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SHARING AND
SUSTAINING: THE
THRUSTS OF
FRIENDSHIP AMONG
YOUNG ARTISANAL
GOLD MINERS IN
NORTHERN BENIN
(WEST AFRICA)

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Sharing and Sustaining: the thrusts of friendship among young artisanal gold miners in northern Benin (West Africa)

Tilo Grätz¹

Abstract

The article deals with friendship relations among male artisanal gold miners in West Africa, exemplified by case studies from Northern Benin. I will argue that friendship is an important element in understanding the social configurations in the mining region. In the new social environment, immigrants develop new ties among themselves and to the local societies and/or transfer social bonds into a new context. I will explore the general logics of friendship bonds in that area and discuss their integrative strength as well as their limits. In the context of gold mining, above all logics of economic as well as social risk minimisation incline many migrants to create friendship bonds. Parity in income sharing is more likely to be established among friends than among kinsmen. Friendship is specifically relevant to integrate people of very different regional, ethnic and social backgrounds. Despite the many divergent interests between different economic actors, locals and immigrants, there are multiple bonds which ease tensions and give rise to different levels of social integration.

Der Text rekonstruiert Freundschaftsbeziehungen unter jungen Goldgräbern in Nordbenin. In einem von Unsicherheit geprägten sozialen Umfeld hat Freundschaft sowohl emotionale Bedeutung, eine Solidarfunktion als auch ein integrierendes Potential. Der Beitrag geht auf die Logiken der Freundschaftsbeziehungen ein, zeigt aber auch Ambivalenzen und unterschiedliche Grade von Intimität. Es wird gezeigt, dass Freundschaftsbeziehungen vor allem auf Normen des Teilens sowie der gemeinsam geteilten Erfahrung als Minenarbeiter und Migranten in den Goldgräberorten beruhen.

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Introduction

This essay deals with friendship relations among groups of male artisanal gold miners in West Africa, exemplified by case studies from Northern Benin. I will argue that friendship is an important social means shaping the social configurations in the mining region.

This contention may be surprising given the fact that gold miners are often portrayed above all as selfish, driven by greed, violence and mutual distrust. In that same discourse, the entire mining community, with its high circulation of money and multiple forms of consumption is seen as an evil place of social decay. Without ignoring or downplaying the many problems linked to these mining booms, my account differs in many respects from these assumptions.²

Generally gold mining communities are migrant communities. In the new social environment, immigrants develop new ties among themselves and to the local societies and/or transfer social bonds into a new context. In both contexts, from an actor's point of view, friendship is one option to be chosen.

Theoretically speaking, the establishment of friendship relations among migrant miners in Africa is a social process that principally involves making reference to known institutions and frames of action. In giving them new meaning, enhancing and adopting them to the situation in the mining camps and so reducing their complexity, a minimum degree of trust is created (Eisenstadt and Roninger 1984) and hence the basis for everyday interaction and economic transactions. Taking this approach, I argue against trends in sociology and anthropology relating friendship typically to "modern" (western) contexts (Pahl 2000, Eve 2002).

In my paper I will explore the logic of friendship bonds among gold miners and discuss their integrative strength as well as their limits. In the context of gold mining, above all logics of economic as well as social risk minimisation incline many migrants to reinforce friendship bonds.

I will argue that it is mainly about sharing the yields: roughly speaking, among friends, parity in income sharing is more likely to be established among friends than among kinsmen or "brothers". This is more important the more flexible these arrangements are in terms of time and the composition of the mining teams.

² I do not, for example, employ the term "gold rush" because it infers too much irrational social action and chaos. I would like to focus on the many more regulated social relations in that field that are of more interest to the ethnological discussion. This should not suggest that I deny the dramatic dimensions introduced by the rapidly changing consumer practices, alcohol abuse, the monetisation of everyday life, the production of winners and losers and the use of violence in many gold mining areas.

Friendship is not the only bond that people use to create cohesion and to seek mutual support in this context. But, according to my data, it is specifically relevant to integrate people of very different regional, ethnic and social backgrounds. Despite the many divergent interests between different economic actors, both local and immigrants, multiple ties ease tensions and give rise to different levels of social integration and advance empowerment of all miners *vis-à-vis* state authorities.

My approach primarily follows an understanding of friendship as “cluster of social practices“ (Carrier 1999: 35), although aspects of cognition and its underlying codes in the context of mining communities will be explored as well. On the methodological level I will distinguish between formal and informal local institutions linked to emic perceptions of friendship and friendship as an analytical category to be defined by its content.

After giving an outline of the basic modes of labour organisation and the economic and social context of small-scale gold mining, I will distinguish two types of friendship ties that are the most relevant in this situation, but differ in their basic mode of constitution and their content.³ Secondly, I aim to present some emic categories and perspectives on friendship. Finally, I will raise some general methodological and theoretical issues on friendship and consider some debatable assumptions in the literature.

The General Context: the current situation of small scale gold mining in northern Benin

Gold mining in West Africa has seen a boom in the last decade. Old, abandoned mines have been reopened and many new shafts have been explored by small-scale (artisan) gold miners who apply and refine traditional mining techniques. This growth of non-industrial gold mining is related to massive labour migration into rural areas (above all in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Guinea).⁴ Due to a general economic crisis, many migrants seek additional income especially in the dry season.

