

The *Mise en Valeur* of the Gold Mines in the Haut-Niger, 1918–1939

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Cet article porte sur l'orpaillage artisanal pratiqué dans les régions minières anciennes du Bouré et du Bambouk à travers la description des effets des politiques d'optimisation des pratiques d'exploitation aurifère précoloniales mises en place par l'administration coloniale française. Les rouages de l'alternance saisonnière entre agriculture et orpaillage dans la vie sociale de cette région ouest-africaine y sont décrits. L'on analyse ainsi les valeurs sociales et les dynamiques de mobilité imbriquées dans ces activités, avant d'interroger les valeurs et les choix des administrateurs coloniaux qui furent à l'origine de ces politiques économiques. En particulier, les auteurs tâchent à montrer d'une part le décalage d'attribution de valeur entre agriculture et orpaillage au sein des politiques économiques coloniales. D'autre part, ils montrent les démarches

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de restriction de la mobilité interne par l'administration française dans le but d'assurer les nouvelles mesures des politiques agricoles et minières. Tout en se greffant les politiques minières sur l'organisation sociale préexistante des placers, celles-ci enclenchèrent de représentations inédites d'autochtonie et d'appartenance dans le but d'accroître la production et d'imposer des taxes d'exploitation des placers.

The history of the Haut-Niger is of particular interest for French colonial history because of its remarkable precolonial history: it was the source of the famous gold that formed the riches of medieval Mali kings. Between 400 CE and 1500 CE, West Africa was Europe's most important supplier of gold. For centuries, the region has attracted the attention of Europeans. In several passages of his influential *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (first published in 1913), Maurice Delafosse considers the gold of "the Bouré and the Bambouk" and how, in his view, this formed the basis for the origin of several influential and large ethnic groups in the region. Delafosse's research identified the sociopolitical groups on which to organize the Soudan Français,¹ giving a prominent place to the Mali Empire and its founder Sunjata.²

Although Mali's gold had stirred the imagination of the conquerors and explorers of West African Sudan, gold mining received hardly any attention after the establishment of the colonial administration. The French *ingénieur-adjoint* Ed. Julian, whose reports are prominently present in the Archives Nationales du Mali, underscores this. He states that between 1910 and 1920, the early years of colonial presence in the region, no serious efforts were made to target the gold of the Bouré gold fields (Siguiri) for a *mise en valeur* (optimizing technological and economic value).³ The local population engaged in artisanal mining, but the administration made no attempt to tap into this wealth. Indeed, Legoux and Marelle confirm that no substantial development of gold mining took place in Siguiri before the early 1930s, when it was marked by a hundredfold increase in exports—from an annual average of 21 kilograms in 1901–1914 to an annual average of 2,150 kilograms in 1930–1937.⁴ Shortly before the start of World War II, in 1939, production in Guinée peaked at 4,534 kilograms. Interestingly, the authors attribute this increase to road construction, which allowed the average transport of 30,000 kilograms of rice a day to feed 100,000 workers at the mining sites. Insufficient research has been devoted to examining the way gold mining became a target in

policies for the *mise en valeur* of the colony, and the way this was linked to colonial interventions in the field of agriculture. For instance, Alice Conklin⁵ describes the interwar period as one of a policy of *mise en valeur*, yet the only examples she gives of *mise en valeur* are restricted to agricultural and infrastructural projects.⁶

This article addresses the question of how the French exploited this "gold region" after establishing their *commandement* and developing the policy of *mise en valeur*. It is based on ethnographic and archival research focused on how gold-mining practices were organized and valued by both local communities and colonial administrators. It makes ample use of hitherto unexplored archival documents on gold mining in the Haut-Niger from the Archives Nationales du Mali (in particular, section Q, "Affaires Economiques"). We argue that major differences in rationales for exploitation, between the local population and the French administrators, partially explain why the French did not develop a policy of *mise en valeur* for gold exploitation as they did for agriculture.

This article first describes how social life in this part of West Africa was based on seasonal alternation of agriculture and gold mining, and details the social values and mobilities characteristic of these activities. It then questions the values and choices of colonial administrators who targeted these practices. Two issues will be highlighted. First of all, the article shows how agriculture and gold mining were valued differently in colonial policies. Second, it analyzes how these policies aimed to limit the mobility of people to realize change in agriculture and gold mining. It shows that colonial interventions in the field of gold mining were grafted primarily onto "traditional" structures. However, to improve and tax these traditional forms of gold mining, administrators introduced zones (so-called "reserves") that would be set aside exclusively for artisanal mining based on new notions of autochthony and belonging to a place.

PLACING LOCAL GOLD-MINING PRACTICES IN TIME AND SPACE

In West Africa, gold mining has always complemented agriculture and been carried out by people raised as agriculturalists (*cultivateur* in French), who were using the same kinds of tools for agriculture and mining.⁷ Gold mining was, and for most people still is, a seasonal activity that is carried out mainly in the dry season (November–May). In abundant rainy seasons, a person can

harvest enough to take care of his family until the next harvest; he is a *sanmògò* (a “year-person”). However, haphazardness in rains and harvests force people to engage in supplementary activities, primarily in gold mining. This alternation over seasons is not merely marked by different types of activities; it also characterizes difference in norms concerning social life. The period of agriculture emphasizes collective values and immobility, while gold mining is associated more with individual decisions to move away from home in search of gold. Although agricultural production has never been as totally communal and harmonic as present-day people claim, it is a kin-based activity in which the same people collaborate every dry season at the same location. These groups are reproduced—as villages (*duguw*)—biologically as well as politically, and through alliances with other groups living in other villages.

