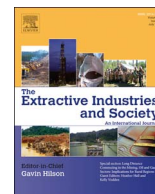




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Contested wealth: Social and political mobilisation in extractive communities in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This introductory paper analyses historical and contemporary developments in the social and political mobilisation of what are termed ‘extractive communities’ in Africa. It demonstrates the centrality of diverse contestations, both between extractive corporations and extractive communities, and within communities themselves, over the real and envisioned benefits of mining and oil production. In contextualising the articles carried in this special section of *Extractive Industries and Society*, it places these dynamics in an assessment of Africa’s past and current position in global economic and political processes of extractive exploitation, and, building on the insights of these articles, suggests ways in which research on these communities may be developed in the future.

1. Introduction

In September 2017, riots broke out in the Guinean towns of Boke and Kamsar, one of the country’s centres of bauxite production. Residents took to the streets to protest the pollution produced by the mines and the constant electricity cuts they experience, in an area where the vast majority of power is consumed by mining companies jointly owned by the Guinean state and by Western and Chinese investors.¹ One person was killed, at least twenty injured and bauxite production was halted as anti-riot police were deployed and negotiations were launched to seek a solution to the problem.² This was the latest in a wave of protests that first erupted in April 2017: one of the

victims of those riots, shopkeeper Mohamed Camara, told a journalist: “This is the fault of the state. We have all the mining, and no electricity”. Local resident Lamine Banoro told Reuters he had sent his CV to the mining companies but had no success obtaining employment: “There are big mining companies here, yet no one who is a native to Boke can get a job. Even the Guineans getting jobs come from outside Boke”. While mine companies claimed the unrest was not directly caused by their operations, Mines Minister Abdoulaye Magassouba admitted: “There is a legitimate frustration but it cannot justify violence ... Our challenge is to reassure people that every job that can go to a Guinean will. We also plan ... to better use our revenues to develop these zones, so people can see the impact”.³

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¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guinea-mining/guinean-protests-halt-bauxite-miner-cbgs-operations-idUSKCN1BU179> (accessed 4 October 2017).

² <http://africatimes.com/2017/09/13/guinea-new-clashes-erupt-in-boke-bauxite-mining-centre/> (accessed 4 October 2017).

³ <http://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/r-one-dead-as-riots-in-guinea-mining-hub-enter-fourth-day-2017-4-1001957913>; <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-05-12/guinea-towns-unrest-a-cautionary-tale-for-african-mining> (accessed 4 October 2017).

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These recent events in Guinea exemplify not only the types of protests and mobilisations that are examined in this special section, but also the divisions within extractive communities and between such communities, mining companies and their states. When proposing the category of ‘extractive community’ for the conference panel that led to this set of articles, our aim was to problematize and bring into comparative analysis a set of issues affecting parts of Africa where extractive industries operate, but which are commonly analysed separately with unhelpfully normative frameworks: for example, the treatment of industrial-scale and artisanal extraction as inherently distinct; the position of workers employed to extract minerals and communities affected by them; and the separate analysis of specific divisions within extractive communities – class, gender, generational, racial and ethnic – in processes of social change and conflict. While extractive communities are clearly influenced by their engagement with economically and geo-politically significant minerals, they also have the capacity to shape their exploitation, its wider effects, and the distribution of the wealth they generate. The articles in this special issue demonstrate that placing extractive communities at the centre of our analysis helps overcome some of the limitations imposed by other ways of approaching the exploitation of mineral wealth in recent African history until today.

2. Historicising extractive communities

Much historical analysis of mineral extraction in Africa implicitly associates such exploitation with the imposition of colonial rule and the establishment of western-controlled mining companies, whose authority to seize territory and exploit it regardless of local claims rested on their colonial connectivity. If we take a longer view, to encompass for example the centuries-long extraction of gold in west and southern Africa and its sale into trans-Saharan, South Asian and Chinese markets, or the ways in which copper mining partly fuelled the rise of some of central Africa’s savannah kingdoms in the 17th and 18th centuries, then we can better appreciate both the continuities and breaks between indigenous and colonial forms of mineral exploitation. Here, and in the Asante kingdom, Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe, mineral extraction and trading enabled the establishment of powerful states, able to convert that wealth into political hierarchy, the conquering and/or incorporation of neighbouring societies, and the exploitation of unfree or subject labour. The concentrated nature of mineral wealth has always enabled its possessors to accumulate wealth in a relatively portable form, but that wealth was also dependent on accessing and controlling trade routes and on realising its fluctuating value in global markets. Colonial annexation shattered many of those trade routes and redirected them along different routes controlled by Europeans, though African challenges to that control were ever present.

