

January 2007

Virtue In Action

Diamonds are forever... and so are their consequences

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



VIRTUE IN ACTION



A miner uses a screen to search for diamonds at Congo Creek, outside Koidu, in eastern Sierra Leone. It is estimated that at least one million Africans earn pennies a day in the backbreaking and increasingly fruitless search for diamonds - a \$60-billion-a-year industry.

Is it the jewelry conglomerate whose name is almost synonymous with the luxurious precious stones? Is it the musician or Hollywood starlet whose neck and wrists drip with shimmering excess? Or is it the young person who, emulating those stars, aspires toward the same material goals of owning diamonds?

Whose **responsibility** is it to determine whether a diamond—often analyzed for cut, clarity and color – should be examined for another “c”: conflict?

The question came to the forefront this winter with the December release of “Blood Diamonds,” a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a **mercenary** who experiences a spiritual reversal when he meets a poor fisherman whose son has been kidnapped by rebel military groups who finance their brutality with diamonds mined in Sierra Leone, Africa. This fictionalized account spotlights **atrocities** and forced child labor that really took place during the 1990s.

Conflict Diamonds Background

Profits from these stones, called conflict or blood diamonds, were used to fund military conflict and atrocities in countries including Liberia and Angola, but most notably in Sierra Leone, where rebels beat, raped and maimed other Africans – including children—and forced them to mine for the diamonds in riverbeds.

Fast forward to today when diamond industry experts estimate that less than 1 percent of the \$8 billion rough diamond industry can be classified as conflict diamonds. According to JD Bindenagel, who served as the U.S. conflict diamond special negotiator, that’s down from about 4 percent of rough diamonds in circulation in the latter part of the 1990s.

Some social activists argue that 1 percent is still too much and conflict diamonds are prevalent in areas including the Republic of Congo. They point out that as powerful trend-setting U.S. consumers, we owe it to the global community to be fully **cognizant** of and responsible for how our purchasing choices affect others.

Fortunately, two extremely influential consumer groups, Hollywood and hip-hop insiders, are stepping up to examine what role the U.S. plays in contributing – indirectly – to the suffering of African men, women and children. With the release of “Blood Diamond,” as well as several other documentaries and songs about conflict diamonds, important attention is being drawn to this cause. We will take a look at how each group – diamond industry, retailers, artists and consumers – is taking action to stamp out blood diamonds and consider what more can be done.

Diamond Industry

At the end of the 1990s, the diamond industry began facing increasing scrutiny for its role in selling conflict diamonds to consumers. Though many of those diamond mining and retailing operations, including industry giant DeBeers, have stated that they were unaware of the source of these diamonds, in 2000, a number of retailers came together to combat the problem. The World Diamond Council was formulated, and in 2000 began working with international

governments and human rights activists to create a tracking system for diamonds issuing each a certificate of origination.

Called the **Kimberly Process Certification Scheme**, this system would require participating governments in diamond-producing nations to have internal controls to bar conflict diamonds from being exported. Any nations not taking responsibility for sourcing diamonds would not be allowed to participate in the diamond trade.

The system, according to World Diamond Council member and general counsel Cecilia Gardner, is working and is, in part, the reason circulation of blood diamonds dropped from 4 to 1 percent.

Still, amid fears that increasing media around blood diamonds might cause consumers to boycott the precious stones, the World Diamond Council also has set up a website educating the public about the Kimberly process and touting the 1 percent rate as a success. However, there are other sources arguing that the percentage is inaccurate. There also are questions about how well the Kimberly Process – which relies on an honor system – is working.

Only 27 percent of 100 diamond retailers surveyed on the “National Day of Action on Conflict Diamonds” had a policy reflecting Kimberly Process regulations, according to allhiphop.com article, “Diamonds & Sierra Leone: A Hard Rock Life” by Seandra Sims.

Still, boycotting retailers and the diamond producers is not the answer, according to industry leaders. World Diamond Council’s Gardner said that to do so would deprive developing diamond-producing nations of revenue that is being used to build schools, hospitals and combat the HIV and AIDS epidemics in African countries.

ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

For anyone tuning into hip-hop videos or listening to the latest Billboard chart-toppers, talk of bling, ice and other synonyms for stones is routine. It’s also evident on the red carpet, with starlets often competing to wear the most attention-snaring diamond jewelry. But recently, notable entertainment figures have been examining whether they have a duty to weigh the **repercussions** of their actions in defining must-have products and purchasing trends.

