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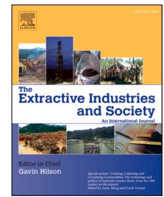

Original article

The anatomy of a gold-rush: Politics, uncertainty and the organisation of artisanal mine work and labour in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies concur that artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has had a significant impact on Africa's livelihoods, environment, urbanisation, agriculture, and other aspects of life. Rarely acknowledged is its effect on the politics of work and labour, as well as on political actions and behaviours in general. In Zimbabwe, ASM is perhaps more connected with and has reshaped broader societal processes, human actions, and the greater political economy than in other southern African nations. This paper offers a dissection of a gold-mining rush, the common ASM occurrence and workplace in order to comprehend how the various actors in mining rush sites perceive "work" and concomitantly "labour" in contexts where the structures and strictures of production and control are informal, flexible, contingent, situational, indeterminate, and frequently evasive of state and institutional confines. How then are political subjects fashioned under such conditions? The study is based on five months of ethnographic field research conducted in the gold-rich Kwekwe District in Zimbabwe's Midlands province between 2021 and early 2022.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Zimbabwean government officials have often hailed gold mining as the elixir that may cure the country's decades-long economic malaise. The optimism is founded on an increase in gold delivery to the country's sole bullion refiner, Fidelity Printers and Refiners (FPR). Between 2020 and 2021, deliveries increased from 19 052.65 kgmes in 2020 to 29,629 kgmes in 2021(Reserve Bank Of Zimbabwe 2022). The fact that Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) provided an estimated 62% of total deliveries is quite noteworthy and of interest to this research, as it demonstrates the increasing significance of such mining operations for the economy and society.[1]

ASM has been Zimbabwe's most noticeable and consistent economic feature since the beginning of the new millennium, particularly in mineral-rich areas like the Kwekwe District in the country's Midlands province. People leaving destroyed rural and agricultural-based livelihoods and industries closed by economic collapse, only to be tempted by easily accessible and favourably priced mineral resources, was one of the earlier justifications for such mining activities' exponential rise (Maponga and Ngorima 2003; Hilson and Garforth 2012). By demonstrating that ASM is truly a dynamic platform of production, wealth creation, class formation, and differentiation, researchers have more recently attempted to free it from the "poor trap" and "poverty cycle" narrative (Hilson and Hu 2022; Radley 2022). Maybe more so in Zimbabwe than in other countries in the southern African region, ASM is now deeply intertwined with and has reconfigured broader societal processes, the political economy, but also the understanding and meaning of work and labour.Fig. 1

As demonstrated by the scholarship cited in this article, the literature on the politics of artisanal and small-scale mining in Zimbabwe and elsewhere is immense. It has investigated the activity's underlying social organisation, labour practices and processes. However, the literature has primarily focused on forwarding specific assumptions, such as artisanal mining's contribution to economic production, development (or lack thereof), provision of livelihood options, and maximisation of profits. Such works have shown a battle between two protagonists: the powerful and oppressive state, political elites, corporations, and variably characterised intermediaries on the one hand, and the mainly submissive and compliant grassroots labourers (the primary providers of mining labour) on the other. The former uses frequently brutal and crude political and

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[1] ASM is commonly taken as the non-industrialized, largely informal, organization of work and production by individuals and groups, and that involves manual labour and rudimentary techniques, simple and impromptu machinery.

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economic coercion to control mineral resources and mobilise mining labour (Geenen 2014; Saunders and Nyamunda 2016; Geenen and Cuvelier 2019). The latter seeks modest productive and economic objectives, such as escaping poverty, securing livelihoods, and increasing incomes (Hilson 2009; Bryceson and Jønsson 2010; Bryceson and Geenen 2016).

Even where acts of 'resistance' against the perceived 'parasitic' state and associated elites are identified amongst grassroots artisanal miners, as Mkodzongi (2020) recently claimed in his study of violent gangs in Zimbabwe's gold mining areas, their motivations and operations are underpinned, first and foremost, if not entirely, by an economic and survivalist imperative (also Chipangura 2019). In the end, the broader political and social dynamics surrounding such mining activities are interpreted through the lenses of dominance and subordination, exploitation and resistance. This emphasis on the vertical imposition of planned domination and control (along with the occasional pushback from below) is a common description of the politics of work, labour and its organisation in informal gold mining spaces. Nonetheless, it is only a preliminary description of the much more complex social constellations, relations, and power dynamics in ASM contexts.

This study investigates the sociopolitical dynamics prevailing at specific artisanal gold mining rush locations, the common workplace for informal gold production in contemporary Zimbabwe. It acknowledges, but does not focus on, the well-documented intertwining of artisanal mining with broader urbanisation and labour organisation processes, which has been effectively elucidated elsewhere (Bryceson and Geenen 2016; Mkodzongi and Spiegel 2019; Bryceson and MacKinnon 2012). However, the study concentrates on the politics, social interactions and processes, and the exercise of power that characterise such gold mining spaces. Its emphasis on the workplace relies on Paul Willis' (1977) and Michael Burawoy's (1979) perceptive studies of how working people actively participate in their subjectivation in a capitalist society. According to Willis and Burawoy, the workplace, through production relations and labour processes, establishes and sustains workers' consent to capitalism, so transforming them into political subjects. The cultural analysis of Willis (1977) depicts the subjectivation of the working class as a process of self-induction into capitalist labour relations and processes. As he says, the working class engages in "self-damnation" by accepting their subordination to the capitalist system and their exploitation. Self-damnation "is experienced, paradoxically, as true learning, affirmation, appropriation, and as a form of resistance" (ibid., 3). According to Burawoy (1979), workers' submission to a capitalist system whose interests are antagonistic to theirs is based more on ideological consent than on general economic coercion.

