

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Working for the stomach’: sustaining peasant mining in south-western Uganda

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Abstract

In the mountainous areas of south-western Uganda, peasant miners are characterized as people who ‘work for the stomach’ and pursue an unsustainable activity: extracting alluvial gold with artisanal technology. After days of hard work in the mines, they allegedly squander their money on alcohol and sex. A common way of disapproving of these miners’ behaviour is to compare them to lake fishers (*ababariya*). By focusing on the *ababariya* narrative as an entry point into the lifeways of miners, and the relationship between mining and fishing and agriculture, we explore how peasant miners think about a sustainable life. Our argument is that the *ababariya* can be instrumental in the reproduction and legitimization of existing social and economic inequalities. We therefore examine the contexts that frame the *ababariya* narrative and the inequalities that it legitimizes. This leads us to reflect on whether this narrative on ‘excessive behaviours’ reveals something about an alternative way of thinking about economy and social relationships based on abundance rather than scarcity.

Résumé

Dans les régions montagneuses du sud-ouest de l’Ouganda, les mineurs-paysans sont caractérisés comme des personnes qui « travaillent pour le ventre » et poursuivent une activité non viable : l’extraction d’or alluvial avec une technologie artisanale. Après plusieurs jours de dur labeur dans les mines, leur argent passerait prétendument dans l’alcool et le sexe. Une manière courante de désapprouver le comportement de ces mineurs est de les comparer à des pêcheurs de lac (*ababariya*). En se concentrant sur le narratif d’*ababariya* comme point d’entrée dans le mode de vie des mineurs, et sur la relation entre l’exploitation minière, la pêche et l’agriculture, les auteurs explorent la manière dont les mineurs-paysans envisagent une existence viable. Leur argument est que les *ababariya* peuvent jouer un rôle déterminant dans la reproduction et la légitimation des inégalités sociales et économiques existantes. Ils explorent donc les contextes qui encadrent le narratif d’*ababariya* et les

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inégalités qu'il légitimise. Cette réflexion les amènent à se demander si ce narratif sur les « comportements excessifs » est révélateur d'une autre manière de penser l'économie et les relations sociales basée sur l'abondance plutôt que sur la pénurie.

Resumo

Nas zonas montanhosas do sudoeste do Uganda, os camponeses mineiros são caracterizados como pessoas que 'trabalham para o estômago' e exercem uma atividade insustentável: a extração de ouro aluvial com tecnologia artesanal. Após dias de trabalho árduo nas minas, alegadamente esbanjam o seu dinheiro em álcool e sexo. Uma forma comum de desaprovar o comportamento destes mineiros é compará-los aos pescadores do lago (*ababariya*). Ao centrarmos-nos na narrativa dos *ababariya* como ponto de entrada para os modos de vida dos mineiros e para a relação entre a exploração mineira, a pesca e a agricultura, podemos explorar a forma como os camponeses mineiros pensam sobre uma vida sustentável. O nosso argumento é que o *ababariya* pode ser instrumental na reprodução e legitimação das desigualdades sociais e económicas existentes. Por isso, exploramos os contextos que enquadram a narrativa do *ababariya* e as desigualdades que ela legitima. Isto leva-nos a refletir se esta narrativa sobre 'comportamentos excessivos' revela algo sobre uma forma alternativa de pensar a economia e as relações sociais baseadas na abundância e não na escassez.

Introduction

Mid-January 2020. For several weeks, in a banana plantation in the village of Akashozi¹ in south-western Uganda, a group of people, mostly young men, have been digging a hole several metres deep. Nearby, others have been doing the same. The plantation is pitted with holes – some abandoned and refilled with earth and banana trunks, others being worked on. Arnold, Begumisa, Mugaba and Katungi dig with shovels and hoes; they remove the water that accumulates with plastic basins. With the same basins they transport earth to the surface. Sometimes they encounter huge boulders; using hammers, iron bars and fire, they break the boulders into rocks that can be lifted by hand. On reaching the sand-covered hard rock beneath, which is impenetrable with shovels and hoes, they remove the sand. Once they have enough sand, usually accumulated over a weekend, they wash it in a nearby creek, hoping to find a precious yellow metal: gold.

