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‘Diamond mining is a chain’

Luck, blessing, and gambling in Sierra Leone’s artisanal mines

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Many mining and development experts consider artisanal diamond mining to be a form of gambling. In Sierra Leone’s mining areas, this comparison also recurs occasionally in miners’ discourses. However, the idea that mining is like gambling deserves critical scrutiny as it allows only a limited, stereotypical representation of this work.

This article considers mining as a complex combination of material production and imaginaries oriented by a specific ethic. Central to the understanding of this ethic is a repertoire of religious metaphors that inform miners’ working and ritual practices. By drawing upon my ethnographic experience in Sierra Leone (2007-2011), I examine the vocabulary of contingency which the miners use to make sense of their successes and failures and guide their daily decision-making. Moreover, I show how this vocabulary mirrors the daily efforts of miners in (re)producing the social reality in and around diamond mines. What I mean to highlight is the ways in which diamond miners challenge dominant discourses depicting them as immoral, antisocial agents.

Keywords: diamond mining, contingency, luck, gambling, ethics of work, stereotypes.

Miners as gamblers…?

Since the mid-1990s, so-called “conflict diamonds” have captured the attention of activists and international development experts concerned with the reasons behind some of the most violent civil conflicts in Africa. Several reports and analyses that examine the “on the ground” realities of mining have been produced using different theoretical approaches (PAC and GW 2004, 1; see also GW 2003, 39; ICG 2003; Moyers 2003, ii; Even-Zohar 2003, 4) in efforts to understand how wars and international terrorist

networks have been fuelled by diamonds extracted and trafficked from countries like Angola, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone. In these reports, great attention has been paid to artisanal mines, as the majority of diamonds illegally circulating worldwide are considered to come from this type of extractive level.

Sierra Leone's mines have been an important site for detailed micro-analyses of artisanal mining, as diamonds played a key role in an eleven-year-long civil war (1991-2002) during which these precious stones were smuggled and traded within various illegal networks (GW 2003). An understanding of how diamonds are produced, traded and exported was crucial in order to plan development initiatives that could turn a potential source of war into a resource for peace and stability (Moyers 2003, ii; Levin 2005, 2006). Thus, experts and consultants have scrutinised the political economy of artisanal mining, focussing, for example, on how African diggers finance and organise their work, or how they share the money obtained from diamonds found and sold to local diamond dealers (e.g. Even-Zohar 2003; Moyers 2003).

Much emphasis has been given by experts to the uncertainty of the miners' income and their motivations for undertaking such a risky and poorly paid activity. Given that artisanal miners search for stones scattered in the subsoil in a virtually random manner, thus "with no certainty of finding any stones" at all (USAID 2001, 5), they have been depicted as workers who, as victims of a "lottery effect" (Davies 2006, 173), live with the "illusion" of finding a precious stone which will make them rich overnight (USAID 2001, 5; cit. in Davies 2006). As this "illusion" leads the miners to accept forms of labour agreements which are tantamount to slavery (Moyers 2003), they themselves contribute to perpetuating the forms of exploitation which keep them in poverty. This financial condition, in turn, drives many miners to undertake illegal activities, such as smuggling. In line with this interpretative picture, artisanal mining has been described

as a “casino economy”, an economy in which: “most are gambling on finding a large diamond” (PAC and GW 2004, 12) and those at the bottom of the mineral hierarchy - the diggers - behave as gamblers: “they work for very little and bet on both a high return and an honest licence holder” (PAC and GW 2004, 13).

Although in-depth empirical studies conducted by the same development agencies and experts have stressed some of the shortcomings of such analyses - pointing to the fact that “rather than resembling a visit to a casino, engaging in mining is the result of rational balancing among very limited alternatives” (e.g. USAID 2005, 1) - the gambling miner paradigm persists explicitly in some academic studies on artisanal mining (see Davies 2006) or appears in more subtle and ambiguous forms. For example, Estelle Levin (2005, 2006) is among those who have criticised the idea that Sierra Leone’s mines are a chaotic reality. Through detailed ethnographic descriptions, she highlights the complexity of the organisation of labour and the forms of payment and agreements drawn up between the multiple social actors at stake in the extraction of the diamonds. Although Levin affirms that: “Mining is conducted with an entrepreneurial rather than casino mentality, as it is commonly commented” (Levin 2006, 208), surprisingly, she also considers certain economic strategies as forms of gambling. Thus, the system of sharing out the gravel used by the miners as a way of distributing the (possible) gains: “is a high-risk arrangement because there is no guarantee that a pile contains a diamond and when a colleague finds one, one has no claim to it (…). This system entails the biggest gamble and could be appropriately be called the casino system.” (Levin 2006, 202).

In other cases, gambling is an hyperbole, a rhetorical device used to stress the uncertainties and vicious circles in which miners seem to be trapped. An example is provided by Richards (2001) who compares artisanal diamond mining in Sierra Leone

to a lottery, a sort of game of chance in which: “Those who, week by week, fail to draw a winning ticket find themselves more and more abandoned and yet addicted to the harsh, asocial way of life of the pits, hoping that yet one more week might result in that big find” (Richards 2001, 73).

It should be noted that associating the extraction of diamonds to gambling is not an ideologically neutral operation. On the contrary, through a transitive effect, this association can uncritically attribute to mining work some of the problematic characteristics usually related with gambling in Western countries (as well as in Sierra Leone) (Reith 1999, 2007). These include the representation of gambling as a pathological or unproductive activity deliberately entrusted to the irrational forces of chance and which disputes the ethics of work based on merit (Reith 1999, 2007, 34); or, as an immoral activity supported by an imaginary of easy money that incentivises individualistic hedonism in players, favours the disaggregation of the social order and tacitly questions faith in divine Providence (Reith 2007, 34).

Considering mining to be gambling, or simply comparing mining with gambling – firstly without taking into consideration miners’ own views, and secondly without taking into account the deepest cultural, political and economic scenarios that inform specific practices - means running the risk of delegitimising “the livelihoods of many communities” (Lahiri-Dutt 2006, 18) and perpetuating or reinforcing other stereotypes. Indeed, the “gambling miner” easily fits with the stereotype of diamond miners as “young, male, economic migrants (and probably ex-combatants) inspired by greed and the ‘casino’ mentality” which has been discussed from different angles (Van Bockstael, Vlassenroot 2009, 85-6; see also Bøås 2013, 616; Le Billon and Levin 2009, 702). In this way, miners become prototypical third world inhabitants blessed with resources that “they cannot or do not know how to deal with, in an orderly fashion” (Lahiri-Dutt 2006,

19). Therefore, allegedly efficient large-scale multinational mining companies are legitimised in exploiting communities' resources in a systematic manner.

