Katja Werthmann (2009), *Bitteres Gold: Bergbau, Land und Geld in Westafrika*, Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, ISBN 978-3-89645-821-6, 260 pp.

Africa is an important sourcing region for the global supply of industrial and precious metals and has been so for a long time. Much research has examined the impact of industrial mining on local societies, such as the emergence of a working class and urbanization, particularly in Southern Africa. Only recently has artisanal mining become a highly researched topic, most prominently in relation to war economies such as in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but also in relation to how it competes with foreign direct investment (FDI) in industrial mining. Katja Werthmann's book comes out of a third, anthropological research tradition, which is interested in the moral economy of artisanal mining in the ancient gold-mining areas of West Africa. Placing her study in this latter strand of writing, Katja Werthmann describes the emerging social order of a new artisanal gold-mining field and the surrounding settlements in the southwest of Burkina Faso, which she has been observing since 1998. Asking how people deal with and make sense of the rapid economic and social change a gold rush brings about, she focuses on the perspective of the local village population on gold mining, as well as on the social world of the gold-mining camps.

The book describes these mining settlements as "heterotopias" (Foucault 1967): non-places or anti-places that are not thinkable and have no place in the norms of general society. They are referred to as *un monde apart* by the miners themselves. One of the arguments of the book is that this "world apart" is not a world without rules and norms. As in other cases of gold rushes, such as in California or the Witwatersrand, the wildness of the "wild west" is tamed by the emergence of a new social order. Except for a brief initial period of a few weeks, political and social structures of ordering quickly emerged in this Burkinabé mining region – from relations of cooperation to power inequalities within the mining settlements to state interventions. Werthmann not only describes political and social structures, she also argues that the people in the mining camps develop a collective identity, making the camps a "temporal aggregation of a translocal community" (29).

The book starts with a brief review of the social science literature on mining and socio-economic change in Africa and beyond, bringing together debates from history, political science and anthropology that are not often connected. Framing her topic as a cultural and social study of artisanal mining as part of a local subsistence economy, Chapter 1 shows in what respects her approach differs from research focusing on the politics and sociology of min-

ing mentioned at the beginning. What is somewhat lacking, however, is a discussion of how these literatures are actually linked and how she expects her study to contribute to or challenge existing work.

After a reconstruction of the more general history of artisanal gold mining in West Africa in Chapter 2, the book zooms in on her case study in the southwest of Burkina Faso. Chapter 3 describes the effect of gold mining on the local village communities. Gold mining – and with it the sudden arrival of thousands of foreigners – increased the economic opportunities for some, but it also brought conflict over land rights and social order. Compared to my own work on Katanga and Guinea, I was struck by the fact that villagers in Werthmann's study rarely engage directly in mining themselves. What is similar to Katanga and Guinea, however, is that mining and some sort of (quasi) state formation are closely interrelated. In Werthmann's case study, state policing was enforced: A *gendarmerie* post was opened at the mining settlement, whereas no such post existed in the area before, and the state-owned gold-marketing agency, which also has policing functions, established a presence as well (80).

In Chapter 4, she moves away from the perspective of the villagers to describe the organizational structures of and everyday life in the mines and the gold-mining settlement that emerged next to the village. Most interesting to me was her discussion of the power and authority of the *délégué*, the elected representative of the miners, who turns out to be a powerful and feared figure in internal conflict regulation and resource distribution. In the eyes of the miners, he seems more important than any of the state agents. She links her analysis of the *délégué* as "big man" to the literature on the same phenomenon in other mining areas (e.g. Lentz 1998), as well as to the broader debate about such political entrepreneurs and forms of neopatrimonial rule and conflict (e.g. Médard 1992; Elwert 1999)(124-127).

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 look at gold mining through the lens of the anthropology of money and gender. Werthmann describes how the gold-mining activities give rise to conflict over land use and access to resources. She argues that because of these conflicts and the physical and moral dangers associated with gold mining, gold is perceived by village communities in the region as a potentially dangerous resource. People refer to it as "bitter gold". Chapter 6 discusses changes in what wealth from gold is used for in light of the recent anthropological debate about the effect of modern money on subsistence-oriented societies. One issue is that, traditionally, gold was not supposed to be used for the purposes of reproducing kin relationships, but this has changed. Chapter 7 argues that these gold-mining settlements constitute a "translocal community". Gender relations, patterns of consumption and solidarity build communal ties, but being stigmatized from the outside –

villagers portray those in the mining settlements as "criminals", "prostitutes" and "outcasts" – also contributes to a self-perception of being a group with a shared identity, though a heterogeneous and mobile one. The final chapter deals with why people squander their earnings in the mining settlements, an observation made in many mining communities. The author argues – and while it is not a new argument, it is a very convincing one – that this is not irrational behaviour, but rather a form of redistribution that is part of a particular moral economy guaranteeing the internal cohesion of these mining communities.

Katja Werthmann has written an insightful anthropological study of the local political, social and economic dynamics of a new artisanal gold-mining settlement in Burkina Faso. Her findings about local cooperation and conflict, political reconfigurations, and social and moral changes are well rooted in the narratives of those involved in or affected by artisanal mining. The study has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of how people organize and make sense of their actions in situations of sudden economic opportunity and change. However, a more in-depth interpretation of the material and a more clearly spelled-out line of argumentation would have been appreciated. The book would have also gained from making more explicit where it contributes something new to the literature and/or challenges existing findings about similar situations, such as the gold rushes in California or the Witwatersrand in the nineteenth century, the social and political dynamics of other traditional artisanal mining regions in West Africa, or mining communities in conflict-ridden places such as the DRC. A concluding chapter might have helped in this regard.

- Jana Hönke

References

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