Chicago-born rapper Lupe Fiasco explored the consequences of wearing diamonds in 2005 with an underground mix-tape track called “Conflict Diamonds,” which contained

anti-conflict diamond sentiments. In doing so, Lupe Fiasco – whose real name is Wasalu Jaco – took a brave **stance** in an industry where materialism is the standard. But he didn’t step out alone in questioning a status quo that upheld “ice” and “bling” over all else.

Super-producer and artist, Kanye West, also shifted the focus from materialism to moralistic lyrics in his remix for “Diamonds are Forever.” In “Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” West raps “Good Morning/This ain’t Vietnam still/People lose hands, legs, arms for real/Little was known of Sierra Leone/And how it connects to the diamonds we own.”



Kanye West photo courtesy KanyeWest.com

West also was involved in a documentary, “Bling: A Planet Rock,” a film that examines rap’s relationship to increased diamond consumerism. West, along with rappers Paul Wall, Raekwon the Chef, and reggaeton artist Tego Calderon, do interviews and a few of the rappers travel with the filmmakers to Sierra Leone to witness the aftermath of conflicts for themselves.

“Up until I heard Kanye’s song ‘Diamonds from Sierra Leone,’ I had never even heard of the country,” Wall told writer James Montgomery of VH1.com. “But once I did, I wanted to find out more, and I wanted to try to help out. So we went to Sierra Leone — me, Raekwon and Tego Calderón — and it changed our lives. We saw the diamond mines and the amputee camps, and it was hard to believe that especially in 2006, people can be living like this.

“When we were over there, it shocked and kind of embarrassed us as jewel wearers, but the people over there told us not to stop wearing them,” he continued. “The thing is, that’s how people eat. Even to this day, there’s a large percentage of illicit diamonds in the marketplace, even though the conflict in Sierra Leone is over. So you want to be careful and get them through the proper channels. I know I’m trying to do that now.”

Wall demonstrated the value of **awareness** as the first step in responsibility. He shows us that by acknowledging the consequences of our choices, only then can we assess to what degree we should be held **accountable** for our choices. Some critics point out that while it is good for entertainers and musicians to now examine their responsibilities as promoters of diamonds, it is far too late given that the problem was much more severe in the mid to late 1990s.

Consumers

That brings the discussion to our last audience: consumers. Though many young consumers are unable to own the quantity of jewelry preferred and popularized by Wall and others in the hip-hop and Hollywood community, what responsibility do you have with our purchasing power?

Quite a bit, say self-proclaimed ethical jewelers who have stopped sourcing Africa for jewelry, even obtaining diamonds from mines in Canada to avoid not only conflict diamonds, but stones mined under less-than-desirable human labor conditions.

Consumers can ask jewelers – including large retail operations of DeBeers and Jared Jewelers – for information about a diamond's origins and how they adhere to the Kimberly process. The Internet is another source of research on finding diamonds and other precious stones mined under humane conditions. One industry leader, Mordechai Rapaport, whose company effectively sets the prices for diamonds, is already envisioning

a way consumers can help eliminate conflict diamonds and encourage fair trade practices in the diamond industry, according to Fortune.

Rapaport told reporter Vivienne Walt that he is trying to start a Fair Trade association of producers, similar to a system set up by Starbucks. Starbucks buys coffee beans at a high price from the growers, then sells them for even more money to coffee drinkers, Fortune reported. That system could mean better wages and increased safety for African diamond workers.

“Our idea is that Tiffany is going to wake up one morning and see that Cartier is selling fair-trade jewelry,” Rapaport is quoted as telling Fortune. “Oh my God, we need to do that.”

Would that extra cost for fair-trade jewelry be feasible for retailers concerned with the bottom line? Could higher prices be acceptable to consumers already paying a premium for the polished rock? Only time will tell.

The story of conflict diamonds demonstrates how interconnected we are as a global community, and how various groups working together with the shared goal of alleviating the suffering of others can change an industry. Social activists, the media and entertainment professionals working together have called attention to the ugly truths of conflict diamonds. Now will consumers step up to their responsibility in demanding that jewelers sell them diamonds that are certified as conflict free? Only time will tell.

Vocabulary

Accountable - subject to the obligation to report, explain, or justify something

Atrocities – acts of an extremely or shockingly wicked, cruel, or brutal nature

Awareness - having knowledge; conscious

Cognizant – state of being aware of or having knowledge of something

Compassion - feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering

Empathy - entering into the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another; imagining yourself in another person's situation

Initiative - an introductory act or step; leading act

Responsibility - accepting and meeting the demands of our duties in life, in this case our duties as global citizens; being accountable for our actions and choices

Repercussions- effects, influences, or results that are produced by an event or action.