Miners are fortune-seekers, young peasants as well as impoverished artisans, small entrepreneurs and businessmen, all trying to cope with the economic crises marked by the decline in agricultural cash-crop production, droughts or reduced soil fertility, political strains like restrictions to out-migration, political tensions, like in the Ivory Coast, or community conflicts.

³ This account refers exclusively to male gold miners. Friendship networks among female migrants are as important as those among men but overlap only partially with them.

⁴ See also Yaro (1996), Werthmann (2000, 2001) for recent case studies in Burkina Faso and Vwakyanakazi (1992) for DRC /Zaire.

Many migrants are also looking to supplement their existing income, especially in the dry season. Gold miners are, above all, mobile young men and women in search of assets that enable them to improve their social position, to marry, to invest in housing or livestock or to start a business in their home region. Taking serious physical and social risks, successful or not, many of them stay for longer periods of time in gold mining areas, becoming semi-professionals, trying to discover new deposits.

The rapid establishment of new mining sites leads in most cases to the development of mining camps in a very short period of time. Immigrant communities emerge with new markets and the spontaneous development of infrastructures and services. Very often conflicts emerge between gold miners and state authorities, between the local inhabitants and immigrants as well as between local interest groups themselves concerning the rights of exploitation, land rights and modes of settlement.⁵ Often the state is only partially able to control these processes.

These are typical mining-frontier societies (Turner 1935, Kopytoff 1987, Dumett 1998). The general features of these mining communities are their heterogeneity in terms of ethnic origins, their flexibility as regards their spatial and economic strategies and the emergence of intricate hierarchies and norms as regards exploitation rights and patterns of conflict arrangement (see Grätz 2002).

The gold mining region in Northern Benin is situated in the Atakora Mountains close to the villages of Kwatena and Tchantangou. The area some 30 km southeast of the provincial capital Natitingou is inhabited predominantly by Waaba and Betammaribe peasant groups as well as Fulbe herdsman. Inhabitants mainly grow millet, sorghum and corn as well as yams and peanuts and practice animal husbandry.

In this mountain region the gold boom started in 1993. Foreign gold miners from Ghana and Togo first migrated to the region seeking gold. After their initial success, they triggered a gold boom and further massive immigration of labour migrants from all over the region. Although the mine close to the village of Kwatena was known to the locals because of its partial exploitation in colonial times, there was no local tradition of gold mining to that date, mainly because of rigid state control of those zones considered to be state property up to the end of the eighties.

The miners profited from a period of political transition and appropriated the deposits with simple techniques. In the following years the governmental authorities tried several times to

⁵ Issues related to the everyday organisation of labour in the gold fields, the distribution of the profits, the circulation of goods, the management of conflicts and interethnic relations are major issues of my research project. Comparative fieldwork was carried out in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Mali.

expel the miners by force and confiscated equipment, money and gold. But in the long run they had little success. First a cohort of *gendarmes* deployed at the site was corrupted, allowing further mining against bribes. Once the military that was sent into the region to establish order was withdrawn, many miners just returned to the gold fields.

Governmental politics shifted towards partial legalisation in 1999. Since then a series of negotiations have been started, aiming at organising gold miners into cooperatives that would sell their gold to the state. This process is far from being concluded (I will come back to this issue again later). At the end of 2001, new expulsions took place, mainly to drive foreigners out of the mining region.

The gold miners work along the rivers and mountain slopes, exploiting alluvial and eluvial deposits as well as engaging in small-scale mountain mining. They use simple equipment such as pans, sluices, chisels and sledgehammers. The miners developed an intricate system of labour organisation including hierarchies, shift work and modes of sharing the yield. The gold exploitation is dominated by small teams headed by micro-entrepreneurial shaft owners, *chefs d'équipe*, hiring assistant workers for a given period of exploitation. Reef mining teams comprise five up to twelve workers, with different tasks, working in shifts. The gold miners usually share the gold ore and every individual miner then needs to extract the gold himself. The chief usually gets half of the yield as compensation for his investment in equipment, the feeding of all workers for the period of excavation and his general organising capacities. All other yields are shared equally among the team members.⁶

The gold ore is processed further by crushing, pounding, milling, sieving and panning to finally obtain gold dust. Women are often employed in much of this work. Gold is sold as soon as possible in small amounts to petty traders.⁷ Most of the local petty traders are trading agents for master traders. They form a part of informal heterogeneous⁸ trading networks extending to the international gold trading centres (Grätz 2000). Most gold traders act as moneylenders, thus obliging the miners to sell their gold to them.

Gold mining in Northern Benin consists of economic activities largely opposed to the mining laws. This generally includes the miners' disregard for licence requirements for exploring and exploiting deposits, the disrespect of any commercial registration rules, tax evasion and working

⁶ Gold miners may receive less when being reprimanded for a bad work ethic, i.e. not working like the others, being late, quarrelling too much, betraying others and the like.

⁷ For a hard day's work, miners may earn between 1000 and 30 000 F CFA (1,50 to 40 €).

⁸ Gold trade does not fit into the "ethnic argument": it is neither embedded in kinship relations nor does it constitute a distinct corporate group with an exclusive group identity, at least not yet.

in forbidden zones as well as the smuggling of gold. Furthermore, the mining communities develop their own modes of conflict settlement without appealing to official institutions. The arrangements between the various, in most cases mixed ethnic working teams as well as those between immigrant gold miners and local inhabitants are negotiated and established on an “informal” basis.