One way to challenge the "gambling miner" stereotype is to question a core assumption of the global diamond industry, namely the idea that diamonds are *precious* and *rare* stones. Indeed, if artisanal miners "gamble", this is due to the fact that diamonds are rare and difficult to find, and, for this same reason, they are also very valuable. A few decades ago, however, Edward Epstein provocatively defined diamonds as an invention, "a mechanism for converting tiny crystals of carbon into universally recognised tokens of wealth, power, and romance" (Epstein 1983, 8). Hence, if the scarcity of diamonds is an illusion created by the monopolistic control of the diamond trade (Epstein 1983), this means that the difficulties experienced by artisanal miners are largely tied to the mythology created around these stones; to the idea that diamonds are precious objects, symbols of luxury and everlasting love. In this light, the stereotype of the "gambling miner" can be considered part of the continuous effort to renew the diamond invention, a way of "blaming the poor" (Beder 2000, 46-9, 79-83), criminalising artisanal mining and distracting attention from the diamond industry's paradoxes, illusions and structural dysfunctions.

This kind of critique is limited as it does not explain a crucial point. As some anthropologists have noted, these labourers seem, to some extent, to share the comparison between diamond mining and gambling (e.g. Fithen 1999, 56; Pijpers 2010, 90; Richards 2001, 78). Moreover, there are a number of studies on artisanal mining in Africa that support this comparison (e.g. Doughty 1963, 74, 80; Gardner 2011, 305; Siegel 2009, 22; Thabane 2003). Thus, understanding to what extent miners share the idea that diamond mining is a form of gambling is key. This means considering not only what miners *say* but also what they *do*. In other words, does this comparison attribute

mining work with the same meanings implicit in the experts' views? More broadly, how do miners elaborate their own experience with uncertainties and contingencies occurring in and around diamond mines?

Rather than starting with the fantasies and mythologies of diamond consumers, this article challenges the stereotype of the "gambling miner" by paying closer attention to the producers' viewpoints. By drawing on field research conducted in Sierra Leone (2007 – 2011),[1] this article shows that the rich vocabulary of contingency with which artisanal miners[2] elaborate risks, uncertainty, successes and failure in their work – is part of "discursive genres" (Bayart 2005) that both internalise and undermine dominant views. By exploring the miners' vocabulary of contingency, I show how discourses and ritual practices in the artisanal mines challenge, *de facto*, the stereotype of the "gambling miner", despite the miners themselves appearing to accept it as a reasonable metaphor to explain the realities of mining. Following this, I refer to a common saying in Sierra Leone's mines: "Diamond mining is a chain". Indeed, based on miners' actions and words, this article argues that diamond mining is a chain in at least three different ways. Firstly, it is a cooperative form of work based on the complex organisation and interdependence of labour and capital. Secondly, it is a chain of fate, hopes and desires in which, to use Jackson's words, "one's fate is inextricably tied to the fate of others" (Jackson 2011, 159). Thirdly, diamond extraction is a chain of human and non-human beings that are economically and ethically linked to this work through the daily activities and ritual practices of miners. Thus, diamond mining is not only a set

[1] The field work includes research in the diamantiferous districts of Kono and Bo undertaken over a total period of about twelve months.

[2] My attention here is on male workers although many women are also involved at this level of mining, mainly as supporters of gangs. It is beyond the scope of this article to compare men and women's roles and positions in diamond mining.

of actions aimed at extracting particular mineral stones - which are introduced to the global gemstones market through different chains of local and international intermediaries (Fithen 1999; Reno 1995) - but also a deeply moral activity which locally (re)produces and relies on a continuum of social relations between human and non-human beings, the worldly and the divine. In other words, the work necessary for the production of diamonds presupposes and runs parallel with the work of the social (re)production of miners. In this sense, "diamond mining is a chain" runs counter to the stereotypical depiction of mining as an immoral and improvident activity.

In what follows, I first provide some sketches of the historical and ideological background of diamond extraction. Following this, I explore the points of view of the miners, highlighting their imaginative social worlds. Finally, I question a number of people whose livelihoods specifically depend upon gambling about their opinions on comparisons between it and diamond mining.

1. The vocabulary of contingency in diamond mining

As is well-known to gem seekers, alluvial diamonds are not easily retrievable. Some miners dig for months or years without finding a stone of significant commercial value. Others claim to have found large-sized stones after just a few days' work. In other cases, rumours are heard of those without mining knowledge finding diamonds of unusual sizes while digging in their garden or walking along the road after torrential rain. The inhabitants of mining areas often use terms such as "luck", "blessing" and "direction" to comprehend these least likely and most unexpected circumstances as well as the reasons behind the workers' success or lack of success. This vocabulary of contingency has been significantly amalgamated over time with an idiom of the occult which accounts for interventions of invisible forces. Neither vocabularies is a recent

invention; they are the result of a complex and ambivalent elaboration process of short and long-term historical-cultural experiences (see Jackson 2011, 156-7). It is worth pointing out three partially intertwined processes of Sierra Leone's history: the centuries-old spread of Islam, the development of the diamond industry since the 1930s, and the continuous evolution of the working agreements and organisational practices in the mines.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, it is worth recalling that the great majority of miners I met were Muslims. In Sierra Leone, Muslims constitute the majority of the population. According to recent estimates, 71.3% of the population in Sierra Leone are Muslims, of which the majority are Sunni (PRC 2009). The process of Islamisation in West Africa has been long and by no means linear.[3] As Allan Howard notes, "the Islamic presence in many sections of Sierra Leone has been intensified through a layering process over many generations in which people of different ethnolinguistic backgrounds participated" (Howard 1997, 23). Among these people, the Mande played a crucial role in the early stages. The Mande were an African population who migrated from the inner region to the Atlantic coast between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Among these migrants there were warriors, adventurers, people who had fled as a result of wars and persecution in the Empire of Mali, and Muslim missionaries (Skinner 1978).