People thus live an annual cycle, from harvest to harvest. In June, when the first rains come, people start to work in the fields to reap a new harvest in September–November. August is always the most critical month: there is no food available anymore, diseases are prevalent because of the high humidity, and people have to work hard in the fields for the next harvest. This period of communal working in the fields and harvesting is a part of the annual cycle and stops the moment the harvest has been consumed communally. In most years this is in January–February. The rest of the year, healthy young people have to find alternatives for agriculture to produce additional income. This could be all kinds of work. Nowadays, younger people often move to urban areas, but a frequently chosen alternative has always been to work in the gold mines. This work enables a person to work with friends (from their own village or from further away), and thus enlarge his or her personal network. Thus, gold is not only an economic resource to them, it is also a substance through which a meaningful life is established.

Although the dry season means that kinship obligations are emphasized far less than in the rainy season, the disruption caused by moving from village to gold mine is not a total social rupture. In the Haut-Niger—and this may be specific to this region—people organize gold mining according to an idiom they also use in village life. In both contexts they establish relationships in terms of host/autochthon versus guest/stranger. This has its practical logic. Since the location of gold mines may change over time, a person who may be a guest one year may be a host the next.⁸ People in the Haut-Niger create

networks on the basis of guest-host “role playing.” It is crucial to note that all the roles a person can play are related to the social context; by definition, they may be overruled in other contexts by other social roles and obligations—any role is relative and relational.⁹

Another major constitutive factor in social life at both gold-mine and village level is the system of patronymics (*jamuw*). In this area, each person claims descent from a heroic ancestor who collaborated with Sunjata, the founding father of “Mali” whose name was recorded in Arab travelogues as early as the fourteenth century. A person’s patronymic is a direct reference to the heroic feats by his or her heroic ancestor and is a source of pride; it gives a person roots that can be traced back to the Mali Empire. The Maninka, the majority ethnic group in the Haut-Niger, distinguish about 20 different ancestors, who each “founded” a *jamu*. A communal ancestor for the entire ethnic group incorporates people with a non-Maninka ethnic background—such as Somono fishermen and Fulbe pastoralists—in the system.

The patronymic is the basic unit of a highly complex, dynamic, and flexible system of alliances based on a wide variety of kinship and marriage relations as well as a system of joking relations between people of different patronymics. A serious understanding of this system is necessary to see the dynamics and value of the personal networks that people create in the dry season. French administrators and colonial officers made great efforts to understand this system—Delafosse being the best-known among them—but their analyses and practices always suffered from static, bureaucratic, and legalistic ideas.¹⁰ They overlooked the dynamic character in the making of contemporary political alliances.¹¹

The maintenance of personal networks is a crucial activity in the dry season. However, people preferred to do this by taking leisure and staying at home. Ideally, the dry season was used to host guests, to expand one’s network. Having to leave one’s village to be hosted and to work in the gold mines has always remained a poor man’s choice. Curtin argued that the available evidence suggests that gold could formerly be mined by hand only because the cost of labor was very low in the second half of the dry season (March–June).¹² Indeed, the French *ingénieur-adjoint* Julian also observed that miners did not make high wages—mining paid less than agriculture.¹³ With the increased labor mobility of recent decades, so Curtin argued in the 1970s, labor costs have risen to the point of making gold mining unprofitable.

Curtin's opinion, however, needs to be nuanced by the fact that "traditional" gold mining is constantly innovating, and this has continued to make it profitable until the present, be it always for the poor only. Innovations such as tripods, water pumps, dynamite, and mercury have increased production levels as well as the costs; miners may earn more, but they also have to pay more for such things as good food, drugs/medication, and security. So, it is still a poor person's job, as it was in the period described by Curtin, but it has certainly also always been a basis for survival for many people. People continue to work in the gold mines until the agricultural cycle starts (and the rains impede further working in the mines). Thus people work in gold mines to get themselves through to the next rainy season and to establish a personal safety network for future periods of scarcity or disaster. Dry-season labor was used to create personal, flexible, and mobile networks, while rainy-season labor reproduced kinship-based networks. This alternation of seasonal activities expresses the valorization of movements and spatial settings. Since agriculture is the highest valued activity, being on one spot is highly valued. Movement is negatively valued, as is change more generally.¹⁴ Unavoidable movements or changes represent a serious challenge. People who work on mining sites are aware of the fact that gold mining takes them to unsafe areas; they leave the "safe" village and then face the dangers of the bush. Gold mining, thus, is a social necessity in an environment of structural poverty, and it is experienced as something dangerous.

GOLD MINING VERSUS AGRICULTURE?

