



## Moralities, risk and rules in West African artisanal gold mining communities: A case study of Northern Benin<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The paper explores the life and work of young male gold miners in Northern Benin, West Africa. It describes modes of organisation, norms and rules of mining teams as well as the situation in the region's mining camps at large. Despite various internal conflicts and a high degree of social fluctuation and uncertainty due to repeated state interventions, the social field of gold mining is marked by cohesion and viable patterns of risk sharing.

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### Introduction

This paper examines the roles of young male gold miners in West Africa, as well as aspects of their work and livelihoods. The basis for this analysis is an artisanal gold mining boom that has been ongoing in many parts of West Africa since the mid-1980s, during which new deposits have been discovered and older mining sites have been reworked.

The analysis argues that there are changing patterns in labour migration, especially during the dry season.<sup>1</sup> Young people from various countries migrate to new gold mining camps in search of incomes. As soon as a mining field exhibits signs of exhaustion, miners move to more prosperous areas, in the process displacing their entire mining camp. They transfer not only techniques of exploitation, but also their particular modes of organisation, norms and rules (Grätz, 2002) from one site to another. A unique socio-cultural configuration has spread across West Africa due to the discovery of new gold mining sites, not only in Burkina Faso but also in Ghana and Mali.

<sup>☆</sup> The paper derives from a research project on the social context of artisanal gold mining in West Africa today. Fieldwork was mainly carried out in Northern Benin, from 2000 to 2004 for a total of 20 months, financed by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Other fieldwork sites were in Burkina Faso, Mali and Ghana.

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<sup>1</sup> For recent case studies on gold mining in West Africa, see e.g. Carbonnel (1991), Yaro (1996), Werthmann (2000, 2001, 2003a, b), Hilson (2006) and Luning (2006).

Miners are fortune-seekers, young peasants as well as impoverished artisans and petty businessmen, coping with the general economic crises in West Africa: decline in agricultural cash-crop production, droughts and reduced soil fertility, political tensions and community conflicts. Many migrants seek to improve their social position, to marry, to invest in housing or livestock or to start a business in their home region. Despite being associated with many challenges and hazards, gold mining seems to be profitable, and provides possibilities for cash income and capital accumulation in the absence of viable alternatives. Taking serious physical and social risks, many young men stay for longer periods of time in gold mining areas, successful or not, acquiring more skills, working to discover new deposits and migrating from site to site. They advance their gold mining businesses—often using procedurally simple semi-mechanised techniques—along migratory trajectories partly correlated with known seasonal patterns of labour migration. Gold mining camps are scattered across West Africa, and are hot spots of consumption, normative transgressions and daily economic struggles. Such itinerant gold mining communities are generally good examples for exploring the development of internal rules and relationships in both a risky and volatile environment, and a socially and ethnically heterogeneous setting. Gold miners are migrants who chose this activity as a temporary way out of crisis, and seek to return to 'normal life'. This temporality and volatility does not obstruct the development of distinctive moral codes as well as characteristic patterns of behaviour that are quite elaborate and distinctive from other groups.

The case of gold mining in Northern Benin is presented to illustrate the identity processes among young male<sup>2</sup> gold miners across West Africa: the cultural as well as social conditions of its emergence, persistence and reconstitution, despite various conflicts and hazards related to their business.

### The social context of artisanal gold mining in Northern Benin

The gold mining region in Benin is located in the north-west of the country, in the Atakora Mountains, south of the district capital Natitingou and along the Perma River (in the vicinity of the villages of Kwatena and Tchantangou). The region is inhabited by *Waaba* (whose principal language is *waama*) and *Betammaribe* (whose language is *ditammari*), Fulbe herdsmen and numerous immigrants. *Dendi* is the lingua franca. In 1993, migrant gold miners from Togo and Ghana began exploiting alluvial as well as reef deposits<sup>3</sup> south of the district capital of Natitingou. A gold boom soon followed, fuelling further immigration of labourers from the region and abroad.<sup>4</sup> Within a short period of time, both the adjacent villages of Kwatena and Tchantangou had expanded considerably. Gold miners work along rivers and mountain slopes, exploiting alluvial sediments (placer mining) and alluvial deposits and reefs. During peak periods, an estimated 5000 miners were at work, although today, there are not more than 300.<sup>5</sup>

Miners have developed an intricate system of labour organisation, characterised by different role playing, shift work and remuneration amounts. Generally, miners work in small teams headed by a team chief, who, in most cases, has the informal right to exploit a shaft or pit. Generally, the rights of exploitation of shafts and pits belong to the person who first discovered and exploited them, assuming he or she has the technical and financial means to do so. In the event that this person does not possess these means, he/she may forge a contractual agreement with a small-scale entrepreneur who, in turn, engages in exploitation in exchange for shares in the yield or the payment of one-off or recurring compensation. Most miners operate 'at the margins of the law' (after MacGaffey and Bazenguissa, 2000). The shaft owner usually acquires tools, rents motor-pumps, feeds the workers, and when needed, pays medical costs during the exploration cycle, which he/she may deduct later when it comes to sharing the profits.