This study seeks to comprehend how various actors at artisanal mining gold rush sites relate and perceive "work" and "labour" in contexts where the structures and strictures of production, control and coercion are sometimes flexible, contingent, situational and frequently evasive of state and institutional confines. In this context, I also argue that the intermittent booms and busts that are typically associated with informal gold mining economies in Africa provide the fundamental understanding of Zimbabwe's economy, and this is accommodated by the indeterminate forms of social relations and political practices and processes. How then are political subjects formed under such conditions? I seek neither a comprehensive distinction between work and labour nor precise conceptual definitions, but I use work to denote the general productive efforts that are expended in giving meaning and value to society, people, things, and situations, whereas labour is rooted in capitalist relations of production and is useful for generating surplus value (Frayssé 2014, 469).

By perceiving work (and labour) as a "political problem" with "lived experience and political textures," a broader scope for artisanal mining analysis can be attained (Weeks 2011, 2). This supports the claim that informal gold mining spaces and similar phenomena are politicised, experiential, and relational. In these spaces, the state and local actors employ inventive sociopolitical and cultural discourses while continuously negotiating, creating, and modifying practices. The central argument is that the value and outcomes of such relationships and experiences are not restricted to rigid categories of human action and vertical exercise of power, nor do they continuously emanate from them. Consequently, the motivations and actions of actors are also driven by 'social value,' which is the value sought and expressed in the nurturing, expansion, and reconfiguration of specific social networks, relations, and processes, and in the creation of a social world that has meaning and significance for its actors. Such a relational orientation appears to thrive in places such as Zimbabwe, where the sceptre of unpredictability and economic uncertainty haunts even the most meticulously managed productive sites. Indeed, the relational (and interactional) in an informal gold mining workplace can "[take] on a quality and a strength such that it constitutes value in and of itself. Not requiring the presence of

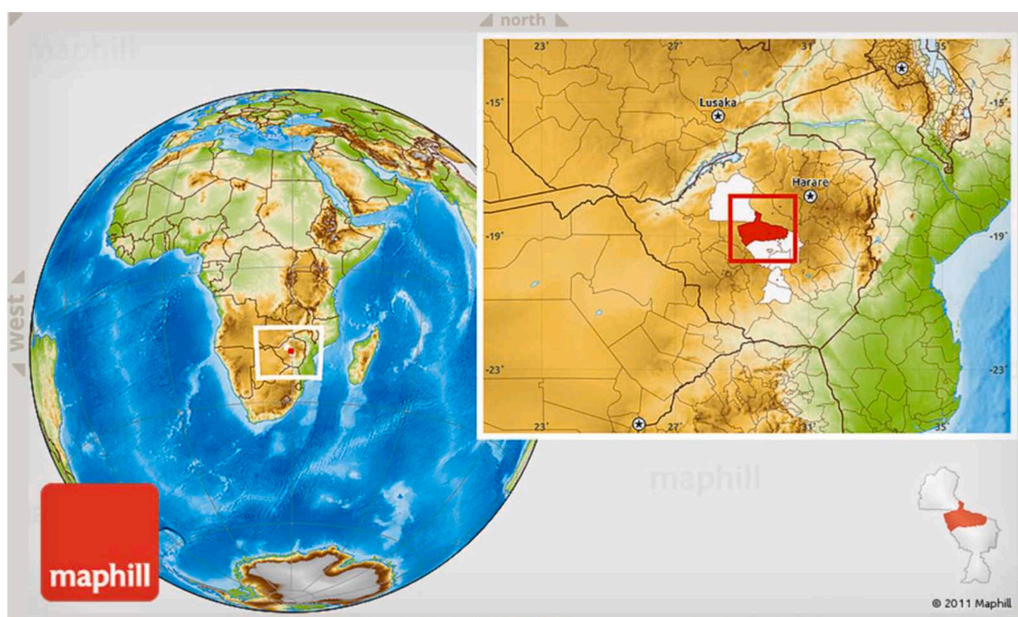

Fig. 1. Map showing the Physical location of Kwekwe District.
District (source: http://www.maphill.com/zimbabwe/midlands/kwekwe-rural/location-maps/physical-map/highlighted-parent-region/entire-country/).

material to exist, it can function outside of the determining factors of classical economics" (Obadiah 2012, as cited in Sarr 2020, 58). Not being innate, categories such as "investment," "start-up capital," " market economy", "profits," and "earnings," amongst others, are embedded in a constellation of social relations, exchanges, and arrangements (see Polanyi 2001).

Observations of social forms in the gold-rich district of Kwekwe in central Zimbabwe echo Chuck (Tilly, 1991, 60) assertion that "compliance [and the exercise of power] does not [only] consist of conscious rule following or straightforward exchange". Instead, it is a much more complex political and social space in which various actors pursue their agendas and interests while navigating obstacles posed by others, the environment, and the local history. In such a mining political space, material productive processes and practices are articulated in relation to broader quests to construct, reconfigure, and recreate political and social relations, subjectivities, identities, a social world *tout court*. The paper acknowledges the analyses on differences between artisanal mining contexts, labour arrangements, scales, diversities, and heterogeneities, which have been highlighted well by Libassi (2020), but does not seek to become entangled with them (see also Hilson and Hu 2022). Nonetheless, it will utilise the diversity and heterogeneity of artisanal mining to contest the fixed understanding of work and labour, their abstraction, and the constant dialectic positioning between the powerful actors, i.e. the state, claim owners, and mine bosses, and the less powerful, i.e. the grassroots workers.

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in and around Kwekwe District in central Zimbabwe between July and September 2021 and December 2021 and March 2022. I observed, conversed with, and participated in the activities of local artisanal and small-scale mining communities. The mundane particulars and granular specifics of the research also stem from my personal social embeddedness in that society. Nonetheless, I approached and presented the data with as much self-reflection as a 'native' ethnographer could muster. In addition to interviews with grassroots miners, politicians, and relevant district authorities, and a review of academic and non-academic literature, the study focuses on observations, insights from my participation, informal conversations, and other personal experiences.