Although mining was, of old, part of the annual production cycle, the French valued it quite negatively as work that put the miners under a spell and seriously reduced their focus on agriculture, the main target of the French policy of *mise en valeur*.¹⁵ Gold mining, the French observed with concern, increased in years of low agricultural production.¹⁶ Therefore, the demand for food by miners was—by definition—high in years when the supply was low. Consequently, colonial policy regarding gold mining was closely linked to the projects in industrial agriculture and the availability and circulation of food crops. Cotton was the prime object of the agricultural politics of Afrique Française Continentale (AFC).¹⁷ Moreover, rice cultivation was central in the colonial project of forced irrigation, which aimed to increase the production of cash crops in AFC.¹⁸

Research on the Sankaran region, on the right bank of the river Niger, south of Bamako, sheds light on this policy, and presents the challenges the French faced as a consequence of their *mise en valeur* policy. In the Sankaran *soudanais* rice cultivation was highest in the plains of Balé and Sankarani, and this went together with a substantial demand for plows and harrows needed to mechanize agriculture. The canton of Dialonfoulah, marked by large fields for rice cultivation, was the most prosperous of Bougouni Cercle (Soudan Français). A large proportion of the food production was destined for the placer mines of Kalana, Siékorolé, and Siguiiri (in Guinée) and served to feed artisanal miners.¹⁹ In the prime period of mining activity, prices of rice went up, sometimes even doubling.²⁰ The strong demand for rice led to a large gap between the prices at weekly local markets and those at placers, as well as to a postponement of the sales of crops, allowing owners to wait for the arrival of artisanal miners at the sites of Kalana, Kalako, and Sindoba.²¹

The projects that aimed to create a *magasin à grains* in the mining zone of Kalana, and the calculations concerning cereal stocks show straightforward connections between the politics in the domain of agriculture and artisanal mining, as well as the ways in which internal and cross-border migrations affected colonial politics regarding agriculture. Between April and June 1938, the flux of 20,000 artisanal miners toward Kalana required a daily availability of 10 tons of cereals, which is 300 to 400 tons for the whole of the seasonal period of artisanal mining.²² This was far beyond the capacity of the Société de Prévoyance (SP) to buy up grain. Given its limited funds, the SP could procure large quantities only by paying low prices to producers. The prospect of selling their harvests for better prices at the mining sites directly discouraged grain producers from selling to the Société.

Three factors in particular facilitated the commercial flows of food stocks coming from Soudan Français. First, in contrast to Guineans, the farmers in Soudan Français continued to assign an important place to agriculture compared to artisanal mining, which remained by and large a seasonal activity. Second, the obligation to pay taxes pushed farmers to intensify cultivation of sorghum, maize, and millet. Despite the very small surplus in grains, in 1938 Soudan Français was still an important provider of rice, sorghum, and cattle for the neighboring colonies.²³ Third, toward World War II, with the aim of blocking the damaging effects of onchocerciasis on the production of crops, the colonial administration obliged the large group of

artisanal miners from the village of Keikoro (Bougouni Cercle) to either cultivate their own fields, including plots of cotton, or to leave the colony. The effects of this obligation were outright counterproductive: artisanal miners dispersed, centers of wealth based on gold transactions lost their trading power, and gold production, which had become illegal, was reoriented toward neighboring colonies.²⁴ Moreover, in 1937 the imposition of cotton farming led to an exodus from the Basidibé (Soudan Français) to Siguiri (Guinée), and farmers from Dioïla (Baniko) migrated en masse to Bamako.²⁵ These trends could not be stopped by the *sensibilisations* of administrators to promote cotton production, which was presented as a means to “become free from tax obligations.”

A straightforward link can be identified between colonial policies in the field of mining and agriculture—policies that often had hardly any effects or were even counterproductive. First of all, the policies failed to assure proper food provisioning for artisanal mining sites. Moreover, attempts to tie people to the land and to particular forms of land use were highly problematic. Mobility of people was considered a menace to proper agriculture. In that respect, artisanal mining was seen to be at odds with agriculture. The fact that 60 percent of artisanal miners in Bougouni Cercle were strangers amplified problems in farming and food provisioning.²⁶ We can conclude that efforts to keep farmers on the land and confined to specific cash crops were failures. They caused forms of exodus, while some of them triggered cross-border migrations from Soudan Français to Guinée.²⁷ The issues of food provisioning for mining sites and mobility recur in policies that were aimed at organizing mining, and in particular artisanal mining.

TARGETING GOLD AND TINKERING WITH TRADITION

We have seen that Bouré and Bambouk, two major historical gold fields of West Africa, were incorporated into the French colonial territory of Soudan Français. Two questions need closer attention. Did the French target gold directly as a source for *mise en valeur*? And how were existing practices of gold mining valued and handled? According to sources written at the time, it appears that hardly any effective *mise en valeur* occurred until the early 1930s. However, ever since the start of colonization, assessments of mining potential had been part of the politics of industrialization of AFC.²⁸ Moreover, the

archives testify that since the turn of the nineteenth century, mining companies had obtained concessions and were at times in conflict with artisanal miners, in particular in Guinée.²⁹ Sometimes colonial law and administrators appeared to side with industrial miners, sometimes with artisanal miners. A major issue concerned the question of whether artisanal miners would be allowed to mine within concessions of mining companies.

