book. And this is the matter of the broader value chain within which the Zama Zama miners currently operate. The closest that Bester gets to any acknowledgement of this comes in the form of the following excerpt from one of her informants named Tessa which appears in the final chapter:

> *We have discussed this a number of times. Formalizing illegal mining would be ideal, but is it possible? Where do you start? Remember, this is a big syndicate that involves communities. It involves industries, companies, it involves officials, police officials, it involves government, you know, so where do you really start? It would be ideal.* (p. 145)

To understand why I think that this is so important, I think that it is now time to formalise a distinction that I have been carefully trying to maintain throughout this reflection on Bester's work, namely the distinction between Zama Zama *miners* and Zama Zama *mining*. From this distinction, it is safe to say that I agree with Bester that Zama Zama miners are direct descendants of a grossly exploitative colonial and apartheid labour history (although I would add rainbowism's neoliberalism to this too). And I agree with her that this long history of crimes against humanity is conveniently overlooked in the popular

narrative surrounding Zama Zama miners. I also agree with her that the popular narrative around Zama Zama miners is dehumanising in the main, and that this dehumanisation in turn legitimises the inhumane treatment that Zama Zama miners are subjected to at the hands of authorities and society as a whole. In short, I agree with Bester that as a society, we have not done right by our brothers and sisters who happen to be Zama Zama miners.

However, on the issue of Zama Zama *mining* our views diverge. For me, Zama Zama mining ought not to be looked at as this problematic production process involving Zama Zama miners which happens in and around miserable holes in places like Stilfontein. For me, it needs to be looked at as just one part of a global value chain in which miserable poverty and streets paved in gold coexist. Indeed, in this value chain, the miserable lives of dehumanisation and exploitation that Zama Zama miners exist in, both socially and environmentally, are precisely the source of the incredible wealth that gets mysteriously concentrated in places like Switzerland. And I would argue that it is the power that this incredible wealth buys that is instrumental in forging the narratives and politico-economic conditions that lead to the incarceration of Zama Zama miners in narratives of dehumanisation and these lives of exploitation.

Looked at from this vantage point, with Zama Zama miners as the victims not just of history, but as victims of current ruthless exploitation, Bester's argument for light formalisation of Zama Zama mining becomes difficult to sustain in my mind. It seems to me that this would be precisely the sort of call that those living in the Switzerlands of this world would also want to see, because more deliberate regulation would surely represent a very real threat to the sources of their wealth – exploitable labour and unregulated externalization of environmental costs.

## 5. In the End

In the final analysis then, Bester's book presents a deep and considered reflection on Zama Zama miners, Zama Zama mining and indeed artisanal and small scale mining (ASM) more generally. Her arguments are rich with empirical findings from qualitative

work conducted in South Africa, interlaced with a thorough study of literature (both academic and otherwise) on ASM globally. And her effort to humanise Zama Zama miners by attributing to them a history, and through striking testimony and imagery is absolutely timely. For these rich insights, as well as for its inherent provocation to reflect, I think that this book is well worth a read.

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