While waiting to see the results of their efforts, they chat about how they will spend the money they will receive (after subdividing it equally). Begumisa fantasizes aloud about going to town and enjoying life, like that guy did – a guy whose name no one remembers any longer, nor do they know what happened to him – who, after earning the exorbitant sum of 20 million Ugandan shillings (US\$5,250) (or was it much less?), spent it all by staying in a luxury hotel surrounded by beautiful women. Begumisa wants to invite his favourite Ugandan singer. He is willing to pay anything for a night with her. Everyone laughs; someone teases him by reminding him what to do with his shovel. If they are lucky, Arnold, Begumisa, Mugaba, Katungi and the others will be able to enjoy soda or beer in the village, congratulating themselves that no one was hurt by a rock- or landslide.

¹ Pseudonyms are used for the names of the villages and people.

Rose, another peasant miner, works with her husband on a piece of land on the edge of a protected environmental area, a wetland. She is twenty-three years old and has a baby girl. Before getting married, she studied nursing and worked in a pharmacy in the city. However, the owner did not pay her regularly, so she decided to return to Buhweju district. She and her husband found a good gold vein on Rose's mother's land. As a result, they bought a motorcycle that her husband now uses as a moto-taxi. She would like to save enough money to open a small pharmacy in the village.

Many different dreams entwine under the shade of Akashozi's banana trees. Some peasant miners hope the gold will last a long time; others do not consider the issue. Those with experience know that gold can be 'fast money' – a quicker way of getting cash than growing crops (such as bananas, coffee and tea). However, fast money cannot guarantee security: an economically productive gold deposit can become unproductive after only a few months of intense work.

Artisanal gold mining seems far removed from the economic growth envisioned by President Yoweri Museveni, who has led Uganda as the head of his party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), since 1986. After years of corrupt regimes, brutal violence and a civil war that severely damaged the country's economic productivity, Museveni has repeatedly expressed his desire to transform Uganda into a modern economy that defends the private sector and will end the hardship of peasant lives. In his vision, 'wealth creation' is at the core of social and economic transformation. In fact, 'economic growth [has] become a source of legitimacy for the NRM's monopoly of power' (Tripp 2010: 35). Accordingly, Ugandan society is broadly divided between 'wealth creators' and those 'working only for the stomach', for subsistence (*bakolera kidda kyoonga*), to use Museveni's words.² Peasant miners are not among the 'wealth creators' listed in the president's most recent speeches, which include, for example, cattle keepers, crop farmers, carpenters and clay workers.³ Considering the uncertain incomes and working conditions of peasant miners, one can only draw the conclusion that they belong to the category of those 'working for the stomach'.

In Akashozi, as elsewhere in the region, people – especially those who are not miners themselves – characterize peasant miners who 'work for the stomach' as squandering their money on alcohol and sex; in so doing, they explain their poverty. People who do not 'create' wealth – either because they do not accumulate it or because they actively 'destroy' it – are compared to lake fishers (*ababariya*),⁴ or, more pertinently, to what fishers are associated with in the local imaginary.

People say that *ababariya* go to bars when they receive their pay and 'do not get out until their pockets are empty'. An apt Runyankole expression, '*Okurya mununga kno omubariya*', literally means 'eating too much, like a fisherman'. Near Akashozi, there is a tiny bar visited by farmers and peasant miners whose name is 'eat as you work' (*koranorya*), an ideal name to attract people prone to 'excessive behaviour'.

² Museveni's speech to the members of the Central Executive Committee, 9 August 2020. Available at <<http://statehouse.go.ug/sites/default/files/files/presidential-statements/speech-members-cec-9-august-2020long.pdf>>, accessed 23 October 2021.

³ Museveni comes from a family of Ankole cattle keepers and owns a large ranch in Kisozi, south-western Uganda (Kivengere 1999).

⁴ On boats, the fishers are almost exclusively men. Women are also involved in the fishing industry, but they work on shore.

Often depicted as ignorant and hedonistic, quarrelsome and sinful, miners and fishers represent prototypical examples of people living irresponsibly and carrying out unsustainable activities. In this sense, these characterizations provide an insight into issues of sustainability refracted through the lens of people's understandings. A focus on the *ababariya* narrative as an entry point into the lifeways of miners, and the relationship between mining and fishing and agriculture, enables us to explore how peasant miners think about a sustainable living. We contrast their views with the dominant narrative on 'wealth creation' promoted by the government to show how the *ababariya* narrative speaks of an incoherent, moral imaginary rather than a consistent reality. Indeed, as a narrative based on stereotypes, it works precisely because it relies on 'relative truths': it selects partial or marginal elements of a more complex reality, presenting them as a generalizable description of this same reality (Olivier de Sardan 2005; see also D'Angelo 2019). Thus, in the case of gold miners, occasional instances of 'excessive behaviour' stand for the common miners' lifeways, a status quo that is taken for granted.

