

# *Who owns the diamonds? The occult economy of diamond mining in Sierra Leone*

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# WHO OWNS THE DIAMONDS?

## THE OCCULT ECO-NOMY OF DIAMOND MINING IN SIERRA LEONE

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*Abstract.* Much of the literature on Sierra Leonean diamonds focuses on the role that this mineral resource played in the recent civil conflict (1991-2002). However, the political-economic perspective that is common to these analyses has lost sight of the main actors in this social reality. What do miners think of diamonds? Like their Malagasy colleagues engaged in the search for sapphires (Walsh 2004), the Sierra Leonean diamond miners often maintain that they did not know what diamonds could possibly be used for. What is specific of the diamond mining areas in this West African country is that suspicions and fantasies about the uses of diamonds go hand in hand with the idea that these precious stones belong to invisible spiritual entities locally known as djinns or *debul den*. Although this article aims to analyze the occult imaginary of diamond miners, it takes a different stand regarding the occult economies approach. By combining a historical-imaginative perspective with a historical and ecological one, this article intends to highlight the indissoluble interweaving of material and imaginative processes of artisanal diamond production in the context of Sierra Leone's mines.

Despite NGO campaigns connected with the so-called 'conflict diamonds', the social reality of the artisanal production of precious gems continues to remain opaque. The cutting and polishing operations that turn rough stones into bright jewels seems to conceal the processes of mining work, and little or no information is available about the point of view of the extractor-producers. For instance, what do these workers think of the uses of diamonds made by Western consumers?

During fieldwork in the diamondiferous districts of Sierra Leone<sup>1</sup>, I noticed that miners, like their Malagasy colleagues engaged in the search for sapphires and described by Walsh (2004), would maintain that they did not know what diamonds could possibly be used for. When I asked them to envisage the uses of these stones and questioned them about the reasons why so many people were willing to spend enormous amounts of money to possess them, their responses varied considerably. Some believed diamonds were mainly used to make eyeglass lenses and crystals for cars. Among the younger fans of action movies, a rumour circulated that diamonds could be used to build weapons of mass destruction. Others believed that these stones were used to construct technologically complex equipment (for instance, mobile phones or airplanes). More in general, many felt that they were used in the production of those goods that represent modernity in their eyes, ‘desirable and intensely desired’ (Masquelier 2000: 85), and yet distant and unaffordable. Like miners and sapphire traders met by Walsh in Madagascar, miners in Sierra Leone thought it was improbable that the stones extracted through such hard labour were being used in the global jewellery industry (cf. Walsh 2004: 225).

Although most extractor-producers maintained they did not know what diamonds were for, when solicited they would say that ‘diamonds are just money’, thereby recognizing that stones with no local use-value might become objects of value once in the hands of those who ‘know’ their inherent secrets. Suspicions and fantasies surrounding the diamond trade in Sierra Leone, unlike those in Madagascar, call for an analysis that extends beyond the visible sides of the diamond commodity chain. According to several miners, diamonds belong to, or are under the control of, invisible beings known as *debul den* (pl.; sing. *debul*) or djinns. In the south-eastern diamondiferous areas of Sierra Leone, there are miners who turn to these invisible presences to increase their chances to find the

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork in the Districts of Kono and Bo was carried out between 2007 and 2011. Between 2007 and 2009 the research was funded by fellowship from the University of Milan-Bicocca. The author is especially grateful to his family and those friends that supported, in many different ways, his research project between 2010 and 2012.

precious stones and accumulate extraordinary wealth in a short period of time. Through gifts and ritual offerings these miners hope to minimize the threat posed by such entities and to be reciprocated with diamonds.

What is the relationship between diamonds, their alleged uses and their invisible owners and how is it articulated in the life experience of miners? Several scholars have recently insisted on an approach centred on the so-called ‘occult economies’ (for instance Comaroff, Comaroff 1999; 2000; 2003). This is a peculiar ‘ethnology of suspicion’ (Robotham 2005) that focuses on the growing ‘deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends’ in the post-colonial societies (Comaroff, Comaroff 1999: 279). In addressing the question, this perspective promotes an analysis of the reactions and contradictory effects of modernity, global market expansion and neoliberal capitalism.

While this field of study has gained wide popularity among scholars and has had the advantage of pointing to the concealments and imaginaries of capitalistic accumulation of wealth in the context of broad economic conjunctures, it has paid little attention to the specificity of local historical experiences, the relevance of long-term cultural elaborations and their impact on the lives of specific subjects in specific historical and political circumstances.

Terence Ranger (2007) considers different ways of breaking the ‘occult economies’ consensus. He points to ‘the crucial importance of context; the crucial need to disaggregate; the significance of history’ (*idem*: 282). This article aims at rectifying the ethnographic and theoretical omission of the occult economies by considering the *ecology* of peculiar discursive practices about diamond mining and its *economy*, the intertwining of visible and hidden forces and their action through objects, words, techniques and environmental elements (cf. Ferme 2001) – an intertwining that reveals, in turn, a system of relations between human and non-human agents (Ingold 2000).

The article consists of three parts structured around the overlapping and interlaced meanings of the

words ‘economy’ and ‘ecology’<sup>2</sup>. The classic definition of economy as the science of managing uncertainty and scarcity, and its etymological meaning of management (*nomos*) of the habitat or the household (*oikos*), orientate the first part. Here the focus is on how artisanal miners work, distribute profits and speculate about the uses of diamonds. As has been the case with diamond diggers analysed by De Boeck (1998; 2000; 2001) on the border between Angola and Congo-Zaire, in Sierra Leone diamonds have triggered an imaginary that draws its symbols and its images from different sources. The second part examines how the miners’ imaginary on diamond money and illicit wealth has been shaped through the prism of a particular regional history. The third part changes perspective considering the ecological side of artisanal and small-scale mining. It interprets the mines as phantasmagorical places in which the spatial, cultural and imaginative dimensions of the local and the global are intertwined, producing new images and cultural practices that challenge the existing social order and create environmental spaces of potential power dispute.

## 1. THE ECO-NOMY OF DIAMONDS

In Sierra Leone diamonds can be extracted on a large scale, small scale and artisanal scale. Each of these levels is monitored and regulated by the Ministry of Mineral Resources (MMR) which, since the end of the civil war (1991-2002), has collaborated with major development aid agencies and Human Rights NGOs to reform the mining sector and minimize the smuggling of precious stones.

The large-scale extraction usually operates on the kimberlite deposits and therefore requires the use of complex and expensive technological equipment. In contrast, on the artisanal level miners work

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<sup>2</sup> The word ‘economy’ and the word ‘ecology’ share the same etymological root (*oikos*). To stress this proximity I will use the expression eco-nomy.

on alluvial deposits. In this type of deposits, diamonds are scattered almost randomly.<sup>3</sup> Technological investment here is minimal. Shovels, buckets and sieves are the essential tools used to open pits in the ground or dig holes in river beds; to collect and sift the gravel. Much of the work is done manually by a number of people varying according to the economic resources available to the supporters, the size of the mines, and the various working phases (stripping or removing vegetation and rocks, excavating and draining the water filtering into the pits, washing or sieving the gravel). The small-scale level instead is an intermediate level: the miners can use medium-sized machinery - such as excavators, dredges and automated washing plants - and be in large numbers, even hundreds. It should be noted that, unlike the small and large scale extraction levels, the MMR grants artisanal licenses only to Sierra Leonean citizens. The large-scale licenses are held, as a matter of fact, by foreign mining companies capable of large financial investments, while the small-scale companies can be wholly-owned by Sierra Leoneans or they can be bodies corporate with a minimum of Sierra Leonean shareholding.