We are dealing here with the emergence of a distinct economic and social sphere, shaped by the specific method of gold extraction and labour organisation, but also by the distribution of incomes, the emergence of markets and patterns of settlement.

General Types of Friendship in the Mining Region

Given the empirical drift of my paper, I will not pretend to give an exhaustive definition of friendship. I will rather present a working concept, which will need to be refined (further points of debate will be discussed in the final section).⁹

I see friendship as a relationship involving of relative durability, mutual appreciation, comprising shared moral standards, and expectations of reciprocity and trust, sustained by mutual affection, equity, support and common ideas of equality. It shares similarities with kinship and patron-client relations. Friendship is characterised by a bundle of features, multiple meanings comprising both emotional and functional aspects that may vary in degree and weight according to the situation. Friendship needs permanent reaffirmation, often through rituals and favours. Friendship is first of all a dyadic relationship that *may* grow into polyadic/group relations. The establishment of a friendship relationship is contingent on cultural as well as on social practices. Both ideas and practices of friendship are socially, culturally and politically embedded and could only be studied employing a contextual analysis (Adams and Allan 1999, Carrier 1999, Pahl 2000). One such context is constituted by gold mining camps – where I initially did not expect many friendship relationships at all.

There are two general categories of friendship I will distinguish in the following: Friendship among gold miners in working teams and friendship among clusters of joint immigrants.¹⁰

⁹ It is generally difficult to present a conclusive definition of friendship because of the manifold debates related to the issue, mirrored in the overall introduction to this series of papers on friendship in Africa (Grätz, Meier, Pelican 2003).

¹⁰ There are also friendship bonds between some immigrants and local inhabitants, developing on the basis of host-guest-relations. In this article I will limit the analysis to the mentioned categories.

These analytical categories are not mutually exclusive. They may overlap partly in a given dyadic and, even more, triadic relationships. The differences between these types are determined by:

- The initial social ties that may then turn into friendship.
- Their basic “logic”, which sustains them and makes them a preferred relationship.
- The specific content of the relationship in terms of forms of exchange, reciprocity, rites and affection.
- Their social effects in the mining region in general.

Friendship among Gold Miners in Working Teams

This type of friendship derives above all from the everyday working relations, especially among members of the same working team. The young men work together and as members of the team they share the labour as well as the yields.

As regards the social composition of the mining teams, typically, a high proportion of interethnic bonds develop in that setting. Mining teams are set up right on the spot on a contractual basis for a minimum of one exploitation cycle, which may last from several weeks to several months. The majority of team heads try to compose their team out of experienced and hardworking gold miners, often regardless of their ethnic origin. In most cases the teams are made up to one half by peer groups, who may have immigrated together (see below) and to one half by migrants who met each other in the mining region. Among them a high portion of strangers become work mates and potential friends.

They may become friends not only when sharing the hardships of work, the risks (Grätz 2003) and the yields, but also in their leisure time in the mining camp, exchanging information, favours, help of all kinds and comradeship. The next section will discuss emic representations of friendship ties.

Emic Dimensions: types of friends, degrees of intimacy and closeness

I think it makes sense to point out the different degrees of intimacy most emic concepts of friendship entail. My empirical research shows that informants distinguish between closer friends, mates and simple friends. I have distilled three categories out of many encounters and interviews and put them in a hierarchical order.

A (simple) friend (French: *un ami*)

This term, employed quite often, designates an acquaintance, a fellow, someone with whom one is in a frequent exchange relationship based on mutual understanding and a minimum of trust. It is a type of good acquaintance. They do not have to be equals. For gold miners this may be a trader on the market, a team-mate in a football match, etc.

A mate (Dendi: *akwasi*)

Akwasi are those whom “you understand well, you can hang around and you can have fun with” (Kiki, Kwatena, January 2001). Regardless of the personal relationship, this is a kind of friendship that is generalised to a whole group of mates, implying the idea of equality. This may be applied to a gold miner’s colleagues.

Close friends (French: *ami intime*; Dendi: *akwasi suu*)

An individual person has only few close friends; sometimes only one. This kind of friendship refers to a personal, durable bond with much intimacy, affection, mutual help and exchange of information. Generally, this kind of friendship is meant to endure over longer periods of time, regardless of the actual social position and spatial distance between the partners.

All these categories are, however, far from always being distinguished clearly by the interlocutors. *Akwasi* could be regarded as a polysem, pointing to many kinds of actual relationships. Further idioms need therefore to be analysed to determine the local emic perspectives.

The Basic Logic of Friendship among Miners: reciprocity, sharing and modes of communication as ways to reinforce a preferential relationship

Ethics of Sharing

Friendship is an important bond between gold miners, both a result of the interaction among the members of a mining team and their heterogeneous nature, and a condition for their functioning. The latter aspect points above all to the specific sharing ethic and the preference of miners for friendship as opposed to agnatic kin and age-grade relations.

Many of my interlocutors pointed to the fact that sharing among friends means in most cases getting an equal portion of gold ore. This includes all members of a team who engage in the same way in gold extraction.

According to my informants, this would be quite different when working with relatives: in the latter case, seniority, status and even gerontocratic aspects may dominate the sharing rules.