2. The place and ethnographic context

Kwekwe district serves as the ethnographic context for my analysis of the political anatomy of a gold rush. This mineral-rich region is situated in the geographic centre of Zimbabwe, approximately 210 km southwest of the capital, Harare. The combined rural and urban population is slightly more than 130.000 individuals.[2] Observations based on empirical evidence indicate a high degree of mobility between rural and urban areas and other regions outside the district; consequently, demographic statistics cannot be asserted with absolute certainty.[3]

Numerous researchers have theorised that the significant increase in informal activities, and ASM in particular, since the late 1990s can be attributed to the country's long-term socioeconomic crises, which pushed many people into informal economic activities where gold mining became an important source of new income and a means of subsistence and livelihoods (Maponga and Clay Ngorima, 2003). After the difficult 1990s, which were characterised by the government's austerity politics - including massive job cuts and unfavourable policies for the majority of Zimbabweans (Mlambo and Alois, 1997) - an impromptu land reform programme implemented at the beginning of the 2000s dealt an additional blow to an already ailing economy. It undermined the nation's agricultural base by replacing white-owned large-scale commercial farms with thousands of black, indigenous small-holder farmers. The adverse ripple effects spread from agriculture to other sectors of the economy, such as the formal mining and manufacturing sectors, which had dominated the economic landscape of the Kwekwe district since the late colonial period of the 1960s and 1970s.

A few formal large corporations dominated Zimbabwe's mining industry for much of the colonial and post-independent periods until the 1990s. In the 1980s Bradbury and Worby (1985) discovered that foreign owned transnational corporations (mostly British, US American, and South African) accounted for between 73% and 95% of the total output of the industry. The most important of these corporations was the Anglo-American Corporation, which controlled 25% of the total output (Chachage et al., 1993). Kwekwe district, specifically, had hosted many large-scale mines such as Gaika, Rennie Taylor, Sherwood Starr, Indarama, Riverlea, Bell-Riverlea, Venice, Jojo, BD, Chaka, and Tiger Reef mines amongst many others. It was also home to downstream industries amongst them Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (Ziscosteel), Zimbabwe Mining and Smelting Company (Zimasco) and Lancashire Steel (steel and wire making), Sable Chemical Industries, Dyno Nobel (explosives manufacturing), National Railways of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe United Passengers Company, the National Breweries-Kwekwe Maltings, amongst others.

From the colonial and post-independence eras until the 1990s, a few formal large corporations dominated the mining industry in Zimbabwe. In the 1980s, Bradbury and Worby (1985) found that foreign-owned transnational corporations (primarily British, US-American, and South African) accounted for between 73% and 95% of the industry's output. The most significant of these corporations was the Anglo-American Corporation, which controlled 25% of total production (Chachage et al., 1993). Kwekwe district in particular was home to numerous large-scale mines, including Gaika, Rennie Taylor, Sherwood Starr, Indarama, Riverlea, Bell-Riverlea, Venice, Jojo, BD, Chaka, and Tiger Reef, amongst others. It was also home to numerous downstream industries, including Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (Ziscosteel), Zimbabwe Mining and Smelting Company (Zimasco), and Lancashire Steel (steel and wire manufacturing), Sable Chemical Industries, and Dyno Nobel (explosives manufacturing), amongst others.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the proportion of people who earned their living through informal economic activities increased to 95% as a result of crises that displaced formal economic operations (The New York Times 2017). Jeremy Jones (2010) writes that the hardening of reality and the persistence of the crises resulted in "the progressive encroachment of economic [and sociopolitical] styles and tactics formerly relegated to the urban social margins," which he refers to as "*kiya-kiya* logic" to denote the non-linear, unpredictable, and contingent search for opportunities. Jones (ibid., 287) describes *kiya* as a "generalized culture of evasion: evasion of social institutions like the state, the bureaucracy, and the law; and evasion of cultural norms and hierarchies. [...] *kukiya-kiya* is all about a 'zigzag' search for opportunity in the hardened face of reality". Under such informal and non-straightforward conditions, gold extraction in Kwekwe district became an irresistible draw for tens of thousands of people who lacked access to other opportunities that could sustain their lives. Currently, it is estimated that in Zimbabwe, half a million people are directly involved in ASM activities, and an additional three million could be dependents (Hilson and Gavin, 2016; Alliance for Responsible Mining, and PACT 2018).

In the Kwekwe district, artisanal mining has reconfigured social, economic, and political relations, practices, and procedures. This

[2] https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/zimbabwe-population

[3] Indeed, in common colloquial claims, the rural can 'arrive' into the urban areas (as locals in the city often comment at the sight of donkey-drawn carts carrying goods and people from surrounding rural areas), or the city 'travels' to the rural in variously purposed mobilities which head in the opposite direction. James Ferguson (1992, 90), provides an important critique on how conditions of "rurality" and "urbanity" in southern Africa are "rarely experienced as absolute, unambivalent, final" but "necessarily conditioned both by the politico-symbolic demands the urban present and, at the same time, by the political and economic character of the social relations linking the country".

paper's analysis of the politics of a gold rush is one way to demonstrate this. While many 'frenzied' gold rushes have occurred (and continue to occur) simultaneously and at different times throughout Zimbabwe, Kwekwe is an interesting case because it was one of the first places in the country to experience extensive artisanal mining at the turn of the century. Former industrial mines, gold-rich reefs, rivers, and streams provided an ideal setting for such mining activities. More than anywhere else in the country, the influence of an artisanal and small-scale gold mining economy became immediately perceptible in politics (including public administration and authority), popular culture, and social imagination, and in fact in the everyday sociopolitical spaces.

