

COWRIES, GOLD AND ‘BITTER MONEY’  
Gold-mining and notions of ill-gotten wealth in Burkina Faso\*

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INTRODUCTION

When I asked a Dagara informant in south-western Burkina Faso what he thought of the area’s most recent gold finds, he replied:

The proceeds from the sale of gold are very dangerous. If someone uses this money in order to buy something valuable, he won’t be able to enjoy it. You can’t use such proceeds to marry a woman, she would die. If someone were to buy livestock with this money, the animals would not reproduce. Gold can bring in a lot of money, but this money is useless, it can’t establish a home.<sup>1</sup>

The association of mineral resources with a category of money that cannot form the basis of lasting prosperity is strikingly similar to the concept of ‘bitter money’ among the Luo in Kenya.<sup>2</sup> The Luo, a segmentary society whose main economic activity is farming, regard ‘bitter money’ as that which is earned in the pursuit of anti-social activities like theft, murder or the sale of products that are associated with the earth or the ancestors, products like tobacco, gold or the land itself. It is believed that the spirits of the ancestors ‘follow’ the proceeds of the sale and punish the seller. If such money is invested in livestock or marriage payments, the livestock may sicken or the woman may die. Thus, money earned by the sale of tobacco, for example, is preferably spent on clothes, alcohol or prostitution (Shipton 1989:31–34).

In the same year that Shipton’s study appeared, Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch published the collection “Money and the Morality of Exchange” (2000). Challenging Bohannan’s thesis (Bohannan 1955, 1959), like Shipton, the contributors

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews about conceptions of gold held by local populations in south-western Burkina Faso were conducted in 30 Birifor, Dagara, Dyan, Phuo, and Vigué villages in the provinces of Bougouriba, Ioba and Houet between 1999 and 2001. The interviews were recorded and translated from the Birifor, Dagara, and Dyula languages into French by Joël Somé. Moreover, more than 100 interviews were conducted in Mooré and French with gold-diggers and other inhabitants of a gold-mining camp and transcribed and translated by Sibbila Dabilgou, Dominique Tiendrébéogo and Gabrielle Roamba. I thank all of them for providing creative collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> Shipton (1989). Apparently Shipton was not aware that Michelle Fiéloux had already described a similar phenomenon among the Lobi in Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire in 1980 (see also Père 1988:181).

to Parry and Bloch's book demonstrate that the introduction of modern money did not necessarily lead to the collapse of local 'spheres of exchange':

To the extent that spheres of exchange exist among the Luo, money does not necessarily scramble spheres. But it is usually classified as belonging to one sphere or another. How money was obtained determines how it is classed; and how it is classed determines how people think it should be used (Shipton 1989:9; see also Hutchinson 1996:56ff.).

Studies of various Melanesian societies have come to a similar conclusion that money could indeed be 'domesticated' (Akin and Robbins 1999). The responses in Melanesia thus range from the acceptance of modern money and the wholesale abandonment of older currencies (like shell money) to the coexistence of modern money and local currencies (each being relevant for a specific type of exchange), to the 'enclaving' of modern money and its restriction to a few transactions like the payment of taxes.<sup>3</sup>

The idea that modern money possesses an inherently destructive force has also been rejected by other authors.<sup>4</sup> According to Bloch and Parry (1989) the apprehension with which modern money and certain forms of production, exchange and market relations are regarded may be understood as arising from inherent tensions between two basic 'transactional orders' (Bloch and Parry 1989:23): 'a cycle of short-term exchange which is the legitimate domain of individual – often acquisitive – activity, and a cycle of long-term exchanges concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order' (1989:2). That which is tolerated or even promoted in the context of a short-term exchange cycle, namely 'a degree of impersonality, considerable scope for individual gratification and a concern for pure instrumentality' (1989:29), may, if taken to the extreme, threaten the interdependence between the short-term and the long-term exchange cycle. Modern money, which is often regarded as symbolic of the 'short-term cycle' is judged to be morally problematic the moment it threatens to supplant the 'long-term' cycle (1989:27, cf. Akin and Robbins 1999:14). In order to prevent this from happening, money is 'converted' from certain forms of short-term exchange and is introduced into the long-term exchange cycle (Bloch and Parry 1989:25). In a similar vein, Elwert (1987) argues that the expansion of the market economy necessitates the creation of spheres of non-market exchange (or spheres of generalised reciprocity) in order to generate and protect the trust that is the basis for market exchanges (Elwert 1987). Otherwise the system would ultimately break down because everything (including love, justice and divine grace) might become the object of 'venal accumulation'.

