

# Colonial gold mining in Northern Benin: Forced labour and the politics of remembering the past<sup>1</sup>

Tilo Grätz

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## Introduction

In 1939 the French colonial administration set up a gold mining scheme in the Atakora Mountains. Its goal was to increase the supply of gold and, hence, to augment the budget of the colony A.O.F. during the II World War. The system of exploitation was medium-sized and semi-industrial. The activities in Northern Benin were at the same time intended to explore the Atakora gold deposits, (over-) estimated as being very rich. For many older inhabitants, especially those who were compelled to work there, this period is still very present in their memories and often linked with narratives of suffering and exploitation frequently presented to a visitor.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I will explore the different strategies and attitudes of the colonial administration and the mining staff towards the organisation of daily labour and the way the workers adjusted<sup>3</sup> to the mining project. I will identify the main actors and their strategies during different periods of time. My focus is directed to the colonial period but I will also evaluate the post-colonial period in order to discuss continuities and major changes, especially with regard to the relations of local inhabitants towards the state.

My argument is that there is no coherent view today among those who were engaged in that venture, due mainly to their different positions in the mining hierarchy and their very personal strategies and experiences associated with that period.

The paper attempts to do more than contribute a piece to local colonial and post-colonial economic history. I will try to link history and its representations with the political agenda of today. Given the fact that in 1993 a new gold boom started in the region and several conflicts over the access to the mineral resources emerged, it attempts to show to what extent histories and their representations have been used by various actors to generate arguments and legitimacy for their political action today.

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<sup>2</sup> To my knowledge, there are no major works in the social sciences concerning the Atakora gold scheme.

<sup>3</sup> My usage of the term 'adjustment' refers to that of Goffman (primary and secondary adjustment; Goffman 1961), i.e. both as active and re-active.

In the first part, the text follows a chronological approach before exploring some aspects of the colonial mining enterprise in detail. The second part reviews the post-colonial exploration projects. In the third part I will refer to manual gold extraction<sup>4</sup> today and the ways in which references to history become significant.

### Pre-colonial and early colonial history of the Atakora region

The text deals primarily with the south-eastern part of Atakora mountain ridge, located in Northern Benin (former Dahomey), a region south of the provincial capital Natitingou. It is a sparsely populated area, the major villages are situated on the edge of the Atakora mountain range. Their inhabitants are predominantly Waaba, but many *Betammaribe* have also settled especially in its western parts. Most people are peasants growing yams, sorghum, millet, rice and engage in small animal husbandry. Many inhabitants are either Christian or Muslim – above all immigrants – but respect older religious traditions as well. People were forced to settle in larger villages by governmental decree in 1960.

In recent times the villages close to the mining areas; Kwatena and Tchantangou; grew considerably as an effect of the new mining boom after 1993, with an influx of many new settlers. Gold deposits are known to exist in the mountains veins, as quartzite layers, and in alluvial sediments along the Perma River and its tributaries.

Apparently, there was no pre-colonial indigenous artisan gold extraction in the Atakora region. Oral history and archaeological research to date, at least did not hint at local practices, such as the ones known in other parts<sup>5</sup> of Africa. This is probably due to a certain degree of isolation of the population in a region which provided shelter against slave raiders (N'Tia 1993). Some basic contacts were established with traders, but in contrast to other regions, no gold or gold products were exchanged in the northern Atakora at all, although the neighbouring Wangara and Dendi merchants did trade in gold from the beginning of 18th century onwards (Kuba 1996: 238). The major mineral product of the pre-colonial Atakora, however, was iron, which was extracted at several small sites and used to produce arms (Tiando 1993). Apparently, technologies of extracting and processing iron could not be used with regard to gold.

The first exploring missions of the colonial period arrived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the occupation of the southern parts of the colony. But it was only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the region of northern Atakora was effectively integrated into the colony *Dahomey et dépendances*. The colonial administrators met severe resistance, which led to a rebellion between 1916 and 1917 (Grätz 2000a). Up into the thirties, most parts of the region were under military administration.

The Atakora province (*cercle*) was founded in 1916, with the new provincial capital and its administration in Natitingou. The mining area of today was administered directly by a *chef de la subdivision*, who, after the creation of a larger urban district, became the *chef de la circonscription urbaine*. From the early thirties up to 1975, local headmen were installed as *chef de canton* to exercise power. This situation only changed during the

4 For historical studies on colonial gold mining see e.g. Kiethaga (1993) and Dumett (1993, 1998).

5 Pre-colonial gold mining is known basically for the historical regions of Bambuk (today's Mali) and southern Ghana, but also for areas in southern Burkina Faso. There were local small-scale sites as well as larger sites, the latter exploited by slave labour. From earliest, the gold trade, as well as gold-smithing was important especially in sudanic urban centres and kingdoms.

socialist period following the 1972 coup, when new rural communities (*communes rurales*) were established. In the eastern parts of the mountain ranges surrounding the gold mining areas, the local centre shifted to the village of Perma, which under the influence of a well established catholic mission, became an increasingly important market place. On the western fringe, Kotopounga became a centre for all villages on that side of the mountains.

### The discovery of gold deposits: first exploratory missions<sup>6</sup>

Mineral deposits in the Atakora region were already mentioned in documents from 1903 and 1908. Some amateur collections of precious stones (*échantillons de minerais*) were organised by colonial administrators. The first professional geological missions to explore mineral deposits were sent to the region in the twenties. According to Chermette (1963), the geologist Chetelat was the first to discover the gold deposits in the Atakora Mountains<sup>7</sup>, in 1927.