At the artisanal and small-scale level miners are organized in gangs. In the artisanal case, a gang may be composed of a minimum of two or three people - usually, no more than a dozen. The greater the number of people involved in a mine, the greater the structured hierarchy of tasks. At the top of this hierarchy are the financiers or supporters who often, but not always, are also the owners of the mining licenses (the 'license holders') granted by the MMR after the miners have identified the most promising sites, asked for permission from local chiefs and from the landowner or landholder. A supporter can have direct control over the work in the mine and be a miner himself (sometimes referred also as 'boss' or 'master'). Or, he can be, for example, a diamond dealer employing expert miners with the role of supervisors or managers. The supervisor mainly has the role of representing

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<sup>3</sup> In Sierra Leone, alluvial diamonds are distributed over a large area of the Sewa river valley. There are no tools or methods to identify and assess with certainty the productivity of these deposits. Therefore it is not a stretch to compare the miners to skilled hunters who scour the landscape and interpret the clues that will lead them, with a little luck, to their underground prey (De Boeck 1998; 2000; Ferme 2001).

the supporter in the mines and coordinating the work of one or more gangs. This latter is made up of the labour force in charge of excavation activities ('diggers') and of sieving the gravel ('washers'). Their work is coordinated by the gang leader who represents the gang and communicates with the boss or the supporter in case of need.<sup>4</sup>

A decade after the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone, many people still try their luck in diamond mining. With few very options for employment (Peters 2012: 140), and the similar 'dire conditions that gave rise to the conflict', that is, 'high level of youths unemployment, marginalization, and lacking hope for the future' (UN 2007, cit. in Fanthorpe, Maconachie 2010: 255), artisanal and small-scale mining attracts many people. The minimum daily guarantee of 'food' offered by the supporters, and the messianic promise of a future reward on (and *from*) the earth - which includes money but also 'social freedom' (see Richards *et al.* 2004) - seem to be some of the main common reasons to work in the mines. Thus, despite the gloomy predictions about the exhaustion of alluvial deposits, the rate of production has returned to pre-war levels. In 2005, for example, it was estimated that more than 100,000 artisanal miners were working in Kono District alone.<sup>5</sup> This is surprising considering that in Sierra Leone most of the population lives below the so-called 'poverty line' (UNPD 2011) and that the difficulties and uncertainty which characterize diamond mining do not even guarantee recouping the costs. Yet, contrary to the claim of some development experts and analysts interested in the problem of mining in this country (i.e. PAC, GW 2004), the diamond economy has nothing to do with a 'casino economy' (cf. Walsh 2004). Miners ponder their choices and their strategies reflect the awareness of working and making complex decisions under conditions of radical uncertainty. This clearly emerges when we consider the agreements miners

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, the mines are populated by persons who perform tasks not directly related to mining operations, but nevertheless essential, like the water bearers ('water-boys'), or the women who prepare and sell the food to the miners.

<sup>5</sup> In 2003 the Ministry of Mineral Resources estimated that 150,000 to 200,000 artisanal miners were engaged in the trade in the Kono District alone (The Diamonds and Human Security Project, *Diamond Industry Annual Review*, Partnership Africa Canada - Network Movement for Justice and Development, Freetown, Sierra Leone 2004).

make for the allocation of earnings.

### *1.1 Secrets and deceptions*

Among alluvial diamond miners there are various possibilities for agreements. They may, for example, decide to share out the extracted gravel (hoping to find the best gems in their heap or pile), or share out the actual earnings from any “winning”<sup>6</sup> according to precise percentages, or again draw up an agreement of a wage-earning type.

The first case is common when a supporter or boss realizes or knows from the start, that he or she does not have the necessary capital to complete the extractive operations. In this case, he or she may come to an agreement to share out the extracted gravel with other supporters or persons<sup>7</sup> involved in the mining operations (pile and bucket systems), or with his or her own work force (*kongoma* system) (Fithen 1999; Levin 2005; Author 2011).<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that, at the end of the gravel sharing operations, the apparently less likely events may take place. It may in fact happen that the miners who have received the smallest quantities of gravel are those who make the most gains (e.g. find most or biggest diamonds). The luckiest miners may arouse suspicions of having actually stolen diamonds by using magical means prepared by ritual specialists (*moriman* or *jujuman*). One of the instruments most suspected for this

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<sup>6</sup> In the jargon of the miners “winning” is synonymous with diamonds discovered.

<sup>7</sup> Other categories may, for example, be the licence holder, landowner, or machinery owner. All these roles may overlap in different ways in a single subject or in different persons. For example, a machinery owner can rent his equipment to a supporter who is also the licence holder but not the landowner.

<sup>8</sup> The system of gravel sharing is also common among illegal miners (*san-san boys* or *gado gang*), who lack finances. They usually work in small groups and share out the extracted gravel into as many parts as the gang members with percentages which may be higher for the leader(s) or the elder(s). As Fithen (1999) notes, gravel sharing was a common system during the civil war, due to the lack of ready money.

kind of theft is the *fana*, a sieve-shaped charm which the miner hides in a pocket and uses to magically transfer by night the diamonds from his fellow-worker's heaps to his own (Author 2011). To prevent problems of this type arising, but also simple quarrels and bad temper concerning the methods of sharing out the gravel, many miners I knew considered that the best agreement between supporters and labours was the contract system. This system is the most widespread form of payment for small-scale mining. Here, the supporter gives the miner a fixed salary of Le5,000 to Le10,000<sup>9</sup> per work day. Whoever accepts this agreement with the supporter gives up any other benefit and any percentage on diamonds that might be discovered. From the point of view of the supporter, this system is more risky economically speaking because he can never be certain if, at the end of the mining operations, the diamonds' value will cover all of his expenses (i.e. salaries, rent and maintenance of machinery, compensation for the landowner, fees for licences, etc.).<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the advantage for the supporter is obvious if the mine where he is working is full of gems. All of the profits will end up in his pockets, instead of being subdivided among the other workers, as happens in other systems of distributing earnings.

Most of the Sierra Leone miners, however, do not have sufficient capital to undertake small-scale digging, as stipulated by the licence concession criteria issued by the MMR (2005), but may afford to work on an artisanal scale. At this level, the most common form of economic agreement is called 'supporting' (Levin 2005; Author 2011) or 'tributary system' (Zack-Williams 1995). Within this system, supporters and diggers agree on the percentages of money they will share from the sale of each diamond discovered. Typical ratios for subdividing earnings are 50:50, 60:40 or 70:30, where the highest percentage always goes to the supporter. Supporters offer each digger daily portions of

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<sup>9</sup> These values refer to the period 2007-2011. In 2008, at official exchange rates, Le3000 corresponded to about one dollar.