From the early 1930s onwards, colonial sources mainly expressed an explicit preference to develop *mise en valeur* by focusing on traditional forms of gold mining. In this period of worldwide economic crisis, *ingénieur-adjoint* Julian voiced a most “modern” critique when he stated in a report on gold mining in Siguiri:

Les Sociétés actuelles ne sont elles pas surtout des affaires financières dans laquelle la production passe au dernier plan? On fait un peu de minerai, selon le jeu de la bourse, pour réaliser un bénéfice sur le cours des actions ou pour faciliter une augmentation de capital, on vivote lamentablement en traînant des passifs de plus en plus lourds, jusqu’au jour où la liquidation devient inévitable.³⁰

Rather than depending on large mining companies, the administration preferred to organize gold mining on the basis of the existing practices of artisanal mining. The sources suggest that colonial administrators were faced with some considerable opposition to their views, not just from the *métropole*, but also from local people who expressed a preference for industrial mining. *Indigènes* would invoke the situation in Madagascar and Haute-Volta in support of their wish to work for a European mine rather than to be *orpailleurs* themselves. For them, the mine in Pourra, Haute-Volta, served as an attractive example of working for steady wages. The *inspecteur des affaires administratives*, Aubert, wrote part of the “Rapport sur la situation du commerce de l’or et sur l’exportation des Mines d’or de Siguiri par les indigènes”³¹ in response to these opinions. Aubert tried to argue against industrial mining. He expressed doubts as to whether European mining, based on wage labor, would be able to feed many people and generate a substantial level of commercial activity. At the time, 25,000 to 30,000 people were nourished around “les placers de Siguiri,” with the value of the goods and foodstuffs (*denrées*) of Europeans and indigenous people being traded put at about 15 to 20 million francs. According to Aubert, these economic effects were possible only if gold mining continued to be organized by *exploitation familiale*.

Aubert's preference fits a wider trend in colonial policy regarding the organization of labor. Cooper describes the debates in colonial circles regarding labor, and in particular forced labor that served to recruit African subjects for the plantations of *colons*, mainly in Côte d'Ivoire, and for public works.³² The question of forced versus free labor generated a debate between those in favor of peasant labor and those who wanted to push wage labor. The question was whether the African should be helped to become a productive peasant or forced to be a worker. Cooper³³ stresses that both opinions were based on denigrating premises about the nature of Africans, with only a few advocates of the peasant way of life with more positive views.³⁴ The way of life preferred in the setting of Guinée was indeed that of the peasant, but with a major role for traditional artisanal gold mining. This choice is particularly relevant for the earlier discussion on the policy nexus between agriculture and gold mining, since artisanal mining is highly dependent upon good food provisioning. We have already seen how gold mining, and in particular the migration of people to placers and the food required for artisanal miners, could affect *mise en valeur* in agriculture, and vice versa. The reports on Siguiri do indeed spell out the importance of sufficient and affordable food supplies that would require viable trade routes and infrastructure. Aubert mentions, for example, that salt produced in the south of Guinée is too expensive due to the costs of transporting it by rail from Conakry up north.³⁵ Improving trade routes was considered to work both ways; it would make substantial artisanal mining possible, and gold sites could increase possibilities for traders.

The colonial reports on Siguiri do not focus so much on the *mise en valeur* of agriculture itself. Instead, they are preoccupied with trade routes to both improve food security for artisanal miners and create viable markets. In this two-sided effect, traditional artisanal mining could contribute to surplus production in the colony. This peasant way of gold mining was considered to depend first of all upon rules of access to agricultural fields and mining sites, embedded in an overall organization of spatial arrangements. This was required in order, first, to control the mobility of miners; second, to improve the *mise en valeur* of gold mining; and, third, to coordinate taxation and the organization of trade connected to artisanal mining sites.

In the historical sources it is argued that local forms of *exploitation familiale* could be kept intact only if traditional rights in gold fields and

agricultural fields were not withdrawn—hence Julian's advice in 1932 to annul and change previous laws on mining in colonial Guinée.³⁶ He describes how an 1899 decree allowed *indigènes* to work wherever they wanted to, even on exploration and exploitation permits. After 1924, access to these areas was prohibited. Julian advises reformulating this exclusion from areas given to *permissionnaires* and *concessionnaires*. Rather than excluding *indigènes* from certain areas, Julian insists that a system of reserves would be much better. He uses the term *mines dominiales* for areas selected for artisanal mining. The term indicates that the areas would remain the property of the colonial state, since *indigènes* could not be considered *personnes de droit*. They would be given usufruct, rights of use. Julian stresses, however, that these rights should have a permanent character, and it would therefore be important to provide large reserves that the local population could use in perpetuity.