The paper is based on the gold mining rush at Chakawa and kwaMzila farms, two family farms located approximately 30 km west of the city of Kwekwe. Between June and October 2021, and to a lesser extent in January and February 2022, thousands of people from across the country flocked to these locations. The two farms are privately owned (freehold tenure), but are surrounded by hundreds of smaller farms in the Grasslands resettlement area, a former white-owned, large-scale commercial farm. In addition, they border numerous old, colonial era small-scale mining operations, including Unit and Collision mines, as well as dozens of placer posts on unworked claims. The haphazardly implemented resettlement programme with its contested, unclear, and ambiguous tenure regimes and boundaries, primarily due to the delays in awarding leases, has negatively impacted the farms via frequent counter encroachments and land access claims, even from nearby communal areas who are under communal tenure (customary authority).[4] Neighbours from the resettlement area, private farms, communal areas, and mines encroach on one another's land in search of pastures, water, firewood, and other forest resources, and, in recent years, gold deposits. As such, the farms are located on this more-or-less chaotic but rich agricultural and mining region, which stretches west from Kwekwe city for approximately 90 or so kilometres until it reaches the rural (communal) areas of Silobela and Zhombe. Therefore, the mining rushes as both physical sites and sociopolitical spaces are not a bounded phenomenon; there were connections, albeit irregular, with other spaces and other occurrences beyond Kwekwe and in the country's broader political economy. As 'new gold discoveries' in formerly agricultural areas, the Chakawa and Mzila cases provide an appropriate entry to the discussion of the gold rush phenomenon. Unlike permanent and established mining sites, the Chakawa and Mzila rush exhibit the uncertainties and ambiguities (including the high momentum, intensity, and brutality of activities) that constitute the analytical core of this paper.

3. Profiling a gold rush

Money (gold ore) is said to have "exploded!" in a gold rush ("*mari yakaputika*" or "*mari yakadhuuka*" in Zimbabwe's chiShona language). The words describe a metaphorical explosion, but their literal aftermath is a picture of scarred landscapes and fragmented social and economic relations, practices, and experiences. Initially, the rushes at Chakawa and Mzila farms unfolded similarly to other well-known stories from other mining rushes across Africa (Werthmann 2000; De Boeck 2001; Werthmann and Grätz, 2012; Walsh 2012). During conversations I had with participants in the Kwekwe gold rush, I was told that it began with artisanal miners who had wandered away from the nearby Collision mine and stumbled upon rich gold samples. In April 2022, in a separate gold rush near the city of Kwekwe, it was reported that a schoolboy "accidentally" discovered a gold-filled clay pot in a cave, drawing thousands of people to the site. As Van Bockstael (2019, 905) has observed in other African contexts, the widespread availability of fast mobile technologies such as cell phones and the internet has increased the speed and intensity with which information spreads and the pace of mining activities. In Zimbabwe, one can also find inexpensive, primarily pre-owned ex-Japanese automobiles that make actors extremely mobile. Regardless of the veracity of such tales, they typically border on the fantastical and conceal the painstaking efforts, trial and error, and uncertainty involved in searching for gold in Zimbabwe's difficult informal economic environment. As soon as word of the discoveries spread, a large number of people, primarily young men in independent and loosely organised work gangs, arrived. There were groups as small as three people and as large as twenty or more. Women also joined, primarily to perform less lucrative gender-based roles, such as scraping and carrying away debris, a task known as "*kusketa marabhuru*" (fossicking through rubbles), or mixing ground ore with mercury to recover gold amalgam, "*kuserengeta*".

The metaphor of "explosion" accurately depicts the unexpectedness of most gold rushes to the average person, as well as the seemingly uncoordinated, opportunistic, and hurried diggings by hundreds of individuals and collectives, many of whom used simple manual tools (hoes, picks, chisels, shovels, etc.) and were later joined by larger earthmoving machines (dozers and excavators) as better resourced actors moved in. Other individuals, predominantly women, set up stalls to sell food, alcohol, drugs, clothing, torches, and other items to the labouring miners. Truck owners congregated and offered their vehicles to transport the ore to the mills. Others could be seen with idle hands, loitering, conversing, imbibing alcoholic beverages, scouting for robbery opportunities, occupying specific positions, and pursuing unclear missions.

Gold rush actors occupy a variety of positions and perform a variety of roles and responsibilities, ranging from the most carefully planned to the most opportunistic and impromptu. They are, for instance, those whose roles in patronage relations straddle the powerful political and business elites on the one hand and the toiling masses below or parallel to them on the other. For example, those labelled as "sponsors" (often well-resourced individuals who finance the activities of work gangs) typically play the role of broker, but I should quickly note that the relationships they broker are not unidirectional or causal, but rather frequently imply each other. During a gold rush, the position of sponsors and other actors is also not stringent. Different individuals, at different times or at the same time, can serve as patrons, supervisors, brokers, and even labourers. The sponsor's role as broker is not limited to serving as an intermediary between a defined network of actors; it can also be an integral part of the formation of the collectives it mediates. Therefore, brokers do not only operate at the edges of such collectives or act as their nodes; they also move from one node to the next as opportunities arise.

The grassroots workers organise into groups known as "*masindalo*" ("syndicates") or "*ngoro*" (literally a scotch cart, denoting a gang working toward a similar objective) (see also Mawowa 2013). While *masindalo*s are typically associated with working in mining spaces, ngoros have been linked to a variety of other activities, including criminality, political hooliganism, vigilantism, and other forms of violence in and around mining spaces. Numerous *ngoro* groups in and around Kwekwe, such as the infamous Maketo Brothers, frequent gold-rich mining regions in search of lucrative opportunities.[5] When there is a lucrative gold rush, the "brothers" run protection syndicates, charge "protection fees" to successful miners, and, amongst other activities, provide foot soldiers for the political campaigns of gold

[4] The post-2000 Zimbabwe land reform programme created hundreds of small-holder farms from the former large-scale commercial farms around Kwekwe, such as the former Kwekwe Group of farms that was owned by white commercial farmers. For a substantial discussion on the ambiguities of post-2000 land tenure in Zimbabwe, see Maguranyanga and Moyo (2006).

[5] https://www.herald.co.zw/190-illegal-miners-jailed-as-arrests-top-1-500/

entrepreneurs-cum-politicians.[6]

In general, however, these collectives have constantly shifting hierarchies and alliances that determine work arrangements, i.e., positions, tasks, and uses of space and time. Roles and responsibilities may be inverted or expanded based on arising circumstances and opportunities, so as to accommodate a particular situation. A person who was formerly engaged in actively excavating gold ore from pits can easily transition to other pursuits. This makes the gold rush a hive of interconnected but difficult to define activities. For instance, the roles of individuals designated as "*mbimbo*" (strong group leaders akin to "bouncers") and "*zvipamuzi*"/ "*madhidhirika*" (low ranking "labourers) are never set in stone; they change based on the context.[7] Mbimbo Bhule, one of the leading mbimbos of the numerous work gangs I observed, described how he rose from being a labourer when he joined artisanal mining fifteen years ago to becoming a feared and well-respected work gang leader. It was a rise marked by setbacks, good fortune, deception, opportunism, and at times, privilege. During the gold rush, he continued to wear other hats in the gold rush arena, which meant he could easily return to the role of sponsor, security around the workplace, go underground if there were tasks that required a great deal of strength, or engage in intermediary political negotiations with the police, the ruling party, and other actors in matters pertaining to their work.