Initially, Mande groups settled along the main trade routes and the major navigable rivers. They played an important economic and political role in the British colony of Freetown, both during the Atlantic trade and the so-called "legitimate trade" periods (Skinner 1978, 39). Due to their extended networks, members of these communities and

[3] At the outset it should be noted that the processes of Christian missionaries were lengthy and did not follow linear, continuous paths (Hair 1997).

their descendants could rely on wide spheres of political and economic influence that made them particularly suitable as mediators of disputes or as ambassadors on behalf of both local rulers and the colonial government (Skinner 1976, 1978).

As the Mande and the subsequent generations of Muslim traders were admired by the local people because they brought caravans full of goods and symbols of wealth from distant places, likewise, the ritual specialists who followed them were appreciated for their esoteric and magical knowledge relating to their understanding of Arabic and Muslim sacred texts (Bledsoe, Robey 1986). Muslim "clerics", also known as *mori* or *wallihu*, could be consulted for spiritual guidance or to ask for divine protection. It was said that they had magical powers and the *baraka* necessary to ensure prosperity and good fortune to those who used their amulets or prepared sacrificial offerings following their indications (Skinner 1978). The local diviners competed with their Muslim colleagues of Mande provenance. The outcome of this competition was an incredible proliferation of methods and ideas that incorporated cultural elements of these "powerful and prestigious outsiders" (Shaw 1992, 40). For all these reasons, *mori* were appreciated both by Muslims and non-Muslims. In this way, in the late nineteenth century, Islam settled in among different ethno-linguistic groups present in Sierra Leone, particularly among the Susu, Fula, Temne, and Yalunka.

As underlined by Howard (1997), the intensification of regional trade was also important in spreading Islam by providing resources with which to strengthen and extend social networks among Muslim immigrants. This in turn helped not only the emergence of an elite that the British gradually incorporated into their colonial system of indirect rule (Skinner 2009), but also the formation of "big men", that is, people who could support and had influence on an extended network of clients, dependants, and other members of their households (Howard 1997, 37-8). The development of artisanal

diamond mining offered further material and symbolic resources to these networks and to their primary nodes. Some big men went into the diamond business as commercial intermediaries or as patrons of local and foreign tributary-diggers in search of economic and spiritual protection.

Artisanal diamond mining soon proved to be an ideal opportunity for rapid social climbing, particularly for those who were not in a privileged position within the society at large, including newcomers. During the so-called "diamond rush" of the fifties (van der Laan 1965) and in subsequent decades, many migrants heading to the diamondiferous areas were attracted by the possibility of making money with which to pay off any accumulated debts, becoming economically independent, and, as a consequence, avoid the obligations and constraints imposed by local chiefs. The chiefs control over the land and "community labour" imposed restrictions that made the possibility of getting married and advancing socially more difficult for those without connections to them or other influential social actors (Peters, Richards 2011; Richards 2012). Thus, diamonds were perceived by many gem seekers as powerful social converters capable of challenging the existing social order.

The possibility of subverting the social order leads to the second historical and cultural process that is worth considering in understanding the actions and words of contemporary miners. Since the mid-thirties, the colonial administrators were constantly concerned with preserving the local social power structures in the face of changes brought about by the birth of the mining industry. It was through these structures that the reduced colonial apparatus maintained indirect control of the mining areas. The defence of the monopoly of diamond extraction – granted to the Anglo-American mining company Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST) in 1934 - also drove Freetown bureaucrats to invent or apply disciplinary and legal arrangements aimed at certain

social categories: “migrants”, “unemployed”, “vagabonds”, or any other person who was potentially attracted by illegal activities, such as diamond smuggling (D’Angelo 2015).

The concerns of the colonial administrators and SLST managers matched those of the missionaries and Christian churches. The latter played an important role in the colonial effort to moralise the lifestyles and consumption habits of the inhabitants of the mining districts (van der Laan 1965). Despite the tough position of the Christian churches, the propaganda of the government newspapers, and the police operations organised to remove the “foreigners” from the mining areas, the illegal extraction and smuggling of stones never ceased. Even when, in 1956, the SLST gave up its monopoly and the Sierra Leonean citizens were permitted to have mining licences, artisanal mining continued to be interpreted as a form of anti-colonial or anti-imperialist resistance (Van Bockstael and Vlassenroot 2009, 91).

Many of these problems were inherited by future independent governments, which in their turn reiterated the British government strategies with few innovations. From the mid-fifties onwards, the “drive strangers” operations (Rosen 1973) - through which thousands of migrants were expelled from the diamond-bearing areas – continued, even after 1961, the year of Sierra Leone’s independence (Reno 1995). In the same way, the moralising rhetoric of the honesty of hard work in farming activities continued, contrasted with the search for easy money and the immoral or harmful extraction of diamonds (D’Angelo 2011).

In the late 1970s, about two thirds of the Sierra Leone economy depended on the export of minerals (Temple 2006, cit. in Maconachie, Binns 2007, 104). However, President Siaka Stevens and his ministers often declared that the minerals were wasting assets, and that young people should seriously take into consideration the opportunities

offered by agriculture, “a field which could yield handsome dividends if sufficiently exploited”, to quote the words pronounced by the All People’s Congress leader in January 1980 (OPSH 1980, 540). These words clearly show the hypocrisy of a power based instead on corruption and violence (Reno 1995), a power that invested little or nothing in young people and the agricultural sector. Unsurprisingly, the agricultural production continued to decline although it was an employment source for about three quarters of the country’s work-force (Sellies, Wanders 1996, cit. in Maconachie and Fortin 2013, 259).

By the late 1980s, the mechanisms of the parastatal power with which Stevens and his political heirs had dominated the country for two decades had started to become unstuck (Reno 1995). The country found itself in major difficulties; the economic and social collapse had by then become irreversible. Civil war was not far away. In 1991, the rebel group *Revolutionary United Front Sierra Leone* (RUF-SL) entered the Kono District and in a short time succeeded in taking control of its main mining resource. After a few years, images of mutilated men and women, of children taking up arms against the background of villages laid waste, started to be seen around the world. It was thanks to campaigns promoted by the leading international human rights organisations that the bloody economy supporting the traffic of gemstones from this region of Africa was brought to the international community’s attention. In the years immediately following the end of the Civil War, the Minister of Mineral Resources estimated that several thousand people were employed in the artisanal extraction of the most precious stones (DHSP 2004). As in the past, artisanal extraction continued to be an attractive activity for many young people, an extremely hard, risky and badly-paid form of work, but in no way chaotic.

