



Original article

From pickaxes to metal detectors: Gold mining mobility and space in Upper Guinea, Guinea Conakry



Anna Dessertine*

LESC (UMR 7186)/ED. 395, Milieux, cultures et sociétés du passé et du présent, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense, France

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on fieldwork conducted over a period of one year in a Malinke village in Guinea, this article aims to develop an understand of the evolution of mining mobilities from a spatial perspective. Artisanal and smallscale gold mining (ASM) has expanded rapidly in Northeastern Guinea since the 1980s. Here, men, women and occasionally, children, work at the gold mines and live in temporary camps during the dry season. However, since the introduction of metal detectors at the end of 2011, mobility has been dominated by men and has become much more random. Men now make numerous trips back and forth to their villages during the dry season, changing mobilities into trajectories. My purpose is to show that, paradoxically, this randomness allows men greater flexibility in managing their presence and absence in their village of origin.

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1. Introduction

In February 2011, I began a year of fieldwork in the village of Guirlan in Northeastern Guinea (Conakry), where I would come to know the dry season for the first time. I was immediately struck by the number of people who were absent from the village. Homes were empty, and only older women, children and a few other inhabitants remained in the village. Two censuses, one conducted during the dry season and the other during the rainy season,¹ later confirmed the significance of this migratory phenomenon. The village clearly endured massive departures during the dry season, affecting on average a third of the members of each household – men and women included – mainly to work in artisanal gold mines. The arrival of people returning to work in the fields at the beginning of the rainy season was just as significant. In September 2012, I returned for a second time, for a five-month field study, but this time the back-and-forth of some individuals was much more rapid and seemingly chaotic than what I had seen in 2011. A few inhabitants left, came back, and left again, sometimes after having only stayed a few hours or a few days. In short, two forms of mobility coexisted, and according to the inhabitants, the explanation lay in a new technical tool: the metal detector. It was all

anyone could talk about, especially the young bachelors,² who now constituted the majority in gold exploitation, since metal detectors had been introduced. The inhabitants had always practiced artisanal gold mining, but according to Musa a miner I interviewed, the use of a metal detector allows the miner to return home more often and to gain much more money. The mines were well known to Musa, and he was reputed to have good luck. He had managed to build a concrete house for his mother, in a village where there were no more than ten such houses for over a thousand inhabitants.

In this article, I interrogate the evolutions that have occurred within the various forms of mining-related mobilities in this region, and the way in which they create and characterise spaces. Thus, choosing to employ the concept of “forms” is far from arbitrary. In using it, I situate my analysis in a perspective which maintains that mobilities create ties (and not ruptures) and allow individuals to “enter into relationships” (Simmel, 2009). I thereby envision them as one form of socialisation among others. The term “mobility” is preferred to “migration” because it best encompasses the variety of movements observable, including their circular dimensions and their social and cultural embeddedness (De Bruijn et al., 2001; Bakewell and Jónsson, 2011). I also situate my work in continuity with that of de Certeau (1984), for whom space is “an

* Correspondence to: 50 rue de Turenne, 75003 Paris, France.
E-mail address: anna.dessertine16@gmail.com (A. Dessertine).

¹ The rainy season begins around May or June and the dry season begins near the end of October.

² This expression is actually tautological, as I employ the terms “young” and “youth” in their Malinké usage, in which they designate a social status – that of a bachelor – rather than a biological age. Marriage thus marks one’s entry into “adulthood”.

intersection of mobile elements”, and for whom “in relation to place,³ space is like the word when it is spoken” (p. 117). In this context, the “mobile elements” are in reference to individuals and to objects such as the metal detector. Therefore, I posit that the different “intersections” at the foundation of the constitution of spaces are neither incidental nor random, and that they rely on particular forms which, as we will see, are not the same with artisanal gold mining and with that based on the use of metal detectors.

In Guirlan, if certain people are permitted to leave it is only because others stay behind. This is particularly striking when it comes to maintaining a household. What is important, as I am told, is to not let the household (*lu* in Malinké) – composed of classified brothers, their wives and their children – “die”. Families count on an adelpic mode of succession in order for the household to continue existing, wherein the second-born brother succeeds the first-born brother, followed by the next-born, and so on. This mode of succession in itself influences movements in general, as it implies that men can only leave once another has returned, in contrast to succession from father to son. In the first case, all men must theoretically return home one day to take their place as the head of the household, and in the second, favouring the firstborn gives a certain liberty of movement to the younger brothers. In parallel to the adelpic mode of succession, the *lu* is perpetuated following the principle of patri-virilocality – involving the circulation of wives – which allows for ensuring offspring. Therefore, in order to maintain the *lu*, all individuals must at one time or another fulfil an obligation to be present, according to their sex, their age, and their status.