In case I work together with my brother (in a large classificatory sense, also including father's brother, father's brother's sons, mother's brother's sons etc., T.G.) or with my father, it may be that after all, he demands a higher portion of the yields, and I cannot refuse this. (Kiki, Kwatena, January 2001)

In the Atakora region, social relationships in all ethnic groups are generally shaped by strong norms of seniority, especially in the same patriline, both politically and economically. As a result, services and goods may be distributed in unequal ways.¹¹ This may be seen as a kind of delayed reciprocity, as the young men themselves will one day be promoted to a higher age status and may enjoy similar privileges. But in the context of the mining camps, where the wish to accumulate money in a short period of migration and the possibility of being able to spend a large part of it on the spot predominate, these kin-based systems of reciprocity are, however, seen by most young miners as largely inappropriate. They prefer to share “among friends”, as peers and equals who “*neither cheat each other nor claim too large a portion because of their age*” (Kiki, Kwatena, January 2001).

When I mentioned the possibility that, given the situation of an unequal share for the elder brother, the latter may invest his earnings in one way or the other for the benefit of a family unit in general, from which all members would profit, the counter-arguments – as indicated in the following statement of a young gold miner – pointed especially to the reality of migration and life in the mining camp.

The elder brother or father may spend all the money in the market; on the other hand, I need cash for my part to nourish myself to remain strong, but also to enjoy life with my friends. (Donné, Tchantangou, December 2001)

“*Needing cash*” means to be able to re-invest immediately into the network of friends in the mining community. It is a way of reinforcing the bonds of friendship and thus the logic of their preference.

¹¹ In the Marxist dominated economic anthropology of the seventies, the unequal relationships between generation sets were widely discussed, especially among French scholars.

Migrants say that this does not mean to exclude the kin mates totally from their expenditures or to long only for individual consumption. They would bring various gifts when returning home, but they need cash in the mining camps immediately and in large amounts because they had to pay rent and food.¹²

I differentiate perhaps too sharply between the different economic and social logics in the mining region and of other modes of rural production. These latter systems of reciprocity, which are linked to the domestic mode of production (also called lineage mode of production etc.), depend unquestionably on seniority and are, of course, more intricate. They also include the aspect of pooling and redistribution by the head of the household, generally guaranteeing the subsistence of all members of the household or involved kin group.

But miners only hand over a portion of their earnings to the head of the household. It could be argued that the household-based mode of providing economic security does not necessarily need to be respected by gold miners in the mining teams, firstly, because of the spatial separation between these economic activities and their homes and secondly, because of the patronal system of labour relations.¹³ The head of the team, who is charged with guaranteeing the basic living standards of all members of the team, is able to do so because of his larger share in the yields. This system of patronage and contract has more in common with craft guilds than with family-based economies in the agrarian sector.

Team leaders try to employ the members of a certain team according to their physical capacities, social virtues and experience. Ethnic background or even kinship is less important, as compared to these skills. Team leaders know that the performance of a team depends on mutual understanding and respect among all of its members. Another reason is given by the fact that team leaders cannot wait until relatives may show up, being eager to engage in mining. This results in the existence of many ethnically mixed teams, largely outnumbering those that primarily work on the basis of kinship (to various degrees). An important “glue” to their internal cohesion is, aside from the (unwritten) contractual relations, common economic interests and prestige, given by the importance of friendship relations.

¹² It is thus not surprising that I primarily found more kin-based working units of gold miners in Kwatena, Tchintangou or Koussigou among the local inhabitants, members of local households with full subsistence production and reproduction. These younger men conceived the comparatively less rewarding assistant work for their fathers, elder brothers or agnates as an investment into their own kin group and the household they were integrated into, where they enjoyed economic safety, including access to clan based arable land, in the long run, but only in relation to the achievement of seniority and status.

¹³ For a similar account on Congolese gold miners see Vwakyankazi (1992).

Representations of Honour and Shame among Gold Miners

Gold miners try to earn a good income during their often limited period of migration. They are, of course, often inclined to earn their part at the expense of others. According to my observations, these strategies are, however, limited by representations of honour and shame, as regards the disapproval of severe personal misbehaviour like repeated theft and betrayal, and closely linked to that, reciprocal norms, i.e. help and sharing ethics as an ideal, both guiding the actions of the individual miner. Those who follow these norms are called “good fellows” and/or, (less often) “friends”, especially when they additionally show respect, conviviality and amity. A friend is someone “*who does not cheat you. Of course, everybody tries to get his part but a good friend will never try to take more than he ought to*” (Donné, Tchantangou, December 2001).

Livelihood and Lifestyle of Young Artisanal Miners

This sharing ethic is not limited to the gold mining work itself; in a wider context of everyday life in the mining camps, it also applies to leisure time.

Kiki is a young gold miner. He is from Natitingou but usually lives in Kwatena where he rents a room with “Old Nata”. He was in school until the 6th grade, and later became a trucker’s apprentice. Lacking money, he was not able to write the exams to get a drivers licence. He has been working in the mining fields for four years, primarily in a team lead by Ikro, where I met him recently. They are exploring a promising new shaft without having found any veins yet. Ikro is of the same ethnic origin as Kiki but from another village. They first met in the mining fields. Kiki says that only some members of his mining team are at the same time close friends:

My friends are Ikro (the team chief), Raoul, Mohamed and Ismail. Ikro is a Waaba, Mohamed is a Semere. Raoul is Kabye from a village close to Chabi-Kouma. Ismail is a Waaba. There are no problems between us. With two of them I used to work together, Ikro and Raoul, but with all of them I hang around and stick together. We eat together and drink and go out to look for girls together, usually in Natitingou. There we go out to dance each Saturday, maybe in “le village”, “sixteen” or “Basilic”. There the ambiance is cool. We take the motortaxi and there we are. In the “Basilic”, we meet all the “Joes”, the big ones who party all the time. (Kiki, Kwatena, January 2001)

Friendship relations among miners across ethnic affiliation are possible because of the strong peer relations among young men of the same age group, sharing similar life-worlds, and are

rarely hidden.¹⁴ Miners also share the same semantic field, their own intimate codes which they constantly recreate. With the category of semantic field, I refer primarily to internal discursive and communication practices among gold miners. This includes common codes, symbols, particular neologisms, gestures, speech acts, narratives and other elements miners develop, which contribute to the emergence of distinct modes of interaction, the social creation of meaning and hence, to a cultural integration. I will only mention one element in detail here: nicknaming.