<sup>10</sup> The payment of the bush/land owner or the landholder, like the hiring and maintenance of machinery, is often calculated according to actual earnings. In this case a typical agreement between supporter and bush/land owner is 70:30, i.e. the bush/land owner takes 30% of the supporter's earnings (Author 2011).

rice<sup>11</sup>, oftentimes accompanied by small amounts of money (from Le500 to Le3,000) and, more sporadically, other benefits (such as medicines or alcohol). In exchange supporters have the right to purchase any diamonds found in the pits by the gang, which has a prior collective ownership interest in them.<sup>12</sup>

Under the supporting system, the stone belongs firstly to the gang that found it. This means that before a supporter can sell it to a diamond dealer, he or she must first agree on the price with the workers of the gang. Notwithstanding the pre-established agreements, which cannot be renegotiated during extracting operations, there is ample room for bargaining between the gang and the supporters; such negotiation is based mainly on two factors: the 'effective' value of the diamond and the costs incurred by the supporters, which are to be subtracted from the sales value of the diamond. Supporters dutifully note down their expenses, but tend to overestimate them while bargaining with their workforce (Levin 2005). As far as the value of diamonds is concerned, it is worth noting that most miners cannot easily evaluate the gems. This is a tricky task even for experts. Such reputedly valuable diamonds as the 'white' type, one of the most valuable ones along with the fancy coloured gems (e.g. 'pink', 'white-blue', or 'gold'), may, when examined under a lens, show impurities or flaws invisible to the naked eye; consequently, their market value is considerably lower than expected. Each gem is unique (cf. Walsh 2004) - the problem is how to quantify its uniqueness in monetary value.

Precisely by taking advantage of this difficulty, supporters and diamond traders try to maximize

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<sup>11</sup> On the importance of food as a material and symbolic basis in clientele relations in Sierra Leone, see Shepler (2012: 49-50) who shrewdly underlines that 'rice is not the same as money'.

<sup>12</sup> It must be noted that, in principle, even before the gang, the landowner has property rights on the extracted minerals (Fithen 1999: 12). In fact, the supporter shares out his earnings with the labourers, taking into account the share also due to the landowner or landholder. The landowner may also claim further payment from the supporters he grants his land to (e.g. a monthly bag of rice). In exchange, he acts as a guarantor with the local authorities, in a sort of 'landlord-stranger' relationship (Cf. Reno 1995: 49-50).

their profits. In the ‘supporting system’, none of the buyers has any interest in revealing what he thinks the diamond is worth (Levin 2005) – *if* anyone can *really* know it. Even if the workers can use the knowledge they have gained through previous experience, or if they have the opportunity to consult friends, relatives or more experienced colleagues, in the end, they just have to trust their counterparties. Trust and loyalty, however, are only some of the ingredients in a complex game of negotiations where what counts is, among other things, the ability to persuade, to deceive or even to impose one’s own decision with veiled threats.

There are those who are willing to cheat in order maximize their profit. There are supporters who have no qualms about bribing those among the workers who are most influential, by secretly promising large tips in the event that bargaining will swing in a favourable direction and the gang will accept the offer. Others may even get a preliminary agreement with diamond dealers on a ‘shadow price’ and, at the moment of trading in the presence of gang members, underestimate the value of the stones (Zack-Williams 1995: 150).

Conversely, the workers are not always passive victims, as the supporters know perfectly well. The risk of thieving is on the agenda, above all during the washing stages. Finding a local intermediary, a peddler or an illegal dealer (*banabana* or *nikoniko*), willing to buy the stolen gem is not an impossible undertaking, as it is also not difficult (although risky) to smuggle it.<sup>13</sup> That is why building up and maintaining a bond of trust with workers remains a central concern for mining sponsors. Their interest is to get along well with their men so as to enhance the conditions for the success of the mining operations as well as to dampen the temptation to purloin any ‘winning’. This is an important aspect to bear in mind in order to understand some of the social dynamics at play in the mines.

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<sup>13</sup> For more details concerning the opacity of dealing and marketing diamonds in Sierra Leone, see Reno (1995) but also van der Laan (1975) and Fithen (1999) for the historical role played by the ‘Lebanese’ communities in Sierra Leone and their international networks in the diamond trade.

Supporters invest money in each worker in the hope of recovering these expenses with the sale of the diamonds. A miner attracted by higher payment in another mine, who leaves his work before the end of mining operations, is considered ungrateful. But, if the miner leaves when the extracted gravel is being washed, that is, sieved to search for gems, he can be suspected of having found and stolen a stone of good quality. Since all miners involved are entitled to a predetermined quota, the other workers will largely share the suspicions and concerns of the supporter. An eye will be constantly kept on the suspected thief, and in general a change in patterns of consumption, for instance the purchase of a new phone or new shoes, will be regarded as suspect or evidence of guilt, and will be checked. Recovering a stolen diamond may be a hard and expensive task. Hence, the supporter must manage his relationship with his workers very carefully. As the miners say, the employee should always be ‘made happy’ and given small tokens of appreciation in cash and food. In this way, the supporter dispels temptations to steal the bigger stones and, at the same time, acquires a credit of gratitude that will be weighed during the bargaining for the purchase and sale of diamonds.

In these complex exchanges, the ability to conceal and lie, and to hide intentions and knowledge is crucial in order for the miners to be successful and to avoid being deceived by colleagues. Indeed, secrets and concealment of ‘diamond business’ accompany the life of workers outside the mines as well. By hiding the discovery of a stone, miners forestall the pressing demands and the impossible expectations for cash and favours from friends and relatives - who will also claim a quota of the winnings.

In contrast, there is no way to hide a ‘big stone’, a group of workers I happened to meet on the street in Koidu-Sefadu told me. It is difficult to keep secret the discovery of a diamond of unusual size<sup>14</sup> (‘jack’). The news would quickly spread all over the country, they playfully maintained, becoming a ‘national issue’. During my research in the Kono District in 2007 and 2008, I was told

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<sup>14</sup> Diamonds over 20 carats may be considered unusual (van der Laan 1965).

by several persons that a few years before my arrival, a young man had found a diamond ‘as big as an egg’. Stories of this kind are very common in mining areas in Sierra Leone. They often share common narrative plots. In this particular story, it was rumoured that the lucky finder had been taken by helicopter to Freetown to meet the President in person. Accompanying him were relatives and various local diamond dealers previously contacted, all hoping to take part in the negotiations with international dealers able to make offers to match the value of the stone. Once they reached the capital, the ‘diamond’ was examined and was discovered to actually only be an ordinary stone. So the young finder was sent home with a small sum of money to compensate for his disappointment. But, ‘If it was only a stone...’, commented Sia, the young Kono woman who told me this detail of the story, ‘...why did they *pay* him? This is corruption!’ – she exclaimed, convinced that the young man had been taken in or he might have told a lie. And she suggested I listened to a song by the Sierra Leonean rapper Daddy Saj (*aka* Diamond Saj) which, according to her, was partly inspired by this story. I thereby discovered that Sia’s words echoed the text of ‘Corruption E Do So’ (2003), in which the themes of poverty and suffering, injustice and social inequality, local favouritism and international frauds – what the singer synthesized in the word ‘corruption’ – are *also* intertwined in the issue of diamonds. In his controversial debut album, he in fact polemically asks:

*... How can diamonds turn to stones?*

*... We get diamonds, silver and copper,*

*tell me why we are still dying like poor persons?*

*Tell me! This is corruption!*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Daddy Saj, ‘Corruption E Do So’, from the album ‘Corruption’ (2003). The original text is in Krio language.