The document *Immatriculation des terrains aurifères* of 1936³⁷ gives a very good idea of why these reserves were seen as a solution to graft and yet changed colonial traditional gold mining. Reserves could first of all serve to confine access. Second, reserves would make it possible to provide technical support to miners. And finally, trade could be taxed and organized. These various reasons are interrelated. The following quote shows the interesting articulation between autochthony and the provision of technical support:

Tout le monde est bien d'accord sur le principe de la protection du gain par des populations laborieuses des régions considérées, mais les abus qu'a entraînés l'exercice d'un droit dont se sont comparés des milliers d'étrangers aux mines, semble avoir fait pencher la Haute Administration de Dakar en faveur d'une limitation restrictive [. . .] Par ailleurs il semble que la création de réserves en faveur des mineurs autochtones, pourrait être un sérieux argument pour les inciter et même les obliger d'améliorer leur outillage.³⁸

Indeed, the choice to build the *mise en valeur* of gold mining on traditional forms of artisanal mining went together with a process of transforming tradition. As we have underscored in the first part of this article, dry-season gold mining depended on host-guest relations that were flexible and reversible. The policy of creating reserves stipulated that only autochthones, that is *originaires du cercle*, would be allowed to work on the traditional gold-mining sites. Mobility was seen to inhibit a proper *mise en valeur* of such sites. By confining the category of people who could gain access to reserves, the colonial administration would change a basic social characteristic of the place of artisanal mining in traditional

village life: gold mining as an activity in the dry season that, in contrast to the period for agriculture, was marked by freedom. Artisanal mining had always allowed men and women to leave the village, to wander to one of the artisanal mining sites, which were characterized by access for all on condition that one could link up with a host. This mobility was seen as a threat to improvement schemes that the colonial administration deemed necessary for traditional gold mining to be viable, both as a site of production as well as a site for consumption of marketable goods.

Administrators and engineers were under pressure to prove that traditional mining would not be at the expense of efficiency. Time and again the archival sources address the question of how much gold would be wasted if gold fields were covered largely by reserves that would be worked by artisanal gold miners. Various reports describe processes to assess the production of traditional gold mining. How much could be obtained? How much would be left in the ground? And what technical improvements could be made? For instance, Blondel's report centers on the question of how to fight waste.³⁹ He describes how artisanal miners extract a deposit by working on lines. The gold in between the pits may be lost forever. Moreover, pits were often abandoned due to water problems, or after digging up merely the gold that was most easily accessible.

Several improvements could remedy these losses. A system of authorizations could prevent gold miners from abandoning areas too quickly. They would be allowed to work a new area only after testing the situation at the site they would leave behind.⁴⁰ In addition, technical improvements, such as the construction of safer, wooden galleries and short sluices to improve practices of processing ore, were proposed. For all these improvements, artisanal miners would have to be provided with equipment on credit. This support required that people not be too mobile: reserves should be worked by miners who belonged to the place and who could be confined to the reserve until the mining site had been exhausted. We see here how notions of autochthony are inserted into traditional practices to facilitate technical improvements.

The spatial organization of gold mining and issues of access are also evoked where the reports deal with changes in trade and tax practices on and around gold-mining sites. We have already seen how Siguri was described as a large market for gold and foodstuffs, and how the French had a moral argument for wanting to keep it that way: *indigènes* should be able to

continue to nourish themselves through the market as well as to produce for it. For this trade to contribute to France's colonial endeavors, it had to be better organized and opened up to French traders. What should be done to organize the market in such a way that French traders would get access, that traders could be taxed properly, that commodities, and in particular gold, would not be smuggled (to, say, Ghana)? The choice for a policed traditional form of gold mining has to be understood in relation to these commercial and tax objectives. Again, moral judgments played a major role in the descriptions of the trade situation the colonial administration wanted to intervene in. Sources from the 1930s on gold mining in the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française), and Guinée in particular, are without mercy in their portrayal of the two major categories of traders: *Dioula* and *Syrien*.

There is an extensive literature on the histories and identities of these two prominent groups of traders in West Africa and their relations with colonial administrations. *Dioula* are Muslim migrants of Mande origin who, from the fourteenth century onwards, started to establish trading communities along trade routes in West Africa.⁴¹ They were trading in gold, kola nuts, millet, and slaves, most of the time under the protection of local rulers. Even though *Dioula* communities were characterized by caste distinctions, and their kin groups were associated with different professions (including scholarship and waging war), the term *Dioula* has been used to gloss together all Muslim traders in the region. This is precisely how *Dioula* are defined in the French sources used for this article. The term *Syrien* is also a gloss for a heterogeneous group of merchants, in this case with origins in the Levant. Van der Laan analyses the use of the term *Syrien* and how this was subsequently replaced by *Lebanese*.⁴² The use of the names is related to the history of the Middle East and in particular to the aftermath of World War I, when the Province of Ottoman Syria was divided into a southern English and a northern French mandate area. The French part contained the district of Lebanon, which gained national independence in 1943. The first traders who came from this mandate area to West Africa called themselves *Syriens*. The colonial sources of the 1930s employ the term *Syrien*, but when it became clear that most of these traders actually originated from the Lebanese part, the term *Libanais* gained currency.