Later, it was R. Pougnet, a geologist at the Central Mining Board in Dakar (*Direction Fédérale des Mines et de la Géologie*) working in Dahomey between 1946 and 1952, and Chermette himself, who led the most important exploring missions up to 1963.

### The placer mining project and forced labour 1939-1945<sup>8</sup>.

#### Main actors and hierarchies

The establishment of a larger semi- industrial mining site alongside the Perma riverbank close to the village of Kwatena (Kouekari) began in 1939. The mining camp was set up close to the foothills of the mountain range. Some brick-layered houses were built for the expatriate staff as well as a couple of simple houses (round huts) to lodge groups of labourers. Young men from all over the Atakora region were compelled to work at least some months in the camp. The involvement of France in the Second World War in 1940 intensified activities there and led to the engaging of more personnel<sup>9</sup>.

From 1939 on, the enterprise was directed by a certain Chidaine, an expatriate mining engineer (at that time *ingénieur* as well as *agent du Service Géologie de l'AOF*), figuring as *président du placer*. He was responsible to the authorities in Porto-Novo and Dakar up to 1942. In Dakar, it was the Central Mining Board<sup>10</sup> (*Direction des mines AOF*) that coordinated all state-led geological research projects and exploitation schemes and super-

6 Some basic information derived from an internal report on the chronology of the subsequent exploration missions and exploitation projects in Dahomey, which was established in 1962 by Paul Vincent on behalf of the Bureau de Recherches géologiques et minières in Abidjan (Vincent 1962).

7 The Chetelat mission carried out its work between 1925 and 1927. It was initiated by the governor of Dahomey, Fourn.

8 The archival sources are rich for the period between 1939 and 1942 and there are almost no detailed accounts for the following period (1942- 1970). This is due to the fact that the mining scheme was handed over to a private enterprise after 1942, and government authorities were only involved to a lesser extent as supervisors.

Apparently, some early documents were simply destroyed because they were regarded as being useless for the new projects. Nevertheless, it seems that some maps from the 40s and 50s were partly used by the following projects as points of comparison, but access to them is limited.

9 "La guerre a modifié considérablement l'évolution de Travaux du Service des Mines à Perma puisque de la simple prospection, nous sommes passés au début d'octobre à la préparation intensive du gisement en vue de son exploitation; augmentant considérablement le personnel européen et indigène employé sur les chantiers" (lettre du chef du service des mines de l'AOF à Monsieur le gouverneur du Dahomey; Cotonou le 17. mars 1940, P.S. 25:2).

10 In 1951, the Direction des mines AOF in Dakar was composed of 35 geologists and 2 assistants. It coordinated research and exploration in all parts of A.O.F. (A.N. Direction des mines, rapport 31.12.51:3).

vised private enterprises in that sector. Furthermore, there were some French technical staff members as mining specialists and physician<sup>11</sup>. On a second hierarchical level, there were African staff members, mainly as supervisors and leaders of the working teams. Due to the lack of qualified expatriate staff, Chidaine had to promote African assistants as well. The majority of the latter were recruited in southern and eastern parts of Dahomey, not in the region itself.

In 1940 the overall number of people on the scheme was 6 European and 520 local labourers, divided into a larger unit of 5 European staff members and 500 local workers, and a smaller itinerant exploring team of one geologist and 20 local assistants (lettre du chef du service des mines de l'AOF à Monsieur le gouverneur du Dahomey; Cotonou le 17. mars 1940, P.S. 25, p.1). Later he appointed COMET as managing agent (*agent administratif*, AN letter from Chidaine to Dakar, 17.3.40; p. 2).

## Techniques and yields

A yield of 2,8 kg of gold had already been declared powder (*or en poudre*), consisting of two major lots, one of 1,5 kg and the other of 1,3 kg in 1939. Both quantities were sent by air as special freight to Dakar (rapport 3Q1-9; *radiogramme officielle*, 19.12.1939, and waybill) and later sent to metropolitan France (rapport 10.2.1940, *télégramme Dakar*). A second major report (20.1.1940) hints at a parcel of gold with the total weight of 4.3278 kg<sup>12</sup>.

In addition to these shipments, every month the project managers had to write a very specified report on the mining activities and especially on its yields. A detailed account "*procès-verbal de récolte et de pesée de l'or*", was written and signed by the members of a special committee<sup>13</sup> that listed the yield of gold (*recolte d'or*) for every minor working site (*chantier*) and every single extracting facility, i.e. the sluice boxes.

On arrival in Dakar, the lots were registered and weighed again by members of a special commission who wrote a new protocol (*procès verbal*) before melting the gold dust into ingots. The subsequent transport of the ingots to France was entrusted to the B.A.O. (*Banque d'Afrique Occidentale*) as intermediary, handing them over after further refinement to the state owned *Banque de France*. Chidaine was asked to establish once a trimester, his needs for credit (*demandes de crédit*), accompanied by detailed reports on all activities, the situation and numbers of staff and assistant workers and the expected salaries, plus justification for all demands in material and equipment. These accounts were addressed directly to the *secrétaire générale* (A.N. Lettre du S.G. Saliceti au Chef placer Perma, du 8.1.1940).

## Labour regime and composition of working teams

The expatriates were required to set up the working teams, with the help of African assistants. This was done on a daily basis. The work groups were formed according to the individual capacities of the workers, their roughly estimated physical strength and pre-

<sup>11</sup> At the time of the scheme, the staff at the Placer had repeatedly consulted Chermette as geological specialist. He was apparently entrusted with several exploratory missions from 1929 up to 1963.