Miners usually call themselves by nicknames. These nicknames generally refer to distinct personal features, virtues and attitudes, to certain events or circumstances in the biography of the person, or by way of analogy, to military grades, prominent politicians or cult musicians and actors.

Let me give some examples: There are not only big guys like *Ghadaffi*, *Ben Laden* or *The American*, but also *The President*, *The Ambassador* or *Le capitaine*. *David toujours propre* (David always clean) is obviously a reference to his vanity on arriving and leaving the mining site with extremely clean clothes. *Washington* is known to listen regularly to the Voice of America and *Rasta Man* dreams of buying a good guitar and performing as a reggae star. *Dix Tonnes*, *Paul Acier* (Paul “Steel”), *Paul Marteau* (Paul “Hammer”) as well as *Tarzan* are undoubtedly tough guys in the mountain works.

Nicknames also indicate that ethnic identity becomes less prominent, and the youths are judged according to their behaviour at the mining site, irrespective of their origins. *Moussa Cetaci* (Moussa four-legs) moves fast in the shafts like a dog.

Especially young unmarried miners demonstrate a particular mode of consumption.¹⁵ This includes extensive drinking, smoking and eating practices, hair- and other dress codes, but also partying to various degrees (*faire de l’ambiance*),¹⁶ from joint visits to discothèques, bars and video-cinemas, well established in all these mining areas, to the creation of dance styles and the preference of particular musicians (Alpha Blondy, Black so Man, Awilo, 2Pac) and athletes (Mike Tyson) that miners identify with and imitate. In their spare time, they are dressed in good clothing. It is the whole of all these elements: dress, haircut, but also gestures, certain ways to

¹⁴ This contrasts to the case of Fulbe friendship relations to farmers in Borgou (Benin), examined by Guichard, where these relations tend to be hidden because of strong distinguishing public discourses and the wish of both sides to disguise the actual extent of cattle leasing. But these relations are the daily basis for close and long-term encounters and also friendship relations between them (Guichard 2002a,b).

¹⁵ As traders and service people immediately follow a new gold boom, the supply of goods (and temptations) in these places is usually extensive: from video-cinemas, bars, coffee shops to gambling of all kinds, discothèques and other entertainment facilities. Established in a simple manner, shops offer fashionable clothing, hairdressing, sunglasses, sport shoes, radios and even motorbikes and cars.

¹⁶ Many of the cultural orientations are, of course, influenced by the transnational West African youth culture.

talk and walk together which make up the external, public performance of these youths (*être un jô, faire le grand etc.*).

Some of the young miners spent their money in ostensive ways as fast as they earned it. This public behaviour contributes to images of miners as being mad, unsocial and unconscientious and mining camps as sites of decay. On the other hand, investing in drinking is an investment in the social group. My biographical data and narrative interviews also show a great variety of attitudes and practices among miners.

I cannot go much into the detail of all the representations of masculinity, particular symbols, practices and idioms of strength young miners create, although they are part of what makes up the self-identity of a miner and his attitudes. What is, however, important to mention are the core notions of trust and understanding. Trust (and the positive aspects of) mistrust are, surprisingly, part of the special social and cultural embeddedness of gold mining. “*You cannot trust all – but a good comrade is somebody to trust, because he will be fair to you*” is a widespread statement in this respect. The second notion is mutual understanding: “*somebody you work with and the works go fine without much talk, who simply knows what you are suffering from without saying*” (Jonas, Tchantangou, December 2001).

This is a semantic field relating to a shared life-world, composed of familiarity and common experiences as labour migrants in a new environment and a cognitive frame of bonds in that mining culture,¹⁷ beyond (although partly including) local and ethnic cultural references. It is one of the elements that lay the basis for friendship relations, especially among migrant miners.

Taking lifestyle, social practices and sociability, self-perception and status together, we may speak of a particular gold miners’ habitus (Bourdieu 1979) in the making.¹⁸ Despite the precarious, liminal situation miners share as migrants and the dynamics of social relations a discrete socio-cultural form emerges, related to a distinct group, its social relationships, dispositions and positions. And this socio-cultural form is sustained by friendship relations. Thus friendship has many possible qualities for young gold miners that are part of aspirations of young men in the whole of the region.

¹⁷ For a similar account on lifestyles of diamond divers see de Boeck (1998).

¹⁸ It is that combination of specific modes of labour organisation, conflict resolution, an ethos of sharing, consumption patterns, shared meanings and tastes despite many conflicts and instabilities that tend to be reproduced, which encourages me to discuss the concept of habitus, despite its association with more static social structures.

