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God's Gifts: Destiny, Poverty, and Temporality in the Mines of Sierra Leone

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Abstract

In Sierra Leone, many artisanal miners share the view that every human act and every event is the realisation of an inscrutable divine plan. Even though notions of fate and destiny are part of the vocabulary of Krio, the country's lingua franca, miners prefer to use expressions that evoke God and stress His immanent presence and influence in their everyday lives. In order to understand the religious vocabulary of contingency and the cosmology underlying the ways in which miners interpret, reproduce, and imaginatively prepare the conditions to change their lives, this article focuses on the ritual practices connected to artisanal diamond mining. It considers these rituals as attempts to resolve the ever-present temporal and moral tensions between actual conditions of suffering and poverty, and the realisation of the well-being that miners associate with their desired futures.

Keywords

Sierra Leone, artisanal mining, contingency, poverty, rituals, temporality

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Introduction

The discovery of a diamond, a landslide that threatens diggers' lives in a deep pit, or an encounter with a generous person in a time of hardship are all events and situations in which Sierra Leonean artisanal miners confront the unexpected and the accidental. Central

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to both Christian and Muslim miners' understanding of these events is the religious belief that every human act and every event is the realisation of an inscrutable divine plan. Even though the notions of fate and destiny are part of the vocabulary of Krio, the country's lingua franca, many of the miners I encountered in Sierra Leone during my fieldwork there (2007–2016)[1] used expressions that evoke God and stress His immanent presence and influence in their everyday lives. For example, when I asked miners how they would explain the different results obtained by two colleagues working in the same mine with the same level of experience – one becoming rich and the other losing everything – one of the most immediate and common responses was *Na God*, "It is God."

Far from being just an exclamation (cf. Butticci, 2013), *Na God* conjured any event or situation whose ultimate end or reason could not be understood and explained in terms of human intentionality. Thus, the radical uncertainties inherent to artisanal mining in Sierra Leone and the insecurity that these generated in the everyday lives of miners were at least partially offset by the reassuring certainty of the existence of a divine order in which everyone will – sooner or later – receive reward or punishment, as sanctioned by God. The moment when this outcome, predetermined by God, comes to pass – particularly when something happens that changes someone's life for the better – was defined by some of my interlocutors as "God's time." In concert with this view, diamonds were regarded primarily as God-given things or divine gifts – and only secondarily as stones obtained through hard work in the country's mines.

In order to understand the religious vocabulary of contingency (Crapanzano, 2014; D'Angelo, 2015; Menin, 2016) and the moral view underlying the ways in which miners interpret, reproduce, and imaginatively prepare the conditions to change their present situations, I focus on the ritual practices connected to artisanal diamond mining in Sierra Leone. Given that similar concerns are at the centre of Michael Jackson's existentialist analysis of the Kuranko of Sierra Leone[2] (e.g. 1988, 1989, and 2011), it is useful to consider his approach to investigating these issues. Taking inspiration from William James's radical empiricism, Jackson considers divination and ritual offerings prepared by people in order to overcome obstacles or even change the future as an expression of a "pragmatic attitude to destiny" (1988: 198) in which "the 'objective' consistency or truth of narrative events and divinatory techniques is not an issue" (1989: 64).[3] Considering specifically diamond mining in Sierra Leone, Jackson interprets miners' ritual offerings as a way to obtain a "degree of control over the forces of destiny" (Jackson, 1998: 71) by exercising agency in a *seemingly* "more manageable world" (Jackson, 1998: 72) – that of God, ancestors, or djinns.

Whereas Jackson's insights are an invaluable contribution to the understanding of human experience, his existentialist perspective raises some problems. By considering "actual destiny" as a dynamic interplay between what is given and what is chosen, between prenatal dispositions and social praxis, or between innate dispositions and extrinsic social norms (Jackson, 1988, cf. 1998: 21), he tends to underestimate the role played by poverty (e.g. Cidade et al., 2015), power relations (e.g. Urreiztieta, 2000), and structural and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2000; Farmer, 2005) in conditioning people's moral understanding as well as their actual room for manoeuvre.[4] Further, Jackson considers uncertainty as a source of existential anxiety, something that most human

beings find difficult to accept – a problem "for both thought and action" (Jackson, 1989: 51). Being an issue of existential mastery, it comes before any political or economic concern (cf. Jackson, 1998: 21).

