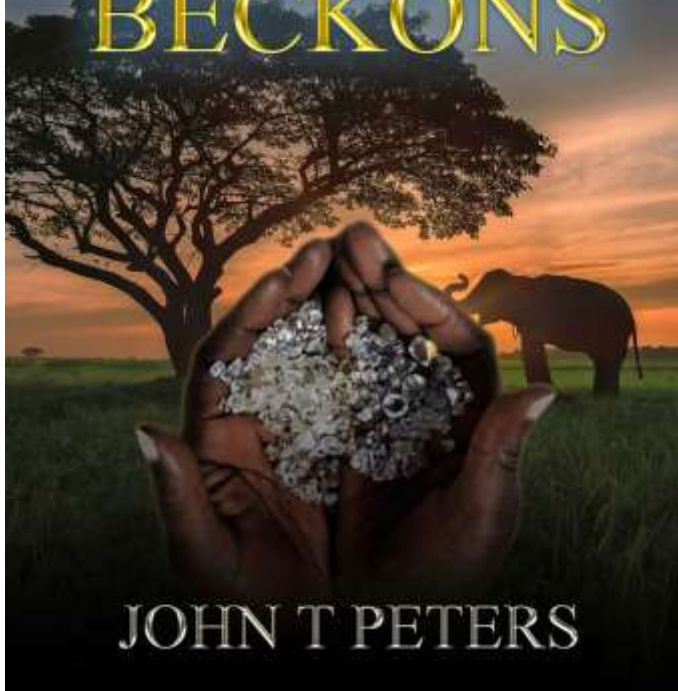


TRANSITION
TRILOGY
BOOK THREE

AFRICA BECKONS



JOHN T PETERS

Africa Beckons



Africa Beckons

Transition Trilogy
Book Three



John T. Peters

Africa Beckons

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Also, by
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Sidetracked
Destroyed Trust

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CHAPTER ONE

Africa smiled a little When you left. 'We know you,' Africa said, 'We have seen and watched you, We can learn to live without you, But We know We needn't yet.' And Africa smiled a little When you left. 'You cannot leave Africa,' Africa said. 'It is always with you, there inside your head. Our rivers run in currents in the swirl of your thumbprints; our drumbeats counting out your pulse; our coastline the silhouette of your soul.' So Africa smiled a little When you left. 'We are in you,' Africa said. 'You have not left us yet.' *Bridget Dore*

My lips were parched and dry, desperate for a drink of water. I had been wandering in the jungle for some time, living off scraps of food, mostly fruit and insects.

I did not know where I was, only following a dirt road winding through the jungle in a westerly direction as I assumed it led to the sea and habitation.

I was not even sure what country I found myself in. In Africa, one can cross borders easily without knowing. I know where I am supposed to be, that is, in Kinshasa, Zaire.

All I knew was that it was 1972, my name was James Hammond, a director of Zurich Precious Metals UK Limited, and I was somewhere in central Africa where

most of the countries were in some form of civil war. You had to be careful who you approached, but I was becoming desperate and needed to get out of this jungle.

A military-looking jeep approached, travelling in the right direction. Two people occupied it. I was nervous about stopping it or not, but my hunger won, so I stepped out into the road.

The jeep screeched to a halt, nearly running me over. Fortunately, they were soldiers wearing the President Mobutu Sese Seko army uniform and not rebel forces.

One of the soldiers spoke, 'Who are you, white man, and what are you doing here in the jungle, miles from anywhere?'

I responded, 'I think someone abducted me. I tried to see the minister of Mines and Energy in Kinshasa, but I got bundled into a Toyota HiAce and dropped not far from here about two days ago. Only now have I found this road. I would like to return to Kinshasa.'

'Climb aboard. We can take you as far as Mr Singh's trading store on the outskirts of Kilembe.'

'Where exactly are we?' I asked.

'We are about halfway between Tshikapa and Kikwit,' he responded.

'Do you have any form of identification? A passport or something like that?' he added.

All I had on me were several business cards. I handed the soldier one of them. 'I'm sorry, my passport is in my hotel room. Will this do?'

He studied my card. 'You are here looking for diamonds.'

'We are wholesalers of precious metals, including diamonds,' I explained.

After several more questions, he said, 'When I get back to base, I will check your credentials, and if not correct, we will come looking for you. However, you are free to arrange transport back to Kinshasa with Mr Singh.'

We arrived at the trading store complex. Mr Singh seemed to sell everything you could dream of, including petrol, diesel and paraffin. He even served hot food to the passing taxis.

The soldiers dumped me off in front of the store without introducing me and sped off down the road.

Mr Singh was friendly with a great big turban on his head. He was busy talking to an African man. They stopped their conversation and looked at me in astonishment. It was clear that white people were not in abundance around this area.

I explained to them what had happened and that I was seeking a lift back to Kinshasa. The African introduced himself as Folli Thango. He had the friendliest eyes I have ever seen. He ran to his vehicle and returned with a can of ice-cold Amstel lager beer

and offered it to me. ‘Drink up; you must be dying of thirst, and don’t worry. Tomorrow, I will take you to Kinshasa myself. I am sure Mr Singh will put you up for the night.’