Narratives such as the one about the *ababariya* can be instrumental to the reproduction and legitimization of existing social and economic inequalities. Taking seriously 'relative truths' means examining both the *partiality* of their 'truth' and also the little *truth* (however distorted) they contain. In other words, we explore the reasons and context behind the *ababariya* narrative and the inequalities that it legitimizes. This, in turn, leads us to reflect on whether the alleged miners' 'excessive behaviour' tells us something about a way of thinking about a sustainable life.

Anthropologists have examined narratives on artisanal mining and 'excessive behaviour' or consumption elsewhere in Africa (De Boeck 1998; Walsh 2003; Werthmann 2008) and 'binge economies' more widely (e.g. Day *et al.* 1999; Wilk 2014). Here, we consider Buhweju inhabitants' narratives on *ababariya* from a particular angle: namely, through the lens of debates about sustainability. We have two reasons to do so. First, the vocabulary of sustainability contributes to guiding the Ugandan government's rhetoric and decision making. This has promoted initiatives for sustainability and environmental protection, which also concern miners and fishers. Indeed, it is (also) in the name of environmental sustainability that, as we will see below, the military police have a record of keeping peasant miners away from mines and seizing fishing boats. Second, a contribution that anthropology makes to debates on sustainability comes from the possibility of showing 'the viability of alternative life-ways and values' (Moore 2017: 67; see also Fisher *et al.* 2023). Questioning whether another (more sustainable) world is possible has huge implications. This is especially the case if ideas come from lifeways and knowledge either actively suppressed or inadvertently pushed to the margins of dominant lifeways, such as those of Ugandan peasant miners. These ideas have the potential to 'contribute to the unlocking of our collective imagination, an imagination we are going to need quite dearly in the rapidly unfolding future' (Livingston 2019: 9), to address economy and ecology through different assumptions. That economy is a management of scarcity to be countered with economic growth is one such assumption, an entrenched belief (see *ibid.*) that an anthropology of sustainability helps to dismantle.

It is in light of these reflections that we understand *ababariya* as a stereotype that is instrumental in stigmatizing people who are usually young, male and uneducated, although they can also include women, especially peasant miners' wives and widows,

who have limited access to land and impeded social mobility, and whose main crime is to be poor and vulnerable. We see relevance in focusing on sustainability and social dynamics in gold mining in Uganda because this context provides the potential to reflect on how we can pluralize knowledge and perspectives beyond an emphasis on technological solutions and unquestioning reproduction of dominant economic models. This feeds into debates that seek to reframe artisanal and small-scale mining by placing it within broader debates on resource politics. This is reflected, for instance, in Lahiri-Dutt's figure of the 'extractive-peasant' (2018) and in how Fisher *et al.* (2023) deploy the notion of 'gold lifeways'. We believe that the context we examine here shows how sustainability, which tends to be considered more in environmental terms, cannot be addressed without considering 'the co-evolving fates of sustainability and equity' (Leach *et al.* 2018: 2). From this, we draw a broader conclusion: the equitable transformation of the relations of domination that produce or maintain inequalities is a necessary step forwards for a sustainable future.

Our analysis draws from a combination of interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observations conducted between 2018 and 2022 in Buhweju district in south-western Uganda. With a primary ethnographic focus on peasant miners, we present two dimensions: the *ababariya* narrative as it emerges in local discourse, particularly among privileged people; and, in contrast, the common practices of miners in their daily routines.⁵

We begin by considering debates about neoliberalism and semi-authoritarian regimes in Uganda (Tripp 2010), linking this to a discussion of gold mining. We then reflect on how the politics of 'illegalization' of informal economies extend into the livelihoods of fishers. We go on to explore how agriculture forms a cornerstone of livelihoods in south-western Uganda, and therefore how it is central to understanding the positioning of gold mining within a neoliberal economy, before concluding our discussion.

