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# When miners become “foreigners”: Competing categorizations within gold mining spaces in Guinea

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic research and problem-centered interviews in Guinean mining areas, this paper presents a comparative reading of the conflicting conceptions of what constitutes a “mining community.” First, I explore how independent artisanal miners describe and identify their activity. The weight of autochthony conventions is discussed concerning their insertion both in the mining fields and in their living locations. Second, I focus the case study on how the corporate social responsibility (CSR) interventions toward the mining community, commissioned by a gold mining company in Guinea, are interpreted by the artisanal miners. The analysis of the deployed discourses and related interventions delineate what is defined as the mining community in CSR programs, and how these interventions shape new understandings of the company’s territory among the miners.

Using a boundary work approach, the paper shows how CSR interventions symbolically transpose the spatial concession border into symbolic and social boundaries among the artisanal mineworkers. CSR discourses and interventions transform “trespassers” into “foreigners”, as opposed to “natives”, who are often viewed as “traditional sedentary workers” by the mining company. In doing this, CSR programs reinforce and standardize autochthony-based relations, and extend autochthony boundaries in all segments of the gold mining socio-technical system. The attachment of these initially separated categories creates an idealized figure of “traditional” artisanal mining, while also stigmatizing the itinerant artisanal miners. As a consequence, I will discuss the emergence of conflict situations regarding access to mining spaces and resources within the surrounding villages.

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## Introduction

First in November 2008 and again in the beginning of 2009, 13 and 23 people, respectively, died in two shaft collapses in artisanal mining fields in upper Guinea. These dramatic accidents echoed strongly in the local media, as well as areas much further away than the region where they occurred. While more than 200 people die every year in the same area in similar shafts' downfalls, these incidents are not reported, nor are they published in the media (Bolay, 2013). Although these kinds of accidents regularly happen, they usually do not involve as many people. In this respect, the mentioned fatalities were striking because they occurred on the concession area of one of the main gold mining companies established in Guinea, and involved significant numbers of fatalities in single collapses. The consequences are wide-ranging, but in the case of the company, it suddenly highlighted the question of its “responsibility” toward neighboring collectivities, especially the active, independent, artisanal gold diggers, most of

whom are temporary workers. The answer given was quick, clear, and easy to formulate: yes, the accidents had taken place in the concession area of the company, but no, they were not the company's responsibility, as the injured and casualties were trespassers who had no right to be there at that moment. Unsurprisingly, all press releases used the same words to qualify the casualties: “illegal gold diggers coming from abroad”.<sup>1</sup> This observation, thus, removed any responsibility for the company and hinted that the blame lay with a specific group designated as foreigners.

## Who competes for what?

The question of the relations between mining industries and the neighboring collectivities, especially where artisanal and small-scale mining<sup>2</sup> (ASM) is also practiced, is usually seen as

<sup>1</sup> Guinée Presse (May 8, 2009), Agence France Presse (November 13, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) refers to informal mining activities carried out using low technology or minimum machinery (Hentschel et al. 2002).

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problematic through the lens of competitors for the same resources. However, it has been shown that independent artisanal miners and large-scale multinational mining companies do not necessarily compete for the same gold (Hilson, 2011). The artisanal miners are technically constrained to limit their digging to surface reefs or alluvial placers, while mining companies extract the ore from deep reefs in large quantities (Hilson and Yakovleva, 2007: 102; USAID, 2005: 3). Practically, even the so-called “trespassers” hardly ever dig in active company mining areas, the access to which is often tightly guarded and controlled by the military. How, then, can we understand the narrative concerning the relations between the two, and its construction around the opposition between “legal owners”, on the one hand, and “illegal robbers”, on the other? The introductory example offers a way to perceive the question from a different angle. The material property of the gold obviously does not matter that much to the mining company, as artisanal gold diggers mostly extract and wash old ore from abandoned pits. Instead, property that is located in a certain territory implies legal responsibilities, the need for justification, and an unsought public visibility of what happens within this territory. How, then, do mining companies discursively and practically manage the territorial control of their concession area when the surrounding collectivities live, work, and often die around, and sometimes within, this same area? How do corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourses and practices deployed by the companies toward the mining community contribute to this form of governance? In addition, which are the consequences of the categorizations of people and space among the artisanal miners (i.e., local residents, itinerant miners, and part-time workers)? The paper aims to answer these questions by examining the kinds of symbolic, social, and spatial boundaries at stake in the relations among the artisanal miners and between the artisanal miners and a mining company.