Differing from Jackson, I maintain that what the miners of Sierra Leone find most difficult to accept is not the existential anxiety generated by an uncertain world but rather the daily suffering produced by poverty and socio-economic inequalities. In a country in which the majority of the population live on less than USD 1 per day, and the malnourishment rate of under-fives is among the highest in the world,[5] it is poverty and inequality that generate the uncertainty that concerns my interlocutors and deeply affects their daily lives. When miners speak of their own lives in terms of what God has written before one's birth, they not only express what seems to be – to some extent – a reassuring world view; they also articulate the misery of this same world and the objective possibilities available to them to enact change within it (cf. Bourdieu, 2000). In other words, I do not consider ritual practices as the expression of "a search for ontological security" (Jackson, 1998: 71) or as "a way of redressing a loss of balance between one's immediate world and the wider world" (Jackson, 1998: 72). Neither do I consider rituals as "true practically" (see Durkheim, 1915: 80), as Jackson (1989, 2013) does in the following pragmatist philosophy. Rather, I consider mining rituals for what they reveal of "certain truths about the human condition" (Pickering, 1998: 6); that is, as contextual attempts to resolve the ever-present temporal and moral tensions between actual conditions of suffering and poverty and the possibilities of realising the well-being that miners associate with their desired futures (cf. Engwicht, 2018; Geenen, 2018; Pijpers, 2017). As "technologies of the future" (Graeber, 2012) informed by memories and experiences of the past (Ferme, 2001; Shaw, 2002), mining rituals can be also seen as attempts to manipulate temporal horizons and to "accelerate," so to speak, the coming of "God's time."

Attempts to change or trick "God's time" by seeking diamonds through prayers and rituals mean interacting and negotiating with a complex, interconnected, and mutable network of relations that ideally includes all humans and non-humans – such as djinns and God Himself – in a moral chain of being. The efficacy of these rituals lies not only in the ability to make sense of reality but also in the exhibition and practice of the moral values shared by a group (Robbins, 2015) – and thus preventing and rejecting suspicions, rumours, and misunderstandings about the morality of their activity. It is through these rituals – which express and reinforce the miners' unity as a moral community – that these workers can create the premise to change in the future what seems to be immutable from the temporal perspective of an unequal and unjust present.

Being in Control of One's Destiny

Since the end of the civil war (1991–2002), the everyday life of many people in Sierra Leone has been marked by radical uncertainties including a lack of stable employment, the increasing cost of living, difficulty accessing safe drinking water, non-existent or inconsistent access to electricity, irregular provision of fuel, and significant bureaucratic inefficiencies. Despite the encouraging economic growth rate – due, in large part, to the

large-scale mining sector, and in particular to the export of iron (see Pijpers, 2016)[6] – many Sierra Leoneans still live in conditions of extreme poverty[7]: they do not own a house, land, or a car and live in substandard housing.[8] Furthermore, they have to cope with rising inflation rates that erode, month after month, their purchasing power.[9]

Following his 2007 election win, President Ernest Bai Koroma promised change. The "Agenda for Change" guided Koroma's first term, a programme that the president himself described as "a bold new path for accelerating the advancement of our country on all fronts."[10]

On more than one occasion, the president directly addressed his country people, stressing the importance of taking control and full responsibility for their own destiny.[11] For Koroma – who has often expressed the intention of governing Sierra Leone as a business – having control over their own destiny means not being passive recipients of international aid but economic actors capable of "capturing the moment" and becoming reliable and transparent partners in business.[12] One way for Sierra Leoneans to achieve this control over their destiny, thus exceeding the inertia of an allegedly "fatalistic attitude," is to grasp the opportunities offered by the rich and varied mining industry of the country – "the opportunity that is at their door step."[13]

Koroma opened the inauguration ceremony for his second term as president in 2012 with these words: "The hand of destiny has led me where I stand today." In 2013, he launched a new agenda for the country.[14] Thus, the Agenda for Change was replaced by the "Agenda for Prosperity." With this, the president and his government elucidated their long-term vision for Sierra Leone: to become "a middle-income country" by 2035, a target perfectly in line with the ambitious programmes of the world's major economic organisations. Following the dominant paradigm in development sectors, according to which large-scale mining has the potential to reduce poverty (Gamu et al., 2015), the new agenda also placed particular importance on this extractive activity and on natural resource management. This productive sector was considered to be the engine of the economy,[15] which "is making us one of the fastest growing economies in the world."[16] Yet the benefits of the mining industry in terms of employment have been only limited.[17] Almost two-thirds of employed individuals, especially the young, continue to find informal jobs in the agricultural sector.[18]

Despite the Ebola epidemic that began in 2014 and officially ended in 2016 – and that tragically exposed the difficulty of solving Sierra Leone's structural problems – the idea of becoming a middle-income country has never been abandoned. If anything, the Ebola experience reinforced the belief that on this "epic journey" – as the Agenda for Prosperity defines this goal – "every individual is responsible for the fate of this nation, every family is responsible for our collective destiny."[19] Thus, the achievement of a middle-class standard of living has become more than ever an aspiration for many Sierra Leoneans.

