

Gold Mining in West Africa - Worlds of Debts and Sites of Co-habitation¹

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West Africa is a region with a long and infamous history of gold mining. The soaring gold prices of recent years, together with neoliberal politics, have pushed gold mining, both artisanal and industrial, to the centre stage of land use in West Africa. Over the last fifteen years the organization of mining in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso has made a shift from dominant state intervention - both on the level of production and the selling of gold - to a sector giving ample room to private companies. This process of liberalization, and the increase of Africans being involved in artisanal mining have triggered heated debates on the pro's and con's of gold mining for Africa's future, debates on gold as curse or blessing. This volume seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of winners versus losers, beyond rigid monolithic models, and beyond rhetoric on gold mining and development.

Positive assessments of current developments in gold mining, voiced by strong international protagonists such as the World Bank and big mining companies, promote mining as a panacea to decrease national debts and to stimulate development. These assessments are based on monolithic stakeholder models and ideal type schemes of mining cycles. They express a belief in unilinear growth, towards a higher economic and technological status. In this public discourse mitigation of negative effects is possible by international agreements in combination with Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives working towards community development.

Negative views on artisanal and large-scale mining presuppose a Wild West frontier model. The immigration of foreigners is often described as fully eradicating existing land rights, and the subsequent social situation appears to

¹ I thank Jan Jansen and Sabine Luning for their substantial help, their crucial advice, and their relaxing comments during each phase of the production of this book. I am indebted to the men and women working at the mining sites of Sébékourani, Koflatè, and Kola who gave our research team so much valuable information about their daily work.

develop into an institutional vacuum. The frontier model is tempting because it seems to confirm the power of newcomers - be they colonial or otherwise - to deny or overrule an existing social order (Tsing 2005). Moreover, this perspective considers gold mining as a world of chaos.

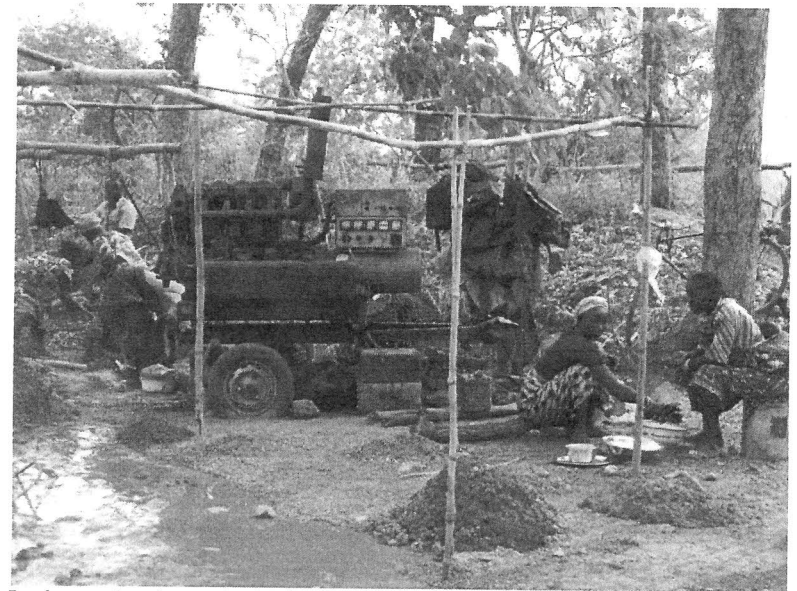


Order or chaos? A view on the mining site of Kola, Mali (photo: Robert Pijpers 2009)

This volume challenges these ideas by combining a critical theoretical analysis with in-depth case studies. New insights and assessments are based on an interdisciplinary collaboration in which investigations from anthropology, history and geology reinforce one another. Anthropological research provides empirical insights into the social processes to which stakeholder models refer and in which they are produced. Secondly, historical research allows for long-term perspectives with which to counter pre-suppositions of empty lands and institutional vacuum. Thirdly, scrutiny of specific sites where both artisanal and industrial mining takes place, shows not just how these ways of mining compete but are also complementary in the three dimensional spaces of co-habitation. Together, this interdisciplinary knowledge allows investigating broader articulations of mining

with other forms of land use as part of long term, dynamic processes of co-habitation.