Important observations on more or less comparable artisanal mining contexts frequently emphasise the significance of hierarchies and other clearly defined divisions of labour and work. In Zimbabwe, additional emphasis is typically placed on kinship and other affective ties as determining factors in choosing artisanal miners' groups, connections, and work organisation (Mkodzongi and Spiegel 2019). In a number of studies, the transition from the frenetic gold rush phase to more established extraction involves artisanal miners settling into specific and ideal-typical labour roles, tasks, and even a career path (Bryceson and Jønsson 2010; Bryceson and Geenen 2016). However, such representations of artisanal mining work and labour as seamless typologies speak more to their analytical abstraction than to the social reality. In contrast, I argue that the division of labour, tasks, and roles assumed by various actors should be viewed as fluid, adaptive, negotiated and contested in accordance with the shifting social dynamics and local understandings and resignification of work itself.

4. The understandings and meaning of work in a gold rush

Work, or more precisely, the effort expended by individuals during a gold rush, is not a homogeneous set of actions or statuses. Rather, work is termed and perceived in accordance with the actors' intentions, conditions, and anticipated outcomes. Claude Lévi-Strauss 1996 coined the term "*bricolage*" to describe the creative assemblage of disparate repertoires and experiences (1966, 24). During the Kwekwe gold rushes, I observed a work environment resembling a *bricolage*. In Zimbabwe, the noun "basa"/ "*umsebenzi*" ('job'/ 'task'/ 'work') and the verbs "*kushanda*" or "*kusevenza*"/ "*ukusebenza*" ("to exert effort") are the most common vernacular terms for describing how people exert themselves to earn a living or achieve the desired result. The terms refer to one's efforts to create value in things, people, and situations, which are typically sanctioned by societal norms and expressed with moral overtones. With the rise of informality in the economy and society as a whole, new creative understandings and (re)significations have emerged in addition to these long-standing notions of work. The term "*kukiya-kiya*" can also be applied to informal activities at gold rushes, as described by Jeremy Jones (2010, 285–99), and it emphasises multiple forms of shifting and unpredictable "making do" in a society in crisis. Underlying *kiya-kiya* logic are creativity, spontaneity, luck, privilege, serendipity, opportunism (and everything else sporadic) that complements or subverts predetermined plans and accepted norms. Critical to Jones' analysis is "the emergence of a generalized culture of evasion: evasion of social institutions like the state, the bureaucracy, and the law; and evasion of cultural norms and hierarchies" (2010, 287).

This reasoning applies to gold rushes and other informal economic endeavours in general. During my field research, individuals employed the more pointed term "*ngwavha-ngwavha*," a portmanteau closely related to *kiya-kiya* that adds ambivalence towards morality and legality or the legitimacy of the actions. *Ngwavha-ngwavha* is a combination of the words "cleverness" ("*ngwa-ra*") and "theft/trickery/dishonesty" ("*humba-vha*"). The *ngwavha-ngwavha* endeavours and other activities frequently go hand-in-hand with "*kuhardira*" (from English "getting hardened") which means hardened perseverance. According to Ndlovini, a 43-year-old miner at the Chakawa rush site, *ngwavha-ngwavha* is,

> "like work, but it doesn't exactly look or feel like the job because I'm working for myself and my family. I don't wait until month end like I used to do working for the municipality in town. I can see anything else that gives me money here and do it. It is something that my children see, and they acknowledge the long way I'm going for them to survive. Yesterday the gangs [*mbimbos*] pushed us out [from the pits], but we sell cigarettes and eggs and continue to live. I can persevere [*kuhardira*] for some months and win a rich [gold ore] sample that will make me leave the pits, but I can also be here for as long as I have to. That is *kungwavha-ngwavha*. I do everything, anywhere, at any time" (Interview with Ndlovini 09/01/22).

This conception of work fits situations of uncertainty and general life difficulties, in which social and economic outcomes of the present and even the immediate future are uncertain. There is uncertainty in actual production during a gold rush, primarily due to a lack of organisational, technical, and other resources. The longevity, profitability, and even ore grade quality of a gold rush cannot be determined with certainty. This limbo extends to the social milieu, where the risk of personal safety, injuries and illness, robberies, theft, and eviction by violent gangs is common, and where the state always seeks its stake. People confessed to me that the "gold belt could cut [stop] at any time" ("*bhandi rinogona kungo-cutter*") or displacement and dispossession by state security apparatus and robbers ("*kuntsariwa*", to be criminally displaced/ dispossessed). This ephemerality is reflected in the arrangement of space and the organisation of work and time; space and time thus combine various functions, roles, and tasks, including production, recreation, and religion/spirituality.

5. The social-magical connections of work

Informal gold mining in uncertain economic conditions, such as Zimbabwe, is susceptible to ritualistic, symbolic, and not infrequently occult idioms due to the fact that it is a primary source of income and an exercise in social world-making for its actors, but its processes and outcomes are largely mysterious. Work alone, the simple exertion of one's energies toward production, is insufficient to guarantee success; it also requires creativity from the preternatural and supernatural. Spiritual, ritual, and symbolic invocations are also components of the *ngwavha-ngwavha* logic, the widespread work logic. A person or mining site is said to have been "worked on" ("*kushandirwa*") when it undergoes ritual and divinational processes that connect the physical with the

[6] Note that the "brotherhood" of the Maketos extends beyond consanguineal kinship ties, to include friends or people who have known each other through work ties, political ties and other social ties (Mkodzongi and Spiegel 2019, see; Chipangura 2019).