Shipton, the contributors to Parry and Bloch and Akin and Robbins all contrast 'good' money (pre-colonial currencies) with 'bad' money (modern money). Yet the following examples will show that in certain contexts local currencies may also be

<sup>3</sup> Akin and Robbins (1999:24–25). Cf. also Jane Guyer's reflections on 'interface currencies' (1995, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Şaul (in press), Trenk (2001), Zelizer (1994, 2000), and Znoj (1995, 1998).

adjudged to be morally problematic. I shall discuss conceptions that are common in Burkina Faso regarding the association of a specific natural resource, gold, with 'bitter money'. Here 'general purpose money' in the form of cowry shells circulated before the introduction of modern money. Even before the penetration of the modern market economy, cowries derived from specific transactions were regarded as being 'bitter' or dangerous. Because gold is associated with the earth and the ancestors, the proceeds from its sale, whether in cowries or in money, may only be used for specific purposes. I argue that concepts like 'bitter money' provide an idiom in which the appropriation of resources and the ensuing consequences can be negotiated both within and beyond a local context.

#### THE MINING ACCIDENT

On November 3, 2001 a serious accident occurred in a non-industrial gold-mine in south-western Burkina Faso.<sup>5</sup> In one section of the mine several of the more than fifty-metre deep shafts collapsed, trapping about sixty gold-miners. The surviving miners, as well as the inhabitants of the neighbouring village, desperately tried to rescue the victims, but were unable to do so. Two days later, after volunteers had managed to recover only one body, a number of the trapped miners continued to show signs of life. Yet even attempts to reach the shafts with bulldozers and excavators failed. Representatives of the Ministry of Mining came from the capital, Ouagadougou, to discuss whether or not the mine should be closed entirely.

After the accident, a rumour spread that, just before the collapse, the victims had discovered a particularly large gold vein. Supposedly the whole area they uncovered sparkled magnificently, which was why the rock pulled so many people into this section of the mine. The gold 'wanted blood', and that was why the gold-mine 'ate' the victims. The real cause of the tragedy was often viewed as the failure to gain the favour of the earth deity and the bush spirits three years before by sacrificing a cow when mining first began. Some believed that the victims of this accident had themselves become a belated sacrifice. Not only the gold-miners but also some residents of the nearby provincial capital were convinced that in time the corpses buried in the collapsed shafts would turn into gold as the metal would penetrate the skulls and bones of the corpses.<sup>6</sup> In this context, mention was made of the *coupeurs de têtes*, murderers paid by wealthy Muslim businessmen to sever the heads of their victims and bury these

<sup>5</sup> At that time I was in Burkina Faso and was able to follow these events closely (Werthmann 2003:63).

<sup>6</sup> An almost identical incident occurred in April 1998 in a mine in Tanzania, where about 100 miners were buried alive after heavy rains had caused the pits to collapse. 'Rather than drive away mineral prospectors, this incident is likely to attract the locals to the mines in their thousands in the belief that the spirits "have been calmed" and it is now their turn to reward the people' (Dushimiyimana 1998). Cf. also Nash (1979:156) and Taussig (1980:149).



Fig. 1: View into a section of the gold-mine in the year 2000. The supporting beams mark the entrances to the vertical shafts (photo: Katja Werthmann).

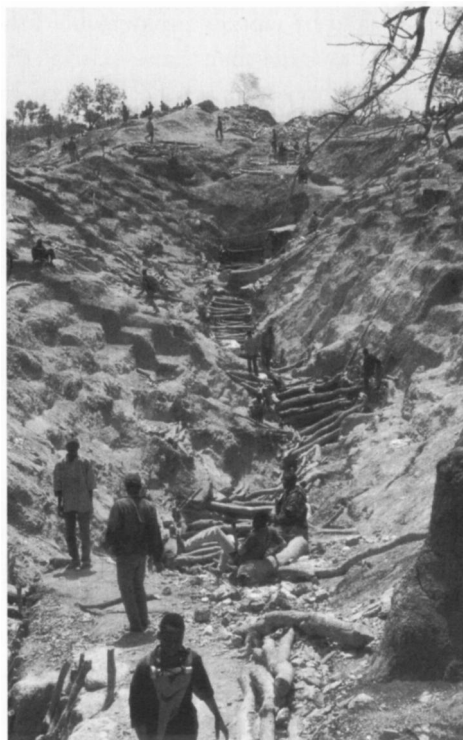


Fig. 2: The same section as in Fig. 1, one year later, after the mining disaster. Several pits (visible in the foreground) caved in and about sixty people were buried alive (photo: Katja Werthmann).