The question whether gold mining could lead to sustainable development can only be assessed when we know the effects of mining practices over time. That is why the contributions to this volume emphasize the importance of a diachronic approach. Moreover, the contributors selected regions with a long history in gold mining marked by alternating periods of economic boom and bust. Rather than singling out a focus on economic boom times or moments of rushes at a particular place, this volume does promote an approach that can be called 'the social life of sites' (cf. Appadurai 1988); an understanding of the social organization of gold mining through a case study approach focusing on local and regional history.



Implementation of new technology has consequences for the organization of labor as well space (Koflatè mining site, Mali, photo: Robert Pijpers, 2009)

This approach of a 'social life of sites' is particularly relevant in the regions of West Africa selected by the contributors. These regions are associated with the Mali empire (thirteenth and fourteenth century) and the Asante kingdom (seventeenth

and eighteenth century). In these contexts gold mining was a major factor in shaping political relations, long-distance trade, and forms of labouring the land.

A case study approach based on a wide range of sources will enlighten how regional differences in current forms of 'local' or 'artisanal' gold mining have come into being, as a result of 1) local practices of gold mining, social hierarchies and the allocation of land; 2) colonial administrative and technological interventions, and; 3) geological and geographical context in which people live and work.

To summarise, we insist that an understanding of the historical dynamics of gold mining and the challenges people face on and near mining sites requires interdisciplinary teamwork between anthropologists, historians and geologists.

Gold Mining: Worlds of Debts and Sites of Co-habitation

This volume is the product of an interdisciplinary collaboration enhanced by a fieldtrip to Mali as part of a joint application for funding.² The field visits brought to light the strong mobility and heterogeneous backgrounds of people working on mining sites. These visits also demonstrated that complex networks in mining and trade are often rooted in repetitive collaboration among individuals. Gold mining is often associated with heavy indebtedness in anticipation of life-changing wealth, and with a reluctance to move to alternative livelihoods. We aim to investigate the specific values attributed to gold mining and to compare them to other economic activities. This raises the issue to what extent mining is valued either as a life style, a dry season activity, a lottery, or as specific source of wealth.

The authors of the volume acknowledge that any gold mining site is a world of debts. Debt relations are an excellent approach to study the chain of moral economy of gold mining (rural actors, state, NGO, mining company relationships, brokers) and to investigate how each of these stakeholders develops on-site entrepreneurial and discursive strategies. National governments formulate ambitions to develop their country and to pay their debts to foreign countries or institutions by revenues from gold mines, either direct (gold), or indirect (tax

² Both workshop and field visits were sponsored by 'NWO-WOTRO' (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research/WOTRO Science for Global Development) as part of the finals of the 2008-2009 Integrated Programme grant application procedures.

revenues, concessions to investors). As part of recent processes of decentralisation, governments and NGO's claim that local communities can target mining sites as places to raise revenues for community based projects and community infrastructure. These revenues are often raised by taxing those who develop on-site economic activities other than gold mining. The taxes are justified by the idea that those who work on a mining site are indebted to the 'original' autochthonous community, the ultimate owners of the land (see below). From a theoretical perspective, systems of debt, gift and taxes are closely linked, since they refer to social ethics of redistribution (Mauss 2001 [1923]; Panella 2007; Luning 2009).

Gold mining connects to changes in livelihoods and new regimes of debt, revenue and redistribution, and can enable either increases or decreases in economic inequality. Heuristically, a focus on debt relations opens space to study linkages between stakeholders through monetary flows of investment and redistribution, while at the same time taking into account cosmological representations of the earth. Debts relations are not only important to understand the stakeholders as sociological (f)actors, they are also of a crucial importance in order to interpret the micro-dynamics on a mining site. The composition of any artisanal mining team is, although always based on kinship or other established networks such as friendship, contingent and subject to sudden changes. These teams have to work for a long period during which they become indebted to a wide range of people, before any earnings may be divided. The study of the debt arrangements brings into focus forms of trust (Grätz 2004) but also of debt-bondage between miners and traders (Van Bockstael 2008) that makes crucial a cross-over economic approach.

