Negotiating Artisanal Miners’ Payments and Distributing Risks and Earnings in the Diamond Mines (Sierra Leone)

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Most scholars who have analyzed the reasons for the civil war in Sierra Leone agree that diamonds were not the cause of the conflict, but that they certainly contributed to sustaining it. For this reason, consultants of important international development agencies and human rights activists have analyzed the economic policy of diamond mining in order to understand how to transform this potential resource for war into a tool for peace and economic development in the country.

These analyses have often concentrated on the labour activity of the artisanal miners. From these studies it would seem that this level of mining is where we find the conditions of exploitation and poverty that cause discontent and social conflict. In fact, a disturbing picture emerges from these analyses: miners work with primitive tools, without adequate technical knowledge, and in a disorganized way. Moreover, they are mainly motivated to work in the mining sector by poverty and the desperation of those who live in one of the poorest countries in the world. That is why they accept work relationships with their employers that are based on *debt bondage*. From this point of view, it is not surprising that miners make decisions that appear to be irrational, willing to take the risk of losing everything they own in the mines, as if they were at the gambling table.

The aim of the present paper is to question this type of analysis, starting with a detailed – and historically informed – ethnographic study on how skilled miners establish and negotiate compensations and the subdivision of monetary gains. The fulcrum of the analysis is the “supporting system” or “tributary system”, a system of economic agreements between financiers and artisanal labour. In particular, this paper will focus attention on the system of distribution of money obtained through the sale of diamonds. This system involves, according to precise relations, *landowners*, *supporters*, *bossmen* and *labour*. Thus I will show how there are many-sided, flexible possibilities of agreement between miners according to the situations, but this does not mean that they are extemporaneous or altogether improvised. On the contrary, these agreements presuppose a rational distribution of earnings and risks which involve not only miners, but also a wide range of social actors who are apparently extraneous to the mines.