Fig. 3: A graveyard in the vicinity of the mine. Gold-diggers who died as a result of mine accidents are buried here, often several corpses in one grave (photo: Katja Werthmann).

in gold-bearing ground in order eventually to recover the gold-covered skulls. During the Catholic memorial service held in the village, the earth priest delivered a speech and pointed out once again that the gold-diggers had never made the required sacrifice at the earth shrine. He also complained that gold-mining had led to the felling of a considerable number of trees. But if the mine were to be shut down, the village would lose in two respects: first the loss caused by deforestation, and then the loss of jobs associated with gold-mining activities. The earth priest thus hoped that everyone would do what they could to ensure the mine's continued operation. Four months later, a large sacrifice was carried out just as the earth priest had instructed, when the miners brought to the earth altar one cow, four chickens, a goat and a sheep.

#### *EARTH CULT, BUSH SPIRITS AND 'DANGEROUS GOLD'*

The present-day inhabitants of south-western Burkina Faso started immigrating into the area during the eighteenth century. The historical processes by which these mostly segmentary societies (Bwaba, Sisala, Phuo, Dyan, Birifor, Lobi, Dagara) settled in south-western Burkina Faso included peaceful cohabitation, assimilation and the gradual displacement of previous inhabitants by immigrants, as well as the violent appropriation of certain areas and local shrines. What is remarkable is the consensus that has been reached, irrespective of linguistic and cultural boundaries, regarding the spiritual dimensions of land claims. In south-western Burkina Faso, as in other parts of Africa, the earth is considered a deity (Zwernemann 1968). The settlement of previously uninhabited 'bushland' or the appropriation of land in an area that has already been settled by other groups requires ritual negotiation by the so-called earth priests or masters of the earth. Even those immigrants who, since the eighteenth century, have forced out the previous inhabitants continue to comply with these norms, taking over or installing earth shrines in order to ensure the well-being of their community (Kuba, Lentz, and Werthmann 2001:18).

With the exception of Lobi and Birifor women in the Gaoua region, who perform small-scale shallow-pit mining and panning (Schneider 1993), most of these groups seem not to have practised gold-mining except as forced labour during colonial rule. The recent non-industrial gold-mining activities in Burkina Faso began during a drought in the 1980s after gold was discovered in the north-eastern part of the country. Non-industrial mining presented an alternative to urban migration or to searching for work in neighbouring countries. Initially it was thus mostly those people from drought-affected areas who worked in the mines in the northern part of the country. Later mining spread to other areas, until in the 1990s it began in the southern and western parts of Burkina Faso (Werthmann 2000, 2001). The majority of the in-migrating gold-diggers are Mossi from the central areas.

The recent appropriation and exploitation of gold deposits is threatening the local population's land-use rights and affecting religious beliefs regarding 'natural' resources. Despite differences in origin and language, many of the population groups in present-day south-western and western Burkina Faso voice very similar warnings regarding the danger inherent in gold. A commonly held view is that gold is a living creature that moves and can suddenly appear or disappear to the accompaniment of strange lights or sounds. Gold can make a person blind, lame or crazy and can even kill. Some groups or certain clans are forbidden even to come near gold. As a Dyan informant put it: 'Even today the prohibition still holds. If one of our children were to go to a gold-mining area, it would be all over; the ancestors would kill it'. If one happens to find living gold while in the bush or working in the fields, one must first 'kill' it before it can be taken. Gold is killed by sprinkling it with blood or urine; however, the corresponding body part will 'die' too. But it is not the gold itself that brings bad luck, but rather the hill, tree and water spirits to whom the gold belongs. Found gold is treated like other objects that one finds above ground or underground, such as stray animals, buried cowries or Neolithic adzes. It must be presented to the head of the family, who will hand over the found object to the earth priest. Because gold is believed to possess special powers, it is sometimes incorporated into medicine shrines or altars dedicated to the ancestors. Such beliefs exist not only in the south-west, but also in other regions of the country. The Mossi and Gurunsi, for example, claim that all household property must first be moved into the courtyard before gold can be brought into the house. Only then can gold attract further wealth. A failure to take such precautionary measures before bringing gold into the house will have the opposite, deleterious effect (Kiéthéga 1983:187).