## 1.2 Mineral oikonomikos

The miners' secrets and precautions contrast sharply with the emotions they feel when a good quality diamond is discovered, an experience that diggers often described as a shock. After such hard work, hopes and desires suddenly seem to materialize in a few glittering sparkles coming from the sieves. Such hopes and desires are shared not only with colleagues, but also with extended family and friends. Not surprisingly, the gang is often composed of members of both. The fact that workers are related to each other, however, does not prevent disputes or quarrels on the division of the quotas of earnings or the desire to steal.

Emanuel, the young son of the sister of a supporter working in the Kono, confided to me that if he happened to find a *jack*, he would never give it to his uncle. Although he had held positions of trust in his maternal uncle's mine, and was satisfied with his pay, he told me that if he found a very large diamond, he would hide it and smuggle it abroad. With the money earned, he would leave Africa. He regretted having turned down an offer from an international NGO which, at the end of the war, wanted him to work in a rehabilitation programme for 'child soldiers'. He could have gone to Europe, but he refused. Emanuel, who said he had never used a weapon, but admitted that he had known and lived for a long period with the RUF rebels when he was still a child, now hoped that, by finding a large stone, he would be able on his own to re-create the opportunity to go away. So he imagined that with the money from the stolen diamond, he would be able to travel far away and call his uncle from Europe or America. In Emanuel's fantasy, his uncle would be very angry on the phone, but then would understand and forgive him. The young miner was in fact aware that with a theft like that he would accrue a debt of gratitude, a debt which, sooner or later, his uncle would claim repayment for, perhaps by receiving in his turn an invitation to some European country.

In this regard, Abduraman, a Kono miner in his thirties, also recounted a significant episode, which had actually happened. Just before the war, he was working with his brothers in a mine financed by

their father. After several months of fruitless labour, Abduraman's brothers decided to abandon the site while he was sifting the last buckets of remaining gravel. As Abduraman told me:

...The very last day, I was washing the gravel. My older brother, who is in London now, and others, left me and decided to go away (...). I was not expecting anything. But, when I did so [makes the gesture of bending with the sieve in his hands] I saw a big stone. I took it without letting them know. When they returned I told my older brother - who is now a lecturer at the University - "We have something". At that time my father was alive and supported us. I said that we would have to bring the diamond to our father. But, he said: "No. I want to study in Russia. You have to give me the diamond now or I'll give you a good deal of beating". I told him: "Wait, the diamond is not here". I disappeared with the diamond and I gave it to my father. Our first money.

In this episode Abduraman emphasizes his young age compared with his brothers'. Later on, he also told me that he never had the opportunity to finish his studies. Although he was less experienced and less educated than his brothers, he was still able to find a stone large enough to repay the entire investment made by the family. With his story Abduraman shows a sense of personal vindication that is mediated by family solidarity ethics. This contrasts with the words uttered by his elder brother - educated and cosmopolitan - but unwilling to share the money with the other family members. His brother knew that once the stone had been delivered into the hands of their father-supporter, the latter would have had to balance different demands, not necessarily compatible with his personal dreams of studying abroad.

For Emanuel and for Abduraman's brother, diamonds represented the possibility of escaping from Kono and realizing their ambitions abroad. For Musa, an experienced Muslim miner of about fifty years of age who lived with his extended family in a mining village on the banks of Sewa river, the question of the use of diamonds arose in other terms. When I asked him what he thought the uses of these minerals were, he explained to me how he managed his household. Indeed, not knowing what

to say about the uses made of diamonds by Westerners, he explained what diamonds meant to him. He indicated the brick and concrete building where we were, a building surrounded by many other homes in the village that were instead made of mud and wood: 'These are diamonds'. Then, he nodded to one of his two wives, who sat on the sidelines pretending to be indifferent to our conversation – to suggest that he had afforded the cost of a dowry to marry her with the money obtained through the diamonds – and finally, he listed on his fingers of his hand the projects he had achieved with diamond money, like marrying his older sons and sending his younger children to school.

Musa faced the uncertainties and hardships of the post-war economic plight through a coordinated strategy of diversifying the working activities of each member of his family. At the artisan level, diamonds did not guarantee at all the reproduction of its own conditions of existence. Therefore, during the rainy season Musa and his family engaged in the cultivation of agricultural products required by the local market, such as rice, cassava, potatoes, onions and okra. With the profits from the sale of these vegetables, they funded the extraction of gold, which, in general, was entrusted to wives and daughters. They invested their earnings to support – especially during the dry season – the more expensive search for diamonds. When the extraction of diamonds did not render the profits expected and money was scarce, the strongest young family members were redirected by Musa into the difficult but economically safer extraction of sand from the river. Other family members, particularly women, were engaged in petty trade on a daily basis, which provides vital support to the domestic economy during periods of shortage. However, it was on the diamond money that Musa and all his family placed their greatest hopes to escape from the economic autarchy. Luckily, the extraction of diamonds allowed them to earn large and immediate sums of cash, but what these so profitable stones were for – what uses were made of them by foreign buyers willing to pay U.S. dollars in order to win the best pieces - was not clear to Musa and, actually, it did not seem to matter to him at all.

## 2. *FAST MONI, DEBUL MONI*

Many miners claimed not to know what diamonds were *really* used for. But unlike Musa, they showed curiosity about this issue. As in the case of the Malagasy miners, in general, the miners of Sierra Leone attributed their ignorance to the perception of a difference in knowledge and power between themselves and foreigners, ‘Europeans’ and ‘Americans’ in particular (cf. Walsh 2004: 226). In this central region of West Africa, secrets, knowledge and material wealth are frequently associated with foreigners (Bledsoe, Robey 1986; Shaw 1992; Skinner 1978).

In the same district where Musa lived, I asked a Nigerian-born miner in his sixties and his younger Sierra Leonean colleague if they knew the use made of diamonds in Europe or in America. I was answered in this way:

R. We Sierra Leoneans, we do not know the value of diamonds. Perhaps, people who buy them know the uses of diamonds. How people process them.

O. Yes, we do not know how they work. We only know that we sell them, we have the money and they end up from the “hand to mouth” (*an to mot*)! If you have a lot of money you buy a bike, you build a house, you buy a car. This is what we know about diamonds. We do not know what they do.

On other occasions, my interlocutors returned to the issue of the uses of diamonds, assuming that I knew the answer perfectly well. A group of miners in a Kono village affirmed that I - as a ‘white man’ – should know more than they did about the uses of diamonds. My answer was genuinely vague.