Stance - mental or emotional position adopted with respect to something

WWW.VIRTUEINACTION.ORG

COPYRIGHT JANUARY, 2007 CURRENT LINKS IN EDUCATION

1126 DARTMOUTH RD. FLOSSMOOR, IL 60422

Phone: 708.922.1075 • Email: dkcortes@comcast.net

Virtue In Action

Diamonds are forever... and so are their consequences

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

Virtues Highlighted

Compassion
Empathy
Initiative
Responsibility

Lesson Goals

- Help students understand the virtue of responsibility and provide them with examples of taking responsibility and initiative
- Reinforce students' sense of their role and responsibilities as global citizens and their impact on others as members of the global community
- Create a desire in students to examine their consumerism and materialism.
- Help students to develop empathy for the suffering of others and compassion in developing a desire to help others in need.
- Develop in students an understanding of the importance of awareness and learning in assessing the impact of our decisions, and as necessary components of being responsible.

Virtue In Action

Connecting Virtues to Our World

www.virtueinaction.org
Current Links in Education
1126 Dartmouth Rd.
Flossmoor, IL 60422
708 922 1075
dkcortes@comcast.net



AP photo

Discussion Question Options

1. During what time period were conflict diamonds most prevalent in the diamond industry trade? Name at least two African countries from which these diamonds were obtained.
2. Why are these stones called conflict diamonds?
3. What is the Kimberly Process? When did it officially go into effect and who participates in the certification process?
4. What responsibility do consumers have to educate themselves about the Kimberly process? Is it fair to ask consumers to research a diamond's sourcing or is this something retailers should address? Why or why not?
5. Should entertainment figures have a responsibility to examine the effects of the trends they promote, such as with bling and conflict diamonds? Why or why not?

Do you think entertainers acted early enough in realizing and countering the problems of conflict diamonds?

What impact do you think entertainers have on consumer choices and our decisions?

What responsibility do you feel that hip-hop artists – such as Kanye West, Paul Wall and Lupe Fiasco – have in promoting awareness of conflict diamonds?

6. What does the issue of conflict diamonds tell us about the role of the news media and other media such as movies in addressing issues such as conflict diamonds?
7. Do you think that the diamond industry has gone far enough to stamp out conflict diamonds? Why or why not?
8. Do you think boycotting diamonds would be helpful or harmful to African countries? Why or why not?

Journal Writing Options

1. Are there other products that you feel are questionable that you would like to learn more about their origins? Name one such product and explain why you feel that way about it.
2. Is the hip-hop community too late in addressing its possible role in promoting diamonds? What responsibility do you feel that hip-hop artists—such as Kanye West and Lupe Fiasco – have in promoting awareness of conflict diamonds?



A miner uses a screen to search for diamonds at Congo Creek, outside Koidu, in eastern Sierra Leone. It is estimated that at least one million Africans earn pennies a day in the backbreaking and increasingly fruitless search for diamonds - a \$60-billion-a-year industry.

AP photo

Extended Learning Activities

1. Organize the class into teams with each team responsible for delivering a presentation on one of the conflicts that have involved conflict diamonds. Each presentation should include a general history of the conflict, geography, and the motivations and goals of the major parties to the conflict. Nations with conflicts involving conflict or blood diamonds include Liberia, Angola, The Republic of the Congo and most notably Sierra Leone
2. Lead the class in a reading of author Greg Campbell's "Blood Diamonds" article posted on <http://www.amnestyusa.org/amnestynow/diamonds.html>, which outlines the suffering associated with conflict diamonds.
3. Ask students to survey jewelry stores in your local and surrounding communities as to whether they are following the Kimberly guidelines in certifying that the diamonds they sell as conflict free. For stores that are not, have students ask the store managers as to why they are not certifying their diamonds.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Topic: Entertainment Industry and Diamonds

<http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/new-films-diamond-industry-their/story.aspx?guid=%7B9DD32B33-B839-4A56-85D8-69964A03FAD6%7D>

CBSMarketwatch Coverage of Documentaries, Films about Blood Diamonds

<http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/movies/ny-etdiamond4992057nov28,0,5963988.story?coll=ny-moviereview-headlines>

Newsday.com

Topic: History of Conflict Diamonds in Africa

<http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/2193.cfm>

Worldpress.org

<http://diamondfacts.org/conflict/index.html>

World Diamond Council Website



KanyeWest.com