Even many gold-miners share the view that gold is dangerous. Although Mossi migrants are stereotyped throughout south-western Burkina Faso as willing to do anything for money, these gold-miners also refer to the danger stemming from the supernatural powers of gold. They say that when gold was first discovered in their provinces, they, too, were afraid of gold, because it was believed that one could not find gold without a relative falling ill or dying. They, too, say that gold 'belongs' to the spirits, or, in the words of a Mossi informant:

Some say that it is this thing which moves [...]. Others say it is like a serpent, and when it moves you see fire. If you see gold and you have a strong heart, then you take a machete and cut it to pieces. You can take it, but not just like that. Since it belongs to the spirits, it instils fear.

In south-west Burkina Faso, gold is 'guarded' by the earth deity and the bush spirits. Thus, when people intrude into these spheres, it is regarded to be just as dangerous potentially as other forms of interference with nature.

He who discovers a gold deposit runs the risk of dying, because he has uncove-

red the spirits' secret. On occasion spirits appear in the mines, manifesting themselves in human or serpent form.

Usually, when gold-diggers discover gold, they appropriate the area without further preliminaries. It is only when the number of mysterious incidents grows that they consider taking ritual action. Thus it was only after a number of accidents had occurred, one of which ended fatally, that a delegation of gold-diggers at the previously mentioned mine consulted the earth priest, who instructed them to sacrifice a specific number of cowries and animals. A failure to do so would cause the hill and river spirits to make the gold disappear. However, the speaker for the gold-diggers opposed this sacrifice, because sacrifices were what was said to have caused the gold to disappear from other mines. The date of the sacrifice kept being postponed.

The notions that may be encountered in Burkina Faso regarding the origin and nature of gold are by no means unusual. Similar ideas regarding nature spirits or 'local demons' may be found throughout Africa (Zwernemann 1968:388f.). Moreover, the 'genuine miners' complex of ideas about the mountain spirit' characterises mining folklore all over the world (Heilfurth 1981:209). The 'belief in spiritual powers residing in the mines' (Heilfurth 1981:208) can be found in many regions and in many historical periods, although the specific manifestations and their activities may differ considerably.<sup>7</sup> Particularly in Latin America, mountain spirits gradually became devils as Christian influence spread.<sup>8</sup> A recent gold discovery in Papua New Guinea was integrated into the local cosmology by being interpreted as the excrements of a mythical snake (Biersack 1999, Clark 1993).

#### 'BITTER MONEY'

Unlike in other regions of Burkina Faso, the local populations of the south-west do not participate to any significant extent in gold-mining activities. Many regard gold less as a source of prosperity than as a danger to be avoided. Moreover, gold's dangerous characteristics may contaminate money earned selling goods. This money is known among Dagara speakers as 'dirty' (*dewr*) or 'bitter' (*tuo*).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Heilfurth (1981:211–217). Similar notions have been reported in the context of industrial mining in South Africa (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:206, 466, n. 87; Harries 1994:221).

<sup>8</sup> See Edelman (1994), Harris (2000), Heilfurth (1981:215), Nash (1979), Sallnow (2000) and Taussig (1980).

<sup>9</sup> Today the Dagara are demographically the most important group in south-west Burkina Faso and north-west Ghana, and comprise an influential educated elite (Lentz 1998, Somda 1984, Somé 1996). In the following accounts I shall focus on the Dagara, since they constitute the majority of the population in the area I am dealing with. The Dagara terms used here are those used in the Wile variation, which in some respects differs from the Lobr variation (e.g. Wile *bawr*, Lobr *bagr*). Notions of 'dangerous gold' or 'bitter money', however, are not limited to the Dagara-speaking populations. –

In conversations conducted in French, gold's dangerous characteristics and the money obtained through these are often referred to as 'satanique', 'diabolique' or 'maudit'. Even if these terms can be traced back to influences stemming from Christian missionary activities in the 1930s, the idea of 'bitter' money is most certainly older than these terms would lead us to believe. The term 'bitter money' (*libi tuo*) not only refers to modern money (the Franc CFA), but also to cowries.<sup>10</sup> From the sixteenth century, cowries were a common currency throughout West Africa. In the early nineteenth century these shells followed the trade routes and spread into the area that is present-day Burkina Faso (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986:104). In spite of several attempts on the part of the French to suppress cowries in favour of coins from 1909, when it was officially prohibited to pay taxes in kind, the populations in the south-west and west of present-day Burkina Faso continued to use cowries as a regional currency (Saul n.d.). As late as the 1950s, in an empirical study of the financial transactions of 130 households in south-west Burkina Faso, Boutillier found that 90% of all such transactions involved cowries. The Franc CFA, on the other hand, was used mostly to purchase imported goods or to pay taxes (Boutillier 1993:251; cf. Tengan 2000:220). Only after independence were cowries 'demonetised'; although they continue to be used at local markets as well as for ritual payments (Somda 1993:236). Cowries are particularly important as offerings that are laid upon the altars belonging to the earth deity or to the ancestors, or on market shrines.