The words of a mine supervisor and his colleagues involved in the extraction of diamonds in Kono District synthesize the views of many other miners; they established a close connection between the possession of an object and knowledge associated to its use:

Diamonds are for those who know what diamonds are for (...). If you ask what are the uses, most people will say: “Diamonds are money” (...). But if you ask me, I know that diamonds are minerals that are used for different purposes. You can use them for car windows, you can use them in airplanes, in cars, in many different things. There are many different uses. 95% of them do not know this.

Only a few miners said that diamonds are used in the jewellery industry. Like the sapphire seekers in Madagascar (Walsh 2004: 225), many people suspected that diamonds *must* have some hidden or unknown use. Otherwise, they would not have been able to explain the many secrets and deceptions that surround their extraction and trade. Still now, rumours circulate on how the British, in colonial times, mocked the inhabitants of the mining areas and told them that they should not touch those strange stones unless they wanted to get a shock, or burn their fingers.<sup>16</sup> That being said, if diamonds are ‘just money’, what kind of money do they promise? What makes them so attractive as to entice miners to invest more money to find them?

‘A diamond is a stone, but also money’, miners would say, thereby emphasizing two aspects of diamonds: their economic significance for the economy of many miners and their families and their deceptive ontological duality: they are stones and, *at the same time*, money.<sup>17</sup> As ‘potential money’, they have the ‘alchemical power’ (Neary, Taylor 1998) to become the universal equivalent of desires and projects that require ‘actual money’. Miners, therefore, conceive their use-value in terms of exchange-value, albeit in disguise. Contrary to the Marxian perspective according to which what makes a commodity ‘an arcane mystery’ is its being an exchange-value, for the miners, the mysterious part is first of all the use-value of the diamonds.

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<sup>16</sup> These and other similar stories are also reported by Conteh (1979: 148), Zack-Williams (1995: 52) and Frost (2012: 39-40).

<sup>17</sup> This duplicity is clearly visualized by some banknotes printed and circulated by the Bank of Sierra Leone (see figure 1 and 2).

“FIGURE 1 & 2. Banknotes and diamonds. INSERT HERE”

Unlike money circulating through other productive or commercial activities, money obtained from the sale of diamonds is called ‘fast money’ (*fast moni*), desired cash coming unexpectedly and, above all, in abundance. In the everyday life of Sierra Leone, *fast moni* is also the money of thieves or corrupt politicians, those who become rich through questionable and non-transparent means, or by cheating people. By association, this money is connected with selfishness, greed and with the lack of any sense of community. During and after the civil war, the same type of behaviour was associated with rebels. Furthermore, these associations are not new. In the fifties, thousands of young people from every region of West Africa went to the mines of Sierra Leone, attracted by the prospect of easy earnings within short periods of time, far more lucrative job opportunities than what was offered to common people (van der Laan 1965). However, while SLST retained the monopoly on diamond extraction, whoever was searching for diamonds was breaking the law. Even later, when a licensing system was introduced, which allowed wealthy or entrepreneurial Sierra Leoneans to engage in mining, the search for diamonds remained an illegal activity for most miners excluded from this system, and especially for foreigners.

Arguably, licensed miners realized immediately that the new opportunity was not without ambiguities. Miners had to deal with the paradoxes and magic of the alchemic capitalism of diamond industry. Stones without any local use-value could multiply their value while not undergoing any evident process of transformation but simply by passing from hand to hand; those very stones could be obtained, ideally, without necessarily having worked at all, something that was contrary to a widespread ‘hardship ideology’, based on an ethic of hard work and merit (cf. Bledsoe

1990). The mining mercantilist rationale (Zack-Williams 1995) not only stimulated the economic expectations of gem seekers, but also strongly questioned the previous moral and social order - already accustomed to the social, economic, and religious innovations resulting from trading operations with foreigners and quite used to the knowledge they brought and shared (Bledsoe, Robey 1986; Shaw 1992) - and called for a new balance between different sets of values (Richards 1996).

Affluence coming from the extractive economy of natural resources or human beings has long been associated with material wealth imported and traded by foreigners, especially from Europe (Shaw 2002; 2009). These new forms of material wealth have been largely considered immoral and suspicious for two main reasons: first, they entail the enrichment of some individuals over others - as is evidently the case in the trade of human beings; second, the extraordinary wealth generated through contact with foreigners, and especially that obtained by using forced labour or selling human beings, sharpened the contradiction between personal wealth achievements and social responsibility (Brown 2003: 47).

Nowadays, the fortune promised to diamond miners can be as dangerous and immoral as human trafficking and the exploitation of slave labour were in a not too distant past. Such prosperity becomes particularly dangerous and immoral when quick money is generated through interaction with the spiritual forces controlling diamonds, the *dɛbul dɛn*. Rumours circulated among miners about colleagues who had sacrificed body parts, the life of relatives or colleagues in order to get diamonds and money more quickly.

### 3. THE OCCULT *ECO*-NOMY OF DIAMOND MINING

In Sierra Leone Krio the word ‘dɛbul’ is used to describe an incredible variety of religious and

popular culture elements.<sup>18</sup> With the word ‘debul’, miners refer to a specific category of spirits, which many Muslims also identify with the Arabic term ‘djinn’. According to the Qur’an, the djinns are preternatural, non-human beings created by Allah. In Islam, these spirits belong to the ‘hidden world’ (*‘alam al-ghayba*), which can interact with the visible world inhabited by human beings (*‘alam al-shahada*). The djinns are described as intelligent and invisible beings that are able to manifest themselves as animals and humans. They possess extraordinary powers and their strength considerably surpasses that of humans. For all these reasons, Muslims sometimes ask for their help, using the intermediation of ritual specialists.

In Sierra Leone, the process of Islamisation covers a long period of time, and follows complex trajectories (Skinner 1978). The ideas and practices imported from the Islamic clerics have intertwined with existing ritual knowledge and religious forms (Shaw 1992: 40). As Thayer notes in his study on the categories of nature and culture among the Susu of Sierra Leone (1983: 118), the Qur’anic cosmology has integrated various local spirits, reinterpreting them as djinns. Consequently, the *debul den* mentioned by my interlocutors shows aspects of the djinns described in the Muslim holy book and features of other local spirits associated, for example, with unexpected wealth or unwanted changes.<sup>19</sup> The Qur’anic cosmology has therefore become a source of symbols and images for elaborated mineral cosmogonies.

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<sup>18</sup> The Krio word ‘debul’ can be used in at least three different contexts. In some cases it may designate either the tutelary spirit, or the masks worn by the initiates of secret societies. Some of the most known secret societies *debul* are: *Bondo Debul*, *Eri Debul*, *Ontin Debul* and *Poro Debul*. In Sierra Leone, in addition, there are other categories of spirits, commonly referred to as *debul*. These cannot be confused with the *debul* of the secret societies. Examples of these spirits, whose reputation is not limited to a specific region of the country, are: *Egbere*, *Kinjimi*, *Wan-Fut Jombi* and *Ronso*. Finally, Mami Wata, a spirit that is often associated with spring water sources and rivers can be loosely defined as a *debul*.

<sup>19</sup> The similarity is most evident with Mami Wata (see note above). Shaw (2009) interprets Mami Wata as an emblem of a transgressive political economy.