The organisational structure and techniques employed by miners are the result of environmental adaptation and long-term political and historical processes (Van Bockstaele and Vlassenroot 2009, 82-3). In this regard it is worth mentioning the so-called "tributing" or "supporting system", that is, the system of recruitment, organisation and economic agreements based on patronage relationships. According to Zack-Williams (1995), tributing emerged in the late colonial period when searching for diamonds was still an illegal activity for Africans. This system was particularly suited to the artisanal extraction of gems in depleted or poor deposits. Supporters and gang leaders recruited labour promising to pay accumulated debts and ensuring quotas on eventual discoveries. Aside from adapting to changing historical and political circumstances, the majority of gangs in artisanal diamond mines are still organised according to this system. "I am behind you" (*I de biaynd yu*), the boss or supporter says to his or her men to encourage them to work in exchange for daily portions of food, small amounts of money, and a percentage of the sale of diamonds. "I am behind you", the diamond dealer who agrees to finance a gang says to the supporter in exchange for the guarantee of selling him or her any diamonds discovered by the gang. Thus, this is a system in which, generally, "everyone is 'for' or 'behind' someone else and no one can claim to be 'for' her/himself" (Richards 1996, 145).

The repertoire of words, images and symbols by which the miners give meaning to their experiences emerges against these long and short-term historical and cultural backgrounds. I argue that this repertoire may be considered a hybridisation of "discourse genres" (Bayart 2005, 110-1) which, on one hand, draws the utopian boundaries of another possible existence (Bøås 2013, 614) – an existence in which "everybody is made happy" by successful miners - and, on the other, warns of the

concrete or invisible dangers which arise or come up against the achievement of this same existence.

In what follows, I focus upon a number of specific religious ideas which orientate many diamond miners' daily decisions as well as their understanding of the way fortune is distributed in the world. While this vocabulary reflects the awareness of being enmeshed in a web of relations which can be beyond the human comprehension, it also points to the necessity of acting morally, that is, within or on the edge of religious and material possibilities.

1.1 Luck and blessing

The ways diamonds are searched for and found are not of secondary importance when considering a miner's success. Although there is not always agreement among the miners, and at times certain statements seem mutually contradictory, this multiplicity of views can be partially clarified by taking into account the different meanings of the notion of "luck" (*lok*); its different translations and associations with other Islamic notions, as well as the different contexts in which it is used and interpreted (cf. Gaibazzi *this issue*).

"In Africa" – Tamba, a Muslim Kono miner, aged about thirty, explained to me in English - "you have 'natural luck' and 'dangerous luck'. 'Natural luck' is what you are born with, 'a gift from God'", he told me. "Dangerous luck", on the contrary, may be acquired, but on conditions which might make it "bad". While "natural luck" here alludes to the Islamic notions associated with fate or divine destiny[4] - in particular, with

[4] Central to the understanding of the concept of fate in the Qur'an are the notions of Qadar and Qada. Over the centuries an intense theological debate between those who emphasise the deterministic

the idea that God has decreed the destiny of each person from birth, the "dangerous luck" Tamba was referring to was that obtained by seeking the mediation of local ritual specialists able to communicate with spiritual beings (*dem debul* or *djinns*) dwelling in the mines. The latter are in fact considered the owners or controllers of these stones. As a consequence, to obtain the most precious stones, sacrificial offerings (*sacrifice*; *sarat*) must be prepared to please them (D'Angelo 2014). Controversy may arise over the morality of these sacrifices. For example, Tamba, who described himself as a devout Muslim, considered offerings made to obtain the diamonds from the *djinns* to be immoral. Asking God to be lucky, or better still, to be guided was a different matter:

> When I go to the Mosque, each time I pray, I beg God to give me diamonds; to guide me. This is "direction". You can come here but the diamond is not here. Someone comes, stays there and finds it (...). I pray. I don't go to "voodoo" or jujuman for help. I don't believe in this.[5]

Those who, like Tamba, declare that they are "true" Muslims do not deny that ritual specialists - commonly also known as *jujumen* or *morimen* - can help to find diamonds. What is most often challenged is not the effectiveness of this help, but its morality. Tamba himself, for example, recognised that miners applying to *jujumen* may actually obtain the fortune they seek: "I don't do it. But I've seen people doing it and having success."[6] Miners that define themselves as "true" believers, are seeking blessing

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tone of the Qur'an, and those who emphasise free will and human responsibility has developed (Karamustafa 2002).

[5] Interview with Tamba, Kono District, 25/02/2008.

[6] Interview with Tamba, Kono District, 25/02/2008.

(*blesin; baraka*)[7] and pray to God to obtain guidance, to know where to find the diamonds. They are seeking a lasting luck can make them truly happy, without the acquired well-being turning out to be harmful to themselves or others.

Not all the miners, however, judge negatively the use of or appeal to magic-religious means or practices to attempt to obtain greater luck. Ibrahim, for instance, a fifty-year old miner who, when I met him, was working in the Bo District – and who declared he was also a "true" Muslim - did not conceal the fact that he prayed and made sacrificial offerings (*sarat*) advised by the *moriman*. The sacrificial offerings, however, had the aim of asking God to make him luckier in his search for diamonds. From his point of view, the sacrifices helped to find diamonds faster: "You can find diamonds without sacrifices as well, but you'll find only a few of them and strenuously", he maintained. According to Ibrahim, anyone can find diamonds working hard, but you have to pray to God if you want to have the fortune you desire. Since the diamond belongs to, or is under the control of the djinns, God will communicate with them, trying to convince them to grant their diamonds to the miners.