In the Dagara context, it is first and foremost 'earth money' (*tengan libie*) that is considered bitter. This refers to cowries that have been hoarded by their owner and buried at a secret location, such as in a field. Sometimes the owner of such buried treasure dies without telling family members of its existence. When subsequent users of the land find such treasure, they must turn it over to the earth priest, just as they would any other found object. Should a person keep money that he has found, this could result in his suicide, because the buried money is regarded as 'poisoned'. Since gold is associated with the earth – and by extension with the ancestors and the bush spirits – its sale generates 'bitter money'. Just like other kinds of earth money, the proceeds from gold extraction may only be spent on particular goods or for particular purposes. They must under no circumstances be used for payments that are important to the reproduction of the patrilineage and by extension in the relationship between the living and the ancestors. This applies particularly to bride-wealth, which usually comprises 360 cowries that are laid on the ancestral altar on the husband's farmstead to seal

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According to Goody 'bitter' as used here does not necessarily refer to an unpleasant taste, but rather is used to describe actions or objects that deviate from the norm (1962:113). The meat obtained from cows which have been slaughtered in the course of funeral festivities is distributed among specific categories of persons and is regarded as bitter (Goody 1962:174, 407). The 'bitter funeral beer' ceremony marks a specific stage in the funerary celebrations (Goody 1962:220).

<sup>10</sup> On the etymology of *ligbi* or *libi* (money), see Tengan (2000:219).



the marriage.<sup>11</sup> From this moment on, the woman's sexuality 'belongs' exclusively to her husband. Should she commit adultery, the ancestors may severely punish both her and her husband. If one were to use 'bitter' money for such a payment, this would risk the wife dying or the marriage failing fairly soon. Among the Dagara, 'bitter money' may also arise from the unauthorised sale of a cow belonging to the entire patrilineage. Because of this special status, it is thought of as falling into the category of 'black' (dangerous) animals that are usually killed only in sacrifice (Goody 1962:109–110, 395–396). Even if this cow were to belong to the herd of a particular family member, the latter would still require permission from his elders in order to sell it. Moreover, the sale of gold is equated with the consumption of a prohibited animal.

In some cases, money becomes 'dirty' by analogy to the properties of the product that has been sold to obtain it. Some of this kind of money is generated by women's activities, such as making millet beer or bean cakes. This money (in cowries or cash) is literally dirty because women touch it with fingers that are wet or oily from the products they sell, but it is also symbolically dirty, because beer and bean cakes are sold in places like markets or bars, where people tend to fight or to speak ill of other persons. This money should not be mixed with 'good' money, and it must not be used to pay bride-wealth. As one woman explained, the dirtiness of this kind of money has entered proverbial use, as in 'dirty like a woman married with the money of bean cakes'. A similar analogy exists between the money obtained from the sale of red peppers and the character of a particular person, who might be said to be 'arrogant like a woman married with the money of red pepper'. Such a person is considered having a 'hot' temperament, reference being made to the hotness of the red peppers. There are also animals that are considered dirty, and money obtained by selling them becomes equally dirty. This is the case for dogs and pigs. Whereas pigs symbolise dirt (as elsewhere), dogs are seen as a symbol for incest, because male dogs frequently interbreed with their mothers. The money obtained from the sale of a dog must, therefore, not be used for bride-wealth in order to avoid detrimental influence on the character of a woman who is married with this money.

Money obtained from the sale of beer, bean cakes, peppers, pigs and dogs is not so much 'bitter' (*tuo*) or impure, as 'dirty' (*dewr*) or improper. It can be 'cleaned' in order to become 'proper' money. In order to 'clean' dirty money and make it suitable for marriage payments, it first has to be spent on buying animals such as chickens. Once these have multiplied, they can be sold for other animals such as goats or sheep, which in turn can be sold again. The money obtained from the sale of these animals can then be used to pay bride-wealth. Since chickens are thought to be intermediaries between the ancestors and the living and are primarily used for sacrifices, money that is obtained by selling chickens is pure.

