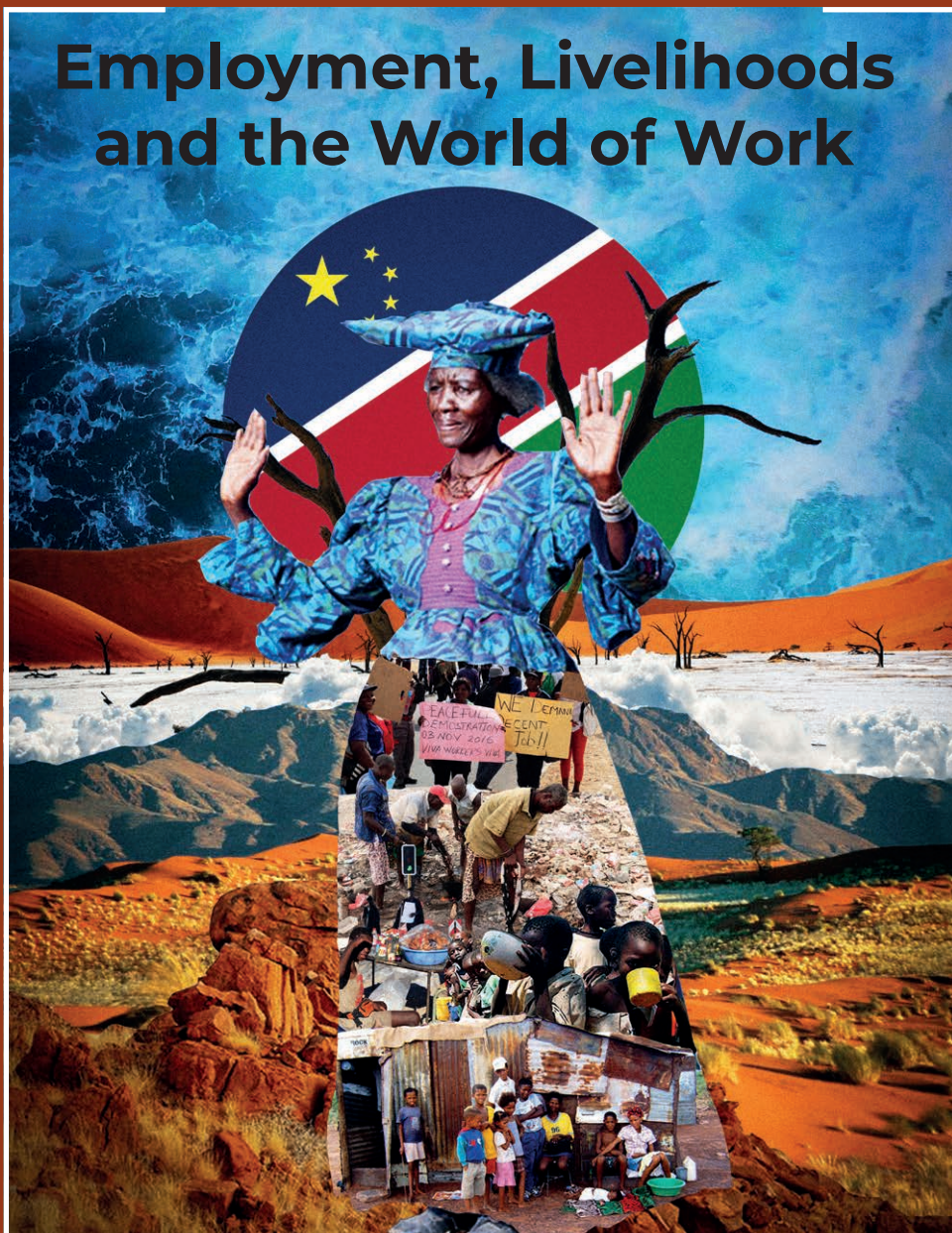


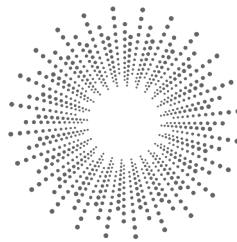
# Employment, Livelihoods and the World of Work