A lot has been written about the position of both *Dioula* and *Syriens* in the French colonial setting of the AOF. Bierwirth shows that *Syriens* worked

in ways similar to, and often in collaboration with, Dioula.⁴³ Both groups of traders moved into the bush, even if infrastructure was lacking. They operated like ambulant retail traders, trading in inexpensive goods such as kola nuts. Later, by scaling up their trade, they competed with expat wholesale traders, based in urban centers. This menace to the European traders increased substantially during the economic crisis of the 1930s. Traders were forced to collaborate with *Syriens*, but at a later stage they tried to turn the tables with requests for protection from the chamber of commerce.⁴⁴ Indeed, Hart points to the ambivalence among these groups of traders.⁴⁵ The relationship oscillated between uneasy symbiosis and explicit confrontation. The French colonial administrators tried to help the French trading houses in their attempts to get access to markets dominated by Dioula and *Syriens*, and they backed their policies with moral arguments. The authors of the sources we use for this article are relentless. Dioula are portrayed as extortionist lenders, *Syriens* as cheating with instruments for measuring the weight and caratage of gold.

Two questions preoccupied the administrators: how could the local population be protected from the extortionist practices of Dioula and *Syriens*, and how, in this setting, could colonial policy reinforce the French interests of both the administration and the trading houses? Indeed, Suret-Canale has argued that the administrators' decision to focus on traditional mining has to be understood in the light of the close ties the French colonial administration had with some of the major trading houses in Bordeaux (such as Chavanel and Peyrissac) and Marseille.⁴⁶ Strategies were devised to organize mining through local practices of artisanal gold mining so as to be able to tap into trade relations connected to this. Helping mining companies to set up mining monopolies would destroy market options for these trading houses. In the 1930s, the administration of this part of colonial Africa, in contrast to Congo, sided with merchant capital.⁴⁷

A lively debate between representatives of the Peyrissac and Chavel trading houses and colonial administrators illustrates the close connections between colonialism and commerce in the AOF.⁴⁸ The discussion centered on how to approach artisanal mining sites for trade purposes and who to allow as traders at placer mines. Some were in favor of creating commercial centers at the mining sites. Others were against this idea, for practical reasons (the mobility of placers), but also for strategic commercial reasons. Representatives from Peyrissac and Chavanel argued against commercial centers, since this formalization of the

presence of Europeans would also justify and trigger the presence of *Syriens* at mining sites. They preferred their role as wholesalers, restricting on-site trading activities to Dioula. According to them, Dioula would have to submit to a system of heavy taxation. In this way, poor Dioula, whose poverty would instigate fraudulent behavior, could be prevented from entering the market at gold sites. The skeptical reactions of colonial administrators are telling; they pointed out that *Syriens* were already present at the sites through straw men, and they mocked the naive idea that higher taxes would improve Dioula trading practices: "Il n'est pas certain que le dioula riche soit plus honnête que le dioula pauvre."⁴⁹

Despite their differences, French colonial and commercial agents did agree that a system for taxing miners would have to be put in place. The taxation concerned the "droit de circulation" (right to sell gold), and not the taxation of gold production. The tax system was seen as a way to transfer the tribute miners now paid to Dioula. The tribute was estimated at 2.50 or 3 francs per gram. If the French managed to eliminate these forms of tribute they would be justified in instituting taxes of about 500 francs per kilogram. This would be 4 percent of the value of the gold. This was celebrated as a fair system, in particular in comparison with the current extortionist practices of Dioula.⁵⁰

Historical sources constantly foreground a close relationship between autochthony, the spatial arrangements of traditional gold mining, and trade. What about the mining–agriculture nexus? The sources on taxation point toward a painful paradox. The report cited above suggests that before 1931 very little gold was sold. Most was used for savings and jewelry.⁵¹ After 1932 the circulation of gold increased, peaking in 1936, a year of famine. Apparently, the crisis in agriculture pushed people to gold mining and caused tax revenues from gold production to increase. With good harvests, these revenues risked shrinking. On the other hand, colonial administrators insisted, as we have seen, that good harvests and the proper marketing of foodstuffs would be a precondition for turning "traditional" gold mining into a basis for revenues, both for French trading houses and the colonial administration.

CONCLUSION

Time and again the historical documents speak of change legitimated in the interests of the miners: local miners should be protected against strangers,

extortionist Dioula, and speculators in foodstuffs, and they should be helped in improving mining technologies. These forms of protection were to be organized in a paradoxical way, whereby changes were imposed to protect the customary way of life of indigenous people.

Bien entendu, toutes ces mesures de police devront être prises avec le maximum de discrétion—il n’y a pas eu de difficultés jusqu’ici, il ne s’agit pas d’apporter des perturbations là où il n’y en a jamais eu. En se brusquant rien, en faisant de l’approvisionnement, on peut arriver à se faire admettre puis à s’imposer. [...] Dès que la confiance sera acquise, il s’agira bribe par bribe, de reconstituer la coutume indigène.⁵²

The changes proposed started with attempts to fix farmers as well as gold miners. Claims in terms of autochthony were reinforced in the domain of agriculture and introduced in the domain of gold mining. The administrators did acknowledge that autochthony in the form of a right that excludes strangers would be new in gold-mining practices.