As noted by Shaw (2007), in the years following the end of the civil war in 2002, working for an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), obtaining employment in the public sector, achieving a university degree and graduate employment, or choosing emigration were identifiable and effective strategies for improving one's living conditions and quality of life. However, for those without formal higher

education or unable to continue their studies, for those who lacked the connections to obtain a job offer in the public sector, for those without sufficient means to start a business or move to another country – in short, for those people removed from "the promise of a middle-class adulthood" (Shaw, 2014: 310) – artisanal mining represented a more accessible strategy for earning money and changing their social status. However, this "opportunity at the door step" is not immune from risks and uncertainties. This is particularly clear in the case of miners seeking alluvial diamonds with artisanal technology. The underground distribution of this type of diamond is not uniform, and it is extremely difficult to find profitable deposits. Some miners dig for months or years without success, putting both their health and capital at risk. Others – only very few – find gems within a relatively short space of time or are lucky enough to find a high-value stone that compensates for all their effort. Thus, for one reason or another, diamond money may come quickly or in abundance to some, but not to the great majority.[20]

It is in this context that many miners define diamonds as God-given things and their discoveries as inscrutable divine decisions. "It does not matter if you are a good or bad person [. . .], if God has decided that you will have a diamond, you will find the diamond," a miner told me during an interview. What this worker's words highlight is the awareness that divine omnipotence translates into the unpredictability – and, at times, the indecipherability – of human events. However, while conducting oneself ethically or not is irrelevant to the outcome of diamond extraction, this does not mean that immorality has no impact. The sense of the existence of divine justice was clearly present among the miners that I met – even when this justice does not always manifest within the time frame expected by human beings.

A recurring example among the miners was that of the digger lucky enough to find a large diamond, but who committed immoral acts to get it – namely, using an amulet or performing a sacrifice without following the recommendations of a religious leader recognised by the whole community (cf. Soares, 2004: 87). Like in other West African mines, the wealth generated through the extraction of precious minerals can generate ambivalent reactions and moral anxieties (e.g. Grätz, 2009; Luning, 2012; Werthmann, 2003). In Sierra Leone's mines, it is widely believed that the wealth obtained through amulets and rituals will not last long and that a miner who uses illegal means will almost certainly fall into disgrace.

It is worth emphasising that miners were well aware of rumours and gossip circulating around their activities and the possible illicit and immoral ways to "accelerate" their pursuits. Unsurprisingly, miners who had devoted most of their working life to the extraction of diamonds, and who claimed to have been successful, tended to underscore the morality of their actions and make as strong as possible the connection between God and diamonds. It is clear, however, that to say that it is God who gives diamonds does not neutralise rumours. In some respects, the expression used by some miners in relation to diamonds as "God's gifts" is still morally ambivalent. The uncertainty surrounding these gifts descends from the temporal perspective of the present. Only over time, with the *future* effects on the life of the gift's recipient, can the dilemmas and contradictions of this *present* be resolved. Only in the social and moral context of everyday life can one tell if a diamond is God's help, or one of the many ways in which He tests one's faith.

God's Time

Diamond mining is made up of different kinds of temporality and different rhythms or cycles: the *longue durée* of mining capitalism, the extremely *longue durée* of the environment and its natural resources, the seasonality and rhythms of human work, the life cycles of each miner, and so on (D'Angelo, 2018). But one temporality seems more relevant than others for artisanal miners in Sierra Leone, as became clear in conversation with those I met in a village near the Sewa River: "God's time." After the civil war, "God's time is the best" was among the most popular slogans written on vehicles travelling the country's roads (Jackson, 2011: 145–6). As in other West African countries (cf. Gaibazzi, 2012; McGovern, 2012; Shaw, 2007), in Sierra Leone, the slogan was so popular that it was echoed in the words of both Christian and Muslim believers.