<sup>12</sup> All reports say a great deal about the quantities of gold being extracted, not about the quality (in terms of purity, carat).

<sup>13</sup> The protocols were always signed by at least three commission members, in most cases by Chidaine, the mission head (chef de mission) of the Perma Placer and an 'ingénieur, président' of the commission, plus Goas and someone named Polce. Goas was listed in the record as *chef surveillant* des T.P., and Polce as *prospecteur* (e.g. *procès verbal* no. 11/ 03.03.1940).

vious experiences. This resulted in mixed teams in terms of ethnic origin and language skills. A team rarely worked together over a long period of time.

Because of the lack of more experienced local technical staff, some workers were even brought from the former Soudan /Mali (letter from *chef servives des mines* to *gouverneur* 15.3.40). The technician Goas was entrusted with that mission because he had worked previously in gold mining schemes in Soudan<sup>14</sup>. In a euphemistic manner, the local forced labourers were generally listed as contract workers, “*contractuels*”. There were two categories: those compelled to work only for one month, and others for 6 months.

Those working only for one month were needed for special tasks, e.g. to build channels, paths and houses, not for everyday activities. The reports indicate that money was spent on the workforce, although oral sources only mention salaries for supervisors and long-term hired workers. It is highly probable that the bulk of the funds listed were simply used for housing and buying food. Special stocks were established to ensure continual supply for the workers, not for altruistic purposes but to maintain a stable workforce. Later, a system of savings and credits (*pécules et caisse d'avance*) was set up, but only few could benefit from it. According to the central colonial authorities, it was up to the local administrator to decide which ethnic group (*race*) should be preferred.

### Narratives of hardship and suffering

All interviewees referred to the hard compulsory extracting works they or their fathers were compelled to do in that period<sup>15</sup>. Most of them underlined the central role of the village heads in supplying the labour force: they had to find strong young men and organised their enrolment on behalf of the colonial administration. When people refused, they were simply captured with the help of colonial police (*gardes du cercle*).

As gold mining was not known in that region before that colonial period, at the beginning people had no clear idea about the goal of the works they were obliged to do. The final extraction work, e.g. emptying the sluice boxes and the final washing or panning of gold, were only done on Saturday evenings. The expatriates themselves did this only after all assistant labourers had returned to their camps or homesteads and only in the presence of a few African staff members. This was apparently done to hide, at least for some time, the real intentions and results of the enterprise, to prevent informal, independent panning and, of course, to prevent the stealing of gold. But there were also other reasons which contributed to the fact that, for a long time, the local people did not start informal mining or panning. First, the mountain zones as well as large parts of the *Placer* area were forbidden zones with armed guards, which were, at least until the end of the 80s, more or less respected.

The second reason relates to the experiences in colonial times: many elder inhabitants who worked there during the period of forced labour still refer to the region as a bad place, simply because of the many dead who were not buried according to customary

<sup>14</sup> There were, unfortunately, no further descriptions of those people in subsequent documents or local memories. They returned home after 1945.

<sup>15</sup> «We were always driven by force. Only at night times we could have some rest. Every morning there were gatherings (sounds) to count all workers and to compose the working teams. We had to work from Monday to Saturday; only on Sundays there was some rest. Some of us from neighbouring villages could return to greet their parents, but most of all workers could not return until their assignment finished» (Kwiiga, Tchantangou, 2.02.01).

procedures. These older people were often against the employment of their sons at the mining site.

Nevertheless, not all interviewees referred to this work as something evil. Especially those who continued to work there into the fifties mentioned many positive facts. They were being paid relatively well and they enjoyed, especially when they became supervisors, houseboys, drivers etc., more respect and established better relations with both the staff of European and African origin.

It was reported very often that when it came to injuries, no medication was given. This changed later when a modest clinic was set up with an expatriate physician.

Except for the workers from the nearby villages, all miners who were compelled to work there had to live in small camps in the vicinity of the gold fields<sup>16</sup>. People from one region (as they arrived at the site) were put into one compound, regardless of ethnic or clan relations. Special stocks for staple foods were maintained. Twice a day a meal was offered. Once a week, a bull was slaughtered for the preparation of some more wholesome dishes.

It should be noted that there is no coherent view on these times among the older people, not only due to different personal experiences and positions in the mining schemes, but also because later experiences with less compulsory mining schemes and exploration projects in late colonial and post-colonial times overlay those of the early times.

## Memories concerning staff employees

Throughout the interviews, I detected very vivid memories concerning certain staff members, African or European. Their habits, especially their arrogance were often evoked. People often mentioned personal features; very few real names were remembered.

The interviewees often mentioned the person Beréberi (late Marcel Bagri, Kwatena, named him Dikaa, 14.02.01), an African staff member, as a severe supervisor, working at the scheme long before Chabi l'Appel, and Jean Tampeku, a married Zerma from eastern Dahomey. Bagri<sup>17</sup> also remembered Mounier, called "*the sergeant*", owning a truck and a car. This expatriate was living there with his wife and a French doctor. The workers struggled permanently to adjust to the very difficult conditions of work and life in the mining camp. On the other hand, they developed a series of methods of secondary adjustment (Goffman 1961), among others a kind of discursive resistance. One interesting aspect is the attribution of nicknames by the labourers to the white (French) staff members. The main supervisor (apparently Chidaine himself, Bagri 14.02.01) was called „*Tabekusu*“, deriving from *tabac*, tobacco, because he was always smoking "*with a big pipe*". Another one, Mounier, was constantly called "*sergeant*", because he was a former military man, now serving as supervisor. The name for the African employee "*Béri-Béri*" was probably associated with his "*big belly*". The same applied to Chabi Soumanou, called *Chabi l'Appel*, a personality people today refer to partially with disgust, partially with respect.

