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Robyn d'Avignon, *A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savanna West Africa*. Publisher: Duke University Press, Durham, 2022, 328 pages. 31 b&w illus. ISBN # 9781478018476.

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Gold mining is booming in twenty-first-century Africa. This is nowhere more apparent than in the West African region, where gold is now the top export of countries including Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Senegal. While much of this metal is mined by huge transnational firms headquartered in Canada, South Africa, and Australia, a significant portion is excavated by workers in what is commonly called the “artisanal mining sector.” This sector is believed to employ some ten million workers in West Africa, where its output may rival or surpass that of foreign industrial firms. *A Ritual Geology* by Robyn d'Avignon is a masterful examination of this activity's cultural, political, and economic importance in the region.

The book's focus is *orpaillage*, a French term used by d'Avignon to transcend the colonial-era linguistic binaries that have long contrasted industrial mining (legal, “modern,” and undertaken by white people) with “artisanal” or “customary” mining (often illegal, glossed as “primitive,” and undertaken by Black people). While her fieldwork is grounded in the Kédougou district of eastern Senegal, her outlook is explicitly regional, drawing from a variety of West African oral histories as well as archives in Conakry, Dakar, and Paris. Modern-day *orpaillage* in West Africa stems from centuries-long traditions, and the “ritual geology” of the book's title refers to “a set of practices, prohibitions, and cosmological engagements with the earth that are widely shared and cultivated across a regional geological formation” (4). Engaging with this dynamic body of knowledge and practice enables d'Avignon to approach *orpaillage* as simultaneously art, science, and economy.

The book's first chapter sets the scene with an ethnographic exploration of *orpaillage* in the Senegalese village Tinkoto, where local laborers, customary authorities, and migrants from other parts of Senegal as well as Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali collaborate and sometimes compete with each other, with agents of the state, and sometimes with mining firm geologists. They blend local mining knowledge with foreign techniques and chemical inputs. As d'Avignon writes,

orpaillage and industrial mining in this region constitute “a single extractive economy across which family histories and cyanide solution circulate” (32). As a mobile, seasonal activity that has brought generations of strangers into West African mining zones, orpaillage has sustained communities through various forms of labor. As shown in chapter two’s excavation of the contours of the region’s heretofore occluded ritual geology, much of this labor is ritual.

West African ritual geology has emerged through the intertwining of mining practices and knowledge with mythology and epic history. This interweaving is evident in the legend of Bida, the spirit snake of Ouagadougou—a legend described by d’Avignon as “a template for a shared ritual geology in which rain, gold, and fertility are materialized in the body of spirited snakes who broker among the underground, the earth’s surface, and the sky” (66). Territorial spirits, symbolized by the snake, were believed to require sacrifices in order for humans to extract gold safely. Such beliefs help explain why, over the thousand years prior to European penetration, the region supported a far-reaching gold trade yet many inhabitants valued the metal below baser ones like copper: gold was, in their eyes, charged with too much dangerous supernatural energy. By the time Mansa Musa ruled the Mali Empire in the fourteenth century and made his storied visit to Cairo that left the city’s markets flooded with gold, many West African elites had embraced the precious metal as a symbol of power—though, as d’Avignon points out, even they generally avoided it for burials.

While the Atlantic Era saw increasing French interest and involvement in gold extraction from the region’s subsoils, West Africans themselves largely retained control of gold production. Under French colonial rule, industrial mining activity was sparse, while the imposition of head taxes encouraged labor migrants to take up orpaillage, and French administrators generally upheld Africans’ customary rights to mineral deposits. As d’Avignon writes in chapter three, orpaillage was “well suited to the political economy of indirect rule, which exploited African productive economies while making minimal investments in infrastructure and production” (106). Colonial geologists relied on the knowledge and skilled labor of West African orpailleurs (those who conducted orpaillage) when surveying the region’s mineral resources, described in chapter four. Readers may be surprised to learn that many French geologists were well versed in local culture—they stayed in particular locales far longer than administrators did—and they learned to value local knowledge that others dismissed as superstition. D’Avignon pays close attention to the evolution of local geological knowledge amid political and technological changes in French West Africa, and to the ways in which it alternately diverged from and intertwined with European knowledge.

With independence in the 1960s, governments in the region took divergent paths regarding orpaillage. Authorities in Guinea and Mali criminalized and attempted to ban it, but those in Senegal, wary of stoking political resistance in a sensitive border zone, chose to tolerate the activity. Chapter five shows how, against the geopolitical backdrop of the Cold War, Senegal profited from French, Soviet, and United Nations technical support to conduct surveys of their country's mineral resources. These survey missions did not bring the expected rewards: low market prices for gold led many men to abandon orpaillage for several years, while the surveys themselves helped cement ethnic hierarchies within the Senegalese population, privileging coastal elites over other groups. From the late 1990s, however, higher prices and new technologies fueled a resurgence of West African orpaillage, drawing new generations of migrant workers from throughout the region to the Guinea/Mali/Senegal border zone. As described in chapter six, d'Avignon found that by the mid-2000s, Kédougou residents had developed a new "regional language of subterranean rights, centered on gold" (153), and orpailleurs formed a powerful constituency that neither West African states nor transnational mining companies could ignore. In negotiations with government and mining company officials, orpailleurs mobilized multiple ethical claims to protect their own mineral rights.

Examining regional constructions of ethnic and Islamic identity and their effects on mining in chapter seven, d'Avignon documents strong essentialist constructions of ethnolinguistic difference that map onto divisions of orpaillage labor. For many inhabitants of gold mining zones, particular ethnic groups maintain special bonds with territorial spirits that give them privileged roles in gold extraction. Meanwhile, the centrality of ancestral religious beliefs to orpaillage has led people to see the activity as outside of, even antithetical to, Islamic practice, and to see the wealth gained from gold extraction as morally tainted. Amid the region's steady Islamization over the past century, West African Muslims have tried with some success to remake orpaillage as a secular activity, but it remains widely associated with un-Islamic powers and beliefs.

A Ritual Geology makes a strong case for orpaillage as an activity deeply rooted in West African history, still largely controlled by West Africans, yet largely overlooked by scholars. The author, a graduate of the University of Michigan's doctoral program in anthropology and history, puts her ethnographic and historical training to excellent use in making this case. While orpaillage poses environmental, social, and political challenges to communities throughout the region, its benefits are distributed far more widely (and, one suspects, more equitably) than those paid by transnational mining companies, thereby ensuring livelihoods in rural areas where survival would have otherwise grown more tenuous. As even small-scale West African mining operations are increasingly penetrated by capital flowing in

from other continents (see Whitehouse 2022), *A Ritual Geology* offers a precious resource that unearths the historical origins and contemporary context of the region's gold extraction.

Works cited

Whitehouse, Bruce. "Illicit Flows to the UAE Take the Shine of African Gold." *MERIP* no 305 (Winter), 2022. <https://merip.org/2023/01/illicit-flows-to-the-uae-take-the-shine-off-african-gold-2/>

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