It is worth emphasising that the "quick" luck described by Ibrahim must not be confused or identified with the "dangerous luck" stigmatised by Tamba. "Dangerous luck" is definitely a form of "quick luck" and "mixed blessings" (Jackson 2011, 157), but in Ibrahim's view, not all "quick luck" is "dangerous luck". The premise behind Ibrahim's "quick luck" is that the person praying already has a blessing. In his view, God primarily listens to and answers above all the prayers of blessed people. The people who have a blessing are those who firstly honour their father and mother. Honouring

[7] The notion of *baraka* is commonly translated in English as "blessing" and means "beneficent force, of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order" (Colin 1960, 1032).

one's father and mother means "making them happy". A way to make one's parents happy is to give them presents or gifts every time you have the chance: clothes, food and anything else that could please them. The blessing of one's mother, in particular, is the most important of all. In Krio, to refer to a person who is lucky in life, it is said that (s)he "has his (or her) mother's blessing" (*I get mami blesin*) (see Jackson 2011, 178). The people who have their parents' blessing or that of their family, can be recognised, according to Ibrahim, by the way they are respected by everyone. Since the miners are not always sure of having the blessing, or of being sufficiently blessed to be heard by the Supreme Creator, they ask the people taking part in the sacrifice to pray for them. Hence, the importance of inviting people who are esteemed within the community, particularly, religious persons or those who know the Qur'an better than others. In Ibrahim's words:

> If your desire is to be lucky, you must pray to God. At times you prepare your food and invite those people skilled in reading the Qur'an and bear good knowledge of Islam. You offer them a meal and then tell them: "Now I'm confused, worried. I'm working but without stumbling upon diamonds. I'd like to ask God for some luck". If these people eat your food, they will pray for you and God will answer.[8]

Among the many persons involved in the consumption of the sacrifice which follows, or precedes, praying in the Mosque, there may be one in particular whom God listens to more than others, Ibrahim and other fellow workers explained to me. It is thanks to this blessed person, or to this set of persons - which is usually made up of

[8] Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 29/12/2008.

members of the community to which the miners themselves belong – that one can hope to see their prayers answered regarding luck in the mine.

Thus the notion of luck, at times, seems to translate the English word "luck" (in the sense of unexpected and positive event which brings fortune, success). On a deeper level, however, it recalls the Islamic notions related to divine destiny (the "natural luck" of Tamba). These, in turn, are closely linked to the notion of *baraka* (the blessing sought for by Ibrahim and other Muslim miners) and, as we shall see, to that of guidance.[9] Hence, it is difficult to speak to the miners about luck without involving the notion of blessing. To use Ibrahim's words: "Luck and blessing work together".[10]

Although these notions "work together", they are semantically and ontologically distinct. On the subject of being blessed, miners say that "I am finding blessing", the opposite of luck, which is not something one may "find". As a personal fate, luck is a gift from God, Tamba reminds us. In this sense, not all forms of lucks are the same. Some people are lucky as miners and others are lucky in other things. Everyone has to follow his or her own "lucky star", by discovering what is most successful for themselves, a young miner migrated to Kono District told me. Moreover, there are those who are lucky, but not blessed, conversely there are those who are blessed but not lucky. Different combinations (and interpretations) of luck and blessing account for different possibilities and nuances of miners' varying degrees of success and happiness:

[9] The picture may further be complicated by considering other notions associated with success (or failure) in the mines. For example, according to many miners, luck and blessing form a triad with sababu. In Sierra Leone this word - of Arabic origin - means opportunity, but it is also used to indicate a recommended person or the good connections a person has with powerful people. There is both "good" and "bad" sababu. In my experience with miners, this notion was mainly used to refer to situations in which somebody knows the right people at opportune times, or uses these social connections to improve their own circumstances as a miner, for example, by borrowing money.

[10] Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 20/02/2011.

I. When you have luck and blessing you are happy. Everything you do, you don't suffer. But, if you have no luck, ah... you suffer! If you have the blessing, but you are not lucky, you suffer. If you have the luck and you are not blessed, you suffer (…).

L. Can you make an example?

I. When you dig and find a big diamond, but it is spoilt, you say that this miner is lucky but not blessed. Any diamond he finds is spoilt. He doesn't have the blessing. He has the luck, but not the blessing.

L. And someone who is blessed, but it is not lucky?

I. When you work until you find a diamond, which is small, but it is good it is said: "This man has the blessing, but his luck is "hard".[11]

These words run parallel to rumours of gem seekers who have been able to find large diamonds, but who have never really achieved a real benefit from their discoveries. This happened, in particular, when the seekers had not respected the pacts with the ritual specialists who had helped them to find the gemstones, or when they had not received any blessing from relatives and friends. Consequently, these persons had lost their diamonds in mysterious circumstances or, once dealing with a dealer provided with a magnifying lens, they had discovered that their diamond, however large it might have been, was "burnt", or spoilt. A large diamond which turns out to be of little value is perhaps the most suitable mining metaphor to represent a large fortune without an appropriate blessing.

1.2 Divine guidance and paradoxes of happiness

[11] Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 17/01/2009.

In Sierra Leone, seeking luck and desiring the blessing of God through relatives and ancestors are not an exclusive interest of diamond miners (see Jackson 2004, 2011). People may prepare a libation for their ancestors to ask for divine intercession to favour, for example, business in trade, or a promotion in public employment, or success in politics. An elderly Muslim teacher who lived in an important mining district told me that he had often prayed to his ancestors asking their blessing. He told me that this explained, at least in part, how he had succeeded in obtaining important posts in his professional career, despite the merciless competition of his colleagues. Thus, the miners' offerings and prayers did not seem very different from those made by people in other professions. We may then ask whether some specificity exists in the requests and expectations of diamond seekers. Otherwise put, is there a kind of luck to which miners refer in an exclusive or specific way?

The miners often pray to God to ask for protection (*protekshon*) from the risks and dangers of their profession, dangers which may be both physical and spiritual, and which may occur, for example, when an underground tunnel is being dug. "Let God look after us", the believing miners pray, hoping that the tunnel they have dug will not collapse and bury them. But they also pray for divine guidance (*dayrekshon*): "Let God show me the way / open the way". If luck and blessing are sought by all, while protection is above all invoked by those undertaking dangerous jobs or feeling threatened, for example, by the envy or jealousy of fellow workers, the "guidance" or "direction" has a particular aspect when requested by diamond miners. Clarification on this point is necessary.

The notion of direction is not an invention of diamond miners. Protection and direction are implicit notions in that of blessing – where it is clear that, in general, by "direction" it is meant the spiritual path of a blessed person towards Rectitude or God.