'Bitter' or impure money cannot be purified, since it is obtained from acts that

<sup>11</sup> This portion becomes *libi tuo* (bitter money) after having been deposited on the ancestral altar.

amount to 'selling' people, i.e. profiting from the suffering of others. This may, for example, consist of cowries or cash that are collected by the master of the initiation ceremony or *bawr*. Likewise, money that has been paid as compensation for the death of a relative by accident is considered highly impure. This kind of money is likened to the proceeds from the sale of a person. In addition, winnings from the local game of chance or *gbaw* that is played with four cowries are also considered bitter, because in former times family members were sometimes used as a stake.<sup>12</sup> Should one not be able to spend all of the cowries or coins collected at the *bawr* on food, clothing, funerals, etc., they are buried. This is the reason why cowries found in the earth cannot simply be kept and spent. Even if the finder knows nothing about where these cowries came from, his ignorance will not protect him from the consequences should he handle them improperly. If even one bitter cowry shell or coin from the *bawr* falls into a pile of normal money, then the entire pile will be contaminated and must be used accordingly. The bitterness of *bawr* money is not removed even when, for example, an object bought with 'bitter money' is sold and the proceeds used to pay bride-wealth. 'Bitter money' may only be used for certain purposes. One may, for example, pay taxes<sup>13</sup> or repay one's debts. Mostly this money is spent on personal, short-lived consumer goods that are not inheritable, such as clothes or bicycles, or on perishable goods that must be consumed immediately, like millet beer or bean cakes.<sup>14</sup>

While some people believe that the money earned by migrant labourers in the industrial gold-mines of Ghana (Lentz and Erlmann 1989) is bitter, others claim that this is not the case, since the workers do not sell the gold themselves, but rather draw wages for mining it. According to the latter, work in the Ghanaian mines is therefore no different from other work, like that on the plantations in Côte d'Ivoire. It is not just older people who emphasise the difference between 'good' and 'bad' money. Even younger people are very conscious of the difference. One Dagara gold-miner, for instance, justified his working in the mine by claiming that he needed to pay off his debts at the Caisse Nationale de Crédit Agricole. This young man emphasised that the money he earned with his own two hands could not be bad, and therefore it deserved to be regarded by the elders just like the money that is earned through labour migra-

<sup>12</sup> See Labouret (1931:174), Somda (2000) and Somé (2001).

<sup>13</sup> Taxes are called 'debts to the white man'. – Cf. 'shit money' (wages earned by emptying latrines) among the Nuer: 'It's going straight to the government!' (Hutchinson 1996:84). 'Shit money' was separated from other kinds of income and would never be used to purchase cattle.

<sup>14</sup> 'Bitter' money is not defined in the same manner by all societies in the region. In the course of her research, Michelle Fiéloux discovered that, in Lobi village communities in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, 'bitter money' results from the sale of 'bitter' crops that were introduced by the ancestors and are regarded as 'belonging' to the patrilineage. In contrast to the Dagara context, this 'bitter money' may not be used to purchase products for immediate consumption, like millet beer and tobacco, nor may it be used to purchase personal goods, like bicycles. Instead it may only be spent on absolute essentials such as farming tools, grain in the event of a shortage, or the payment of taxes (Fiéloux 1980:167; see also Père 1988:180–182). What both these conceptions of 'bitter money' share, however, is the link between 'bitter money' and the realm of the ancestors.

tion. In either case, one would not use the money earned to buy food for the family back in the village. Some Mossi informants also said that certain types of money could only be used for certain purposes. Thus, money that mourners attending a funeral give to the family of the deceased should not be invested in trade, because this would certainly lead to the enterprise failing. Cattle that is bought with money earned by working in the mines will not multiply. Yet Mossi gold-miners do not always act in accordance with this normative concept. Often, whoever manages to save enough money buys cattle with it (cf. Shipton 1989:34). Particularly young gold-miners, for whom working in the mines is something like an adolescent test of courage (cf. de Boeck 1998), spend their money directly in the mining settlements, buying alcohol, cigarettes and meat or luxury goods such as mopeds and clothes, much like gold-miners all over the world.

#### *INTERPRETATIONS OF 'BITTER MONEY'*

Shipton rejects monocausal explanations for concepts like 'bitter money': 'Each of the theoretical perspectives – political economy, diffusionism, functionalism, structuralism – yields a part of an understanding that will always be incomplete' (Shipton 1989:66). He sums up: 'Regardless of one's theoretical or political persuasion, it is hard not to conclude that „bitter money“ represents a reaction against new strains of possessive individualism in this rather egalitarian society' (Shipton 1989:81). According to Shipton, the idea of 'bitter money' embodies, among other things, the 'levelling ideology' of a segmentary society that is opposed to the accumulation of individual wealth. Shipton stresses, however, that for quite a long time the Luo have been involved in labour migration, and that the cultivation of cash crops first introduced during the colonial period, such as sugarcane, cotton or coffee, does not generate 'bitter money' (Shipton 1989:51). It is thus the individual appropriation of resources for which others have lived and worked that is regarded as a 'betrayal' (of the family, the lineage, the neighbourhood or the ethnic group), because this entails the denial of other group members' claims (Shipton 1989:67). Znoj comes to a similar conclusion: 'Ultimately, then, the notions of bitter and hot money, respectively, emerge out of a contradiction between commonly held or claimed resources and the private ownership of the proceeds of their sale in the form of liquid money' (1998:207).