I had almost forgotten how infectious the laugh of an African with a good set of teeth is. Folli Thango had it all. He laughed continuously. I was glad to be back in Africa.

I must admit that the first beer was mouth-watering. I handed Mr Singh my business card. Both he and Folli Thango studied it with great excitement. Folli beamed, ‘You want diamonds... I can get you diamonds by the dozen.’

Mr Singh interrupted, ‘Folli Thango, you are the greatest thief in Zaire. Be gentle with Mr Hammond. He probably hasn’t eaten for days.’

Mr Singh showed me a small room behind his trading store. ‘You can sleep here tonight. I will get someone to add a bed and some blankets.’

It was a small room, but at least it had a washbasin in the corner. I prayed that there was running water.

Folli Thango appeared with a Russian sausage and chips for me. I was starving and dug into the food like a vulture. Folli Thango joined me, and together, we finished it all in seconds.

We arranged to meet up the following morning at 8 AM after I assured him that I would pay all his expenses when we reached Kinshasa.

Folli agreed happily and added, ‘Did you know I own a diamond mine? I will show you tomorrow morning before we leave for Kinshasa. I know you are tired now. I will leave you in the good hands of Mr Singh.’

Folli returned to his vehicle and fetched me another two cans of lager for later, then left. Mr Singh shook his head and smiled. ‘That Folli Thango is a nice man, but oh, he is the greatest thief in all of Africa. I bet he stole the beers that he is handing out freely from me.’

With that, Mr Singh departed, stating that he would arrange for someone to bring me my evening meal.

I assured Mr Singh that I would give Folli Thango an envelope with cash to repay for all his kindness in Kinshasa.

Mr Singh replied, ‘That is unnecessary, but it would be most welcome if you can afford it.’

My evening meal consisted of four sausages, peas, and many chips washed down with the Amstel larger Folli left me. Afterwards, I crashed down on the bed and fell asleep in seconds, grateful to have a comfortable bed. I was exhausted; I think even a haystack would have been welcoming.

The following morning, Folli drove me out to his diamond mine.

In Zaire, miners do most diamond mining by hand. Folli Thango’s mine was no different.

It's a labour-intensive process that requires hauling away layers of dirt and rock, sometimes 50 feet deep, to expose ancient beds of gravel where you find the crystals.

Miners then wash and sift that gravel one shovelful at a time, searching for tiny glints of light that might be a diamond. If they are lucky, a peppercorn-sized crystal could fetch them a few dollars once the mine owner gets his take.

In New York or London's diamond district, such a gem—cut and polished—would be worth several hundred dollars.

At first glance, one would not call it a diamond mine. Folli Thango had about five men digging away, and I would be amazed if they produced one stone per day amongst the five of them.

At least Folli Thango's mine or hole in the ground was accessible by road. You could only reach some of the mines in Zaire by air. These journeys most likely involve an internal flight on an airline, blacklisted for its shaky safety record, followed by a long 4x4 drive on red dirt tracks down to the mining sites. In some cases, they even use motorbikes or boats to reach the mines.

You find some of the wealthiest gravel beds at the bottom of the rivers that snake through the region. There, miners siphon gravel from deep underwater using pumps mounted on rickety rafts.

The diamond mining business is rich in Zaire. The area has an estimated \$24 trillion in untapped natural resources and is the centre of the world's diamond source.

This unregulated sector employs many Congolese, who hardly eke out a living from what they extract.

The Congo was once a farming intensive region. In the last 50 years, that has changed. Mining is now the dominant employer in the area, resulting in food shortages and insecurity.

Mining is a dangerous and unstable occupation. You find diamonds all over in mines or the ground in areas rich in natural resources like Zaire. Zaire is now pockmarked with unproductive small mines as the industry has become centred in Africa.

The raw materials found by Congolese are not what we see in jewellery stores—most of the diamonds look more like black rocks and are not worth much until polished and cut.

The mines are hazardous, and the methods by which the workers excavate the rare gems are tiresome and not routine.

There is no organisation in mining. Each man, woman or child works for themselves. The miners must provide their equipment. Therefore, their tools

are simple—an old pick, a rope, and a torn sack. They don't have shoes, gloves, hard hats, or flashlights, resulting in many injuries, illnesses, or deaths.

Most African countries partake in artisanal mining; only a tiny portion participates in industrial mining. Artisanal mining occurs in countries with alluvial diamonds, which are diamonds washed by rivers into a large area.

Millions of artisanal miners dig in African countries and sell their diamonds for less than 1/5th of their potential price. The income is inconsistent—some days, a miner will find nothing, and other days, they will find a small fortune.

The gems found cannot be manufactured in Zaire due to a lack of skilled labour. Therefore, the raw materials are sold elsewhere at a microscopic price compared to the price after polishing.

The miners sell the raw materials to virtually anyone with money willing to buy them. They have no idea where the diamonds go because the money is desperately needed.

Diamond mining is an occupation that many Congolese men, women and children participate in, hoping to find a way out of poverty.

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