

Robyn d'Avignon, *A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savanna West Africa*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press (hb US\$104.95 – 978 1 4780 1583 3; pb US\$27.95 – 978 1 4780 1847 6). 2022, xvi + 304 pp.

This book is a tremendous contribution to current reflections on the relation between extractive industries and development. It shines a light on the vastly understudied role of West African artisan miners – or *orpailleurs* – in the history of geology and gold mining in the region, against the backdrop of a 'corporate enclosure of goldfields' (p. 6). It weaves together archival and ethnographic work that accounts for the way in which *orpillage* has taken shape historically, materially, ethically, socially and politically. Most of the time this involves dealing with spirits and otherworldly earth guardians, and therefore has a lot to do with ritual management. Hence, 'a ritual geology'. Far from an exoticizing tale, it claims to be a regional one and also makes important interventions in current debates about extractivism.

A key intervention I see is in the way in which *A Ritual Geology* sheds a new light on what Lahiri-Dutt called 'extractive peasants'.<sup>1</sup> *Orpillage*, and artisan mining in general, is a bit of a misfit in critical agrarian studies and debates around extractivism. It is often either presented as a villain, as an actor of the environmental depletion and labour exploitation that are produced by the human greed that characterizes extractive frontiers, or as a victim of this situation. Making the Juura, the *orpillage* site, the central matrix of the book brings up questions about its history and reveals the depth of lifeworlds that complicate this dichotomy. It is, for example, hard to view *orpillage* as a villain knowing, as d'Avignon shows, that the goldfields of West Africa were historically sites of refuge, from slave raids (p. 181) or from colonial head taxes (pp. 87, 118). *Orpillage* was also not a 'first choice' livelihood, but undertaken in times of crisis, to extract gold that could be bartered for grain during famines (pp. 49, 167, 175).

*Orpailleurs* are not quite victims either. Although a significant predicament of the book lies in showing the racialized construction of the terms 'artisanal' and '*orpilleur*', the end game of this demonstration is in showing how *orpillage* is also a political force. '*Orpillage*' was constructed under the French colonial regime as a lower-ranking job compared with that of 'miners' (p. 10) and 'engineers' (p. 126). Ritual is key to this hierarchization. When *orpillage* was relegated to the lower rank of 'customary' mining, this partly operated through its relation to certain 'beliefs' of West African artisanal miners, and despite the fact that these beliefs were often akin to those in certain regions of the metropole (p. 81). D'Avignon's archival work further unravels the important role that these 'beliefs' played in the formation of modern-day geology, although they became progressively erased from geological maps (p. 127). This echoes, and extends further back into history, Luning's demonstration of *orpillage* as key (and unpaid) pathfinding labour for mineral exploration companies in the 2010s in Burkina Faso.<sup>2</sup> In demonstrating that a similar process was under way in the 'colonial geology' and 'mineral mapping' of the Cold War era, d'Avignon restores the ironic intellectual contribution of African artisan miners underlying

<sup>1</sup> K. Lahiri-Dutt (2018) 'Extractive peasants: reframing informal artisanal and small-scale mining debates', *Third World Quarterly* 39 (8): 1561–82.

<sup>2</sup> S. Luning (2014) 'The future of artisanal miners from a large-scale perspective: from valued pathfinders to disposable illegals?', *Futures* 62: 67–74.

contemporary frontiers. Yet d'Avignon's intervention here is not only that *orpaillieurs* have been dispossessed by racialization, but that they are authors of history – not as brute labour, but as intellectuals, and therefore they have power.

There are several other ways in which *orpaillage* appears as a political force. The power of *orpaillage* manifests in the various 'concessions' made to *orpaillage* groups over time, to contain contestation by a 'volatile' *orpaillage* population (p. 106), which reveal *orpaillage* as a true 'organized political constituency' (pp. 154, 176) to be reckoned with. It also shows in the way in which the French colonial regime resisted mining industrialization in the colony, for fear of a potential 'proletarianization' of the *orpaillieurs* (pp. 105, 109). In a context where the welfare epithet of the state is largely absent, the political force of *orpaillage* also manifests in the skilful navigation of post-colonial national borders by gold traders in search of the best gold price, which almost re-signifies smuggling as a form of political resistance (p. 103).

But as the book recentres the history of the current gold-mining frontier in West Africa on the role of Africans, it also raises questions about the relations between African actors with varied privileges. Gender is a case in point, when the role of women's gold-panning work, maintained in times when gold was least profitable, made sufficient traces in memory and landscape to ensure that geologists would find places that became mapped as '*anciennes mines de femmes*' (p. 120). One wonders whether the intellectual work and contribution of African miners is gendered. It would seem from previous work that the ritual management of artisan gold mining certainly is.<sup>3</sup> And so one wonders whether the racial amnesia about the role of African miners in West African mining history is also gendered, and what role (gendered) ritual geology plays in that dynamic.

But, in the end, if *orpaillage* is a political force, this book is too – and it begs a question about the role of scientific interventions in current 'corporate enclosures'. There seems to be much food for thought about the management of our global mineral commons through a ritual geology that acknowledges gold as a 'dangerous' (p. 61) substance with 'a price' (p. 161), and that emphasizes an ethic of 'taking one's share' and leaving some underground 'for the unborn and the otherworldly' (p. 206). These are productive principles in rethinking the regulation of the corporate mining frontier as well as the artisan one. My hope is that the political journey of this book can be extended through translations into languages and debate forms other than English, academia and the written word.

Muriel Côte

Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Email: [muriel.cote@keg.lu.se](mailto:muriel.cote@keg.lu.se)

doi: [10.1017/S0001972024000408](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000408)

<sup>3</sup> A. Ouédraogo (2020) 'Les détentrices de hangars de traitement de l'or face à la technique de cyanuration (sud-ouest du Burkina Faso)', *Journal des Africanistes* 90 (1): 168–87.