Julian mentions a document that describes gold mining predating the epoch of Samory (pre-1850s):

Cependant avant l’avènement de Samory la coutume voulait que les mines fussent ouvertes à tous les gens du Soudan (Kayes, Bougouni, Bamako, Ségou) y venaient travailler moyennant le paiement d’une indemnité aux chefs de mines et au chef de canton. Cette coutume ne répondit pas à l’exercice d’un droit exclusif des autochtones, mais à une véritable opération commerciale qui subsiste tant bien que mal jusqu’à nos jours.⁵³

We started this article by describing how the organization of mining was based on the predominant practice of host-guest relationships and highlighted features of the system. We have emphasized that host-guest relations did not depend on belonging to a particular place or on ownership of land. Hosts were not necessarily tied to the land, but the relationship between hosts and guests could perhaps best be compared with role playing; depending on the social context and issues at stake, the positions could be swapped and overruled by other relations. We have argued that the colonial intervention led to the creation of autochthony as a category linked to belonging to a place, residents of a newly created *cercle*. This was motivated by negative images of strangers: ambulant Dioula traders and *Syriens* were portrayed as “parasites”; migrant laborers were hard to police and improve. Local populations were regarded as suffering from these

external actors. This representation failed to appreciate the value and importance of creating personal networks.

The findings of this article come close to the processes outlined in the work of Geschiere, Luning, Panella, and Van Beusekom.⁵⁴ Geschiere argues that French colonial administrators valued the notion of autochthony in their attempts to fix and territorialize colonial subjects. In grafting colonial interventions in the field of gold mining on “traditional” structures, colonial administrators changed notions of autochthony and forms of territorialization. Where autochthony used to be a relational position in a social field marked by mobility and inclusion through host-guest relationships, it became a notion that served to exclude strangers and to inhibit mobility. This article shows that technological and tax issues legitimated the creation of this land-based category of autochthony.

The French opted for an active *mise en valeur* of gold mining, but never at the cost of agricultural production. They were very much aware that productive traditional gold mining depended upon proper food provisioning. However, this peasant way of artisanal gold mining went hand in hand with paradoxes and policies that were outright counterproductive. In particular, the attempts to confine farmers to specific places and crops appear to have triggered mobility, both migrations and crossovers in activities from agriculture to gold mining. At times, interventions in the field of agriculture were at odds with gold-mining practices, and vice versa. Overall, colonial interventions focused more on agriculture than on mining. The French were convinced that they had the expertise and policies to develop agriculture. In the field of gold mining, colonial interventions were less articulate, and this was due to a lack of understanding of the socialities, mobilities, and values of local practices of gold mining.

NOTES

1. Jean-Loup Amselle and Emmanuelle Sibeud, eds., *Maurice Delafosse: Entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l’itinéraire d’un africaniste (1870–1926)* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1998).
2. For instance, at the École William Ponty future generations of schoolteachers learned to teach a modern, linear history of the Soudan Français that started with Sunjata and the gold of Mali. See Stephen Bulman, “A School for Epic? The ‘École William Ponty’ and the Evolution of the Sunjata Epic, 1913–c.1960,” in *Epic*

- Adventures—Heroic Narrative in the Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents*, ed. Henk Maier and Jan Jansen (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 34–45.
3. ANM 3 Q 11, “Rapport sur l’organisation de la région aurifère de la Haute Guinée,” 1932: 8.
 4. Jean Servant, Pierre Legoux, and André Marelle, *Les mines et la recherche minière en Afrique Occidentale Française* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), 168.
 5. Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 41–43.
 6. For a similar picture with a focus on Soudan Français, see Monica van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920–1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).
 7. For details on Malinke mining practices, see Jan Jansen, “What Gold Mining Means for the Malinke, and How It Was Misunderstood by the French Colonial Administration,” in *Worlds of Debts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Gold Mining in West Africa*, ed. Cristiana Panella (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2010), 95–110.
 8. Although there has been no systematic research on the longevity of these personal networks, it is a practice often confirmed, by both men and women, during our fieldwork.
 9. See Jan Jansen and Clemens Zobel [aka Sidiki Kante & Brehman Diabate], “The Guest Is a Hot Meal: Questioning Researchers’ Identities in Mande Studies,” in *Africanizing Knowledge: African Studies Across the Disciplines*, ed. Christian Jennings and Toyin Falola (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 375–86.
 10. Ed van Hoven, “Representing Social Hierarchy: Administrators–Ethnographers in the French Sudan: Delafosse, Monteil, and Labouret,” *Cahiers d’Études africaines* 30, no. 118 (1990): 179–98; Jean-Loup Amselle, *Logiques métisses: Anthropologie de l’identité en Afrique et ailleurs* (Paris: Payot, 1990).
 11. Etienne Smith, “Des arts de faire société: Parentés à plaisanterie et constructions identitaires en Afrique de l’Ouest (Sénégal),” (Ph.D. diss., IEP/CERI, Paris, 2009).
 12. Philip D. Curtin, “The Lure of Bambuk Gold,” *Journal of African History* 14, no. 4 (1973): 623–31.
 13. ANM 3 Q 12, “Note sur les exploitations indigènes d’or de la région de Siguiri (Guinée),” 1934: 8.
 14. This preference for staying put is well illustrated by the armies of Al-Hadji Oumar Tall, who fought in his mid-nineteenth-century jihad against the kingdoms of Kaarta (in the west of present-day Mali) and Ségou, but increasingly preferred to settle to engage in agriculture. See John H. Hanson, *Migration, Jihad, and Muslim Authority in West Africa: The Futanke Colonies in Karta* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