Moreover, this focus on the micro-dynamics of worlds of debts allows an in-depth analysis of mining sites as a gendered field of relations. It forces to look into cross-overs of the economic activities taking place in the pits and on the market/residential site erected close to the mining area. Investors in teams of artisanal miners are often female entrepreneurs (e.g. owners of bars, providers of meals, prostitutes). A focus on gender relations will track flows of investments and

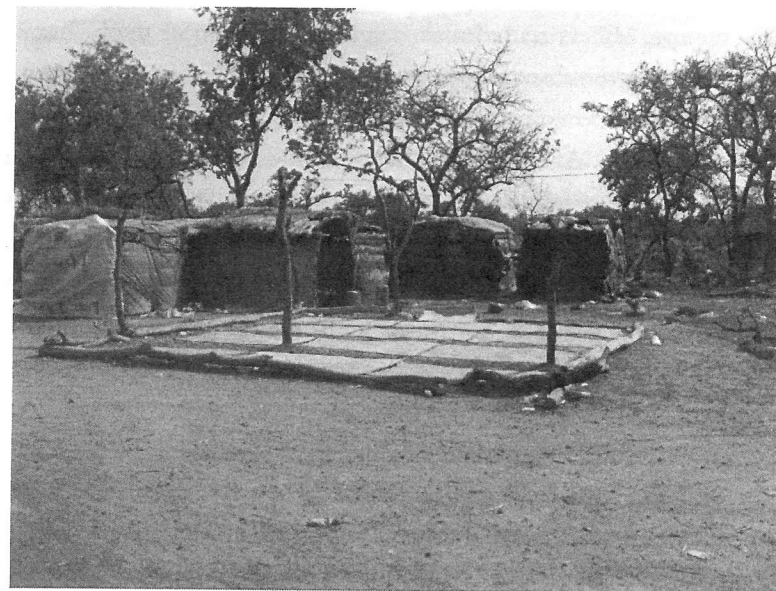
repayments, and also give insights in the nature of the transfers; in ore, money, gold and/or tailings (Cornwall 2007; Panella 2007; Werthmann 2008).

Together, the contributions to this volume allow comparison of sites where operations of a variety of scales and phases (exploration and exploitation) dominate the social landscape of gold mining, but are shaped in close, often power loaded, articulation with other forms of land use. This choice provides a better understanding of how specific social settings play into and are dealt with in tangible mining operations. What are the sources of power and legitimacy, which allow stakeholders to overrule other types of land use and settlement, and by what procedures? How are these put in place; what are results, reactions and side effects? Answering these questions requires a scrutiny of systems of rights and claims, but also of the technical characteristics of gold mining practices in their geological setting.

Crucial to the concept of 'worlds of debts' is the fact that gold mining physically is a process of 'co-habitation' based on the intertwinement and competition of gold mining with different forms of claims to, and use of, land. Clearly, identities of 'stakeholders' are often defined by claims in land: on whose national territory, ancestral land, agricultural fields, or concession does mining take place? Discussions focus on spatial divisions and overlap: is a mining concession a form of sharecropping with the host country as ultimate owner (Akpalu & Parks 2007) and what is the status of 'autochthonous/firstcomers' in areas covered by formal mining titles? Debates on redistribution of benefits from mining are tied to the question who is local, autochthonous, and who is stranger, foreigner? The arguments emphasize the value of land for specific groups of people who claim to be historically linked to it. Recent research has stressed the global trend of claiming 'autochthony' by actually denying historical developments and events that can be traced by historians (cf. Geschiere 2009; cf. Lentz 2010). Conflicts between stakeholders in and around mining sites in West Africa show that the concept of autochthony is used more and more in attempts to exclude others, and at times even to block access to the nearest of neighbours (Luning forthcoming).