Friendship Ties among Miners between Instability and Persistence

I also collected cases of terminated friendships. In most of these cases they ended due to a betrayal, a fraud in the “moral matrix” of friendship in the gold mining area, i.e. unequal shares in yields or the abandonment of common ventures. In some few cases, it was about “*problems about women*”, but also insults and simple quarrels that led to disagreements that have not been reconciled yet.

On the other hand, some friendship relations of former working mates proved to be stable over time. In 2002, I often met people, meanwhile residing somewhere else, especially in Natitingou or Chabi-Kouma, who went down to Kwatena (preferably on market days) just to visit their friends who continued working in the gold fields. Many friendships persisted among those who left the mining region after a general decline in the beginning of 2002. Many of them helped each other to get into new jobs in town, visited each other regularly and pooled their money together for investment in businesses such as trading.

Some friendship ties do not end with death. Friends were often those insisting on appropriate burials of their mates despite the distance to their home regions. In one dramatic account, Antoine described the day when he witnessed the death of his best friend who had just recently taken him to the mines. He carried his friend to his home village some 40 km away to help bury him according to ritual prescriptions. It was a painful duty in many respects but he felt obliged to grant him this last favour, even far from the mines. He insisted that “*the mines split our friendship by death, therefore I could not leave him there and continue my business*” (Antoine, Natitingou, August 2002).

Friendship, Integration and Moral Economy

The norms of reciprocity and equity between miners of the same team state that a miner will also get the same share if he has been absent for some time because of an illness or a family affair, while his portion may be reduced if he has been lazy or unreliable. Moral obligations include a fair and equal division of hard work and the acceptance of sanctions, but they also imply accepting different tasks according to a person’s level of experience, expertise and physical capacity.

Elements of a moral economy¹⁹ are important aspects of the rules and modes of organisation in the mining teams. Apart from these informal rules, there are also more concrete institutions that help to guarantee benefits for all and organise redistribution. The fact that mining entrepreneurs, team leaders or successful traders are supposed to contribute more than others is important because this may hinder them in direct accumulation. Some team leaders contribute to fundraisers (French *caisses*) intended to help some of their employees as a sort of insurance.²⁰

This is especially pertinent to mining communities where immigrants live close to the locals or even settle in their villages, as it is the case in the Atakora region of Benin. But taking the more isolated mining camp as a whole, there are multiple modes by which solidarity is organised in the quarters.

Friendship among Clusters of Immigrants

Many miners arrive in the mining villages of Kwatena and Tchantangou together with mates from the same region, the same village or/and ethnic group. Although many of them are relatives, a high percentage are simply mates or acquaintances. They are already organised in peer groups, age-sets or quarters that are as relevant as formal kin relations among them.

Friendship may be a component of these initial bonds. They are, however, given a new (additional) meaning in the mining camps, linked to the joint labour in the mining fields, common or complementary economic strategies, modes of settlement and reproduction. In this context, loose ties become additionally important and may turn into strong friendship relations. To illustrate this process, I quote the following account of an immigrant:

We all came from Partago. Three of us came together, one fellow joined us later. Yes, one of them is a “brother”, more exactly the son of the brother of my brother in law.

¹⁹ I refer to James Scott who applied this concept to the subsistence ethics of an Asian peasant society (1976). Moral economy refers to the social distribution of risks and institutions of reciprocity in a given society and discusses the moral standards guaranteeing the subsistence of all. My usage of the concept differs slightly from Scott’s account. I do not assume a contradiction between the two ideal concepts of market economy and moral economy. Some labour arrangements among gold mining aim at minimising risks and promote common values guaranteeing a minimum degree of subsistence for all. Other economic actions follow more/rather market logics. We have to deal with a transitional economic system, situated between domestic economies, craftsmen – and small entrepreneurial logics. It seems to be that parallel economic logics may even be a precondition to the persistence of the economic system of gold mining. Institutions, like friendship, point to an ethic of sharing and camaraderie and work well within the proliferation of markets vigorously promoted by numerous gold traders, market peddlers and service providers.

²⁰ There are also fundraisers (*cotisations*) organised by representatives of the local population. They do not only constitute a tax for the exclusive benefit of the locals. This contribution in cash and in kind may be redistributed during festivities, but also in forms of communal infrastructure like schools and medical centres, churches etc. that are principally open to all.

Two others were schoolmates before and we usually organise the Saturday night dance down in Partago, having bought the equipment together. A third is one usually helping us. In this respect, one was already a very good friend, the others also became friends here in Kwatena. Only two of us were members of a team, but now all we work in different teams. We don't share the same accommodation in Kwatena. Two of us rent a small house together. It is not large enough for all of us. The others join us only in the evening on the market; they both have different landlords. (Kassim, Kwatena, January 2001)

These clusters of immigrants are built only in part upon conviviality in the same compounds or quarters of the village. The individual members often live separately from one another. This is due to the fact that there is rarely a landlord able to offer many rooms at the same time and there is a general scarcity of available accommodation. Immigrants have thus to accept living in a compound with the locals and other immigrants of diverse origins. They may move in together if possible.

In Kwatena, for example, there are only two small areas of the village where immigrants of the same regional background are living more or less closely together. The majority reside among the local population, either in their own houses or, in most cases, with local landlords, as *tuteurs*. Some of the ties to the local landlords may grow from pure contractual relationships to patron-client relations and further, to long-standing friendship bonds (see below).