- For the negative value of change, see also Jan Jansen, “Hot Issues: The 1997 Kamabolon Ceremony in Kangaba (Mali),” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31, no. 2 (1998): 253–78.
15. See the calculations in ANM 3 Q 12, “Note sur les exploitations indigènes d’or de la région de Siguiri (Guinée),” 1934: 7–8.
 16. See ANM 2 D 23, “Inspection des Affaires Administratives Kangaba, 1951–1953.” This source notes that in 1949 about 400 kilograms of gold were produced; in 1950, a year with a good harvest, only 200 kilograms were produced.
 17. Richard L. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton: Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800–1946* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).
 18. Régine Levrat, *Le coton en Afrique Occidentale et Centrale avant 1950: Un exemple de la politique coloniale de la France* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008).
 19. Cristiana Panella, “Orpaillage artisanal et cotoniculture: Economie œcuménique et éthique sociale dans le Basidibé (Mali),” in *Worlds of Debts: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Gold Mining in West Africa*, ed. Cristiana Panella (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2010), 49–78.
 20. ANM 3 Q 11, “Rapport Economique, premier trimestre 1935.”
 21. ANM 3 Q 11, “Rapport Economique, troisième trimestre 1937, quatrième trimestre 1934.”
 22. Ibid.
 23. Vincent Joly, *Le Soudan français, 1939–1945: Une colonie dans la guerre* (Paris: Karthala, 2006).
 24. ANM 3 Q 11, “Rapport Economique 1943.”
 25. Roberts, *Two Worlds*.
 26. ANM 1 Q 332, “Rapport Economique du Cercle de Bougouni 1926–1945. Rapport Economique années 1934, 1935.”
 27. Panella, “Orpaillage artisanal.”
 28. Servant et al., *Les mines*.
 29. Panella, “Orpaillage artisanal.”
 30. ANM 3 Q 11: 15.
 31. ANM 3 Q 21, 1934.
 32. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
 33. Cooper, *Decolonization*, 34.
 34. Delavignette, for instance, wrote his novel *Les paysans noirs* (1931) to illustrate the point that it would be possible “to equip Africa in the future without proletarianizing

- it.” See Robert Delavignette, *Les paysans noirs: Récit soudanais en douze mois* (Paris: Librairie Stock, 1931).
35. ANM 3 Q 21: 10.
 36. ANM 3 Q 11.
 37. ANM 3 Q 41, also written by *ingénieur-adjoint* Ed. Julian.
 38. ANM 3 Q 41 “Immatriculation des terrains aurifères,” 1–2.
 39. ANM 3 Q 12.
 40. ANM 3 Q 11: 28–29.
 41. In the English literature mostly referred to as Dyula or Jula.
 42. H. Laurens van der Laan, “Syrians or Lebanese: Which Name Is Correct?” *Kroniek van Afrika* 2 (1969): 140–44.
 43. Chris Bierwirth, “The Initial Establishment of the Lebanese Community in Côte d’Ivoire, ca. 1925–45,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 30, no. 2 (1997): 325–48; Chris Bierwirth, “French Interests in the Levant and Their Impact on French Immigrant Policy in West Africa,” *Itinerario* 26, no. 1 (2002): 9–32.
 44. Bierwirth, “The Initial Establishment.”
 45. Keith Hart, *The Political Economy of West African Agriculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 114.
 46. Jean Suret-Canale, *Afrique noire: Occidentale et centrale* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1972); Jean Suret-Canale, *Afrique et capitaux: Géographie des capitaux et des investissements en Afrique tropicale d’expression française* (Paris: L’Arbre Verdoyant, 1987).
 47. Suret-Canale, *Afrique noire*, 28–30.
 48. ANM 3 Q 21.
 49. ANM 3 Q 21: 6.
 50. ANM 3 Q 21: 15–16.
 51. ANM 3 Q 12: 12–13.
 52. ANM 3 Q 21: 3–4.
 53. ANM 3 Q 11: 3, Lettre du Gouverneur Général No. 575 du 11 juillet 1913.
 54. Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Sabine W. J. Luning, “Ritual Territories as Local Heritage? Discourse on Disruption in Society and Nature in Maane, Burkina Faso,” *Africa* 77, no. 1 (2007): 86–103; Cristiana Panella, “L’éthique sociale du *damansen*: Éducation familiale et orpaillage artisanal dans le Basidibé (Wasolon, Mali),” *Cahiers d’Études africaines* 47, no. 186 (2007): 345–70; Van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development*.