These insights point to the political aspects of processes of representation. The field cases selected in this volume reveal social dynamics of integration and

marginalisation reinforced by legal labels. The authors of the volume take into account that gold mining activities may be situated 'betwixt and between' the 'legal' and 'illegal' and are often carried out in clandestine networks (Panella 2002). It is important to study effects of law-making in relation to what people involved consider to be the social norms for legal/licit and illegal/illicit activities.



Misiri' (mosque/praying area) at the mining site of Kola, Mali (photo: Robert Pijpers, 2009)

Historical Background of the Project and Composition of this Volume

First drafts of the contributions to this volume were presented at a workshop in Mali's capital Bamako, 19-20 January 2009. The field visits to gold mines in the regions of Kita and Sikasso followed immediately after the workshop, from 21-24 January 2009. The sixteen participants to the workshop visited an ancient small site near Sebekourani (near Naréna), a medium sized site developed in the 1930s at Koflaté (near Kangaba), and a huge site at Kola (near Bougouni) that boomed in the first months of 2008.³

³ Our team is indebted to Mr. Dramane Dembélé, director of the 'Direction Nationale de la Géologie et des Mines', for providing us in a very efficient way with the necessary 'ordre de

The three gold mining sites differed in geological terms. At Sebekourani (Site 1) miners searched for gold in weathered rock called saprolites.⁴ The water table was situated below the maximum depth of the pits (10 meter). The gold at the site was evenly dispersed, but the ore was very low grade. At Koflatè (Site 2) miners were also digging in saprolites, but all the pits (maximum of about 14 meter) were deeper than the water table. Serious water problems make mining dependent upon submersible pumps. Miners started their diggings high up near the beginning of a cap of laterite,⁵ and have subsequently moved down hill. Water pumped out of pits is used for washing ore. Grade is somewhat higher than on site 1, and again gold is dispersed relatively even. At Kola (Site 3) alluvial gold mining (gold is found in and near the river) as well as mining in saprolites occurred. The diggings showed an extreme variety of types of (intrusive) rocks, of which dates and origins were difficult to determine. The site intrigued due to its complex geology, making mining a hazardous exercise and dependent upon strokes of luck. Some may find a lot, but many miners we spoke had been digging for several months so far in vain. Water did not pose a problem for diggers, however as a consequence all ore had to be transported in order to be processed. The hard rock makes crushing inevitable. The presence of the river facilitated the washing of pulverized ore. The need to crush hard rock ore made this site dependent upon ICE technologies.

These geological differences clearly informed the enormous differences in social organizations of these sites. Sebekourani (Site 1) was once the location of Baya, the capital of the kingdom of Naréna (cf. Jansen 1999). As a site it had a history of being frequented in the dry season by men and women living close and whose major occupation is agriculture. Men and women can mine together (no more than two to three persons work at one place), or they may divide tasks. In the latter case the men mine and the women wash the ore. Remuneration is given in ore. Access was open, even though payments of 1,500 FCFA (= 2,30 euro) to

mission'. DNGM staff member Mahamadou Camara has to be thanked for his calm and efficient supervision during the visit to the Kola site.

⁴ Saprolite is the name for a chemically weathered rock; it is mostly soft or friable.