The idea of God's time is closely linked to the notions of waiting and of patience as moral virtues of the believer. Waiting is a topic that has been examined from various sociological and anthropological angles. Several scholars have highlighted, for example, how it is ubiquitous, yet it is not experienced everywhere in the same way and does not have the same effects on different individuals and groups (e.g. Hage, 2009). Moreover, the same people can have at different times in their lives qualitatively different experiences of waiting – ones that can be mediated through the idiom of religion and influenced by the dimension of gender (e.g. Elliot, 2016; Mahmood, 2001). Various scholars have also shown how waiting can be a way to exercise power that marks the social and economic differences between those who wait and those who are made to wait (e.g. Bourdieu, 2000; Schwartz, 1974). Suffering, uncertainty, confusion, and arbitrariness are common feelings among those who wait and who urgently need to find a solution to their economic problems (Auyero, 2011: 6).

Similar feelings are experienced by miners, albeit with different intensities depending on their symbolic and economic capital. For those who are economically more vulnerable, waiting is often seen as a luxury that they cannot afford. Thus, impatience can be a morally acceptable attitude – as in the case of young Moroccans who try to reach Europe illegally and justify their impatience as "a religiously granted exception in a time of oppression" (Pandolfo, 2007: 339).

Along the banks of the Sewa River, miners have concentrated their efforts on different kinds of extractive activity. Some of them, usually from the poorer and the most economically vulnerable rungs of society (e.g. recent immigrants, children, and widows), those not having enough money to look for diamonds, or those not having found a supporter, extract construction materials – particularly sand and stones. In one of the villages along the Sewa, a diamond seeker named Ibrahim (to whom I return more extensively below) introduced me to two of his friends, Abu and Johnny. During the dry season of 2009, both were busy breaking stones and collecting sand from the river.

Abu was a thirty-year-old Muslim miner. During the war, he lost some of his closest relatives, and with them his main source of financial support. When the conflict ended, the extraction of building materials such as sand and stone with artisanal technologies became his main form of economic activity. In this way, he earned enough money to provide – albeit with some difficulty – for his wife and their five children. "There is

nothing better," he told me one day, when I asked if he would prefer a different job. During the war, Abu worked for a while in the diamond mines. However, in his opinion, in order to find the most precious stones, a lot of patience (and a good amount of money) was necessary before meeting any real success or significant gains. But, now, with a wife and five children, Abu could not afford the time to wait for diamonds.

Ibrahim, the supporter of a small team of artisanal miners and a man who had devoted much of his professional life to diamond mining, was in total disagreement. "I would not do this," he said, referring to the stone mining and to the work being carried out by his two friends then present, Abu and Johnny. "This man [pointing at Abu] now has done a pile of stones," Ibrahim said with what seemed an indignant tone, pointing towards the pile of them split by Abu. Then, turning to me, he remarked: "With diamond money you have to wait, but I prefer diamonds to this." For Ibrahim, breaking stones was too heavy and dangerous.

At that point in the discussion, Johnny intervened: "You do this work [referring to stone mining] by faith." We all turned to him. "Faith? What do you mean?" I asked. He moved away from the rock on which he had been leaning and approached us. Then, he repeated:

> Yes, faith. When you have faith and you think that when you pile stones, someone will buy them, your faith will help you to sell them in a short time.
>
> But what is needed is "true faith," he stressed, a "full faith" – to use his words – not a "half-faith." For Johnny, to have a full faith – that is, faith without hesitation – meant believing that God provides for all.
>
> If you believe in God as to say: "Yes, it will certainly come the time when God will provide for me," then the time when God will provide for you will come.[21]

Unlike Abu and Ibrahim, thirty-five-year-old Johnny was a miner who had converted to Christianity – a "Born Again," as he called himself – and who had settled in their mining village shortly before the official end of the civil war in 2002. Johnny had moved to this village to look for diamonds with his brother. Over time, he realised that he had to diversify his economic activities in order to sustain his family: a wife, seven school-age children, and a younger sister who dreamed of going to the United States. Thus, during the dry season, he mainly concentrated on the extraction of sand – and occasionally stone mining. When the first heavy rains began, he shifted to diamond mining because the extraction of sand was impractical: the water level and the strength of the river's currents prevented any kind of artisanal operation.

For Johnny, it was the "hard work" of the dry season, digging sand and occasionally breaking stones, which allowed him to support his family. Yet it had not always been like this. Things had been better "before." In 1992, during the early stages of the civil war, he found a thirteen-carat diamond. The benefits he gained from the sale of this large stone were lost when rebels attacked his village and he was forced to flee, leaving his possessions behind. "For everything there is a time," he told me, in attempting to explain the loss and his escape. "In everything there is God's time. Whatever you do, you have to wait for God's time."