In the miners' discourses and prayers, this term however also assumes other meanings from that of a merely spiritual search. These additional meanings do not necessarily overturn the "original" meaning, so to speak, shared by the community of believers, but on the contrary, they are superimposed on it, creating an ambiguity which deserves some attention. So, what does asking for "guidance" or "direction" mean from the point of view of diamond seekers? Ibrahim, the fifty-year-old miner I met previously, answered my question with an example:

When you're sitting but would like to work, like I'm doing right now, you go and pray inside the Mosque every day. I get up and ask God to direct me. So, what does "direction" mean? It means that God touches your heart. You say: "I want to work here" and (God) tells you: "No, go and work there". God guides you about where to work. Where He directs you to go, there you find diamonds quickly. This is direction.[12]

Asking for direction therefore means having faith, believing that God can provide for all.[13] "Let God give us", the believers say. Having such faith, therefore, does not only mean having guidance on where to find the diamonds in the shortest time, but also signifies being in the right place at the right time or, simply, meeting the right person when you need it most:

I remember one day when a boy, Tongo, arrived with a diamond.

He said: "Ibrahim…"

[12] Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 04/02/2009.

[13] In Islam, one of the names of Allah is al-Razzak, the All-Provider. This definition derives from the notion of rizk which literally means "anything granted by someone to someone else as a benefit", but also "bounty, sustenance, nourishment" (Bosworth 1960, 567).

I said: “Yes?”

He asked: “What’s happening?”

I said: “Nothing, work is hard.”

“I’ve got a small thing”, he said.

“What?”

“A diamond.”

“Where?!?”

He took it out of his pocket and I was sweating! I started sweating, being nervous, happy, super happy (…). God had provided for me, you see? I didn’t know that man, had never seen him before. Wasn’t God the provider then?[14]

Ibrahim clearly remembered this episode because when it happened to him he was having financial difficulties: he feared not being able to pay his children’s school fees, not having the money to pay off the expenses related to his mining activity. However, that day, as he sat in front of his house brooding over his problems, this stranger who likely had a stolen diamond or did not have a licence for mining had come to him to propose a profitable affair: buying a two-carat diamond to sell to another diamond dealer, an intermediation without any physical effort, which turned out to be very financially fruitful and gratifying for Ibrahim.

Finding diamonds is not easy, miners are known to say. Sometimes there may be a long wait for a good stone. Desires, frustrations, and hopes of finding or not finding gems do not only concern individual miners. The hopes and expectations of each one intertwine with those of others: fellow workers, family, and friends. Thus, extracting a diamond is never an individual affair.

[14] Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 04/02/2009.

Working with common consent, praying and consuming sacrifices together are all important activities, necessary to please God – or, in believers terms, to carry out His Will – but also to have the material and spiritual support of the community they belong to. Without this support, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the majority of miners to undertake their work. In the workers' words, the search for diamonds presupposes an order and a harmony of earthly things with divine order. Hence, if direction is, from a certain point of view, the search for God but it also indicates the search for diamonds, then seeking diamonds can be seen as way of seeking or working for God.

On one particular day, I asked Ibrahim how he explained the fact that many miners, despite their hard work, do not find diamonds. He answered me by saying that for them it is simply a matter of patience and faith. He then compared his work with that of civil servants who are usually paid by the government at the end of the month. Conversely, it is God who pays the miners, implying that miners' earnings are not predictable like a salary, but they come from God, who provides for everyone: "God pay us (…). The "diamond-salary" [is from] God", he added smiling.[15]

This comparison is not surprising. From the point of view of some of these workers, the search for diamonds seems to presuppose the search for a possible, however fragile, equilibrium between the individual and the community; a temporary, or even instantaneous harmony of all with everything: of men with men or of miners with the spiritual entities acting as intermediaries with God, and vice versa, of – human or spiritual – intermediaries with the miners.

[15] Interview with Ibrahim, Bo District, 20/02/2011.

"If everybody is happy, it is easier to find diamonds", a young Kono miner told me at the beginning of my fieldwork in Sierra Leone. A miner who invests his energies and material and symbolic resources in a mine cannot hope to have success – lasting success – without having satisfied the owner of the land where he is digging with a percentage of the earnings; without having fulfilled the demands of the labour force, the village head, the spiritual beings or ritual specialists acting as mediators with these spirits. He will also not be successful if he is not a good believer, a respected, God-fearing man, if he does not obtain social recognition of his virtues through the blessing.

The happiness of all is a pre-condition for individual success which materialises, under certain conditions, in the discovery of a diamond. Therefore, the success or happiness of the individual is only achieved after this person has contributed to the harmony of the group or society – which, in any case, is in its turn indispensable to reach one's working objectives. Like farmers cultivating rice and entrusting themselves to networks of clients during the "hungry seasons" (Richards 1986, 115-6), the miners know how important the support of the family or friends' network is when long months go by without them finding a stone of value. It is unlikely that the mining enterprises would be able to survive without the reciprocal support of the agricultural and business networks of the extended families and communities the miners themselves belong to (cf. Cartier, Bürge 2011; Rosen 1981; Zack-Williams 1995). As Morten Bøås notes, "it is all about networks and finding the nodal point that can ensure your existence as a miner" (Bøås 2013, 617). "Diamond mining is a chain", the miners often repeat to synthesise this feeling of interdependence or interconnection within and between the mining economy and the non-mining economy, the visible and the invisible.

However, making people happy and having the support of all can be as hard as finding diamonds. As miners experience, the happiness of all can be a heavy burden to

bear, fraught with tension, resentment and even suspicious (D'Angelo 2011, 115-7; D'Angelo 2014, 287). Furthermore, pursuing the happiness of all means distributing the wealth already possessed and anticipating wealth promised by a finding. Thus, paradoxically, a successful miner who makes everyone happy is a miner who impoverishes himself. The dream of a diamond big enough to make rich overnight reflects, in some respects, the utopian desire to resolve this paradox rather than the alleged irrational hope of the gambler.

2. Gambling and diamond mining

At this point, having clarified the vocabulary of the contingency and the ethic it sustains, let me return to the comparison between mining and gambling.

During my fieldwork, I only occasionally heard comparisons between diamond mining and gambling. I have already noted that this comparison has been highlighted by other scholars. What has perhaps not yet been done is to explicitly ask the inhabitants of the mining areas what they think about this comparison. The point of view of those who have substantial experience in both mining and gambling is particularly relevant here. Before I go into this issue, however, it is useful to briefly describe the economic and social context of gambling in Sierra Leone.

