



## Original article

# “No cow makes this sort of profit”: Capital, success, and Maasai gemstone traders in Tanzania



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## ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s, Maasai men living in the Simanjiro district of northern Tanzania have worked as middlemen, buying and selling gemstones at Mererani, the only place in the world where the gemstone tanzanite is mined. While some men have struggled to make it, others have been quite lucrative in this booming mineral trade by gaining access to various forms of capital. In addition, regardless of an individual's success, as a group, tanzanite traders are seen by others in their home villages to possess new forms of capital that carry societal value because they map onto current ideas about success and what it means to “be Maasai”. Through an ethnographic exploration of Maasai gemstone traders in northern Tanzania, this article sheds light on an overlooked sector of the mining commodity chain and examines the economic, social, and cultural forms of capital tanzanite traders possess, mobilize, and are perceived to embody. Moreover, it examines the implications for these new forms of capital in terms of social relations and power structures and argues that capital accumulation and livelihood change is expressed through a unique cultural style with important implications for power relations in Maasai households and communities.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1967, the gemstone tanzanite was discovered in the Simanjiro district of northern Tanzania in an area called Mererani. Celebrated by gemstone enthusiasts as “the gemstone of the 20th century” (ICA, 2010–2011<sup>1</sup>) due to its seductive blue-violet hues and rare status, tanzanite quickly rose to popularity and now ranks as one of the top-selling gemstones in the United States (Olson, 2008). For the first couple decades after its discovery, tanzanite was mined by artisanal and small-scale miners and the Tanzanian State Mining Corporation (STAMICO) (Schroeder, 2010). In the 1990s, under economic liberalization reforms, artisanal and small-scale miners were removed from the core of the mining area, and the South African company, African Gemstone Mining, Ltd. (Afgem<sup>2</sup>) took control over

a large portion of land known as “Block C” (Schroeder, 2010: 58). Today, Mererani is the bustling epicenter of the tanzanite commodity chain with both large- and small-scale mining operations and an intricate network of people working as miners, trading gemstones, and running small businesses in the only place in the world where tanzanite is mined.

The liberalization of the tanzanite industry in the 1990s created a space for Maasai living in Simanjiro to corner a niche working as middlemen, buying and selling gemstones in Mererani.<sup>3</sup> Although trading gemstones is a relatively new livelihood strategy for Maasai households, like most East African pastoralists, they have diversified their livestock-based production systems for decades by cultivating land, working as guards in urban areas, selling milk, beadwork, and other goods, and working in tourism and conservation (Igoe, 2004; May and Ole Ikayo, 2007; McCabe et al., 2014; Sachedina and Trench, 2009). For many households in Simanjiro, trading tanzanite has become an important livelihood strategy, and it is also rather distinct. In particular, some Maasai men have been able to access and mobilize various forms of capital that have not been attainable in other livelihood pursuits.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Colored Gemstone Association is a nonprofit arm of the international colored gemstone industry and has over 500 members worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> In 2003, Afgem was restructured and renamed TanzaniteOne and transferred its stock listing from South Africa to London's Alternate Investment Market (Schroeder, 2010). In 2010, Tanzania passed a mining law requiring the government to hold an equal share of all new mining projects. When TanzaniteOne's mining license came up for renewal in 2012, they were required to give up half of their equity to STAMICO (Rimoch and Cherng, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Maasai men exclusively dominate the tanzanite trade. Very few Maasai women work at Mererani, and those women who do work there sell milk and small wares to the traders and the miners. See Smith, 2015 for a discussion of women's work in Mererani.

Moreover, regardless of an individual's success, as a group, tanzanite traders are perceived by others in their home villages to possess new forms of capital that carry societal value because they map onto current ideas about success and what it means to "be Maasai". As a result, the landscape of success in Simanjiro now includes Maasai men who have worked or are currently working as tanzanite traders.

This article provides an ethnographic examination of an understudied but important sector of the mineral commodity chain: mineral trade. In the social sciences, the relationship between mining and livelihoods has received careful scrutiny, as mining activities shape the "social, political, and economic fabric of many societies" (Gilberthorpe and Hilson, 2014: 2), and often evoke larger debates concerning poverty and human rights (Bryceson et al., 2014a,b; Hilson, 2009; Hilson and Banchirigah, 2009; Pegg, 2006). Much of the emphasis in the literature has been on the impacts of mining on individuals and groups of people who either live adjacent to large-scale mining operations and are dispossessed from land and resources or who work as miners. Far less attention has been given to the people who participate in mining-related activities further downstream in the commodity chain, but who no less rely on mining as a significant part of a rural livelihood strategy. This article begins to fill this gap by shedding light on an overlooked sector of the mining commodity chain, and examining the ways in which economic, social, and cultural forms of capital articulate with livelihood strategies and changing notions of success among Maasai in Simanjiro. Drawing from ethnographic research conducted over a period of thirteen months in 2008 and 2009 in four Maasai communities and in regular meeting places for tanzanite traders in Simanjiro, I explore the mechanisms through which young, successful tanzanite traders have become agents in reconfiguring social relations and the distribution of power in their home villages. In doing this, I argue that capital accumulation and livelihood change is expressed through a unique cultural style with important implications for power relations in Maasai households and communities. As Maasai tanzanite traders possess, mobilize, and are perceived to embody economic, social and cultural forms of capital, they offer a novel analytical vantage point for gaining new insights into the relationship among mining, livelihoods, capital accumulation, and change within rural communities.