His brother took him to search for diamonds in a place that was said to be full of gems. However, every time they went there, he did not find anything. Thus, he told his brother that he preferred to work with sand. Perhaps his luck was not in diamonds, he told me. It is a matter of time, Johnny repeated several times on different occasions, a matter of God's time. When I asked him to explain what he meant by God's time, he replied:

> God's time means the time when God decides that something happens [. . .]. If God decided before you were born that you will become rich, you will not die until you have reached this goal. This does not mean that God will give you the money to make you rich. God passes through the people. If you meet someone who tells you: "Brother, keep this thing," it means that God has passed the blessing through that person, so that you may be blessed. Therefore, if God's time to be rich has not come yet, even if you have money, it will not last long. Money will disappear like the wind because it is not God's time.[22]

Johnny criticised those colleagues who relied on ritual specialists for luck and to get rich before God's time. "There are ritual specialists (*moriman*) that promise a diamond as long as you are willing to sacrifice a human being," he told me, horrified by the immorality of such an extreme form of ritual exchange with the spiritual entities considered to be the "owners" of the diamonds, the djinns (D'Angelo, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Johnny revealed in subsequent conversations that diamond mining required even more faith than stone or sand mining: faith both as the confidence that one will be successful despite the uncertainty of extraction and as a moral force guiding one to work hard and not to fall into the temptation of engaging in immoral acts in order to succeed. When I heard these words, I did not realise that Johnny was probably brooding over his own temptations. One of the last times I saw him he said that he had "tasted diamond money," and he had never forgotten that taste. For this reason, he was tempted to leave the hard work of sand and stone mining, and with the help of God, perhaps, the next year he would return to diamond mining.

Diving in the River

Two years after my first interview with Abu, Ibrahim, and Johnny, I went back to the village where we first met. Abu was still engaged in the extraction of stones and sand. His wife had begun selling *poyo*, a popular drink made by fermenting palm water, but their economic situation had not changed significantly. As was the case two years earlier, Abu still believed that sand and stone mining were preferable to diamond mining. After all, the market for construction materials was still flourishing, thanks to ongoing work in the villages and in the nearby urban centre. Only if he could find a good supporter – namely, one capable of guaranteeing the financial backing required for him not to regret his small but regular earnings from sand and stone mining – would he be able to search for diamonds.[23]

I could not find Johnny, so I asked Ibrahim – the fifty-year-old Muslim miner who had introduced me to him – where he was. "Johnny has disappeared. He had accumulated debts and fled. Nobody knows where he is now," he explained. "Johnny had no patience," the miner told me with a wink. Ibrahim defined patience as a fundamental

virtue of a good miner. Consequently, he was not discouraged by setbacks. He would often repeat that when one works hard and has faith in God, it is only a matter of time before the diamonds arrive.[24]

In contrast to Abu and Johnny, Ibrahim engaged in diamond mining as a supporter. His career as a miner began in the 1970s after having travelled around several West African countries. From the beginning, Ibrahim was a success. With the first diamonds, he discovered he was able to buy a twelve-room house for his mother, a motorcycle, and the equipment required to search for diamonds underwater. In the 1980s, he married twice and had children. Then the civil war began. Ibrahim lost everything during this conflict. When the rebels attacked his village, they took his personal belongings and confiscated his machinery and equipment. Therefore, he decided to seek refuge in a camp set up by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Guinea with his family – an experience that he, like many others Sierra Leoneans,[25] remembered as a time of fear, deprivation, and enormous suffering.

After the war, Ibrahim returned to his village and his life continued – but with new challenges. More than a decade after the war, he had not been able to buy back some of the equipment that he needed to find diamonds underwater. Thus he had to make do with digging the ground with his workers at some sites close to the river, or offering his expertise to foreign miners. "It is hard," he said one day as we walked beneath the blazing sun towards a mine where a team of three young men he supported was digging the soil with shovels and pickaxes. "It is hard," he repeated, showing me his calloused palms, marked by the heavy use of ropes, shovels, and sieves. "Here, in Africa, we suffer," he commented as we watched his labourers, drenched in sweat, carry heavy bags filled with gravel to the edge of the river to be sifted.