Processes of Networking and “Ganging Up”

In the last sections I have tried to unfold the many reasons, logics and social processes that are the basis for different kinds of friendship relations in the gold mining communities in Benin.

The common social context of migrant miners, especially in that shared liminal space of migration²¹, helps to bring about friendship relations. These may turn into networks, but not necessarily. The social process establishing a set of connections or network associations is contingent upon many more factors. I will limit my account by only hinting at some of them.

Some recent events had an important impact on the local situation in the mining field. They triggered not only the relationship of the miners to the central state; they helped, at least for a certain period and as a side-effect, to form a clear self-awareness and cohesion among many

²¹ Especially young, new incoming gold miners are exposed to a kind of double initiation: an initiation into the socio-professional world of miners, a male group featuring a distinct lifestyle, work ethic and behaviour. The migratory circle as a whole could also be conceived as an initiation (in a larger sense, van Gennep 1909).

miners. These were the continued control missions by the gendarmerie that miners had to face. In this period, they were relatively united and followed a similar discourse of “we the miners”, regardless of ethnic origin.²² Even foreigners, very much persecuted by the police, were integrated as “our brothers and friends”.²³

Tracing the diverse personal relations of miners in their inter-connectedness, it becomes obvious that often the same persons are quoted by different informants as being their (and thus common) friends. Looking more closely at these persons and asking more details about them, it becomes clear that these were some kind of leading figure, enjoying a certain reputation and being exceptional either in their organisational skills, speaking ability or in their role as representatives of many others and being acknowledged as “those who know”. They were often pioneer migrants in the business or the location. Often, these were very mobile and dynamic people, acting as mediators and small investors. Among them were many team-leaders and traders.

The dual Thrusts of Friendship

Friendship in this respect could be seen from two angles or in relation to two dialectical logics; firstly as a result of strong ties developed in the work sphere. Taking the above discussed moral norms and experience as a framework, miners may refer to them in establishing such a relationship. From this perspective, friendship presupposes that the partners not only share the same norms, but that they also experience the other as performing more or less in accordance with them, this proven by actions and behaviour in situations of stress and need. Additionally, they experience that the other share the *same evaluation* of the situation and the same attitudes, which make it easier to come to terms and to “understand one another”.

²² “We know what others think about us. They say that we are selfish and voracious. We are said to take drugs, to quarrel and betray each other. They blame us for not behaving like ‘normal’ youths should behave and point to the consumption of alcohol. Of course we consume something to relax after work. This is normal in such a camp, where nobody knows what happens tomorrow. We will have a beer or two and we will have a party from time to time. How else can you be able to stand this kind of work and this life out here. But never will a good miner overdo this, because this brings him to nothing. He should go the next morning to work like all the others, if not, he will be ashamed, nobody will want to work with him. A good miner knows how to do things right and is always tougher than anybody else”. (Ismael, Bountwanou, December 2001)

The strong hetero-ascription linked to particular moral discourses and stereotypes may lead to a stronger self-consciousness by way of turning these stigmata against the others: those who “*know nothing about our work and life, and those who are never able to stand these hard works*” (Ismael, Bountwanou, December 2001).

²³ This situation changed in late 2001 with new policies that split miners into fractions.

Secondly, friendship in this situation could also be considered from another perspective, as a moral claim, supported by many “cultural aspects” such as public rituals and masculine rites helping to sustain camaraderie and indirectly to reassert cohesion,²⁴ despite the heterogeneous origins of the team members, the many sources of quarrels and their diverging interests. In this double logic, friendship among miners (excluding all non-miners), is both advantageous and compelling for the individual – reminiscent the basic “double face of the gift” (Mauss 1924).

I might have created the impression of a very functionalist perspective of friendship. Friendship, especially among young gold miners, does not, however, let itself be reduced to instrumental aspects and rationalities of material exchange: in their view, it is firstly more about mutual understanding and esteem, and that they comprehend their relation as being friends, only secondarily about demanding mutual assistance, affirming rather than establishing the respective relationship.

Discussion: the ambiguities of personal friendship relations

In my account, I might have created the impression that friendship relations among gold miners are straightforward, chosen and only conceived positively. These relations are, however, like friendship relations in other contexts, caught in many ambiguities: between necessary closeness and distance; between implicit moral obligations and embarrassment in demanding them; and between confidence and deception.

As friendship in this context is marked by shared spheres of communication in a liminal space with growing proximity, a friend may know much – too much – about oneself (see also Meier 2003). But what may happen when a friendship is terminated one day? Will the former friend use that knowledge against the other to make some personal communications public, pointing at weaknesses and secrets?

“I prefer not to have too many goods friends”, “One or two are just right to deal with. Too many friends mean too many opinions to adjust to, too many people knowing too much about you”.
(Jonas, Kwatena, August 2002)

This informant, too, clearly marks out the difference in degrees of relatedness, corresponding to shrinking circles of trust and intimacy.

²⁴ In this respect, relationships among miners are similar to those in other settings and groups such as construction workers, soldiers, sportsmen, etc.

As already quoted above, a good friend is generally “*someone who won’t betray you, someone you may have confidence in*”. But are there many such partners that would fulfil these criteria? Asked about this, many informants readily restricted their choice to fewer names, or to one person as their “best friend”²⁵:

My best friend is the one who knows my secrets. What kind of secrets? Well, it may be about some business tricks that help me making some money and should not be known to all. Or that I have done something wrong in the past, back home. (Jonas, Kwatena, August 2002)

That intimacy, of course, could become ambivalent when it comes to the breakdown of the relationship.