[7] Some writings on Zimbabwe translate "*zvipamuzi*" as "slaves" (e.g., Mawowa 2013). I deliberately avoided such translation for fear of provoking chattel slavery connotations, or the workers' complete alienation from the control of their lives and labour, which, as far as I know, does not exist in Zimbabwe. However, the work relationships involve extreme exploitation of those subordinated in unequal power and labour relations. Use of the term slavery in African settings requires a much deeper discussion into the subject as the one provided by Miers and Kopytoff (1977).

spiritual, magical and symbolic. For some individuals with whom I have spoken, tangible, material production efforts can supplement or even be epiphenomenal to the social, moral, ritual, magical and symbolic. According to them, this is sufficient justification for consulting spirit mediums ("*n'anga*"), prophets ("*maporofita*"), and other occult practitioners before entering the goldfields. It is believed that these practitioners of rituals can "see" (what is known as "*kuyereswa*" [literally "weighing"]). The *kuyereswa* ritual and divination procedure "weighs" everything that lies ahead of the production process and life's trajectories, such as the probability of success, failure, risks, and other forecasts. It is common for individuals and work gangs to consult a ritual practitioner or bring them along to the gold fields, sometimes to direct the extraction itself, after being informed by means of "dreams" or "visions" of the location of valuable ore and how work should be carried out. A variety of ritual "subjects" could also be possessed by actors, including trinkets, stones, and (sacred) water bottles, to name a few.[8]

In February 2022, at a gold rush site not far from Chakawa's farm, a popular self-proclaimed prophet named Madzibaba Bobby (Father Bobby) agreed with the claim owner and others present to divide the working shifts interchangeably into "normal shifts" which were worked by the claim owner's groups and everyone else, and "holy spirit shifts" (called "*shift yemweyamtsvene*") which were worked by the prophet and his followers. As the prophet had explained to them, the sporadic occurrence of gold deposits since the rushes of 2021 and during many previous rushes was a result of the failure to offer sacrifices to God and the spirits of the land. Most people working there agreed to this arrangement, tacitly at least. During the most recent gold rush, the prophet played a prominent role in the work arrangement, providing access to the gold-bearing mines, privileging some and excluding others, and organising production itself. For his "holy spirit shifts," Madzibaba Bobby brought family members, relatives, and other dependents as labourers. In addition to the production arrangements, Madzibaba Bobby's case and others like him demonstrate, as analysed by Werthmann (2003) in Burkina Faso, how individuals may find the ambiguities of artisanal mining spaces fertile for the accumulation of power and wealth through the use of myths, symbols, and prestige. By circumventing formal and 'rational' state regulations, they establish systems of personal power and authority comparable to the "Big man" of Melanesia studied by Sahlins (ibid. 2003, 95).

Allegations of dabbling in the supernatural can also be viewed negatively, at best as immoral. Nevertheless, their effects cannot be overlooked in the arrangement of gold production sites, anticipated yields, and reputations of individuals and groups. People may believe that successful people are practitioners of magic (or witchcraft) or clients of powerful spiritual and ritual practitioners, a practise known as "*kuromba*," and therefore fear and favour them when it comes to accessing resources and coordinating work. *Kuromba* may involve acquiring charms and magic spells from practitioners of spiritual and traditional rituals. It was explained to me that in order to obtain the powers, luck, and wealth associated with *kuromba*, certain sacrifices, such as the blood of a close relative or loved one, are necessary. In other instances, it may be the blood of coworkers so that the sacrifice fits the work environment. Because the diviners may instruct the recipient of *kuromba* to take all risks and opportunities like a bull by the horns (in the same way that life was sacrificed), work is viewed as an endeavour in which great risks are taken regardless of whether the social, organisational, or technical environment permits it.

Take another instance where a work gang, I was told, was instructed to observe a cockerel pick up grains from the diviner's open palm, and their chances of success at the goldfields were said to be equivalent to the number of grains picked. While I was not a direct witness to such divinations, I encountered many people whose reputation, luck and audacity at the mining site were attributed to, and speak of their preoccupation with the ritual and spiritual. Frantic efforts and risks are taken before the number of grains runs out! Failure, too, may be blamed on a spiritual realm gone awry. Poor-quality gold ore, constantly malfunctioning machines, accidents, displacement/ dispossession of shafts, pits and other resources, robberies and many other misfortunes may be perceived as misalignment between the production process on the one hand and the social, moral and spiritual on the other. There is something in the gold rushes that can be told here about the articulation of production with "occult economies" as analysed by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 297), where "magical means" can be deployed for material ends. At a social-psychological level, then, beliefs in the mysterious and mythical are entrenched in gold rush settings and the understanding of what work is and what it achieves; such orientations, it seems, assuage anxieties or affirm certain decisions, positions, tasks and roles where people face uncertainties of production and of the future itself.

I was told of another instance in which a work crew was instructed to watch a rooster pick up grains from a diviner's open palm, and their chances of success on the goldfields were said to be proportional to the number of grains picked. While I was not a direct witness to such divinations, I encountered many individuals whose reputation, good fortune, and audacity at the mine site were attributed to their ritual and spiritual preoccupation. Before the number of grains runs out, frantic efforts and risks are taken! Even failure can be attributed to a spiritual realm gone awry. Poor-quality gold ore, constantly malfunctioning machines, accidents, displacement/dispossession of shafts, pits, and other resources, robberies, and numerous other misfortunes may be interpreted as a misalignment between the production process and the social, moral, and spiritual. The gold rushes reveal something about the articulation of production with "occult economies," as analysed by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999, 297), where "magical means" can be deployed to achieve material ends. On a social-psychological level, then, beliefs in the mysterious and mythical are ingrained in gold rush settings and the understanding of what work is and what it accomplishes; such orientations, it would appear, assuage anxieties or affirm certain decisions, positions, tasks, and roles where individuals face production and future uncertainty.