<sup>16</sup> «We were living in a camp close to the river, made up from many round houses. There were from 10 up to 20 persons in one single small house. All tribes («races») have been mixed. Among those living in a house people had to choose somebody who had to cook for the others, while he was freed from work» (Marcel Bagri; 14.02.2001).

<sup>17</sup> Bagri mentioned the following expatriates' names: Chidaine, Dika, Diflo, Gerard. It is yet difficult to attribute these names to individuals mentioned in the archival sources. A certain Penier was later a manager, apparently working as pay officer (Bagri 14.2.01 Kwatena).

Although there are no hints at direct sabotage, the labourers did little to increase the output, simply because they were not fully aware of the final results and were not rewarded (with shares, etc.) when production figures increased. Many labourers succeeded simply in fleeing from the works. Consequently, they had to leave the region or hide somewhere out of the reach of direct colonial control. In a letter to the governor of Dahomey, which dates from 28.1.1944 (A.N. 1<sup>E</sup>34-19, 1944 *rapport politique*, p. 2), the district commissioner (*commandant de cercle*) in Natitingou complains about the disappearance of too many workers. Apparently it seems he was entrusted to limit those movements and ensure further conscription.

### Relations of the mining staff with the colonial administration

Apart from the mentioned detailed accounts about yields, all other major production figures had to be reported. Archival sources reveal the tense relations of the local management especially with the mining authorities in Dakar. The latter were often dissatisfied with the yields in gold which arrived in Dakar, and always demanded an increase in production.

The correspondence between Chidaine and the director also points to major disagreements about the hiring policies. In those side glosses (to the letter from Chidaine to Dakar, 17.3.4; p. 2), the chief rejected many proposals to employ more administrative staff in the project as well as to charge some of the colonial administrative staff with managing tasks in the project.

In that period, it was the *secrétaire générale* in Porto-Novo who had to countersign every major document, especially those concerning the allocation of the budget and demands for new credits for equipment<sup>18</sup> and salaries.<sup>19</sup> The notes exchanged between both sides hint at tensions concerning sums and competence. According to a telegram sent by the S.G. in Porto-Novo and Chidaine (*télégramme officielle Porto-Novo 29.2.1940*), the overall sums provided for payment were fixed as follows: for the personnel 70 000 Francs, for unskilled labourers (*main d'oeuvres*) including maintenance, 140 000 Francs and for materials and equipments 100 000 Francs.

### Private exploration enterprises in the post-war period

As already mentioned above, in January 1942 the mining scheme was handed over to a private enterprise (*amodiation du placer*)<sup>20</sup>. The *Société des Mines du Dahomey-Niger* (S.M.D.N.) was entrusted with its further exploitation<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, it was still dominated by forced labour and exploitation ensured by the coercive means of the colonial state under martial law (Fall 1993). Thus, continuity in the period from 1942 to 1945 was established, for the workers there were no changes at all. The majority of staff members, above all the general manager Chidaine, remained.<sup>22</sup>

18 Chidaine drove a Citroen 2CV and had a truck at his disposal plus funds for fuel, as indicate the reports.

19 This complicated and inefficient system of management probably convinced the colonial state to privatise the scheme. The second argument may be the large investment the colonial state was not able or willing to provide.

20 I have not discovered to date the exact reasons for the partial retreat of the colonial state. It seems highly probable that this was due to the general uncertainty in administrative matters in relation to the occupied France.

21 I have not found information on the dividends or shares demanded by the colonial state.

22 The overall production of S.M.D.N in this period went up to about 900 kg Gold (Mining Board, Dakar report 1940, p.2). The average content of gold was estimated to be 0,6 g/m<sup>3</sup>.

The exploitation of the deposits decreased after 1945, and it seems that the mining company S.M.D. abandoned the major works from 1947 to 1956. The demand decreased, and coercion became less prevalent. In 1956, the site was ceded to a private French entrepreneur, Garnier, who started exploitation work again on a low level. According to Vincent (1992), in 1956 Garnier accomplished a production of 4 kg of alluvial gold.

Generally, the fifties saw more private engagements in the mining sector of Dahomey on the basis of special licences (*permis de prospection*) encouraged by the colonial state<sup>23</sup>. Although the state generally retreated more and more, mining activities were followed very closely by the authorities, as archival sources indicate. The authorities were especially interested in preventing tax evasion, which was possible by falsifying reports about the effective yield in gold (Direction des mines Dakar rapport annuel 1953, deuxième partie: activités, p.2). Similarly to the legal situation in Gold Coast / Ghana, the licences had to be renewed from time to time, which left a certain possibility for the state itself to take over the scheme after the end of a contract.

During the Garnier period (from 1956 to 1959), the overall activities at the *Placer* site were less important. The most significant change concerned the mining regime. Officially, forced labour in all provinces of French AOF was abolished by decree. Coercive means could no longer be employed, and people were paid minimal wages. Now, fewer people were engaged in the scheme, and work was executed by much simpler technical means. Instead of recruiting people from distant cantons, Garnier tried to enrol people from the nearby region in order to enable them to return to their compounds for some rest after several days. This system allowed him to avoid caring for new lodgings. He only had to maintain some few simple accommodations. The assistants and administrative staff members continued to be from southern regions.