The majority of shaft owners work on their own account, although many are indebted to moneylenders or wealthier gold

traders. Most miners in Northern Benin disregard any official demands for licences and the *Code Minier* to explore and to exploit deposits.<sup>6</sup> The number of workers in a team varies from 6 to 20 according to the size of the pit, the expected gold yield and the available manpower. Often—according to the overall number of workers in the team—there is a further hierarchy, including assistants, heads of the work shifts and guards. Every team shares the profits from the gold ore directly on the spot. Usually, the *chef d'équipe* gets half of all the stones containing gold, after which, his *secrétaire* and the other workers receive their shares. Everyone then has to extract the gold and in most cases they employ assistants to pound and mill the stones. Women, who are paid either cash or a certain amount of gold-containing materials, carry out some of these activities, especially pounding, milling and sieving.

This system of risk sharing involves a social contract between the team chief and his workers, comprising a kind of 'trade-off': the more unpredictable the yield, the greater the possible gain for the team chief in cases of success. On the other hand, a chief must satisfy the basic living requirements of mine labourers, regardless of yield. Miners recognise an effective team leader as someone who possesses knowledge of not only where and how to exploit gold veins and to organise the shifts, but also how to work efficiently, and how to excavate in ways which prevent injuries and accidents. An experienced team leader commands respect and prestige. Team leaders must fulfil their responsibilities to ensure that workers stay with them and do not join another team leader during the next extraction cycle. Hierarchies thus provide security for working arrangements. They are flexible enough so that former gold diggers may become shaft owners or team leaders, after acquiring experience, esteem and, of course, sufficient capital.

Gold is sold on site in small quantities to petty traders. Local weighing scales, as well as simple gold weights such as 1 F CFA coins and matchsticks, are used to determine selling value. The majority of local petty traders work as agents for master merchants, and comprise a large informal and international trading network (Grätz, 2004). Most gold traders also serve as moneylenders who, by providing timely loans, pressure miners into selling them their gold.<sup>7</sup> People work on the spot for the entire day; some even sleep in the galleries. Female and male petty traders usually cater to the workers, selling food and alcohol, as well as cigarettes and medicines. The mining community also consists of many traders and service providers. The miners seek good luck and work that is free from accidents. In the gold mining region of northern Benin, therefore, as well as at other sites, there are priests, diviners and *marabouts* as well as Pentecost churches, products of the demands of residents of mining communities and new markets.

Gold mining, especially the informal work in the mountain reefs, is arduous and associated with many economic social and physical risks (Grätz 2003a). Miners not only have to cope with the uncertainty of yields and thus the unpredictability of income,

<sup>2</sup> This paper mainly provides an account of male migrants. The gender dimension of gold mining is a very important aspect, but which is beyond the scope of the present discussion. See Werthmann, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The main local crops harvested include millet, sorghum, yams, rice and cotton.

<sup>4</sup> Mostly, these young men are either sons of farmers or craftsmen, unlike in other countries, where many are retrenched workers from other sectors (Drechsler, 2001; Hilson and Potter, 2005; Banchirigah, 2006). The region is characterised by agro-pastoralism, with few cash crops and a general shortage of income-earning options. Most of the young miners pursued employment in the mines, as opposed to the agricultural sector and other informal industries in towns, in-country or abroad (see also Maconachie and Binns, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Typical alluvial placer mining consists of excavation of pits using hoes and shovels; the extraction of gold-aggregated sediments; and washing/panning using sluices and pans. Occasionally, people use motor pumps as well as simple pans at the same site, depending on the financial assets of the teams or entrepreneurs. As alluvial mining follows the river sediments, larger trenches are created. Special wooden tablets are used that originate from a village in Togo. During reef mining, a miner uses pickaxes, chisels and sledgehammers to extract gold in mountain shafts, usually alongside one or two colleagues. Within mountainous areas, mining is much more strenuous and hazardous, but usually, yields contain more gold. The lode mining process consists of the extraction of gold-bearing rocks in galleries or pits; the pounding and milling of gold ore (performed mainly by women); and washing/panning to separate gold dust. Unlike miners in both Ghana and Burkina Faso, miners in Benin do not use crushing machines and mercury.

<sup>6</sup> In the Republic of Benin, all mineral resources are officially considered sole property of the state, which has the right to grant licenses for exploration and exploitation to larger enterprises (*Code Minier*), regardless of local property rights. Government policies have shifted from repeated expulsion of the miners to a partial tolerance of their activities: small-scale mining features in governmental strategies, but only to a limited degree (i.e. based on the mandatory organisation of all miners in cooperatives, the granting of mining permits to nationals only, the permission to operate on a few assigned alluvial gold fields, as well as the obligatory selling of gold to licensed traders to a fixed price, usually below the price on the illegal gold market). These rigid and disadvantageous regulations discourage people from mining legally, despite continued threats of expulsion, especially in reef mining areas.

<sup>7</sup> Miners tend to sell their gold immediately because of their constant need for cash flow, which, in turn, fuels the proliferation of the trade altogether.

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