This contradiction becomes especially obvious with regard to riches that are 'found' rather than earned, such as buried cowries or gold. In south-west Burkina Faso, as elsewhere, these riches or the proceeds of them are declared to be 'bitter money' and 'converted' by using them in such a way as to stress the continuity of the local community. One might give them away to family elders or ancestors in the form of gifts or sacrifices. Alternatively, one may spend them on food, that is consume them

immediately in the context of important social events (e.g. markets, funerals) by spending them on such perishables as meat, bean cakes or millet beer. If they are not converted, they are enclaved and used only for payments that are not linked to subsistence activities such as debt repayments and taxes. Exceptionally large sums of money, such as those which must be amassed for marriage payments, can usually only be collected by mobilising the entire network of one's immediate and extended family. This entails running up both material and moral debts, of which one is reminded at the appropriate time. In the past, and to some extent even today, a portion of the bride-wealth was in fact paid in the form of bride-services, i.e. work performed for one's father-in-law. Even today there are many men who do not have sufficient resources to pay bride-wealth in full. This often leads to marital problems, as the parents of the bride will eventually begin to pressure their son-in-law to pay up by threatening to take back their daughter. Theoretically, a fairly quick and easy way of satisfying these obligations would be to use money earned in mining, but this is the very money that must not be used for bride-wealth payments.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to reconstruct the historical experiences that shaped the concepts surrounding 'dangerous gold'. Similar ideas may be found in other parts of West Africa. Moreover, discussions of gold-mining raise another idea, already mentioned, that is not restricted to Burkina Faso: the so-called *coupeurs de têtes*. These are said to be 'Elhads' (Muslim businessmen) who murder people and sever their heads, burying them so that gold deposits may accumulate in them. Rumours of these *coupeurs de têtes* were particularly widespread during the regime of Sangoulé Lamizana in the 1970s (Jaffré 1997:86), but they continue to circulate to this day. The idea that one can accumulate wealth with the help of severed body parts exists in many countries, not just in Africa. In Burkina Faso, these ideas are not portrayed with such vivid imagery as they are in Nigeria, where corresponding stories are available for purchase in the form of illustrated pin-up calendars. Yet these, too, are part of a complex of fairly wide-spread interpretative patterns that regard sudden, inexplicable and therefore circumspect wealth as being the result of witchcraft or a pact with the spirits, as is the case in Cameroon, Nigeria or Niger,<sup>15</sup> as is the case for 'satanic riches' in Ghana (Meyer 1995), or as is the case for South African 'occult economies'.<sup>16</sup>

Underlying the apprehension vis-à-vis such 'ill-gotten wealth' seems to be the idea that an individual's prosperity can only be gained at the expense of others. Some West African legends about the origin of cowry shells represent wealth as issuing from taking the life of other human beings or animals.<sup>17</sup> These ideas are reminiscent of Foster's concept of the 'image of the limited good', which he encountered among Latin

<sup>15</sup> See Geschiere (1997), Frank (1995), Harnischfeger (1997), and Masquelier (2000).

<sup>16</sup> See Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) and Niehaus (2000). Cf. also de Boeck (1998:788–792).

<sup>17</sup> See Adebayo (1999:149), Elwert (1973:92, 1989:24–25), Gregory (1997:233), Héritier (1975) and Hogendorn and Johnson (1986:155–156).

American peasants (1965). Central to this notion is the belief that all desirable goods (land, masculinity, love, honour, etc.) are scarce. Should one person have more than others, this can only be because he has taken this from someone else's share. Thus, when an individual suddenly has access to an unusual sum of money, informal sanctions (like gossip, slander, accusations of witchcraft, etc.) are used to pressure him into sharing his fortune in the context of, for example, a social gathering. This notion of 'limited goods' can help us understand the implicit logic underlying interpretative patterns in which 'bitter money' and 'ill-gotten wealth' are embedded.