In contrast to ground mining, underwater extraction offered greater economic rewards and was considered by miners to be less strenuous. The gravel of the rivers was held to be the richest in gems. However, this kind of work was more dangerous – particularly when carried out without the proper equipment. Without oxygen cylinders, diving suits, and masks, artisanal miners dived and dug in the darkness of the riverbed with their eyes closed, often for three or four hours without interruption. The air that they breathed was pumped into rubber hoses by air compressors sitting in canoes above, their colleagues on the surface ensuring that the machines worked properly and without problems.

Knowing how to *see* things as they were happening underwater, even when they could not actually be seen, was a quality that expert miners like Ibrahim often stressed. Seeing by touching was one of the most important skills that divers had to acquire in order to avoid risks. Underwater, miners touched everything around them. In this way, they constructed a mental map of the environment and its dangers in order to prevent panic and accidents. Still, divers knew that no matter how careful and experienced they were, visible and invisible dangers always lurked around the corner. Among these, some miners included the presence of unpredictable invisible spiritual beings, the djinns. It was said that these entities were similar to humans, particularly to "white men," and that they were everywhere – especially near hidden treasures like diamonds. These unpredictable spiritual beings could grant their riches to the miners or alternatively refuse to do so, regardless of the offerings made by these workers (D'Angelo, 2014).

Like any good devout Muslim, Ibrahim prayed regularly. Together with his colleagues, he asked God for blessing and protection. Above all, Ibrahim and his colleagues asked to be directed in their search for diamonds. Ritual offerings for finding high-quality diamonds and seeking God's protection accompanied prayers. There were different types of ritual offering. The most common were the *fangadama* and the *sarat*. The former consisted of preparing and consuming food like cookies, bananas, and raw potatoes. The latter essentially consisted of the ritual slaughter of domestic animals such as chickens, goats, and cows. In both cases, the ritual offerings could be eaten by the miners themselves, or prepared with and distributed to the inhabitants of nearby mining villages – often to children. As the miners claimed, one of the primary objectives of these offerings was to make others happy. Indeed, if people are happy, God is happy; and if God is happy, He can help miners by directing them towards the diamonds or convincing djinns to share the ones in their possession. The same djinns can then rejoice in human happiness and let the miners work, without causing them injury or accident.

Rather than considering mining rituals as a way to exert a certain degree of control over others or of looking for some lost balance, as suggested by an existential analysis (Jackson, 1998: 18), they can be seen rather for what they *do*. That is, as "actions that fully realise specific value or values" and, at the same time, "as actions that show people the values that exist in their community" (Robbins, 2015: 21–22). The question then becomes: What are these values in the case of miners? Significantly, these workers consider diamonds not only in terms of an economic opportunity at their door step but most importantly in terms of divine gifts. This vision highlights an economy of happiness based on the exchange of gifts. Making people happy is a necessity for this economy – and also, therefore, for the discovery of diamonds, as well as for any money made through their sale. As miners say, only those gifts from God that are reciprocated and solicited by miners through sacrifices recognised and consumed by their own communities can generate authentic and lasting well-being. In other words, mining rituals aim to trigger a virtuous circle of happiness that is simultaneously both the prerequisite for and the result of the search for diamonds. Under these conditions, it is possible to receive the help of God in a totally unexpected manner – that is, in less predictable times and places.

One day, for example, Ibrahim was sitting on the front steps of his house when he noticed a piece of folded paper in the street. The area was busy, but no one seemed to notice it. He walked over to the object and picked it up. In the folds of the paper, he found a diamond. "When you pray to God, you go to Mosque and you make *sarat*," Ibrahim told me more than once; "luck comes fast." What is faster than money gained when not working?

Ironically, for Ibrahim, this unexpected opportunity at the door step could only be explained in terms of divine intervention: it is God who makes things happen, because although He writes the destiny of each person before their birth, in His infinite goodness God still listens to prayers. Thus if destiny is, to use Ibrahim's definition, "something good that you do not expect when it meets you," then – just as with luck – finding diamonds is like meeting your own destiny. In this light, any effort to "speed up" one's own luck and make the diamonds arrive "fast" through rituals and prayers should not be understood as the illusions of people without "forth-coming" (Bourdieu, 2000: 221–3)

but as an expression of the urgent need to synchronise God's time with the mundane present – to shorten the unbearable distance that separates each from their own destiny of happiness. Thus, rituals are ways of exercising "agency in relation to time" (Moroşanu and Ringel, 2016: 18); calls for change in a context of "spatiotemporal inequalities" (Bear, 2016: 496).