Work during a gold rush encompasses the entire social world, not just the productive aspects, and participants tend to focus their efforts on the tasks at hand and the prevailing social reality. While production objectives, time, technical discipline, and efficiencies remain essential, they frequently become an epiphenomenon or concurrent aspect of this social reality. This observation is partially explained by (Thompson, 1967, 60) analysis of "task orientation," in which he suggests that such labour has,

> "a sense in which it is more humanly comprehensible than timed labour. The peasant or labourer appears to attend upon what is an observed necessity. Second, a community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between "work" and "life". Social intercourse and labour are intermingled - the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task - and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and "passing the time of day" (ibid.)

Understanding the activities and difficulties of the informal gold mining rush requires a comprehensive grasp of this social world and social reality. Work itself becomes a creative but undefinable and unpredictable process in which products (such as gold), their meanings, values, and the social world in which they are embedded are continuously remade. Production and social sites are inextricably intertwined. The workplace is not constrained by the technical disciplines of space and time, upon which the concept of abstracted labour and work may rely. Work and social experiences during gold rushes cannot be evaluated based on the stability of tasks, division of labour, and roles, the dependability of knowledge and information, the rigidity of space, and

[8] I used 'subjects' instead of 'objects' because the stones, water, beads, etc., are not considered passive but are rather active and seen as having an agency, in and of themselves, that is critical for life and production at the gold site.

the predictability of productive and other economic outcomes.

6. Gold rush, work and political subjectivation

> "Perhaps more significantly, places of employment and spaces of work would seem to be supremely relevant to the very bread and butter of political science: as sites of decision making, they are structured by relations of power and authority; as hierarchical organizations, they raise issues of consent and obedience; as spaces of exclusion, they pose questions about membership and obligation. Although impersonal forces may compel us into work, once we enter the workplace we inevitably find ourselves enmeshed in the direct and personal relations of rulers and ruled. Indeed, the worksite is where we often experience the most immediate, unambiguous, and tangible relations of power that most of us will encounter on a daily basis."(Weeks 2011, 2)

Kathi Weeks' persuasive argument compels us to ponder how political and social relations are constructed, how power is exercised in such informal and unpredictable contexts, and, relatedly, how political subjects are fashioned. By consensus, writings on artisanal mining frequently stop at highlighting the rigid fixities of practice, social classifications, labour and social hierarchies. According to Mawowa's (2013, 930) analysis of the political economy of artisanal mining in Zimbabwe, miners are "no more than employees of a 'sponsor', [and other elite classes]". Noting that the sponsors and other elites have a "connection to the state's coercive apparatus," which "provides protection from both police harassment and rival groups," he concludes that artisanal mining is ultimately "oligopolistic, controlled by a few powerful individuals" (ibid.). Such conclusions understate the malleability of power, relationships, and processes, especially in Zimbabwe's rapidly transforming economic and social context. In a discussion of China's shifting labour migration politics, (Xiang 2012a, 47–68) demonstrates that the state frequently entangles itself in local social and political dynamics and complicates society by actively engaging in the formation of new social relations and practices. The Kwekwe case also illustrates a state (and elites) actively and creatively engaged in new, frequently contradictory local dynamics. Xiang (ibid., p. 68) concludes that in the end, the state is "able to govern without knowing all the minute details of [social] life". The local actors during a gold rush, like Nancy Peluso's (2017) "smallholders" in Indonesian agricultural practice, also fall into politicised but non-rigid categories in which they engage in various, fluid, and interchangeable labour and social practices. This is a convincing argument that inverts (Scott, 1998) conception of a hegemonic state seeking to legitimise itself through simplified and readable plans of dominance and control. In Zimbabwe, the state is involved in daily negotiations, relations, and contests, both as an institution and, more significantly, through individuals affiliated with it. In this manner, the state circumvents its own bureaucratic and institutional mechanisms in order to navigate the complexities of informality in society.

As was the case in Kwekwe, the initial gold mining rushes attracted a horde of fortune seekers, seasoned miners, and opportunists of various hues. Soon, word spread far and wide to urban Kwekwe and beyond, attracting more people, including groups of independent and itinerant workgroups similar to those I mentioned previously. On the third day after I began observing the Chakawa rush, more individuals and groups arrived, with many claiming to be under the auspices of the ruling ZANU PF party. The leaders of these groups were referred to as "*mbinga*" ("the bosses") or "*mabhuru*" ("the bulls"), who were accompanied by "*mbimbos*"/ "*mamonya*" ("bouncers"). The groups and their leaders have loose, but occasionally close, ties to the ruling party and, by extension, the state. The majority of *mbinga*s, accompanied by their groups of workers and other hangers-on, arrived in ruling party regalia, including T-shirts, baseball caps, bandanas, and other paraphernalia. In addition to official ties to state institutions, they emphasise personal relationships with individuals within such institutions. For instance, they network with relevant personnel such as the district's mine inspectors, surveyors, environmental agency employees, and police, who may ease state bureaucracy for further access to gold pits and other transactions conducted during a gold rush.

Almost always men, the *mbinga* and *mbimbo* arrived at the rush site with an air of perfomative authority. Some arrived in cars, or convoys of cars, with visibly holstered firearms and short 'chiefly' sceptres known as "*induku*"/ "*tsvimbo*," which confirmed their status and reputation as "bulls," the visible leaders in the gold rush arena. The reputation, status, and prestige of these actors are not always buttressed by their economic shrewdness, in the sense of an entrepreneurial acumen, of a Schumpeterian kind (see Schumpeter 1942), that is directed toward the accumulation of material wealth and economic growth as an end, but they also harness their actions and situation toward the widening of connections with various political actors, who include the party-state and a vast array of social, religious, and ethnic groups. In these contexts, categories such as "investment," "market," "profits," and "earnings" must be understood in relation to the specific social constellations, exchanges, and arrangements at play. Within the conditions created by such accumulation, artisanal mining actors must be adept at cultivating, modifying, and expanding the social capital and value.