### 3.1 *Dəbul dən as men*

When I met Ibrahim, he was an expert Muslim diver in his fifties seeking precious stones in the depths of the Sewa River. According to Ibrahim's mineral cosmogony, before becoming the guardians of the diamonds, the djinns were slaves and, in particular, they were the slaves of King Solomon. In his own words:

At the beginning, the djinns and the men were together, God created them together. They lived together until there was a prophet, Mulk Sulaiman (King Solomon). They all worked for him, every day. Goats, sheep, ants, fish: they all worked for him. But, the *dəbul* have more strength than us, the men. So they worked for him [Mulk Sulaiman] twenty four hours a day, without resting (...). When they wanted to rest they were beaten. They were prisoners, slaves. They worked for him until he died. Sulayman died and was buried. Then, the *dəbul* turned to God: "Please, we cannot stay with them; they make us work too hard. Put the darkness between us and them. Do that they do not see us and we do not see them". For this reason the bush was given to them. Wherever the bush is deep, there is a *dəbul*. Wherever there is a lot of water, or a large rock, there is a *dəbul*. They have all the wealth. They have gold and diamonds.

This tale is rich in symbols,<sup>20</sup> but a particular aspect of the relationship between human beings and djinns is worth attention. Notwithstanding the close proximity between miners and djinns, they are also separated or alienated from each other. This condition is well expressed by the metaphor of

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<sup>20</sup> For example, here the transmogrifying *dəbul* – former slaves of King Solomon who live a parallel life invisible to most human beings – reminds us of a history of trade and transatlantic exchange dense with insoluble ambiguities and betrayals. In other words, they can be considered as social memories with the ability to embrace and refer to the meanings of a landscape in which a history of violence, fear and risk is embedded (Ferme 2001; Shaw 2002).

darkness<sup>21</sup> or invisibility. However, the *debul den*' invisibility does not mean that miners cannot know what they look like. There are people who have the power to see them because they have the 'double vision' (*dobul yay*). In addition, the *debul den* can decide to manifest themselves to those human beings for whom they feel sympathy or affection. In either case, these spirits are generally compared to human beings. Since the meaning of this comparison is crucial to my argument, the question that arises is the following: what do miners mean by saying that the *debul den* look like men?

According to miners and to the inhabitants of mining areas, *debul den* have a social, political and economic life that is specular to that of humans, and it includes the distinction between the rich and the poor, between farmers and miners, between Christians and Muslims. However, values and expectations are reversed: work is effortless, what is invisible and concealed becomes clearly visible, what is scarce is abundant. Djinnns are able to carry out heavy work tasks very easily and they know exactly where diamonds are. Like in a *camera obscura*,<sup>22</sup> their world speaks obliquely of the precarious and uncertain reality of the world of human beings, and as such they epitomize a form of protest against the misery of reality and its unpredictable aspects. 'Diamonds are *rascals*' – Ibrahim complained one day while he observed the men in his gang carrying heavy sacks of gravel on their shoulders to the river to sieve it – 'Sometimes you work very hard, but you can't find them. Other times you work very little and you find them straightaway'. That finding diamonds had become less and less easy, was a recurrent thought for Ibrahim and other colleagues. This thought contrasted strongly with the older miners' tales, when they recalled a past when things were different, and Sierra Leone, like other African mining countries (cf. Ferguson 1999), shared all the conveniences of Western modernity. In these memories the facilities of the Kono (paved streets,

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<sup>21</sup> Rosalind Shaw argues that the concept of darkness is polysemous and in Sierra Leone it is associated with elaborated practices of secrecy particularly relevant for warriors (2000: 35-6).

<sup>22</sup> I borrow the metaphor of 'camera obscura' from Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* (1845-6).

electricity, running water) were comparable with those in Western countries and more Mercedes cars were to be seen than in any other part of the world. Diamonds were easy to find and their finding could be publicly celebrated because sooner or later someone else would find some, and he would do the same.

After the war and decades of intensive mining, having a solid starting capital to explore the deepest deposits, for a long period of time, was considered by the miners as an increasingly necessary, but not sufficient requisite, to have any chance for success with diamonds. And so, having to come to terms with the actual (scarce) resources available, the miners often compared, also ironically, their hard manual work – rich in technical artisan or ‘traditional’ expedients - with the rapid mechanical work of the foreign mining companies, which were, enviably, well-equipped with such powerful, efficient machines that they seemed almost magic.<sup>23</sup>

In this context it is interesting to note that the tireless, hardworking *debul den*, non-human beings able to work unceasingly – just like the machinery of the foreign companies - have Caucasian body features: a pale complexion (instead of the dark-skin colour of most Africans), long, smooth hair (rather than the short, frizzy hair of Sierra Leoneans). In many cases, they are both seductive and familiar. Ibrahim, for example, told me that he found his first diamonds in the late seventies after dreaming of a *debul* who had taken the form of a Lebanese woman named Mariama. The woman

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<sup>23</sup> For example, an artisanal system for collecting water from holes is *kay-te-ya*: a bucket is tied with two ropes so that two men placed one in front of the other can plunge it into the hole and draw up the water. Since it is a very tiring operation, some miners I knew ironically called this pumping system a ‘native *beilin* machine’. By this they alluded to the difficulty of working in the mine without the means and resources available to their ‘modern’ Western colleagues, operating on a large scale. In some cases the comparison becomes merciless. Some inhabitants of the Kono district said that in a mine near their village a large-scale foreign mining company had in the past used a water pump which was so powerful that it could drain a small lake in a few hours. The machinery had been nicknamed *Mami Wata* by the inhabitants, as the spiritual being who is often pictured as half fish and half woman, and appears in the dreams of men in search of success (see Shaw 2009).

was the wife of a wealthy Lebanese businessman for whom Ibrahim had worked when he was just a boy. In his dream, the woman/*debul* guided the young and inexperienced miner to diamonds by pointing to a mass of stone from the mine where he was working with one of his brothers. There, they found many diamonds: ‘They know where there are lots of diamonds’ – Ibrahim commented after many years – ‘But, we do not know. We try our luck’. This episode persuaded Ibrahim to continue this work. After just a couple of seasons, Ibrahim had already earned enough money to buy new mining equipment, a motorcycle and a twelve-room house for his mother. This was a sum of money he could never have accumulated with his previous job (as a cross-border trader and guardian at the port of Freetown).

Not all *debul den*, however, are as generous as ‘Mariama’ was. To see a cobra snake around a mining site may indicate the presence of a malignant or angry *debul* who has assumed the appearance of the dangerous reptile. To prevent or to appease the wrath of a *debul*, or simply to seek their sympathy, miners make ritual offerings. These may range from sacrifices of particular animals to simple acts of generosity. Despite the mediation of ritual specialists, however, figuring out what the *debul den* exactly wants can be a tricky issue. Moreover, even if the *debul den*’ requests are satisfied, miners are not necessarily granted what they want.

### 3.2 *Debul den and men*

How can these presences be interpreted, invisible as they are and yet, so close to miners? We have so far above all considered their appearance, but how do they actually behave? How do they relate to the miners and what relationship do they have with the populations living around the mines? The *debul*-djinnns often behave inexplicably, apparently at random, and sometimes even with malevolence (Thayer 1983: 121; Jackson 1998: 51). As we have mentioned, this is even more evident when they take on the form of dangerous, untameable animals.