Garnier was a former colonial military administrator who tried to earn a living as a private businessman, working together with some other former colonial employees, French and African partners. He also employed some people who had previously worked with the S.M.D.N. Garnier himself was not always personally present at the site. He employed a Dahomey supervisor to manage the scheme. At that time, the working regime was made more flexible. People could sign only for a week, or for some months, and thus many were able to leave the scheme in the rainy season to work on their fields. Work documents (*carnets de travail*) were used (the exact date of their introduction is not yet known). Every day of work was registered to ease payments. The staff members held the documents, but at the end of the last exploitation scheme, they did not hand any document over to the workers or to the local administration. Consequently, all those who were not engaged by subsequent projects (and they were few) had no chance to earn any kind of pension.

Few of the former staff members stayed in the villages until this time. This applies, for example, to the former exploration assistant – today the guard for the mining office – Orou Gani, who married one of the daughters of Chabi l'Appel and, lived with his family at the entrance of the *placer* site. One of the expatriate staff, the aforementioned “Sergeant”, was said to have been married to an African woman from the south and later lived with his family in Parakou until his death. The assistant worker Paul Koukoubou, son of a Baatombu father and a local Waaba mother, became a cook.

<sup>23</sup> The same policy, first to release licences for prospecting and in a second step to issue licences to exploit the deposits – with priority to the entitlement of exploring company - is still applied today.

According to my informants, the working shifts were organised in weekly turns. In each shift they had to work about 12 hours a day for up to seven days before being allowed to take a leave, also for seven days. They were replaced with new groups of workers.

The wages were low compared to the ones paid in other regions, although they represented an important sum for the people in the Atakora region where trade and monetisation were merely developing. It was Chabi Soumanou, called *Chabi l'Appel* who was now *the* major supervisor in charge of organising the mining scheme.

Chabi Soumanou, a *Baatombu*, was from Parakou. He followed the colonial road building projects as supervisor and translator. Being able to speak Dendi and later also Waaba, the administrators had a special liking for him apparently because of a special mixture between charisma and violent attitude. He was said to be strict, but sociable. Four wives and 20 children survived him. The permanent presence in Kwatena of the late Chabi Soumanou, from the forties on until his death, and his engagement with different mining schemes including those of the socialist period (see below) was an important factor in local power relations. His experience and income made him a *big man* over the years, wealthier and at least as powerful as the village head and the *chef de canton*<sup>24</sup>. His growing influence became a factor to count upon for all projects and governmental interventions (*l'incontournable*). This was in his last years also the case for the first miners of the new small-scale gold boom in Kwatena after 1993. At that time, he was no longer able to act as a mediator between the governmental authorities and the local population. His experiences were no longer apt to the new system of labour, with many shaft holders circumventing all official rules (see below). He died in 1999.

His sons are still present in the village, and refer to the colonial and post-colonial times a "period of order and respect".

### Between hope and disenchantment: exploring projects in the post-colonial period up to 1987

In 1959, on the eve of independence, exploration works ceased. The site was taken over by the newly founded B.R.G.M. (*Bureau Régional de Géologie et des Mines*) as local successor of the central colonial mining office in Abidjan. From time to time, further explorative missions were subsequently sent to the region. In the sixties, several exploratory projects sent to detect gold deposits were initiated by the state (OBEMINES) with the help of international donors (among them the UN) and other experts sent by the Soviet Union in particular. In 1972, a larger prospecting mission was set up. It was a joint project of the Benin Mining Board and the Soviet Union. For the first time, all zones were explored systematically and prospected throughout<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> "In the morning, he has been looking at your papers, and gave the names of the workers, he has been able to retrieve and to list them, and he was calling the name, e.g. "the named Nkwei"- and he answered "I am here" and so forth. In case you were not present that very day, your salary would be diminished. His name was Chabi l'Appel, for it was him calling up the names of the people, to list them" (Nata Kwagou, 22.12.2001, Kwatena).

<sup>25</sup>To date, gold has also been discovered on the Okpara river in the province, as well as close to the Mekrou river and the Sina-Issiré river and its tributaries and in some other minor places in the Atakora province. All known gold deposits with their estimated quantities are indicated on a general geological map of Benin, available at OBRGM\*, Cotonou.

Some years later, a new international mission financed by the United Nations boosted the project<sup>26</sup>. A detailed report of the activities between 1972 and 1981, containing the result of a finalising workshop with all project representatives at the *placer* in May 1981, was written in December 1981 with recommendations for future exploitation<sup>27</sup>. This exploitation by a larger scheme was intended to contribute considerably to the national budget. But no effective operation was realised due to the lack of capital and political will.

The majority of the employees of the exploration projects, not only specialised engineers and experienced geologists but also assistant technical staff, were employed in the south. Thus, only few local people benefited from their presence in the projects. From time to time, some local people were enrolled to help dig shafts and carry equipment. Others became houseboys or cooks, some were hired as drivers or pathfinders (*boussoleurs*).

After 1987, the deposits were simply abandoned but remained property of the state and, officially, the population was not permitted to enter this zone.<sup>28</sup>

### The gold boom since 1993: general situation

Generally, artisan-mining sites have developed all over West Africa and are shaped by a massive immigration, the development of new markets and settlement of strangers in a short period of time, especially in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire<sup>29</sup>. New communities are established by a massive immigration of miners, small entrepreneurs and businessmen, traders, barkeepers and those offering all other kinds of services. The exploitation of gold reserves is based on legal or illegal acquisition of use rights, by arrangements with local landowners, or theft of their land. Various local informal hierarchies and dependencies emerge concerning the organisation of labour, the sharing of profits, but also regarding the buying and selling of gold, equipment and services of all kinds.