However, such interpretative patterns are neither limited to specific areas nor to social structures such as 'traditional peasant societies' or 'segmentary societies'. Notions that the accumulation of wealth requires unspeakable measures, that money earned by exploiting mineral resources is 'barren', and that conspicuous consumption is anti-social may be found in Latin America, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> Yet even here one must be wary of the tendency to exoticise. At times, underlying the interpretations of such phenomena is an almost cliché criticism of the capitalist system, according to which the penetration of modern means of production leads to the rise of a class society and the demise of the traditional moral economy. Such views, however, are rooted in a romantic ahistoricism that continues to believe that these societies were egalitarian and harmonious in pre-colonial times. Yet this perspective rests on a 'conceptual resistance of capitalism on the part of the anthropologist or sociologist' (Znoj 1998:194). Even in the pre-colonial period, for instance, there were segmentary societies in west and south-west Burkina Faso, as well as in north-west Ghana, in which some people were wealthier than others, owned slaves, and distinguished themselves from the masses as 'strong men' (Lentz 1998:97, Şaul 1998). The corresponding discourses regarding the source and legitimacy of this prosperity probably existed even back then. What Shipton said about the Luo also applies to the societies of south-west Burkina Faso:

It seems likely that a concept of 'bitter money' or some similar idea has existed for generations, but that the specific commodities or transactions associated with it have changed over time and space as some transactions have become more common and as the Luo have perceived them as dangerous to the fabric of society. [...] It may be, too, that some of today's 'traditions' are being projected into the past (Shipton 1989:39).

Normative concepts regarding ill-gotten wealth and forbidden goods are always multidimensional, and the proscriptive and prohibitive rules that govern them are interpreted and applied in accordance with the context (Shipton 1989:65). In south-west Burkina Faso, we find that discussions about 'dangerous gold' and 'bitter money' contain elements of discourses on what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate modes of access to economic and social resources. Depending on the context or on who is tak-

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Clark (1993), Taussig (1980), Vail (1995) and Znoj (1998).

ing part in the conversation, different aspects of gold-mining and 'bitter money' are emphasised. Thus people often stress that you must earn your living by the sweat of your brow and with your own hands.<sup>19</sup> Even though this may technically also be said of gold-mining, this activity is generally not regarded as respectable and is often contrasted with subsistence farming. This is either because only farming is regarded as 'real' work, or because gold exploitation serves to further the individual accumulation of wealth and cannot be controlled by the family. Alternatively, this may also be because gold, unlike agricultural products, is 'barren' and must be sold before it can be consumed; or because in the process of tunnelling into the earth, one may encounter human remains, which presents an extremely dangerous situation outside the ritual context of a funeral. Or perhaps, it is as one Dagara gold-miner put it, it is 'because we creep through holes like rats'.

## CONCLUSION

Until now, the local populations of south-west Burkina Faso do seem to be not very interested in the proceeds of gold-mining, because they are considered 'bitter money'. This may, however, change with time as it did in the northern and central provinces, where gold-mining began in the 1980s. Despite the predominance of normative views regarding what constitutes 'real work' and 'good money', people do work in the gold-mines. Some cite poverty as the reason, while others justify their participation as do labour migrants, by claiming that the money they earn or the goods they purchase with this money are handed over to the head of the family. The latter can then try to obtain the mercy of the ancestors by offering sacrifices to them. And of course there are always young people who really could not care less what the old folks say, an attitude which serves to convince the older generation that things are indeed getting progressively worse.

Yet, both local communities and in-migrating gold-miners see gold as a potentially harmful resource. On the one hand it promises to bring wealth, but on the other hand it can prove to be detrimental to social relations as well as to individuals. This destructive capacity is articulated through the idioms of 'dangerous gold' and 'bitter money'. Through these idioms, access to resources and the ensuing consequences may be negotiated both within and beyond a local context. One 'solution' for dealing with new means of production like non-industrial gold-mining may consist in treating gold-mining camps as cultural exclaves, where new spheres of exchange and 'permissible'

<sup>19</sup> This ideology of peasant economy is also evident in the failure of attempts by development projects to introduce the plough, for example. When reservations vis-à-vis draught oxen are voiced at all, they run something like: 'An animal cannot do the work of a man'.

– or even compulsory – forms of conspicuous consumption develop, as is the case in present-day gold- and diamond-mining areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (de Boeck 1998), Guyana (Roopnaraine 1996), Papua New Guinea (Clark 1993, Vail 1995) and Indonesia (Znoj 1998). In doing so, the destructive potential of 'bitter' or 'hot' money is largely kept apart from a community's subsistence activities.

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