As far as the colonial and post-colonial context is concerned, in Sierra Leone, gambling has often been associated with immoral activities since the early years of its existence when Freetown was a British Colony. Already in 1851, the Police Ordinance counted betting as illicit conduct along with prostitution, public drunkenness, verbal obscenity, traditional dancing, drumming and other religious practices (Philips 2006, 127, 208). The morality of colonial life, however, was not an exclusive concern of the colonisers. Prominent members of the educated African middle-class expressed moral

perspectives that were, not infrequently, in line with the colonial laws. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the Sierra Leone Times - a newspaper published by the Creole J. A. Fitzjohn - urged the government to take action against street gambling. However, in this case the editor appeared to be "less concerned with the offence in itself as with the space in which it took place" (Philips 2006, 202).

Urban spaces where young people or those on the fringes of the society live have often been at the centre of rulers' attention. Among these spaces, the *potes*, have also captured the attention of those scholars interested in understanding the origins of the recent civil war in Sierra Leone. Abdullah Ibrahim maintains that the genealogy of the anti-social culture of young people who composed the ranks of the RUF-SL rebels can be traced back to the so-called "rarray boy culture" that emerged in Freetown after the Second World War (Abdullah 1998, 208) . These young people who lived in marginal, peri-urban places known as *pote* spent much of their time gambling, smoking marijuana and drinking.

Gambling, however, has not always (or in all places) been associated with immorality or anti-social behaviours. In *Coping with Hunger*, Paul Richards lists gambling among the self-help strategies used by Mende farmers in pre-civil war Sierra Leone to face periods of uncertainty (Richards 1986, 124-5). Considering the sums of money that could be won (or lost), it is clear that gambling was not merely a game to pass the time. Richards underlines that for young people, gambling could be a way to gain notoriety useful in the local political arenas as well as to earn ready cash to deal with adversities (1986, 125).

Regarding more recent historical contexts, it is worth recalling that the Sierra Leone State Lottery lost its monopoly in 2006 when the Government liberalised the betting market by granting a licence to a multinational sports betting company. The latter

claims to be the market leader in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility, donating scholarships worth several million Leones every year. Although the betting industry is still poorly monitored and regulated, it has become a significant source of revenue for the government. Thus, occasional gamblers and hardened betters have the chance to bet on international sports results, and on the numbers drawn in the national lottery. A favourite place for these gamblers to gather is at an "*ataya* base". Young people choose to spend their time at these establishments – sometimes entire days - playing, chatting, and of course, drinking *ataya*, a warm tea and sugar drink which is quite popular in Sierra Leone. As the diamond miners have attracted the attention of international development experts, the regular customers of the *ataya* bases have recently become a focal point for Sierra Leonean experts and politicians.

Although they are often considered as places that contribute to "idleness" and to those forms of "devious relationships" which endanger national development (Turay 2013), in my experience, *ataya* bases are places where idleness is not pure laziness; time spent in the *ataya* bases can be - and often is - filled with numerous social activities. Bürge (2011) has shown how people passing their time in similarly criticised meeting places drinking *poyo* (palm-wine) enmesh in productive social networks. Likewise, people in ataya bases do not only drink tea, or in some instances bet, they also spend their time exchanging job seeking information; discussing the latest international events, and commenting on national political life. In short, they are places frequented by people from different social and cultural backgrounds, different religious or political persuasions, and different occupations, who often exchange resources and cultivate relationships based on principles of equality and solidarity (cf. Bürge 2011, 75-7). Clearly, they represent a cross section of the society which is politically and economically relevant (Turay 2013).

Unsurprisingly, frequenters of the *ataya* bases also include miners or former miners. For example, Foday was a Muslim aged about thirty, whom I met in an *ataya* base in Bo City. He had been born in Bombali District, but had lived for many years between the Bo and Kono districts until, in 2008, he had fallen sick. Not having received adequate help from his mining supporter, he had decided to leave the gang he worked with to move to Bo City. Here, as he told me during a conversation, his life depended "only on God". With these words he alluded to the fact that his principal earnings came from his inconsistent success while gambling. In other words, similarly to those living "on the edge of the state and society" in other African countries like South Africa, for Foday and his fellow workers, gambling was part of a "livelihood strategy" (Krige 2011). "Here, everything depends on what God or Allah has in store for you. If you are destined to be a lucky player today, you will really be lucky", the ex-miner explained to me, underlining the difficulties and uncertainties of his work; the suffering of waiting, the temporality of destiny:

If you are destined to find a 100 or 200 carat diamond, let's say in five years, you will have that diamond in five years. It doesn't matter how interested you are or how much energy you put into it: before that time you will have no way to be successful. You won't be able to find that diamond before that time. This is the way in which we see it from the religious point of view. Here, we believe that everything depends on destiny. So, sometimes, you find Mr. A and Mr. B extracting together on the same mining site. One with his hole on one side and the other with his hole on the other. But, after the extraction and washing, on one side you see one who is successful, while the other proceeds without finding anything at all.[16]

[16] Interview with Foday, Bo District, 03/03/2011.

In an ironic tone, Foday later told me that there are people who believe that successful miners sometimes use amulets to bring them luck, or steal the diamonds in a fellow-worker's pitch by making use of witchcraft. As a believer in Islam, Foday was anxious to keep a distance from these interpretations and stressed that events of this kind should be explained as divine interventions. As we shall see, for him this did not exclude the possibility that the social actors could be acting morally, or that they might choose between what they consider to be right and wrong.

During this discussion, I asked him whether there were similarities between the extraction of diamonds and gambling. He answered me by saying that: "Both are gambling. But one is much better than the other. Well, *maybe* one is much better than the other." For Foday, what the two activities have in common is not knowing the chance of making a gain, the unpredictability of the relationship that may or may not be established between work and remuneration. From his point of view, however, diamond extraction was "much better" than betting on the results of football games or horse races. Contradicting the stereotype of the miner seeking quick luck (and therefore without the fatigue of hard work), he argued that what made diamond extraction preferable to gambling was the bodily involvement necessary to work in a mine. He was not speaking of an abstract, idealised work, but the concrete and often painful actions required to dig holes and wash gravel. Working was certainly better than sitting around, he told me, once again betraying with this statement his ambivalent attitude towards his current gambling activity. Like many other fellow workers, Foday was aware of the stigma associated with gamblers or those who "waste time" or "idle" in the *ataya* bases. In the Qur'an gambling (ar. *maysir*) is considered as a way to gain property from others " in an easy way, without effort and labor" and it is therefore prohibited in the same way as strong drink, idolatry, fortune-telling, and divining arrows (Karic 2002, 280).