A higher circulation of money in mining areas creates new consumer markets with increasing prices<sup>30</sup>. There is a variety of conflicts between immigrants and local settlers who often try to defend exclusive rights of exploitation. To a large extent, this holds

26 Between 1977 and 1987, a detailed list of all mineral deposits in the country was developed and it contributed to the drawing of a multicolored geological map (Carte géologique et de la prospection minière de reconnaissance, échelon 1:20000) with different subdivisions.

The tasks of geological exploration and documentation were divided among the different international teams by latitude: The soviet experts were responsible for the region between the 10th and the 11th degrees, French geologists (sent on the account of the Coopération Française) worked out the maps for the zone between the 9th and 10th degree. A third group of experts paid by the *Fonds Européen de développement* (F.E.D.) was responsible for two regions: northern Benin between the 11th degree and the border between the neighboring Burkina Faso, and a second zone in the south between the 9th degree and the coast.

27 «The thus obtained results are satisfying and should be followed. The works executed at the gold veins of the Perma sector are very promising; a geological reserve of 650 kg of gold metal with an average content of 9 grams per tonne has now been detected. The committee recommends that the OBEMINES and the Projet Minier take all measures to start with the next campaign, a pilot exploitation project of alluvial gold (or alluvionnaire) as well as mountain veins" (Rapport, p. 4, translation T.G.).

28 Some of the African staff were later granted some plots at the alluvial mining sites west of the placer, among them Paul Koukou-bou and Chabi l'Appel. The circumstances of these allocations are still unclear.

29 The artisan exploitation of gold mines can be seen as a reaction to a situation of crisis, especially in the agricultural sector, with fewer job opportunities, the effects of structural adjustment and the general devaluation of F CFA in 1994 causing higher living costs.

30 Gold-mining and gold-trade are thus part of an international legal and illegal system of economic exchange. They depend on changes in price and demands on the global market and the activities of numerous intermediary gold traders. During the last year, the gold price went down considerably. Many industrial enterprises were affected as well as individual miners. Today the price is once again stable.

also true for the gold boom after 1993 in the Atakora Mountains and the two important adjacent villages, Kwatena and Tchantangou, in Benin<sup>31</sup>.

With the growing illegal artisan gold mining, many immigrants came to find their luck. They started gold extraction in the mountains, slopes and rivers. To this date, nobody has worked on the basis of formal licences; instead, teams and local patrons have established their own rules and modes of labour organisation.

We have to deal with two main extracting activities: gold-mining, e.g. the chiselling of gold out of the mountain veins mines and pure gold panning, extracting gold on the riverbanks of the Perma River and its tributaries (with pans and sluices). Mining in the mountains is much harder work, but it is the vein of rock (Waama: *wura tanni*) which bears the most gold. On the other hand, the river gold (Waama *faaka ura*) or alluvium gold has a higher price because it is purer. In the mountains, the miners extract small rocks which later must be processed, i.e. cut into fine pieces and then milled into dust before the gold (Waama: *ura*) can be washed or panned out<sup>32</sup>. The miners work in ethnically mixed teams<sup>33</sup> headed by a team leader, *chef d'équipe*, or patron, who has the informal right to exploit a shaft or a certain plot of land. The *chef d'équipe* or patron has to supply the basic equipment, organise the working schemes and is obliged to supply his team with food. Every team shares the profits, i.e. the gold bearing stones directly on the spot. The *chef d'équipe* gets half of all the stones, then his *secrétaire* and the other workers receive their shares. Every miner then has to extract the gold on his/her own, although and in most cases, they employ assistants – mainly women – to pound and mill the stones. Especially the pounding, grinding and sieving work is carried out by women, who are paid either in money or in a certain amount of gold-containing material.

The Gold is sold as soon as possible in small amounts on the spot to petty traders<sup>34</sup>. Most of the local petty traders are agents for larger traders<sup>35</sup> as part of informal and international networks leading up to international gold traders (Grätz 2004).

## Gold mining, access to resources and the local political arena

Intervention by the central state started slowly<sup>36</sup>. In Benin, the gold rush of 1993 was initially not recognised by the state at all. In 1996, after visiting the spot, a militia was

31 At the end of 1993, knowing about the gold extractions in the past, some migrants from Togo arrived in Tchantangou seeking gold. As government control was not directly exercised – also due to the period of political transition in Benin, – they started to test the gold tenure. Soon many more arrived, especially from Togo and Burkina Faso, because gold was found near the surface on the abandoned exploration sites of OBEMINES. The miners were helped by coordinating markers (marking the gold veins) left by previous scientific explorers.

32 The major gold processing cycle may be described as follows: Exploration of gold mines - Removal of sand and gravel, digging of pits and tunnels - Chiselling of rocks in the gallery -Transportation of stones to the surface- Pounding and grinding of stones - Washing and cleaning to extract gold - Selling the gold to petty traders.

33 The tendency to create ethnically mixed teams is also due to the high number of immigrant miners willing to be hired (above all in the dry season). Competition occurs more between teams from different villages and to a lesser degree between those of different ethnic origin.

34 For a hard day's work miners may earn between 1 and 50€ a day.

35 The way in which gold trading networks are organised is similar to trading systems in rural markets where trading agents act as intermediary buyers on behalf of big traders (e.g. as described by Mahir Saul for Burkina Faso, 1997). The main difference here is, however, not its (official) illegality, but its heterogeneity in terms of the ethnic and social background of traders on different levels of the system.