What is more, one’s presence in the village is closely linked to being visible in daily life: you have to “be seen”, residents told me, “stay awhile”, call on one another, etc. Young men will put a few benches under the shade of a tree and make tea, an old woman will put a chair out and sit for part of the day, giving others the chance to come and greet her, young girls will meet in the central court of the family compound to cook, and children will play together near them: one has to see and be seen by all. This manner of “being there” in daily life seems to easily contribute to the desire to maintain households. The visibility of the inhabitants has the effect of reinforcing the spatial stability they so earnestly seek. At first sight, the obligation to be there might not seem favourable to long-term, permanent mobility. And yet, young men go out “seeking adventure”, wives go to Mali to sell spices, and especially, more and more inhabitants go to the artisanal gold mines in the region. Although gold extraction had already been practiced in West Africa during the pre-colonial period, particularly in the Ghanaian and Malian Empires,⁴ specialists agree that these practices intensified in the 1980s; some even speak of a “gold rush”⁵ taking place at this

time in the region (Mbodj, 2009, 2011). Guinea is no exception: over the past two decades, its gold mines have become one of the principle sources of income for inhabitants.⁶

This paper aims to understand the way in which mining mobilities, depending on their various forms, create specific spaces of sociability. I will start by examining artisanal mining spaces, showing how the gold miners’ temporary installation in camps allows for communities to emerge and defining those communities. In the second section, I will show how the introduction of metal detectors has given way to a new form of mobility which is constantly shifting and more difficult to grasp, encouraging a perspective which is more focused on miners’ trajectories.

2. Artisanal mining camps: miniature villages?

In May 2011, I decided to spend three months at the gold mines with two young men from Guirlan who had been planning their trip for several days. They only decided on their destination the night before their departure, when Musa called them to tell them about a promising mining area near the city of Mandiana – renowned for the mining areas in its vicinity – 85 km from Kankan. And so, the three of us left at daybreak to meet with Musa in Faralako, five kilometres from Mandiana, where a large proportion of the gold miners from Guirlan had set up camp. It is hard to determine exactly how many people were present in the camp at that time; perhaps about 2000 if we are to believe what some said. The camp, which I could immediately see was temporary in nature due to the makeshift wooden shelters covered with straw, seemed to be divided into “neighbourhoods”, grouping individuals according to their place of origin. All of the miners from Guirlan were in the same camp and had joined together with those from Diansoumana, a village which borders Guirlan. The miners from the two villages were mostly all familiar with one another: “You see, we stick together and we organise ourselves”, one told me.

I was immediately struck by how many women were present. Authors have already noted their high rate of participation in artisanal mining. In Mali mines, for example, it has been reported that women represent 50% of the local mining population, on average (Hentschel et al., 2003: 31). I interviewed 51 Guirlan women – 30 of whom were married and 21 of whom were single – aged between 15 and 70, each of whom was asked to describe their trip(s) to gold mines. Spouses were sometimes accompanied by their husbands (12 out of 30); generally, they were the last of their husbands’ wives, their husbands refusing to leave them in the village “out of jealousy”, the miners said. Others came alone or fled, leaving their husbands or close relatives behind. Although this is generally condemned in the village, some spouses managed to obtain permission from the members of their household to go to the mines as long as they stayed with other Guirlan natives (14 out of 30 reported this). This was the case of Mariama, who recounted, in an interview, the events of a typical day:

In the morning, everyone gets up at their own pace. I actually wake up earlier than most because the other women and I take turns preparing the food. We prepare breakfast, or sometimes, if everyone has chipped in, we ask one of the men to go buy bread, mayonnaise and Nescafé. Some don’t eat with us, they prefer to take their breakfast at the café with other miners. We also have to fetch water, but we never go alone. Either we go in a group with the other women, or sometimes a man will accompany us. We tidy up the camp and then we wait for those who are going to work to get ready to go. There are days when some go ahead

³ Translation from French into English is problematic. Yi-Fu Tuan notes “In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. ‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place’. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (2001: 6). Nevertheless, according to de Certeau, “A place (lieu) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the ‘proper’ rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own ‘proper’ and distinct locations, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements” (1984: 117). In that perspective – which I here follow – space is “practiced place”, while in the other perspectives such as Yi-Fu Tuan’s, place and space are two different types of experiences: “Place becomes a center of meaning constructed by experience” (Tuan, 1975: 152).

⁴ Cf. for more on this subject C. Panella (2007) who also explores colonial mining policies in this region.

⁵ Boom aurifère in French.

⁶ Spiegel (2015) notes the same phenomenon in Zimbabwe.

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