A group of miners engaged in sieving the gravel on one of the many islands appearing in the Sewa River during the dry season, explained to me that in a stretch of the river where they were looking for precious stones lived a *debul* in the guise of a large electric fish.<sup>24</sup> Whenever the divers attempted to approach *his* diamonds, he gave them an electric shock. One miner who had found himself face to face with the fish/*debul* under water explained to me that:

When you go down he drives you off, he gives you the shock. When you get some gravel you always dig out some diamonds (...), but he *doesn't want* you to. You get two or three buckets and then he comes (...). He *doesn't want* people working there. When you go down, under water, you can see him: he's a big fish (...), if he turns round he gives you the shock. When you see him, you have to run away (if you don't want to die)!

To ingratiate a *debul*, or pacify him, the miners often prepared libations (*fangadama*) with different kinds of food (e.g. fruit, biscuits, rice) or, according to the instructions of the ritual specialists, the previous experience of the miners themselves and the financial means of the supporter, they would sacrifice particular domesticated animals (e.g. chickens, sheep or cows) (*sarat*).<sup>25</sup> These offerings –

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<sup>24</sup> In the waters of the River Sewa lives the *Malapterurus electricus*, commonly known as 'electric catfish'. This fish is just over one meter long and weighs about 20 kg. The *Malapterurus* gets its food by stunning its prey with electric shocks of up to 300-400V (Source: [www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)). The descriptions given me by the miners seem to match this fish species.

<sup>25</sup> In Krio *fangadamà* means 'mixed', 'scattered' in a disorderly fashion (Fyle, Jones 1980). In fact, the *fangadama* is a sacrificial offering composed of various foodstuffs 'mixed' together. According to Jackson (1977), the *fangadama* or *fankadama* may also be roughly translated as 'all that you have to give'. The most common ingredients in this sacrifice are sweet stuffs (e.g. sweets and biscuits), bananas, peanuts and tubers which may be eaten raw (e.g. cassava). In my ethnographic experience, the *fangadama* was usually carried out to ask ancestral spirits for protection or to 'make' the spirit dwelling in the site where the miners intended to work 'happy'. In this way, it was a ritual gesture of 'opening up', a display of 'good intentions' towards the spirit or spirits present in the place. For a more in-depth, detailed discussion of the various kinds of sacrifices common in Sierra Leone, and on their symbolisms, see Jackson (1977).

the miners I met were anxious to underline – were always preceded and accompanied by prayers to God, and the food prepared after the ritual slaughter was always shared out with as many people as possible in order to underline the social, sympathetic or relational nature of their actions (cf. Jackson 1998: 70-3). *God Father, let make I get a diamond. This is the only thing that I am thinking*, Ibrahim begged when he went to the Mosque on Fridays and was busy preparing a *sarat* together with his fellow workers. Similarly, Mohamed, a Kono miner aged about forty, supervising a few small gangs in the Bo district for a Lebanese diamond dealer, chanted from memory verses from the Qur'an to summon God (*doowa*; ar. *du'a*), while in the heart of the forest he prepared a *fangadama* or a *sarat* with his labourers.

Apart from the controversies arising between the miners concerning the morality and compatibility of these kinds of sacrifices with the precepts of the Qur'an or the Bible,<sup>26</sup> this ethnographic sketch shows that the *debul* are apt to iconize the risks and contradictory possibilities of wealth obtained through the exploitation of the environment and human labour. However, I do not intend to interpret these presences as projections of social anxiety, or personifications of the features of the natural landscape which enact these same anxieties (e.g. Amir-Moezzi 2007; Nash 1993). The environment and its non-human inhabitants play a key role, and they cannot be considered simply as 'bearers of symbolic projection' (Latour 2005: 10). What is worth emphasizing on the basis of this example is, if anything, the non-human agency; the efforts of the miners to establish with other non-human beings relations based on 'trust' rather than 'domination' (Ingold 2000). In even greater depth sense, what is implied in these transactions is that relationships may be established with non-humans which are analogous or identical to those between human beings: the boundary between human and non-human, between animate and inanimate, is therefore blurred. It is in this epistemological

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<sup>26</sup> In a cultural context where syncretic forms of incorporation of different Islamic and non-Islamic practices prevail (cf. Leach 2000: 582; Bledsoe, Robey 1986), we can comprehend the perplexities of those miners who define themselves as pious Muslims, and criticize the preparation of sacrifices in order to get diamonds. What they criticize is not their effectiveness. Rather, they deplore their immoral deals.

‘relational’ perspective (Bird-David 1999) – in which even the diamonds seem at times to be animated by intentions and like the gold extracted in Burkina Faso they can move and ‘suddenly appear and disappear’ (Werthmann 2003: 110) – that we may consider the transactions between humans and non-humans not in terms of categorical errors (Ingold 1999), but as forms of ‘interagentivity’ (Ingold 1996; Kirsch 2004).

Bearing all this in mind, we may outline this *eco*-nomic perspective on diamond mining more clearly, following Leach (1992) and considering the different *uses* of environment. In this vein, the preparatory work at the mining sites and the subsequent phases of extraction and of gravel washing can be considered as forms of humanization or re-humanization of the landscape. Arguably, a symbolical parallel can be made between mining and farming. Working in the rice fields cleared from among the wild areas of the bush entails a constant dialectic between the uncertainty of unfamiliar places governed by unpredictable natural bush forces, and the relative safety of familiar and reassuring places governed by the human regulating forces of the towns (Jackson 1989; Leach 1992). Likewise, diamond mining is based on continuous negotiations and compromises between the certain and the uncertain, order and disorder, or the familiar and the alien. In both cases, the mines and the cultivated fields are humanized spaces as long as human activity provides and maintains order (Leach 1992: 80). Thus, miners, like ‘neophytes’ and ‘strangers’, are symbolically located in the mutable and ambiguous space existing between these different dimensions of the construction and the continued reproduction of the social (Jackson 1998); and like ‘heroes’ are *in-between*, ‘at once inside and outside’ (De Boeck 2000), risking life ‘in the wilderness in order to gain the powerful things on which community life depends’ (Jackson 1998: 49).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> We might push this comparison one step further and, in the wake of Utas’ (2008) thinking, consider the miners as ‘abject heroes’ or, with De Boeck (2000), as ‘mutant heroes’. Against the background of these analyses stands out the figure of the ‘hunters’ who, as Leach (2000) underlines, among the Mande, ‘are seen as operating on the fringes of ‘normal’ social relations, in their fraternizing with bush spirits, their long sojourns alone in the bush, their reputation for possessing powerful and esoteric ‘fetish’ medicines with the capacity to harm and disrupt the social fabric’ (Leach

On this premise, we must make a further step to complete this shift towards the occult *eco*-nomy of diamonds. When the miners intervene on a landscape to seek the most precious gems, they must reckon not only with the landowners – to whom, as we have mentioned, they owe an agreed percentage of their (possible) earnings – but they have to also deal with the demands of the populations (visible and invisible) dwelling in the mines or their vicinity: they also claim gifts or a share of the earnings, often in the form of compensation or payment for the damage and inconvenience they suffer. The mining uses of the environment are in fact not always compatible with other kinds of use, although they do not necessarily exclude them (cf. Pijpers 2010). The lands where the miners dig are mostly fertile land suitable for agriculture; the trees uprooted to make excavation easier may be used for food or agriculture; the river water used to wash the gravel is the same water used for domestic or agricultural purposes. The lands where the seekers find traces of the presence of diamonds may be sacred places and their access may be limited (Conteh 1979). Knowing the ‘chronicle of life and dwelling’ of the landscapes (Ingold 2000: 89), the inhabitants of the mining areas therefore also play a primary role – however unrecognized - in the mining operations, not only as a reserve of low-cost expert labour in the territory, but also as intermediary agents between gem seekers and the spirits’ world.

