

BOOK REVIEW

A ritual geology: Gold and subterranean knowledge in Savanna West Africa

By Robyn d'Avignon. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022. 304 pp.

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Artisanal gold mining in West Africa is often imagined through scenes of desperation and social dislocation, where places and their histories are obliterated. Such visions reflect contemporary anxieties surrounding open-pit mining, which is optimized to leave nothing of value behind. Robyn d'Avignon's excellent book *A Ritual Geology* reframes mining as an altogether different nexus of social worlds, as she takes on many centuries of small-scale gold mining—*orpaillage*, as her interlocutors call it—that have played out atop what is now Senegal, Mali, and Guinea. This long history of *orpaillage* is interwoven with patterns of migration and seasonal movement; shifting ethnic and religious subjectivities; and competing languages for asserting knowledge and jurisdiction. Understanding these strands, d'Avignon shows, is critical for appreciating gold's role as a “famine resource” for millions of West Africans, and for understanding how its attending ethics of engagement effectively regulates access to gold-bearing *juuras* (a Maninka term for a dry-season mining site) for nearby residents and traveling strangers alike.

A Ritual Geography is divided into well-organized ethnographic and historical chapters. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the Kédougou region of eastern Senegal during a global gold exploration boom, d'Avignon's contemporary chapters focus on dispute resolution and knowledge practices in functioning *juuras*; postcolonial challenges to “customary” rights in emergent disputes between *orpailleurs*, Senegalese elites, and corporate miners; and shifting articulations of Muslim identity surrounding *juura* management and gold-based wealth. Interleaving these are historical chapters on precolonial *orpaillage*, including the migration-assisted development and circulation of African geological knowledge and mining techniques; 20th-century encounters between African *orpailleurs*, French geologists, and colonial administrators; and the Cold War-era emergence of the Senegalese state. Throughout, d'Avignon presents dynamic portrait of *orpaillage* as simultaneously a dry-season livelihood practice, a zone of social reproduction, and a complex knowledge economy.

West Africans have long treated gold as a commodity, whose broad distribution in ancient alluvial deposits makes it critical when local crops fail and other trade goods are scarce. Many ethnolinguistic groups in West Africa have practiced *orpaillage* over the past millennium in response to shifting environmental and economic conditions, and the ways that specific groups understand their own senses of place stem in large part from how they have been incorporated into mining work and wealth sharing in specific *juuras*.

As d'Avignon's title suggests, West African engagements with gold play out across expansive cosmological frames. In addition to recognizing gold's unique fungibility, *orpailleurs* also understand the mineral as the property of underground spirits. D'Avignon shows how *orpailleurs* engage occult forces in day-to-day work, particularly as they decide when, where, and with whom to work, and how to make sense of their neighbors' misfortunes. Rich deposits require substantial propitiation, d'Avignon notes, a correlation that occasionally fuels rumors of human sacrifices while also complicating debates over debts owed to specific sites and to one another. Colonial geologists noting these beliefs and their attending rituals mainly marveled at the idea that territorial spirits could literally cause gold to move between sites in response to greed, insufficient sacrifices, and other ethical violations. D'Avignon, however, trains our attention on the contingent sense of access that *orpailleurs* develop around gold, and on the many day-to-day practices transformed by this tension.

Jarring with alarmist portrayals of “artisanal mining,” d'Avignon's account notes the widespread insistence that the fruits of *orpaillage* be shared and that time spent mining be balanced with other kinds of work to attenuate risks from unhappy spirits. More subtly, though, d'Avignon's attention to the ways *orpailleurs* negotiate these pressures offers a robust empirical framework for understanding how identity claims come to matter in contemporary mining and mineral exploration. In the book's seventh chapter, tensions surrounding Muslim participation in *orpaillage* become a vantage point

for understanding the changing meaning of religion and ethnicity in West African history writ large. Working with gold yields “fast” money suffused with risk; crowded mining sites and corporate-run exploration camps can become sites of prostitution and other activities that Muslim men must consciously avoid. As historically high gold prices bring more Muslims into orpaillage and complicate the responsibilities of the *dugutigi* (Maninka: master of the land) in charge of propitiating spirits and managing disputes within juuras, the ways that Muslims reconcile these pressures will shape the claims that they and other West Africans make on the Senegalese state, mining corporations, and other institutions seeking to control the terms of gold development throughout the region.

Like most of anthropology’s rituals, orpaillage demands specialized knowledge. It also secures forms of life under threat. The relationship between these qualities underscores *A Ritual Geology*’s chief intervention. D’Avignon concludes by reiterating that Kédougou’s gold ought to be understood as a famine resource and that conversations about orpaillage’s futures (including the ecological effects of increasing arsenic and mercury use among orpailleurs) ought to be more carefully integrated into critiques of corporate mining. Just as urgent, however, is the need to understand orpaillage as intellectual history, a development first set into motion as Maninka speakers moved across, worked, and redescribed the lands of western Africa, then elaborated through many decades of exchanges of knowledge and techniques between African orpailleurs and

successive generations of white and African geologists and mining engineers—the credentialed experts who represent the Birimian Greenstone Belt and its possible futures for international audiences. The rich, diverse exchanges analyzed here contrast starkly with many ethnographies of mining, in which efforts to demarcate “informal” mining from megaprojects often occlude decades of collaborative surveying, concept exchange, and political dialogue preceding mine construction. D’Avignon highlights an unsettling comparison: African intellectual labor and its influence on internationally circulating concepts concerning geological regions and mining techniques are often effaced in corporate-authored “discovery” stories about mines, too. These omissions have transformed contests over land rights and royalties, where written technical knowledge about ore bodies validate ownership claims and proposals for large-scale development. More broadly, though, recognizing Africans as intellectual actors remains critical for understanding the myriad ways that their specialized knowledge transforms other forms of life. Historians of geology, anthropologists focused on mining, and anyone interested in the relationship between West Africa’s futures and its *longue durée* will all find this book tremendously valuable.

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