Situating gold mining within a semi-authoritarian economy

Since 1986, when President Museveni came to power, Uganda has been at the centre of profound economic and social changes. Emerging from civil war, many development experts read Uganda's economic transformation in the 1990s and 2000s as a sign of the success of neoliberal economic policies. Indeed, the government willingly accepted structural adjustment policies promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions as a model to be imitated elsewhere (Wiegatz 2010). These neoliberal reforms were not received passively but were contested by different social groups, activating a repertoire of values, principles and practices based on love, gifts and reciprocity that contrasted with these reforms but which were well rooted in local cultural and regional history (e.g. Scherz 2014). From this perspective, the notion of

⁵ In November 2018, we visited sites and held initial discussions with miners and district officials. In July 2019, we conducted ten interviews with farmers and miners; and between January and March 2020, we held sixty-four interviews with miners, village inhabitants and local officials. In February 2020, we also held participatory focus group discussions on mining and livelihood issues with thirty-three men and thirty-three women. Between January and February 2022, we conducted a further fifteen interviews. Interviews were linked to ethnographic observations within the villages and around mine sites and farms, as recorded in a field diary.

moral economy has been used to understand the responses of Ugandan society to the dynamics of change, and to highlight the coexistence of different (conflicting and therefore changing) moral orders (Wiegratz 2010; Monteith and Camfield 2021).

Over the years, Uganda has turned into a modern authoritarian (Tapscott 2021) or hybrid regime (Tripp 2010), one that relies on the military to control social, economic and political life (Ashaba 2020; Khisa 2020). Gold mining and fishing are no exception, given how these activities are at the centre of national and transnational economic interests. Since 2016, gold has become a valuable export commodity, surpassing coffee. The government has encouraged the establishment of gold refineries to add value to extracted minerals and has imposed heavy levies on unrefined exported gold. According to Odyek (2022), Museveni considers the export of unprocessed minerals 'a cause of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa'. Ugandan refineries, however, produce much more gold than is mined in the country. Much of this gold comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but also from Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and it is exported to the United Arab Emirates (Fisher *et al.* 2020).

To make its refineries attractive, and to attract foreign investors, Uganda offers advantageous fiscal conditions, but it also needs to demonstrate its ability to tackle illegal gold mining and trading and to preserve its mineral deposits for large-scale mining. Routes chosen by illegal gold dealers include Lake Edward and Lake Albert, which border DRC (Hunter *et al.* 2021) and are often portrayed as 'unruly' spaces (Marijnen 2022). This justifies control by police or army units (e.g. Ashaba 2020), as also happens in the name of conservation and environmental sustainability elsewhere (cf. Ramutsindela *et al.* 2022). Indeed, in 1995, through the Ministry of Water and Environment, the government created the National Environment Management Authority of Uganda to monitor and assess activities that protect the environment. In 2011, the Environmental Protection Police Unit (EPPU) was created to enforce environmental laws and regulations. However, the creation of the unit was not considered sufficient to address illegal mining and environmentally harmful extraction methods. Therefore, the president intervened to create a specific police unit, the Police Minerals Protection Unit (PMPU), which was established in September 2017.

The same year, Museveni ordered the eviction of artisanal miners from the country's goldmines to facilitate the operation of large (mainly foreign) investors. Buhweju's goldmines were among the first areas targeted under the PMPU's intervention (UPF 2018). In 2019, a number of human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-Scale Miners and the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development accused the PMPU of carrying out illegal mining themselves, and of threatening and extorting money from miners (ActionAid Uganda 2019).

For obvious reasons, the peasant miners of Buhweju we spoke to were cautious about discussing government-related issues. Government agents and NRM supporters can mingle incognito with the miners. Nevertheless, miners notice armed police patrols. During our stay in the district, especially in early 2020, we encountered visits by mineral and environmental police. Officially, they visit the mines to ensure that mining operations are undertaken safely and pits are covered once work has finished. These visits are concentrated in periods when miners wash and filter sand for gold, and when they sell the gold: that is, when they receive money from gold buyers. Some

argue that buyers themselves call the police to intimidate the miners, to enable them to bargain down prices from a stronger position. Others argue that certain miners betray their colleagues and warn the police at the right time, in exchange for a reward. Police visits often lead to demands for money, usually 200,000 shillings (US\$50) for each pit or team of miners.⁶ In an area where there are five or more pits, this means collecting at least 1 million shillings (US\$260) per visit. In the most productive mines, such visits by the police can be weekly or every two weeks.