When I followed the excavation work on Emanuel’s uncle’s small-scale mine in the Kono District<sup>28</sup>, the inhabitants of the nearby village had warned the miners that a *debul* lived in that area. For weeks the miners had been engaged in draining a little lake, uprooting trees on the site and digging the cleared land when the *debul* had appeared in the dreams of various people in the village asking for specific types of sacrifices to be consumed in the mines and in the village.

When some machinery hired by the uncle unexpectedly broke down, forcing the miners to interrupt their work, they realised that the *debul* was annoyed with them and the sacrifices made up until that

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2000: 581-2).

<sup>28</sup> I have discussed this ethnographic case in greater detail in Author (*in press*).

moment had not satisfied *all* the inhabitants. While the unfortunate episode worried the uncle because of the high cost of hiring, it was put down by some miners and villagers to the vindictive action of the *dēbul*. Frightened by the idea that even more serious accidents might occur, some workers convinced Emanuel's uncle to perform a sacrifice of reparation. Although he was not convinced of the *dēbul*'s existence, he was, however, set on the success of the mining operations and therefore sought to maintain good relations with all his workers – to whom he knew he had to offer both economic and spiritual protection – but also with the villagers, to whom he constantly gave small presents in exchange for their on-going favours. 'Diamond mining is a chain' – the uncle-supporter claimed to justify his decision of allowing sacrifices in the mine, aware of his role as a *bigman* (Shaw 2000) in a 'social system in which everyone is 'for' or 'behind' someone else and no one can claim to be 'for' her/himself'" (Richards 1996: 145).

And, indeed, in this perspective diamond mining *is* a chain of being. If we consider how the protagonists of this mineral drama positioned themselves along the diamond-commodity chain, we realize that, at one end we find the spiritual owners of the diamonds, the *dēbul den*, or djinns. With their invisible presence they signal the existence of a hidden world holding the order of things and regulating access to wealth - a world of contradictory possibilities such as is the extraction of value from human labour and environment. On the opposite side we have the potential consumers of diamonds, *visible yet absent*. In this reversed logic the mines are places of mediation and connection between people and things that are not necessarily present or directly connected to each other (cf. Masquelier 2000: 113). These places are shaped by the influence of social persons distant in space and time, whose memory lives in practices, rituals, and images continually reactivated and reworked by the miners.

## CONCLUSION

As I have tried to show, the two starting questions of this article are merely two sides of the same coin tossed ‘in the wake of things’ (Walsh 2004). To ask what diamonds are for is like putting the question of *who* needs, or *who* uses the diamonds. For the miners of Sierra Leone, diamonds are nothing more than money. As such, they can be converted into homes, education, dowries or airline tickets to distant countries where the miners’ lives could change. Only very few claim to know the uses of these stones for *Westerns*. In Marxian terms, diamonds have an exchange-value for miners, but no use-value. More than that, they *are* exchange-value.

The miners know that with adequate knowledge and appropriate technology, these minerals become objects with particular uses for the benefit of foreign consumers. But they find it hard to believe that these stones can be really used in the jewellery industry to adorn the bodies of wealthy people with necklaces, rings or bracelets – they find it hard to believe that their utility is largely due to their futility. However, miners recognize that diamonds mean more than the hard physical work needed to extract them. Diamonds represent, above all, knowledge, or ‘immaterial capital’ (Gorz 2003). This knowledge entails the circular interdependence between the power and wealth of those who ‘know/own’ them.

Taking into account the point of view of these workers, we could then argue that diamonds stand as instances of the enigmatic paradoxes and upheavals of ‘millennial capitalism’, or what the Comaroffs define as the age of ‘futilitarianism’ (1999). However, in this article I have preferred to explore the specific socio-historical and ecological production of diamonds in Sierra Leone, and extend the analysis of commodity chains to their invisible aspects. As I have shown, the world of the *debul den* is in itself a dialectical image ‘good to think’ the randomness and uncertainty of events, the morality or immorality of human actions, the social relations of interdependence between individuals and society and, in particular, the extractive relationships with predatory

foreigners (Shaw 2002). Being so similar to nameless and faceless Europeans and Americans, the images of the *dɛbul dɛn* dramatize the distance relationship with ‘absent persons’ (Giddens 1990) who, however distant and unknown they may be, are historically linked to this African region through an extended and centuries-old network of social and economic relations. In doing so, accounts about *dɛbul dɛn* have a paradoxical dis-alienating effect: the phantasmagorical images of the potential consumers of those stones which miners find hidden in the ground, replace a web of interrupted relationships, thus closing the circle in the chain of commodities started by diamond miners themselves.

Furthermore, the invisible *dɛbul dɛn* world mirrors human societies. This enables the members of a particular society to reflect obliquely on the social relationship of dependency and ownership, like the one related to the land; on contingencies and the ‘misery of reality’, as well as on their own moral responsibilities. The mining populations’ criticism of those who have exploited the extraordinary natural wealth of this country, which it is still ranking at the bottom of list of the ‘less developed’ and the poorest countries in the world, is also a self-critique, sometimes merciless, and not without some ironic overtone of ‘Afro-pessimism’ (cf. Utas 2008).

Bitterness accompanies the smiles when the stories of how the British used to make fun of Kono in the Thirties are recalled. There is bitterness, but no derision in these oral memories, because the inhabitants of the diamond areas of Sierra Leone know that things have not changed so much since the discovery of the first diamonds. Although the country has crossed the threshold of the Second Millennium, the streets of the diamondiferous districts continue to remain at the limits of practicality; electricity is a mirage of modernity reserved for the few rich people and water is still being fetched with buckets. But many politicians and local authorities, when they get the chance, send their children to study abroad; they travel in luxury cars and, in some cases, they brag of once being on the board (van der Laan 1965; Reno 1995: 90-4), or continue to be on the board of large foreign mining companies (Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010: 268).

With the same irony which the Kono summoned up to comment the injustices they have suffered since colonial times, we can read a passage from the Qur'an. In the surah 34, 12-14 it is said that the djinns realized that Solomon was dead and, thus, that they were no longer subjugated to his will, but only much later, when the stick that supported his corpse was eaten by a woodworm (Amir-Moezzi 2007). When will the miners' woodworm of doubts and suspicions end its work?

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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