According to Bourdieu (2002), the transformational power of these kinds of rituals is limited. Nevertheless, these symbolic actions contribute to the maintenance and regeneration of a context in which – under certain conditions – the seeds of possible protest may germinate (cf. Nash, 1993: 169). In this regard, it is worth noting again that the djinns were described by miners as beings that resembled white men and that these same beings lived in a parallel invisible reality, one in which work was not hard and wealth was not hidden from them – but readily at their disposal. In stark contrast with their daily reality, this upside-down world can be considered a tacit protest by Sierra Leone's miners against the misery and suffering of the world in which they live and struggle, working hard and imagining alternative futures within the limits and bonds of this same world (cf. Jackson, 2011).

Conclusion

In "Prophecy and the Near Future" (2007), anthropologist Jane I. Guyer observes that since the beginning of the post–World War II period – and within the space of just a couple of generations – temporal sensibilities changed significantly in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. Guyer's generation mapped the past in terms of "before, during, and since the war," and its "struggles and plans projected the future onto near horizons" (2007: 409). However, in current public representations of US society, this temporal frame seems to have evaporated. Thus, the "near future" appears to have been replaced by temporalities punctuated by events and calendar deadlines. At the same time, past and future seem to have moved apart, with the result that "the ultimate origins and distant horizons were both reinvigorated" (2007: 410).

In Sierra Leone, the president and his government have marked the future with a date: the year 2035. This is the deadline by which the destiny of the country is to be changed via a neo-liberal agenda that promotes foreign investment, particularly in the mining sector. Paradoxically, this punctuated time only ensures a negative certainty for an entire generation. The generation of miners who experienced the "before, during, and since the [civil] war" seems to be well aware of being trapped in a present filled with difficulties and a contingent future of collective well-being that, even if it does arrive, will be far removed from their individual life trajectories. They are also encouraged to change their behaviour and to take control of their destiny, as if decades of violence and corruption were a matter only of erroneous beliefs; as if solving the country's problems was, ultimately, the burden of the individual, and not the responsibility of the government or of society as a whole.[26]

They are encouraged to work hard because, to use the president's words, "prosperity is not a gift on a silver platter. Abundance of natural resources is only half of the story."[27] However, available jobs in the large-scale mining industry are limited and national

unemployment levels are high. The artisanal mining sector, especially in the case of diamonds, is characterised by risks and uncertainties that make difficult – if not impossible – the task of "being in control of one's destiny," in the sense suggested by the president. The key question, then, is how miners "can successfully create a good beyond what is presently given in their lives" (Robbins, 2013: 458).

As in the case of the Kuranko people of Sierra Leone discussed by Jackson (1988), many artisanal miners that I myself met described the course of their lives as being predestined. "God's time," "God-given things," "luck," and "a blessing" are part of the vocabulary of the contingency that points to the ways in which miners perceive their room for manoeuvre in their journey towards their desired futures, and the strategies they may engage to achieve them. Given the polysemy of these terms, and the different life trajectories and socio-economic positions of miners, it is not surprising that they do not always attribute the same meanings to or draw the same conclusions from them. What unites most miners, beyond the search for broadly defined "better futures," is the concern about God's time, a time that depends on God but that is not entirely independent of the ethical behaviour of each person in their daily interactions with others. The very possibility of finding diamonds and using the wealth generated from them to make others happy unites humans and God in a chain of being. Thus if artisanal diamond mining is all about "networks and finding," as Bøås (2013: 617) puts it, then miners' rituals are about creating the conditions for finding diamonds by making and consolidating these networks. The issue here is not searching for control over others (cf. Jackson, 1998), but trying to establish or maintain relationships with them so that they become allies – or even just somebody to count on in a context of uncertainty and of limited social as well as economic opportunities (cf. Bledsoe, 1990: 85). Since social practices not only take place over time but also, indeed, *make* time (Bourdieu, 2000; see also, Adkins, 2011: 355), miners' rituals ultimately contribute to the *making* of God's time – that is, to the creation in the present of the conditions wished for in the nearest possible future.