# **Employment, Livelihoods and the World of Work**

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	4
Acronyms and Initialisms .....	5
Editorial .....	7
<b>Economic theories</b>	
Enclave Growth and Development in Africa.....	23
<i>Godfrey Kanyenze</i>	
<b>Livelihoods and human rights</b>	
Unemployment, Underemployment, and Livelihoods in Namibia: The Human Rights Connection.....	46
<i>John B. Nakuta</i>	
<b>Livelihoods and informality</b>	
Everyday Decolonisation: The Popular Urban Economy of Herero Mall.....	64
<i>Phillip Lühl</i>	
Namibia’s Flexible Land Tenure System: The Impact on Livelihoods in Gobabis .....	84
<i>Judy Tymon</i>	
Organising the Informalised: A Monumental Challenge for Namibia’s Trade Unions.....	106
<i>Herbert Jauch</i>	
Case Study: The Livelihood of an Informal Trader in Hakahana, Windhoek... 128	
<i>Casper Tichatonga Bowora</i>	
Case Study: Informality in Okahandja Park, Windhoek.....	133
<i>Nafimane Hamukoshi</i>	
<b>Livelihoods and migration</b>	
Trapped in Poverty and Informality: The Effects of Climate Change-Induced Migration on Women in Urban Settlements in Windhoek.....	136
<i>Bruno Venditto, Christian Nekare and Ndumba J. Kamwanyah</i>	

Keeping the Fire Burning: How Migrants Rejuvenate Relations with Spouses at Home: The Case of Gwanda District, Matebeleland South Province, Zimbabwe..... 168  
*Emelder M. Tagutanazvo and Vupenyu Dzingirai*

Opinion Piece: Inclusive and Universal Access to the Internet and Digital Technologies: The Right to Access Public Goods and Improved Livelihoods in Namibia..... 187  
*Dickson Kasote*

### **Livelihoods, natural resources and agriculture**

Case Study: Livelihood and Living Conditions of a Female Communal Farmer..... 192  
*Claudius Riruako*

### **Minerals-energy complex**

Case Study: The Right to Say No to Mining when it Destroys Livelihoods, the Environment and Cultural Heritage Sites..... 196

### **Green hydrogen (GH<sub>2</sub>) and solar energy**

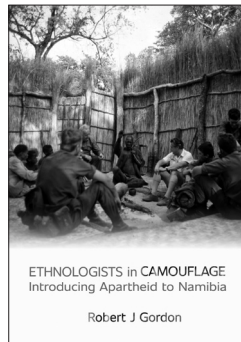
Opinion Piece: Green Hydrogen: Reality or Fantasy? ..... 208  
*Bertchen Kohrs*

Opinion Piece: Germany's Hydrogen Rush in Namibia: Green Extractivism at its Best..... 217  
*Johanna Tunn and Franziska Müller*

Opinion Piece: Turning Katutura into a Transformative Namibian Social and Energy Powerhouse ..... 223  
*Andy Gheorghiu*

### **Book Review**

Ethnologists in Camouflage: Introducing Apartheid to Namibia (Robert Gordon)..... 229  
*Heike Becker*



## Book Review

*Ethnologists in Camouflage: Introducing Apartheid to Namibia*  
(Robert Gordon)

*Heike Becker*

Namibia was South Africa's testing ground for its ambitious apartheid dreams. South Africa's colonial connection with Namibia, then the mandated territory of South West Africa, is today often either ignored or dismissed, even by historians of apartheid. The Namibian-born and bred anthropologist Robert J. (Rob) Gordon's latest book aims to redress this fault by demonstrating the significance of colonised Namibia for the development of apartheid. The narrative revolves around the role of so-called 'native' experts.

Two threads run through *Ethnologists in Camouflage*. Firstly, the book draws attention to Namibia's colonial roots in South Africa's 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Gordon asks critical

questions about South African imperialism and the political logics and epistemic assumptions of colonial knowledge production. Using deep Namibian case studies, he presents an in-depth investigation of "how people commonly known as 'native experts' helped imagine, shape, and consolidate this colonial enterprise" (Gordon, 2022, p. 1). Most of these experts were anthropologists/ethnographers in the Afrikaner nationalist tradition of the discipline, known as *volkekunde*. This approach was overtly shaped by ethno-nationalist and racist implications, with the aim of separating South Africans along racial and cultural lines. These ethnologists designed studies of singular, unified, and historically persistent groups of people, each demarcated with clear boundaries and

separate cultures. People were classified in terms of race, language and culture, and cultural contact with others in the wider social context was regarded as a threat to naturalised, deep cultural differences between people.