36 The start of a "gold-rush", i.e. the massive immigration of gold-diggers, does not only depend on whether the site is controlled by the state, a mining company or not at all. After a first gold-rush, it is difficult for governmental authorities to re-establish a monopoly on violence. They usually deploy security forces first and then establish better systems of controlled exploitation and trade. However, the general policy of the central state in this area differs from country to country. In Burkina Faso, the intervention of the state is much stronger, due to a longer tradition in industrial as well as small-scale (nonindustrial) exploitation, but the fact that there are permanently new mines being discovered or reopened creates a dynamic shift which is difficult to respond to (Werthmann 2000).

deployed by the government to push all miners out of the region. The governmental authorities tried several times to expel the miners by force and confiscated equipments, money and gold. But in the long run, they had little success. At first the guards of the *gendarmerie* deployed at the site became corrupt, allowing further mining against bribes. Once the militia was withdrawn many miners just returned to the gold fields. Hence both adjacent villages grew big, new markets were established<sup>37</sup>.

Since the beginning of the gold boom, state policy towards the miners has changed frequently. In 1999, governmental politics shifted towards a partial legalisation. Since then a series of negotiations has started, aimed at organising gold miners into cooperatives and at selling their gold to the state. This process has not been concluded. At the end of 2001, new expulsions took place, principally to drive foreigners out of the mining region. The governmental strategy seems to be to split the miners; to pay those willing to collaborate with the state against others; to reward the first to get others out of business. When miners are divided – which is rarely the case – they may achieve an easier entry into that field. Generally, the representatives of the Ministry of Mines follow a threefold (and rather contradictory) policy. On the one hand they engage in negotiations with the miners. They aim at attaching the legalisation of their activities to the condition of an acceptance of steady co-operatives and, above all, to some commercial control (to sell gold to governmental agents). Acknowledging the reality of immigration, the flux of people hard to control, they do not try to implement general prohibitions and do not insist on fixed territories of exploitation any longer. On the other hand, they try – with little success up to now – at least to keep foreigners (from Togo, Burkina, Niger) out of the gold mining region.

In parallel with that process, the director of the mining department attempts to convince development agencies to intervene or at least, to allocate resources allowing the state to organise the mining scheme and appropriate the commercialisation of gold. Another agenda is the permanent hope for further foreign private investment; to get more medium sized enterprises to intervene. The Anglo-American enterprise ORACLE working there since January 2001 has proved to be – much to the distress of the mining board – a very small enterprise, creating only few jobs and interested in exploiting the whole area. In case they are willing to invest, they may, however, enjoy absolute priority over the small-scale miners.

In any case, the semi-autonomous social field<sup>38</sup> established by the specific arrangement of actors and their assets in these gold mining areas is largely out of the control of the central state.

## Relationships between local inhabitants and immigrants

At first, the local population was to a certain extent, hostile to the immigrants, but later accepted their presence. They simply had no chance: the immigrants were too many. To-

<sup>37</sup> The first point of entry was the village of Tchantangou. In Kwatena, guards were on duty and settlers were initially hostile to foreigners. Furthermore, Tchantangou was closer to Natitingou and its bus and taxi station. Later, Kwatena too became an immigration village. Both villages, especially Tchantangou, grew much bigger, the market expanded, bars were opened and even cars were sold. Prices increased even in the town of Natitingou. News of the gold site spread quickly among migrant miners in the towns and villages of Northern Benin. Often, the drivers of the mini-buses that connected remote places in the country with the towns who were the most important messengers.

<sup>38</sup> Here I refer to an expression introduced by Sally Falk Moore (1978) in legal anthropology in the seventies when trying to analyse legal heterogeneity in Africa as well as in the West. It refers to a special arena where rules, hierarchies and institutions developed beyond the state and followed unofficial but locally accepted rules.

day, there are various informal arrangements and “contracts” between the immigrants and the locals. The latter cannot<sup>39</sup> claim exclusive rights in exploiting the gold resources, but rather try to get their own share.

Nevertheless, many of them are, in fact, profiting from the immigrants’ presence in various ways: They are providing services and food for the immigrants; they are sharing a considerable part in the market. They managed to make the immigrants pay rent for houses, accept some basic rules and, from time to time, pay “taxes” and make contributions to community affairs, for instance to build a primary school and wells, but also to religious ceremonies, so they could indirectly profit from the gold boom<sup>40</sup>. Many of the local youngsters became gold miners too, employing techniques they learnt from immigrant miners, or are combining gold mining with the agricultural sector.

Immigrants are more accepted in the host villages when they follow the “local rules”, e.g. not to settle in territories without permission, not to cultivate without permission, to accept the village head as conflict arbiter, etc<sup>41</sup>. Conflicts often emerge when they disregard these arrangements, especially when trying to settle without making agreements with the locals.

At the same time, multiple conflicts are occurring within the local communities as well. Local power holders must concede a part of their power not only to strangers and their leaders, but also to youngsters, these no longer need to leave the community for paid work and to get a chance to maintain, at least, some control and prestige and to supervise the way in which the social landscape is shaped. In this context, the traditional supremacies of certain local groups, villages and their social networks may also be challenged. In this power balance between different local and immigrant *big men* and their followers, negotiations take place about access to resources, ways of settlement and of conflict resolution.

### Histories and locality<sup>42</sup> in the local political discourse

Generally, social and political power depends largely on the capacity of individuals and groups to obtain a minimal degree of legitimacy of their action. Thus, powerful interest groups do not only depend on the ability to maintain internal cohesion, but also need to influence the local discourse legitimising political action and authority. Many local inhabitants in Kwatena argue that they were the “real landlords”, the autochthonous people. Many point the fact that the local people were the first – in times of colonial enforcement – to work at the sites. Immigrants, especially foreigners, have, therefore, to

39 In some few cases, villagers in Burkina Faso effectively prevented immigrant gold miners from entering their territories, see Werthmann (2000).