Interactions between mining companies and the surrounding populations are often conflictive in many countries of the South. These interactions have been widely documented in the context of the role and potential for mediation in conflict mitigation (Andrew, 2003; MMSD, 2002 Chaps. 7 and 9), as well as in focusing on issues of competing land tenure both from an institutional perspective (i.e. Dreschler, 2001; Fisher, 2007) and through actor-based approaches (i.e. Hilson et al. (2007)). Those accounts share the following findings: (1) artisanal miners are usually labeled as “illegal” in these conflictive contexts; and (2) competing conceptions of land tenure and issues of formalization are often highlighted as the core reasons of their labelling as “illegal”. As Fischer (2007: 739) states, both of these findings are interrelated, and the difficulties in entering the licensing system play key roles in the criminalization of artisanal miners. They also have in common that conflict is usually conceived as bipartite between a company, on the one hand, and the ASM community, on the other. Yet despite its common use, the notion of the “mining community” in ASM is rarely detailed in view of its internal dynamics of identification; moreover, when a supplementary actor, such as a mining company, is implied in the social fabric.

In Guinea, mining activities are transient for most workers. Compared to other studies conducted in surrounding areas (e.g. Cartier and Bürge (2011), Keita (2001), Maconachie (2011)), most people engaged in ASM combine it with other activities, such as agriculture or, eventually, trade. Consequently, they do not necessarily identify as miners. Moreover, the intrinsically mobile dimension of artisanal mining for many workers suggests that identifications based on territoriality are less relevant in these contexts (Bryceson and Jonsson, 2010). While the idea of a mining community relying on “the myth of the isolated mining camp” has been challenged by empirical attention paid to the socio-technical system underlying the production of gold (Pfaffenberger, 1998:

291), it often remains taken for granted as an analytical unit in most CSR plans. The assumption of a bounded, homogenous mining community is, hence, problematic, as CSR strategies may finally result in supplementary social fragmentation at the local level when local dynamics of group identifications and access to resources are not considered. Therefore, it appeals to a better understanding of the processes of identification and categorization at stake among resident and mobile, transient and long-term, “newbies” and experienced gold diggers, particularly in the context of their relations with mining companies.

Some authors have shown that specific conventions were, indeed, regulating the experiences of individuals across a single mining camp and, hence, contributing to the emergence of a “mining culture” (Godoy, 1985; Werthmann 2010; Werthmann and Grätz, 2012). Grätz (2009), for example, illustrates how consumption practices, friendship ties, and rules of behavior structure the relations among miners in Benin and Mali. Also, Werthmann (2010) proposes the concept of heterotopia to understand the lives of miners in Burkina Faso, as they tend to invert the common values in other social fields, which contributes to enhancing the differences between non-miners and provides a sense of belonging among them. Concerning the mobile dimension of artisanal mining and its role in the process of identification, two strands of questions can be identified. The first concerns how being “on the move” changes the way people define themselves, as well as how they are perceived. As Klute and Hahn (2007:13) explain, practices of mobility contribute to the emergence of cultures of migration that can be understood through the experiences and discourses of the people involved in it. In a recent study, Jonsson and Bryceson (2009) show that a high level of mobility influences the career of artisanal mine workers, which provokes changes in their traditional attachments to their place of origin, and self-definitions. They empirically prove that miners are increasingly judged by their qualifications and competence, instead of their places of origin and tribal or ethnic affiliations. Hence, ethnicity, origin, and other forms of autochthony would not be very relevant in mining social spaces. Second, questions have also focused on the relations between mobile people and host communities (e.g. Grätz (2004), Werthmann (2000)). On the contrary, it seems in these cases that autochthony conventions are central to accessing social and material resources. However, most studies agree that belonging is fluid and can constantly be negotiated. In the case of artisanal mining, belonging to local structures is often a way to access landownership, control shafts, or claim compensations when private companies are involved.

While relations are said to “cross-cut ethnic or tribal group boundaries” among the miners (Godoy, 1985: 207), autochthony claims paradoxically appear to be central for the miners in accessing social and material resources. Drawing the boundaries of a mining community from the inside, hence, suggests first understanding how and when identities are shifting. It also encourages identifying the salient landmarks for belonging in specific contexts. By using case study material where the relations between resident and mobile workers also imply the existence of a third stakeholder (i.e., the mining company), the aim of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to broaden understanding of the processes of identification and categorization among miners: mobile participant observation with a team of highly mobile gold miners illustrates how they relate, identify, categorize, and are categorized. Second, the paper explores the role of CSR programs in the social fabric of groups and identities when artisanal miners are dealing with the same or contiguous spaces, as an operating mining company. The underlying hypothesis of this paper is the following: rather than competing for gold in itself, artisanal mine workers are constantly struggling to belong to different groups that provide access to the needed social and material resources

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