Gordon presents rich historical insights regarding how ‘expertise’, collected through ethnological studies in Namibia, provided the basis for the political aim of ‘grand apartheid’ – the ideology aimed at the establishment of ‘self-governing’ homelands (or Bantustans), each assigned to an ethnic group. Gordon furthermore argues that the Odendaal plan of 1966, which recommended the carving up of Namibia into self-governing homelands, “represents the only serious attempt to implement grand apartheid, the South African nationalist utopia” (Gordon, 2022, p. 13).

Gordon’s second thread discusses the social production of ignorance. He asks, “Why and how did these experts, often highly intelligent, good Christian men, not see, or at least articulate, that their work and recommendations flew in the face of reality?” (p. 2). He addresses the poignant question of looking without seeing with respect to the specific conditions that revolved around South Africa’s ‘dreams’ of apartheid. Ethnologists and other ‘experts’ (sociologists, psychologists etc.) contributed to enhancing, and

sometimes fully inventing, a sense of pivotal difference between people ‘belonging’ to different cultural groups.

Gordon provides rich historical data in a slim volume of just 165 pages. In an incisive introduction, he sets out the aims for the book and positions himself, starting from his school playground experience in high-apartheid Keetmanshoop.

Chapter 1 shows how during the early years of South African rule over Namibia, the administration showed little interest in ‘scientific’ evidence. Rather, they asserted in their reports to the League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission that South Africa was best-situated to take care of the ‘sacred trust’ because of the ‘long-term experience’ of more than 200 years they had in dealing with the indigenous population. Attempts at ‘lay anthropology’ were mostly connected with the German settler minority, who used their ostensibly ‘scientific’ approach to justify why the territory should be returned to German rule.

Chapter 2 points out the changes after the mandate was transferred to the United Nations following World War II. South Africa now started bringing ‘experts’ onto the stage of world opinion. A series of German-born ethnologists were appointed to conduct surveys of districts in the ‘Police Zone’,

while the chief ethnologist in the South African Department of Native Affairs took a special interest in the northern regions, the main source areas for contract labour.

The 1960s are the focus of Chapter 3. This decade was central for the scientific fashioning of ethnic difference to justify apartheid on the international stage. Internally, ethnological research became the driving force to prepare the grand apartheid blueprint of the Odendaal Commission report of 1966. A key actor on both the local and international stages was J.P. van S. Bruwer, an anthropologist who was closely connected with apartheid-era power networks, particularly the Afrikaner Broederbond, a secret society of influential male Afrikaner nationalists.

Chapter 4 shifts attention to the WHAM (Winning the Hearts and Minds) campaigns of the South African Defence Force during the liberation war and the establishment of the ethnic-based front organisations Etango and Ezuva. The design of their activities drew again on ethnologists and their 'expertise'.

Chapter 5 finally evaluates the research of the *volkekundiges*. Gordon argues that their labours resulted largely in the production of simplified 'potted knowledge', supposedly relying on 'fact'.

The consequence, however, was that the ethnological studies reified closed systems of thought and rationality. Gordon discusses this further in the conclusion to the book. He refers to closed systems of knowledge as 'schemas', which "are about how one is influenced by emotion, stereotypes, and what one thinks one knows but does not really know" (Gordon, 2022, p. 160). The book closes with the question of how anthropologists can avoid falling into the trap of looking but not really seeing. In a quirky turn, characteristic of Gordon's witty and entertaining style of writing, he recommends that anthropologists are well-placed in the role of 'court jesters', who speak the proverbial 'truth to power' and challenge closed-system thinkers.

Gordon's new book is important reading for Namibians, especially those who want to learn more about how colonialism, apartheid policies and knowledge production reinforced ethnic difference. Although Namibia has been independent for more than 30 years and the ethnologists in camouflage are long gone, the effects of apartheid intellectual epistemologies still reverberate in the politics of ethnicity that raises its head ever so often.

There is little, if anything, critical to say about *Ethnologists in Camouflage*. Gordon's writing is engaging and lively,

and mostly free of academic jargon. The book undermines academic ivory towers and confronts racism and the notion of 'expertise' as the authoritative voice of the 'knowers'. If I could wish for anything more, it would be for more clarity on the subversive powers of the jesters, anthropologists and other critical thinkers, on how to puncture the certainty of absoluteness

epitomised by past and present closed-system thinkers and the rulers they serve.

### **Reference**

Gordon, R.J. (2022). *Ethnologists in camouflage: Introducing apartheid to Namibia*. UNAM Press.