40 These included special duties and “taxes”, shares from the gold profits and the imposition of high rents on the houses they built with their profits. Especially in Tchantangou, the village head and his followers became rich quickly, often investing their profits in the gold trade and materials to equip working teams from the village itself. The village head became a member of a Protestant sect but he was also in close contact with the earth priest (*chef de terre*).

41 The immigrants live in small camps, renting houses with local landlords or tuteurs. The immigrants themselves have constructed some of them. They have to pay dues to the village heads. The tuteurs (Waama: *n caantè*) are also some type of patron through which the immigrants establish relations with other villagers. The tuteurs allow “their” clients partial integration into the local community.

42 An important way of establishing control over the immigrants is also – as I would call it – the strategic use of local religious beliefs and the specific construction of locality and cultural competence, which empowered some parts of the local population against strangers. The discourse of supremacy, especially over foreigners, was related to their religious knowledge linked to local shrines, holy places and to specific constructions of autochthony.

consult the local authorities and obey the religious principles set by the locals<sup>43</sup>. Some elders are completely against any gold extraction especially at sites where many people died in colonial times.

We have to deal with the strategic use of tradition, history<sup>44</sup> and local religious beliefs, the specific construction of locality as discursive strategy<sup>45</sup> in search of bargaining power against strangers. Thus, there are two competing discourses:

- one pointing to “autochthony” connected to land and exploitation rights, put forward mainly by people from Kwatena,
- and the other pointing to the first effective exploitation of gold and a higher expertise in terms of exploitation techniques, used mainly by the immigrants.

At the end of 1998, severe disputes broke out between the villages over the use rights of a prosperous mountain vein. Even the prefect had to intervene to settle the conflict. Finally, an agreement was concluded allowing teams of each village to exploit the shaft one week at a time. In the debate, the village head of Kwatena also demanded the control over the surrounding territory “because of the Waaba shrines belonging to his village”. The villagers of Tchantangou argued that they were the first to exploit the new site, when assisting the first immigrants.

As mentioned before, the *Waaba* lineages of Kwatena, according to their official tradition, were the first settlers in the region, before the arrival of *Tchantangou* – clans and other ethnic groups such as *Betamaribe* and *Fulbe* pastoralists. The construction of *autochthony*, using historic events and religious facts, were again the main arguments in legitimising their demands. But the affair made a very different turn. In a reconciliation mission headed by the local administrator and the prefect, the latter argued that since colonial times people from all over the Atakora region were forced to work there; today, in principle no one should be excluded. It was argued that all were affected by the “slave labour in colonial times, therefore, gold extraction today should be an affair of all *fils de l’Atakora*, everyone had parents who suffered at that time- except foreigners and people from other regions. People should only seek official licences. The dispute was settled also using references to local history, but this time to create a limited inclusion of people in villages, the ones close to the mining sites. This discourse, using historic reminiscences, at the same time excluded others, especially southerners and foreigners.

There are three facts which hinder any major outbreak of open conflicts between immigrants and locals for the moment. First, many working teams in the gold mining are multiethnic networks. Second, most of the immigrants rent houses with local landlords. Third, there are many mixed marriages between immigrant men and local women and vice versa. These ties enable a minimum degree of social integration.

43 Many older inhabitants of Kwatena still disapprove of the activities in the mountains because of certain religious sites, shrines and holy places of the Waama, which, according to them, are being destroyed or dishonoured. These holy places are associated with local earth cults, ancestor worship and divining ceremonies. Thus, accidents are still interpreted by many of them as a sort of revenge of the local spirits inhabiting these “bad” places under a curse.

44 This argument is not shared by the local population, nor by many African scientists, who often take a certain natural supremacy of local inhabitants and their right to defend “patrimony”, tradition and identity for granted.

45 “Power rests not simply on the acquisition of land and material objects but rather derives from unequal access to semantic creativity” (David Parkin, 1982).

## Conclusion: Continuities and change, narratives and politics

My paper has revealed two political tendencies dominating the gold mining area today. Both the historical experience and the present situation point to many differences but also to similarities. As regards the relationship between the small-scale miners and the state authorities, there are various continuities. In all periods, the state considered gold deposits as natural resources and sole property of the state. All actions were legitimised as being good for “the public interest”. The state, however, changed its attitude very often and subsequently employed divergent, incoherent politics. Another continuity refers to the problematic relationship between the African mining staff, mostly recruited in the south of the country, and the local inhabitants. The latter were only employed for minor tasks, and could rarely benefit from gold exploration or exploitation. Exceptions were some assistants like Chabi l’Appel who profited at lot from his intermediate position, continuing in the post-colonial period. It was the gold boom of the nineties which broke his power because he and his family could not cope with the massive voluntary immigration and the patronal organisation of small-scale mining teams.

The second observation is related to the importance of history: colonial history, as it is (differently) experienced and represented, serves as a tool generating discourses relevant in the political struggles of today. Arguments pointing to the supremacy of actions and decision-making due to autochthony are becoming very important. It is particularly relevant the discourse of the opinion leaders of those local communities vis-à-vis the outside world. Their actual effectiveness against counter – discourses and social relations in practice may be limited for the time being. These discourses, nevertheless, influence the local political culture.

The future development of small-scale gold mining is far from predictable.

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