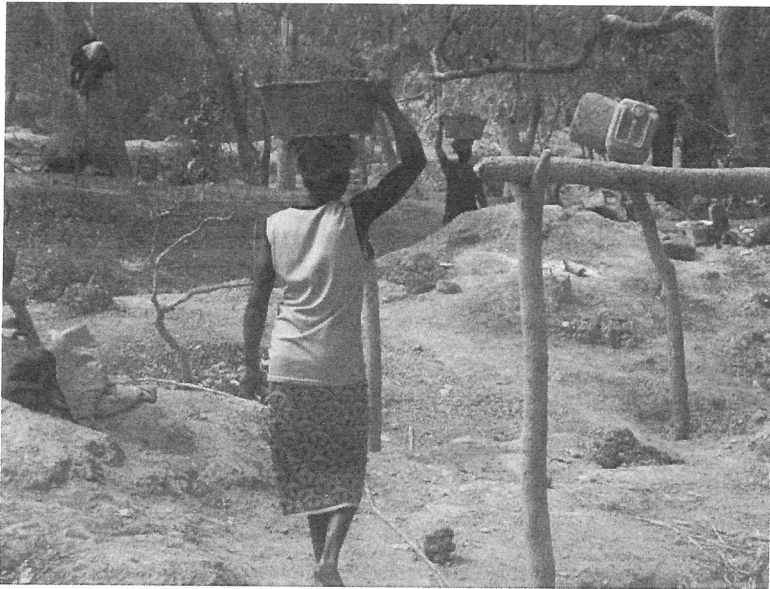
⁵ Also known as 'ferricrete': a mineral conglomerate consisting of surficial sand and gravel cemented into a hard mass by iron oxide.

dig a pit was obligatory to pay to the owner of the placer. People working on site brought their own food, and returned to their homes after work. No commercial or artisan activities (catering, repair of tools) were noted beyond the actual mining and washing of ore. The site did not attract substantial foreigners.

Koflatè (Site 2) is a site with ancient pits. This large site contained a market place with parking, food stalls, blacksmiths, buyers of gold, and a place for generators. People from Mali and Guinea worked here. The process of pumping water out of pits influences both the spatial organisation and the division of revenues. Gender division plays a role in mining and processing ore. Mainly men mine and women wash. Women obtain 1/3 of the ore as remuneration. From the gold that men obtain out of their ore payments to the owner of the placer and owner of pumps have to be made: 1/3 of the gold goes to the pump owner, and 1/3 gram of every 6 grams goes to the owner of the placer, who on this site was not merely the owner of the land but the village chief. Members of the team had long interviews with a large variety of professionals.

We had chosen to visit Kola (Site 3) because, since April 2008, it had attracted many miners - we counted seven nationalities, predominantly Malinese and Guineans. At the time of our visit, 6,000 persons were estimated to work at Kola; hundreds of (temporary) houses and shops testified to the number of people attracted to the place. The site has been designated formally as a 'couloir d'orpillage'. This means that the site can not become part of a mining concession, a form of protection of artisanal mining that is unique to the mining laws in Mali. Oversight and access to the place of actual mining was organized by *tonboloma*, young vigilantes authorized by the traditional village chief. However, the attribution of space in the residential and market zone of the site and all the taxable economic activities (transporting, crushing etc) were the responsibility of the elected representatives of the 'commune de Kola'. The recent processes of decentralisation appear to have turned some artisanal mining sites into places for tax collection. Many data on monetary flows were collected. Money, rather than ore, was used to remunerate most activities along the value chain. At this site many people openly asked advice to the geologists in our team. These interactions

brought home the hardships of mining communities as well as the possibilities of our project to serve in dialogues based on respect and exchange of knowledge.



Most labour on mining sites is organized along lines of gender (mining site of Koflatè, Mali, photo: Robert Pijpers, 2009)

The visits to the three mining sites made the authors taking up a revision of their texts. They have been organized in four categories. Part I consists of an introduction to gold by Henk Gewalt.⁶ Gewalt Sr. explains, by describing the physical characteristics of the metal as well as the history of its extraction, how and why gold has such a prominent place in economies and representations all over the world.