Friendship and the Ideal of Non-Instrumentality

Many sociological and philosophical definitions of friendship claim its non-instrumental nature. This position is questionable. Friendship as non-utilitarian relationship is a romantic western ideal (Silver 1989, Carrier 1999). Assistance, support and help are probably part of all friendship relations. I would phrase the question in another way, pointing to the perspective or sequence of causalities: it is a small but quite decisive difference, whether somebody supports another person *because he recognises him as friend*, or, the other way round, somebody recognises an other person as friend *because of the support* he may expect from him (“*I help you because you are my friend*” or “*you are my friend because you help me*”). In the former case, the relationship may resemble more the ideal of a “pure” friendship than in the latter. But both also involve many more aspects of generalised, direct, or delayed reciprocity – a term which seems to be most appropriate here. The ways in which this reciprocity is maintained may be of quite a different nature depending on the situation.

I am, of course, far from employing a clear-cut distinction or to argue in favour of mechanistic causalities but I suggest that it is useful to point out these differences in order to explain why some particular dyadic relationships among gold miners develop more easily into larger networks and groups on the basis of firm mutual ties and cohesion. On the basis of a comprehensive framework of shared habitus as migrant miners, many commonalities and thus a greater sociability in many parts of everyday life emerge. The ties of cohesion become stronger,

²⁵ In this case, it is not the institutionalised best-friend relationship known for other regions in Africa (Eisenstadt 1956, Kröger 1980).

reinforce themselves involve more and more persons, become more complex and develop into networks.

Friendship, Age, Seniority

Recording dyadic friendship relations in interviews, I realised that in many cases I was dealing with friends of different ages. This often does not represent a major issue for those involved. They primarily regard the essential conditions – mutual understanding and mutual support – as given and thus see themselves as friends. Age is still relevant, but comes into play here only on a secondary level. Differences in age give rise to a different degree of personal experience and the younger partner often expects some guidance from the elder one. It is often the elder one who is more generous, far from exploiting the younger one.

Friendship as a Social Process

Beyond the different nature and conditions of the different types of friendship, I think we should employ a process-oriented perspective. On the individual level, a “soft” relationship, a weak tie may turn into a lifetime friendship, a landlord may become a close friend but a friendship may also end. It is awkward that there is no particular term defining this process of growth or decline, reinforcing or giving up of friendship relations, as it is the case of networks (“networking”). The term friendship should, however, imply this dynamic nature as well.

Summary

Friendship is certainly not the predominant form of social structuring in the gold mining area of Northern Benin, compared to patronage and clientelism, household structures, corporate and all kind of business networks. It structures, however, a great deal of everyday relations especially among young migrant miners. Friendship relations are important to accommodate a particular migratory situation in a typical mining frontier society.

In my paper I examined two different types of friendship bonds among gold miners. Most of these relationships develop in a situation of migration in a highly flexible economic and social setting that makes these types of relationships more prone to being created. Furthermore I identified the various underlying logics of friendship relations such as sharing attitudes among

miners. I argued that in many cases friendship is more preferable than kinship, especially when ensuring a “fair” distribution of the yields.

In addition, friendship, combined with typical elements of a particular life-style of young gold miners, is a way of allowing the rapid creation of networks of support, confidence and empowerment of migrants with heterogeneous origins, a process relevant in the everyday life of the mining fields beyond the work sphere. Seen from an analytical perspective, many relationships not officially coined as friendship may fit into our frame of analysis. Among these are relationships between various kinsmen, migrating together, finding themselves as fellows in a mining team and becoming close friends, sharing labour and leisure time more than they ever did before. Remote relatives may become partners, peers and friends only in the mining region.

The same applies to patronage and age differences versus friendship. Although miners may have a different position in the hierarchies, they interpret their relationship as close friendship. This apparently does not hinder accumulation and entrepreneurial chances but allows a minimum of subsistence for many. A strong opposition between these categories is not helpful. A friend, especially a member of the migrating group from the same region, may be called a “brother”. In this way kinship provides the dominant idioms through which friendship is expressed, given meaning as epithet to establish a sort of pseudo or ritual kinship.

Friendship among miners mainly has informal and flexible qualities. With the hint to common realms of sociability, ethos and understanding I want to go beyond the simple aspects of exchange theory that dominate many other studies on friendship. Referring to the common group situation as migrants in an unstable social field I would like to overcome simple dyadic approaches (see also Eve 2002). Exploring the manifold relations between all these categories needs more data as well as theoretical reflections on the social logic inherent to friendship bonds in general and in relation to the particular situation in gold mining camps.

A social anthropology of friendship should not limit itself to describing local dimensions of friendship, emic expressions, logics and their limits (Bell and Coleman 1999, Pahl 2000). In a comparative venture it should advance theories relating the pertinence of friendship to the particularity of a given social context. Such correlations should aim at classifying differences in significance and substance of friendship according to social situations.

In a first hypothesis it can be stated that friendship relations tend to be more institutionalised the more stable intra – and interethnic relations²⁶ are, at the same time tending to be filled with

²⁶ For an account on interethnic relations with a specific gender perspective see Pelican (2003).

precise but limited functions. In a different context, where social tensions and/or uncertainty prevail, friendships ties tend to be more informal, more frequent, but also changeable and filled with multiple meanings.

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