

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 7 No. 1, April 2023

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-7-issue-1-april-2023/>

Robyn d'Avignon, *A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savannah West Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

Reviewed by: Ralph A. Austen, University of Chicago.

Robyn d'Avignon has set herself a very ambitious task in this multi-disciplinary study of gold mining in French-speaking West Africa and, in very great part, she succeeds. The central subjects of the book are *orpailleurs*, the indigenous “artisanal” miners of this region, whose history d'Avignon traces from the medieval era of trans-Saharan trade, through the early-modern Atlantic period, the epoch of French colonial rule, and various stages of postcolonial development and neo-liberal economic policy. In order to combine her historical and anthropological training (including fifteen years of fieldwork), d'Avignon focuses upon a specific region, Kédougou in southeastern Senegal, where small-scale African gold extraction has both deep local roots and a shorter-term, but intense experiences of confronting expatriate “industrial” mining enterprises.

The “ritual geology” of d'Avignon's title refers to the *orpailleurs*' understandings of where in their landscape they are likely to find underground gold deposits and how to propitiate (via various sacrificial rituals) the spiritual forces that control the supply of this precious metal. The *orpailleurs*' respect for the preternatural aspects of gold mining is linked by d'Avignon to a moral economy of behavior towards their fellow artisanal miners as well as more impoverished neighbors, all of whom are entitled to shares in the gold-bearing rocks extracted from mining sites.

While this book can be read as a defense of the *orpailleurs* against European scorn for their “primitive” technology and “superstitious” beliefs, d'Avignon also insists on a mutual dynamism in relations between artisanal and industrial mining in Kédougou. European geologists—whose history in Senegal is graced in great detail here—did come to respect African ability to find gold deposits. French colonial governments (and eventually their post-independence successors) also appreciated the economic contribution of this “informal” economic sector, which required little public expenditure. The *orpailleurs*, in turn, adopted a great deal of European technology, a practice that was noted by both African and expatriate critics of the

legislation that protected “traditional” mining from full scale competition with corporate mineral extraction.

D’Avignon even goes so far as to describe Kédougou society as “cosmopolitan” because its *orpailleur* economy attracted (and welcomed) immigrants from the much wider savannah regions of West Africa and gradually transformed a large portion of them from off-season peasant migrants to year-round residents. The cultural identity that flourished in this transforming society was not Europeanization but rather widespread conversion to Islam. D’Avignon expertly traces the conflicts, which are not always satisfactorily resolved, between this strictly monotheistic faith and the demands of “ritual geology” for a more traditional African form of worship.

Yet, d’Avignon fails to satisfactorily confront the environmental impact of *orpillage*. Although she notes that the use of cyanide and mercury—a technology adapted from European mining technologies to treat gold ore—has resulted in the pollution of local waterways and made mercury poisoning an “acute public health concern on *juuras* [mining sites] in Senegal,” d’Avignon does not fully pursue this topic or incorporate it into her own moral argument. Nonetheless, this book raises our understanding of West African gold mining to a new level and should become a standard reading for students of the region, the continent, and global history.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2023 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA’s Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990