Colonial-era industrial mining certainly looked different to its pre-colonial predecessors and was commonly perceived by Western observers as a qualitatively new, modernising process that brought new technologies and industry to the African ‘interior’ and supposedly integrated these areas into the global economy for the first time. In reality, colonially connected mining companies required the capacity of colonial states to displace and re-order indigenous communities, precisely because those communities had their own ideas about those minerals and the land under which they lay. Turning deposits of gold, copper or diamonds into profit meant altering the legal ownership and the cultural meaning of land. As [Frederiksen \(2013\)](#) argues, colonial-era mining developments were constituted as ‘scientific’ projects involving the imposition of a colonial production of knowledge on the African landscape. All such processes required economic, political and cultural investment, each of which had to be negotiated and each of which was contested in unpredictable ways that ultimately shaped its outcome.

Of equal importance to land alienation was the harnessing of African labour power for the extraction of minerals, which involved unfree labour of various kinds. Authoritarian labour regimes were

established in colonially connected mining centres, though they were limited in effect: aspirant workers commonly succeeded in evading labour controls. The migration – organised, ‘spontaneous’ or somewhere in-between – of workers to mining locations was usually necessary, but the documentation of this process was distorted by a structural Marxist emphasis in a dual model of migrant labour vs a working-class in the making. In practice, mine work was, for most Africans, commonly conducted alongside non-mine work, particularly agricultural activity, and could itself be seen as a seasonal activity for many of those concerned: mine companies, for example in the Belgian Congo, sometimes used contractors to develop mine sites on their behalf ([Vellut, 1981](#)). Structural Marxists tended to see such ‘migrant labour’ systems as a ‘beta’ version of the African working-class they desired to locate and explained it in terms of its deficiencies or distortions in relation to an idealised proletariat, conceptualised in relation to a particular reading of the West’s history of industrialisation and the birth of its working-class ([Larmer, 2017](#)).

The racial categorisation and segregation of mine workforces was equally central to colonial notions of labour: migrant workers from the Western world were employed on an entirely different basis to their African migrant counterparts and the former often accepted and reinforced this division. Yet, as Duncan Money argues in his article on white mineworkers in Northern Rhodesia, it should not be assumed that ‘race’ was always the primary ‘category of difference’ ([Brubaker, 2015: 18](#)) in the conscious thinking of such workers, or even their mining communities. According to Money, white mineworkers in Northern Rhodesia emphasised their exploitation by and antagonism to mining capital in the political language of global communism and socialism and – notwithstanding their extraordinary privilege, resting as it did on a contractual colour bar – saw themselves primarily through the prism of class rather than race. Money’s findings have relevance for today’s deeply hierarchical mine labour forces in which senior, internationally recruited and racially heterogeneous skilled workers remain strikingly segregated – residentially and in the provision of support services – from a larger, less skilled and often casualised workforce recruited from the locality and nearby.

In their efforts to produce a usable workforce, many mine companies built new mine townships (see also below) and provided health and welfare services. Over time, and sometimes with the prompting of organised labour and late-colonial and post-colonial states, residential and educational services were provided that enabled some workers to accommodate their families in what evolved into towns. While today there is in some extractive communities a pronounced nostalgia for a golden age of corporate paternalism, company towns were – as [Udelsmann Rodrigues](#) demonstrates here for Angola – sites primarily designed to control and discipline labour. Company towns were also inherently exclusionary places that sowed or reinforced divisions: between company town residents and those (mainly women) who were not formally employed by mines but who provided services to these communities; between urban and rural communities linked to mine towns by remittances, migration, and ideas; and – in some cases – between ethnically constituted groups placed in competition for jobs and services. Like mine companies themselves, researchers have often been guilty of privileging organised (usually male) labour over other members of extractive communities, both because of a primary focus on the assumed role of organised labour and because of their greater archival legibility. If we step away from an institutional approach it quickly becomes clear that, while mine communities may see themselves as having unified interests opposed to mine companies, they are themselves marked by significant divisions – racialised, gendered, generational, ethnic and educational, for example – and should never be assumed to have inherently shared interests. Nor however should the meaning of more visible divisions be assumed: although industrial mineworkers with employment contracts may benefit from the exclusion of artisanal miners who seek control of some of the same resources, they may equally be members of the same extended family networks,

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