Part II consists of three anthropological field studies that elaborate the proposed model of a 'social life of a site', which a particular attention for debt relations. Cristiana Panella (Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Department of Cultural Anthropology) provides a case study from the Wasolon (aka Wasulu) area in Mali in which she describes a process of several decades in

⁶ Henk Gewalt is a retired Dutch senior exploration geologist who mostly worked and lived in Southern Africa.

which kinship based groups organize themselves to exploit a local site, complementary to other economic activities, such as agriculture. She proposes an 'oecumenical' approach to artisanal gold mining and cotton cultures and she stresses the importance of global trends in modelling economic strategies of rural households. Specifically, she shows reciprocity dynamics of debt and credit in the moral landscape of the household economy. Sabine Luning (Institute of Cultural Anthropology, Leiden University) describes a case from Burkina Faso. New mining laws and new forms of gold mining are currently reshaping the field of actors involved in practices of resource use on the Plateau Central in Burkina Faso. Since the nineties international exploration and mining companies have started to appear on the scene. Formal land titles, defined and attributed by the state, authorize actors on the ground. Luning's article is concerned with the interactions between state authority and other authorities with claims in land. Often these claims depend upon valorisations of land that do not fit the property regime proclaimed by the state. What shapes does co-habitation take at the interface of these overlapping but different forms of valorising land and practices of authorizing claims? What happens to autochthonous claims and practices? The third contribution in Part II is by Robert Pijpers (MA in Cultural Anthropology from Leiden University). For his MA research Pijpers worked with miners in Sierra Leone. He conducted his fieldwork in an area where both diamonds and gold were mined. In his analysis he meticulously explores the gendered ideas about how to extract these two minerals in relation to the ever changing practices that result from varying expectations to find either gold or diamonds.

Part III consists of three contributions that are related the Manding area, the alleged heartland of the medieval Mali empire. These contributions emphasize the prominent role of local systems of representation related to gold mining. Jar Jansen (Institute of Cultural Anthropology, Leiden University) argues that mining is for the local people a social activity, necessary to establish networks through times of scarcity. This is, according to Jansen, in sheer contrast to colonial policy that conceptualized gold mining as an economic activity which was supposed to increase its efficiency and production. The French administration aimed to accomplish this by transforming the local population administratively into a *nen*

category of 'autochtones' with special privileges on the mining sites. Brahim Camara (Department of German Languages, Université du Mali) describes a phenomenon that has been observed in the past two decades all over Western Africa: the rising popularity of 'traditional' hunters (see Leach 2004). While having become socially marginal in the 1980s, hunters nowadays perform the role of security officers in public spaces crowded with multi-ethnic and multi-national peoples, such as urban neighbourhoods and gold mines. Camara does contest the interpretation that sees the upsurge of 'traditional' hunters as a result of the State's efforts to create a civil society by 'reimagining' an almost forgotten group. (This idea was discussed several times during the field visits.) In an attempt to go beyond this sociological-political explanation, Camara seeks to understand the hunters' popularity in the way Maninka people, in Mali, conceptualize the hunters' moral obligations and the art of hunting. Such an approach ensures to understand micro-dynamic processes, for instance either the arguments and images hunters themselves produce when attributing particular roles ('hunter', 'healer', 'spokesperson of their community'), or the representations that the urban actors produce/accept in the context of neo-traditionalist politics of national integration by the nation-state (Traoré 2004). The third contribution to Part III is by Mahamadou Fakanda Keita, an independent scholar with an MA in Cultural Anthropology from the Université du Mali. His short note implies a mind-blowing dimension to our world of debts model. By introducing the importance miners attribute to their relations with non-human beings located in the ground – whom they consider to be the real owners of the gold – Keita describes a crucial dimension of the 'social life' of a site. At the same time he adds an important dimension to the study of debts, by suggesting that debts to persons might be of a different – and maybe less important – order than debts to the *djinn*s from whom the gold has to be 'stolen'.

Part IV consists of an essay by the historian Jan-Bart Gewald (African Studies Center, Leiden). Gewald Jr. invites the reader to rethink the time frames that are usually imposed on African history. These frames consist either of centuries dominated by slavery, or by decades dominated by ecological catastrophes and bad governance. If, he argues, we write a World History of the last two millennia,

Africa's contribution to the history of mankind suddenly appears to be a positive one by virtue of the role of African gold in the history of global economy. A focus on Africa's gold from a multi-disciplinary perspective does suggest the importance of reading contemporary macro-economic balances of powers through the lens of local livelihood strategies and representations.

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