"People brand us" - he disconsolately told me one day - "but I believe that this (referring to the gambling in the *ataya* base) is much better than stealing or telling lies to survive". He justified himself as if speaking to an invisible accuser and turned much greater accusations against him, the same accusations which in Sierra Leone are usually addressed to corrupt men of power. He then added:

Some condemn us from a religious point of view. I am a Muslim and I shouldn't gamble. But, need sometimes drives you to do something. This may be unlawful for me, but my needs allows me to do it. So, sometimes, you have to save your own life. This doesn't mean you have to exaggerate. As long as I use my head, I don't see any harm in it. I am not being violent, I am not saying bad words (…). I wouldn't advise anyone to do gambling, but at the same time (I wouldn't prevent him either) (…). I am doing it out of necessity.[17]

The sense of being compelled to act without choice suggested by Foday's words is partly offset here by the idea of having a margin for manoeuvre ("using your head") within which one can exercise a sense of agency (however limited) (cf. Krige 2011, 14).[18]

When I say I believe in God, it doesn't mean that you have to go (to the Mosque), sit down and fold your arms. You have to make an effort (…). We can't just sit down on the ground and say: "We believe in God". Yes, we believe in God, but God teaches us to apply effort. The

[17] Interview with Foday, Bo District, 03/03/2011.

[18] On this subject it is useful to bear in mind what Jackson (1988) argues in his study on the 'moral reasoning' of the Kuranko in Sierra Leone. After taking into consideration the hypothesis that Islamic belief in destiny is a response to a history of social upheavals in which it has seemed that man is "powerless to shape his own social world" (198), the anthropologist states that "it is always human choice which, in practice, determines the particular course of a person's destiny" (199).

effort has to come first. So, when the time comes for you to be victorious, God will give you [something].

From this point of view, Foday saw gambling as a chance to do something rather than nothing, to earn without stealing; to try to find a way to overcome his circumstances. He saw in gambling an opportunity for work, a chance to climb the lowest steps in what he perceived to be an unjust society.

During my stay in the Bo District, my conversations and interviews with Foday often ended by attracting the attention of other regular customers at the *ataya* base. Some of Foday's friends and fellow workers shared his opinions, particularly concerning the role played by fatigue, hard work and unfairness regarding the earnings made by the diamond miners. Many of them stated, often with more than a hint of bitterness, that only the intermediaries, "the men who stay in the office", can actually make money in diamond mining. Further, those with the power to improve the general conditions of the life of the population use the money for other purposes, in ways that are not always transparent. Others emphasised how important it was to have a great deal of money at the start to be able to have any chance of success with diamonds. In contrast, one only needs small sums of money to bet and hope to win, according to a young fellow customer who interjected during a conversation at the Bo *ataya* base.

Despite the variety and contrasts of opinions, many of them noted the injustice of an economic and social system in which those who work hard are not suitably rewarded, while those who are merely intermediaries, for example, in the buying and selling of the gemstones, make significant profits. Many complained of the terrible living conditions of the inhabitants of the mining areas, in stark contrast with their capacity to produce

wealth that benefits other people and other countries in the world. However, no one described diamond mining in terms of a "casino economy".

Conclusion

The miners' imaginary is rich in symbols, images and simple slang expressions[19] - Bayart (2005) calls these a "repertoire" - which both includes and simultaneously conflict with past and present dominant discursive genres. Since colonial times, these workers have been under the watch of bureaucrats, missionaries, and various experts. Stigmatisation of their work has provided reasons to intervene and discipline the bodies and minds of the workers primarily in accordance with the diamond industry's needs.

The miners' vocabulary of contingency reflects this ambivalence by reversing the stereotypes of the "gambler miner". Indeed, these workers incorporate and at the same time challenge the dominant ideologies.

Gambling is commonly considered to be as an economic activity that encourages unproductive forms of selfish and hedonistic enjoyment, where chance rewards the winner independently of merit. However, people in Sierra Leone consider artisanal mining to be a *chance* to work. Moreover, this activity presupposes a chain of social relations based on reciprocity which, in turn, is the premise for articulating mining and non-mining work and linking, in a continuum, the visible to the invisible, the material to the spiritual. Unsurprisingly, mining's discursive genres combine different "ways and

[19] Some expressions from the betting world occur in the language of the miners, as, for example, "Jack" (probable abbreviation of "Jackpot") to indicate a diamond of unusual size, or "winning", as the synonym for a discovered diamond.

means of taking possession of the reality" (Bayart 2005, 111): religious metaphors, gestures, rumours, gossip, and so on.

Diamond mining is commonly associated with the possibility of easy money. However, it is also seen by the mining population as hard work which is often not paid properly; hard work that does not reward its "players" regardless of their merits or of who they are, just as in a lottery. To begin mining enterprises, capital is a necessary foundation. Not all miners can support a team of diggers for months. Given the difficult financial conditions of many miners, nothing is left to chance. Miners survey the land; they consult friends and ritual specialists. In other words, they stake their own material and symbolic capital: money, social networks and knowledge. In this context, there is no space for the enjoyment of gambling as an end in itself, or for deliberately irresponsible, immoral attitudes. There is, however, space to hope; to imagine alternative ways of life; to project morally acceptable spaces of social and economic advancement.

Criticism of the stereotype of the "gambling miner" has, however, raised another more general problem. The detailed analyses produced by development experts show that a closer look "on the ground" is not in itself sufficient in developing perspectives that express solidarity and participation with social actors. Paradoxically, micro-local-level analyses of diamond production are disengaged from its deeper cultural, historical, political and religious dimension and have distracted attention away from the interrelationships, similarities and complicities between the large-scale global industry and the micro-contexts of local production. Only a "historically-informed" (Kirge 2011) and politically sensitive ethnography may hope to escape this risk and, syntonic with the miners' point of view, try to imagine diamond mining as an extended mutable chain of social relations.

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