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Notes

1. Between 2007 and 2016, I intermittently visited the mining areas of Sierra Leone for a total period of about one and a half years. Initially, I found hospitality in the guest houses of some international NGOs and, immediately thereafter, exclusively in the homes of private citizens – mostly friends and acquaintances. It is through these people's connections that I came into contact with the first miners. In the diamantiferous areas of Sierra Leone, I undertook semi-structured interviews and conducted participant observation. Between 2007 and 2009, my fieldwork was funded through a scholarship offered by the University of Milano–Bicocca as part of the PhD programme in Human Sciences.
2. Kuranko is a social group, predominantly Muslim, living in Sierra Leone.
3. William James supports a relativistic and functional concept of truth: true is what is useful, not what reflects an allegedly objective reality. In other words, truth is always dependent on the needs and will of the subject (James, 1978). Consistent with this perspective, according to Jackson (1989), the truth of the facts – understood as their correspondence with the objective external reality – is, for the Kuranko, secondary to its effects. This would explain the use of diviners and their credibility in the eyes of the people, despite the mistakes and aleatory success of their techniques. What matter is that "divinatory consultations enable worthwhile things to happen and help people act decisively and responsibly in their everyday social existence" (Jackson, 1989: 64).
4. In some of his later works (e.g. Jackson, 2004, 2005, 2011), Jackson gives greater weight to the objective conditions that restrict human freedom than in the past by alternating reflections on the banality of violence and suffering with stories of atrocities told or experienced by his interlocutors, or by meditating on the impotence of action and the pain caused by the social and physical immobility of the victims – all issues that had gone virtually unexplored in his earlier works. There is no room here for a reflection on Jackson's anthropological perspective and his many philosophical references. It should be emphasised that his perspective on the question of destiny, and on the relationship between religion and truth, remains substantially unchanged over time (cf. Jackson, 1989, 2013).
5. See *Awoko* (2009).
6. See Johnson (2012).
7. See Thomas (2013).
8. See *Awoko* (2016).
9. Thomas (2017).
10. *The Patriotic Vanguard* (2008), President Koroma's Speech at the State Opening of Parliament, 11 October.
11. Milton (2011).
12. The Press Secretariat (2009) Office of the President Press Report. President Koroma Meets the Press on London Conference. 8 December 2009. Available at: www.statehouse.gov.sl (accessed 12 June 2015).
13. See Milton (2011).
14. See Tommy (2011).

15. See The Government of Sierra Leone (2013: xiii).
16. See The Press Secretariat (2012).
17. See *Awareness Times* (2011).
18. See Turay et al. (2015).
19. See The Press Secretariat (2015).
20. At the artisanal level, earnings reflect mining hierarchies based on the "tributing" or "supporting system" (Zack-Williams, 1995). At the top of these hierarchies are the supporters who are often the licence holders. They finance "gang(s)" or team(s) of workers providing daily amounts of money and/or food. In addition, they take a percentage on the sale of diamonds. A typical agreement between supporters and labourers is the "60:40" split, which means that 60 per cent of the value of a diamond goes to the supporter and the remaining 40 per cent is divided in equal parts among the labourers.
21. Interview with Abu, Ibrahim, and Johnny, Bo District, 19 January 2009.
22. Interview with Johnny, Bo District, 23 January 2009.
23. Interview with Abu and Ibrahim, Bo District, 01 March 2011.
24. Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 20 February 2011.
25. Official estimates indicate that at least 600,000 Sierra Leoneans were displaced during the civil war.
26. See Thomas (2009).
27. See Kamara (2013).

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Geschenke Gottes: Schicksal, Armut und Zeitlichkeit in Sierra Leones Mienen

Zusammenfassung

In Sierra Leone teilen viele Bergleute die Ansicht, dass jede menschliche Handlung und jedes Ereignis die Verwirklichung eines unergründlichen göttlichen Plans ist. Obwohl die Vorstellung von Schicksal und Fügung Teil des Vokabulars von Krio, der Lingua franca des Landes, sind, verwenden die Bergleute lieber Ausdrücke, die Gott beschwören und seine immanente Präsenz und seinen Einfluss in ihrem Alltag betonen. Um das religiöse Vokabular der Zufälligkeit und die Art zu verstehen, wie sich die Bergleute die Bedingungen für eine Veränderung ihres Lebens vorstellen und diese interpretieren und reproduzieren, konzentriert sich dieser Artikel auf die rituellen Praktiken im Zusammenhang mit dem handwerklichen Diamantenbergbau. Er betrachtet diese Rituale als Versuche, die allgegenwärtigen zeitlichen und moralischen Spannungen zwischen alltäglichem Leiden und Armut sowie der Hoffnung der Bergleute auf eine bessere Zukunft zu lösen.

Schlagwörter

Sierra leone, kleinstbergbau, kontingenz, armut, rituale, zeitlichkeit