During the aforementioned gold rush, the *mbinga* and their followers were accompanied by a truck of armed police officers with whom they interacted and negotiated closely, though not always amicably. In addition, they interacted with claim holders and other actors for access, privilege, and preference in the gold rush. The owners of the farm/claim had by that time extended invitations to their close relatives from far and wide, including those from South Africa and Botswana. The 'traditional' local leader, Chief Ntabeni, who asserts traditional authority over the region, also participated in the discussions and brought his own work crew.[9] The mission of the police was ostensibly to maintain order at the rush site, as is now the norm at various rush sites across the country, but they, too, wanted a piece of the gold rush. As a traditional and customary authority, the chief had the additional responsibility of resolving minor on-site disputes that could easily turn violent, as well as enforcing the ban on women entering the pits and shafts in the name of cultural and moral constraints – the entry of women into certain gold-rich places, particularly those who are experiencing their menstrual flows, is sometimes believed to cause misfortune, such as accidents or the disappearance of the gold veins (Global Press Journal, 2019). In informal gold mining settings, taboos are one of the ways in which gender roles are firmly established. Women are permitted to perform less lucrative and gender-assigned tasks, such as fossicking through debris ("*kusketa marabhuru*") or mixing ground ore with mercury, soap, opaque beer, and water to create a gold amalgam in a laborious process known as "*kuserengeta*".

When their claim becomes a gold rush site, a registered claim holder may request the presence of armed police. As previously alluded to, however, it has become common, albeit not always official, for the gold rush site to attract other state and ruling party-affiliated officials. In addition to the exchange of bribes and privileges (what is colloquially known as "*kugezana mawoko*" or "washing each other's hands"), the presence and purpose of state functionaries can be viewed as the extension of a complex web of relations in which the state is deeply involved. With this in mind, it makes sense that a convoy of three to four

[9] Chief Ntabeni's claims of authority over the region are based on the historical perception that the land was once under his ancestor's 'traditional' chieftaincy prior to colonial dispossession. In fact, communal areas bordering the privately owned farms and resettlement areas fall under the customary jurisdiction of the Ntabeni chieftainship. However, the farms in question (Chakawa and Mzila) are privately owned, and the majority of the neighbouring farms in the Grasslands area were alloted through the resettlement programme following the year 2000.

trucks, an excavator, and other mobile and mechanised equipment rolled into the Chakawa and Mzila sites and left with loads of gold ore rumoured to be destined for Vigilant Resources, a milling and processing plant in Kwekwe with well-established ties to the ruling party and the state. Many other small-scale mining entrepreneurs also demanded and negotiated access to the gold ore and offered various services, including the rental of trucks, air compressors, metal detector machines, and jackhammers.

The transactions and interactions amongst the various actors who converge at the rush site are about the productive aspects of the mining rush, but much more about the political arrangement of the space and delimiting political actions and behaviours; who is granted access, when and how, and who is denied access, also when and how. Defining the space and the political activities should be viewed as a process of (re) drawing the boundaries of Zimbabwe's local political practices and constituencies. During a meeting with artisanal miners, a ruling party official once remarked,

> "Now I want to turn to my main point. The issue is that here in Chisora area people are mining gold. What you all need to know is that the gold you mine belongs to the state. Is that clear? You can never own the rocks [the gold ore], they are not yours. Even if you have the papers [registration certificates], you have been given those papers as an agent to work on behalf of the state, that is why, sometimes, officials come asking about the whereabouts of the gold you have dug out. Still, on this issue, you can't dig out the gold that belongs to the state and fail to support the political party that runs that state, that is ZANU PF [….]. Let's agree ladies and gentlemen, that we have ZANU PF members and supporters here, if you are not, then pack your bags and go".[10]

Viewing the aforementioned political transactions and relationships as merely another instance of "patronage" politics or top-down state dominance and coercion risks overlooking the specific social constellations, relations, and exchanges in the exercise of power that shape political subjects at a gold rush site. Such power exercises emerge in a particular space, time, and social reality, requiring situational creativity, invention, and serendipity from all involved actors. The exertion of work efforts, exercise of power and social arrangements arise not only from *a priori* reference points and frameworks, but also build from, permeate, and flow within the interstices of day-to-day life dynamics.

7. Conclusion

This ethnographic study aimed to comprehend the nature of political and social relations, processes, and practices in an artisanal (and small-scale) gold mining rush in Zimbabwe. Others have discussed the differences between artisanal mining contexts, labour arrangements, scales, diversities, and heterogeneities, but I aimed to go further. I did provide an understanding of artisanal mining in the context of a specific uncertain and unpredictable political and socioeconomic reality. It was an attempt to refute the depoliticization and abstraction of artisanal mining labour and work from their social contexts.

In order to draw attention to a little-discussed subject in the study of informal economies, I started the conversation by citing the writings of Michael Burawoy (1976) and Paul Willis (1977) and the politicisation of labour in such settings. Although Burawoy and Willis concur that the ideal political subject is created in production spaces, they failed to foresee what would happen when socioeconomic and political conditions are highly informal, fluid, and unpredictable. I responded by presenting local perspectives on the informal political economy of Zimbabwe, which is quite frankly unpredictable for many of its inhabitants. Such uncertainty, according to Jones (2010), is very evasive to institutional, moral, and social structures. Work, I thus argued, is a creative guile used in specific socioeconomic and political contexts, as well as in daily particularities and fluid, intermittent, situational, and contingent spaces. But this suggests that work and labour practices cannot be strictly understood in terms of productive output, time management, earnings, and technical efficacy. Varied efforts and exertion of energies that create social value are considered under the understanding of work, and they can be traced through interactions, flows, and adaptation to the actually existing social reality at the time.

In such ambiguous conditions, the question arose as to how political subjects could be formed and power exercised. I utilised Xiang, 2012 insights regarding a state's ability to create a complex society in order to participate in local processes and practices while establishing new relationships. Using the example of Kwekwe's gold mining rushes, I sought to illustrate that power and its exercise are not abstract concepts, but rather consist of constellations of relations, processes, and exchanges that constitute a substantial social reality. Due to the prevalence of gold rushes and artisanal mining as a primary socioeconomic and political activity, it can be viewed as a site for the formation of a 'new' political subject in modern Zimbabwe. Occasionally, this reality tells a story that transcends simple dominance and subordination, as well as rigid apolitical categories of work, labour and its organisation.

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[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = 15EkNaYb9zc

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