The literature on artisanal and small-scale mining in Tanzania demonstrates the ways in which "capitalist incursions" can impact local representations and positionings in the African context (Hodgon 2011: 5). In a recent edited volume, Bryceson et al. (2014a) examine the ways in which economic mineralization in Tanzania has "embedded seeds of democracy" in the politics and culture of artisanal and small-scale gold mining communities and regions (Bryceson and Fisher, 2014: 201). While the authors pay close attention to the growing tendencies toward democratization, they also highlight the hierarchical structure of gold production and the social and economic disparities embedded in this system (Jønsson and Fold, 2009; see also Bryceson and Jønsson, 2010; Fisher, 2007; Fisher and Mwaipopo, 2014; Jønsson and Fold, 2009; Jønsson and Fold, 2014). Adding to the literature that examines the more sinister side of mining and capital accumulation in areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, Bryceson et al. also discuss the ways in which acts and accusations of witchcraft reflect the changing social and economic order of mining (Bryceson et al., 2014b; Duffy, 2007; Fraser and Larmer, 2010; Smith, 2012). This volume fluently captures the local tensions and inequalities that can erupt and intensify in the context of rapid structural change. It suggests that artisanal and small-scale miners are agents in transforming social and economic frontiers.

Like the miners portrayed by Bryceson et al., Maasai tanzanite traders in Simanjiro are actively shaping the economic, social, and

political landscapes in their home villages. While tanzanite trading presents an opportunity for young men to earn more money in shorter amounts of time than other livelihood strategies (Smith, 2012), an exclusive look at economics paints only a partial picture of the impacts men's involvement in the tanzanite trade is having on communities in Simanjiro. Beyond the economic benefits, tanzanite trading also entails new engagements with social and cultural forms of capital. Successful Maasai tanzanite traders exhibit what James Ferguson identified among urban Zambian Copperbelt workers as "cultural style" or the "*practices that signify differences between social categories*" [emphasis in original] (1999: 95). Ferguson argues that Copperbelt workers cultivated a viable style over time through a performance that represented the convergence of crosscutting poles of social significance (1999). Among Copperbelt miners, expressions of class crosscut expressions of masculinity. In other words, the working class style of being masculine differed from the upper-class style of being masculine, demonstrating the lack of a "unitary 'masculine' mode of behavior" (Ferguson, 1999: 95). Successful tanzanite traders appear to be involved in the same process of "self-making" (Ferguson, 1999: 101), as they accumulate forms of capital that originate from different poles, such as large livestock herds and maintaining international business networks. In doing so, they create a cultural style that is uniquely Maasai yet allows them to fit into a new social category. The ultimate exertion of this difference lies in their ability to access power. To understand the politics of capital among Maasai communities in Simanjiro, it is necessary to first consider the ways in which capital articulates with livestock-based livelihoods.

## 2. Herding livelihoods and capital

Among East African pastoralists, livestock have customarily been the most important symbol of wealth, status, and success and therefore have been viewed as the key to quantifying household assets (Grandin, 1994; McCabe, 2003; Potkanski, 1999). It has only been within the last decade or so that social scientists have recognized the significance of livelihood diversification to pastoral households and begun to incorporate non-livestock forms of capital, such as cash from crop sales or off-farm opportunities in quantifications of household wealth. (Homewood et al., 2006; Sachedina and Trench, 2009).

There has also been a clearer understanding of the importance of social capital to pastoral households (Galvin, 2008; Goldman and Riosmena, 2013; McCabe, 2004). Social capital, or the casual acquaintances or sanctioned memberships that make up an individual's network<sup>4</sup> (Bebbington and Perreault, 1999; Bebbington et al., 2004; Fine, 2001; Fox, 1996), allows households to reduce risk, buffer change, and maintain their livestock herds (Galvin, 2008). During times of hardship, people may borrow livestock from age-mates, neighbors, and clan members, or they may diversify their herds by loaning livestock to others (Salzman, 1999). Social networks also allow pastoralists to maintain mobility and access resources, such as grazing land and water, to maintain livestock herds and guarantee livelihood security (Galvin, 2008; Goldman and Riosmena, 2013; McCabe, 2004; Potkanski, 1999; Thompson and Homewood, 2002). Scholarly examinations of social capital have helped broaden our view of the ways pastoralists manage their livestock assets; however, the importance of social capital to other aspects of pastoralists' lives deserves

<sup>4</sup> Social capital has been defined in many ways by social scientists. At its most fundamental level, most agree that social capital should be used to refer to social connectedness and networks of relationships to which an agent has ties or is associated with (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Putman, 2001)

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