Miners have limited scope to resist, and usually accept that their 'fast money' – that is, the reward for their hard work – can be even 'faster' when it ends up in the hands of those who have the power to 'request' it by simply showing up at the mines. Refusing to pay means not being able to work or being detained and facing even stiffer charges. Police roam the mines with weapons. Some miners say that it didn't use to be that way. Police patrols began carrying arms after physical clashes with angry miners. Reportedly, police officers' lives were put at risk during these confrontations. 'Ababariya are hotheads,' a sub-county chief said to us, to explain why the police are still armed.

In Akashozi, the situation became tense between 2020 and 2021. During this period, gold production declined and miners found it increasingly difficult to pay the money they owed to landowners (see below) as well as bribes to the PMPU and EPPU police units. Initially the police asked peasant miners to leave, but later they chased them away in sting operations that led to arrests. The fact that the mineral and environmental police units coordinated their operations is telling. The official reason given for the removal of the peasant miners was that they were endangering the wetland ecosystem, which is part of the Rwizi River catchment. Some scholars have argued that the degradation of Buhweju's wetlands negatively affects water quantity and quality (Atwongyeire *et al.* 2018). This concerned the authorities because the Rwizi River provides drinking water for Mbarara, the main city in south-western Uganda, as well as local villages.

In 2022, only a small, frightened group of miners remained in Akashozi's pits, where previously there had been hundreds of people. Among those who remained were young people trying to earn money for school fees, in advance of the imminent reopening of schools after a two-year Covid-19 lockdown. As a government security officer explained, in confidence, their presence was tolerated as they were among the neediest in the village and had no other way of getting money apart from stealing it. Allowing them to continue searching for gold was therefore a way to keep the security of the village and neighbouring areas under control.

Situating fishing within a semi-authoritarian economy

Police and military control over fishing is similar to that over gold mining. Here, too, in the name of an abstract notion of sustainability borrowed – and manipulated – from the vocabulary of international development, the government sought to protect the environment by force. In this context, the main problem has been related to the intensification of fishing in Uganda, which started in the early 1990s. By the late 1990s, the size of the catches had severely begun to endanger fish stocks. Some used

⁶ Field notes, 11 February 2020.

poisonous substances to accelerate the fishing process and increase catches. In 1998, the European Union banned imports of Ugandan fish due to high levels of toxins. The ban lasted until 2001, creating difficulties for the local economy. When markets reopened, some problems that preceded the ban returned.

Thus, in 2017, in the name of 'sustainable fishing', President Museveni decided to combat illegal fishing, which he framed as the main cause of the problems the sector faced. He authorized the use of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces Fisheries Protection Unit (UPDF-FPU), believing that the police were unable to handle illegal fishing. As commander-in-chief of the army, Museveni has direct control of this unit, which includes war veterans who have been in the army since the regime of Idi Amin during the 1970s.⁷ According to government data, this intervention contributed to a rapid repopulation of the lakes' waters. UPDF-FPU Commander Lieutenant Colonel James Nuwagaba said that, between 2017 and 2020, fish stocks increased significantly. In response, international investors reopened several fish factories and fish exports have begun again to make a contribution to national gross domestic product (Monitor 2020).

Lake George is close to Buhweju district, yet a thick forest and unpaved roads mean it can take four hours to drive the 100 kilometres from the district capital, Nsika, to the lake. Along its shores, canoe fishing is a daily activity that is mainly carried out by men, while women engage in preparing and selling fish. The catch is largely sold in urban markets, such as Ibanda and Mbarara; however, part of it is exported to neighbouring DRC. Demand is constant, and boat owners and fishers have a regular, albeit variable, income. As Mukisa, a forty-year-old boat driver, pointed out: 'We fish every day, we find fish every day. You can take a few or many, it depends on the weather, but you take them every day, from Monday to Sunday.' On an average fishing day, a team of two or three fishers earn 200,000–500,000 shillings (US\$50–130). However, on favourable days – when catches are large or customers are numerous – they can earn up to 1 million shillings (US\$260). In the words of one Lake George fisherman, Katungi, a thirty-year-old man, in some respects fishing offers 'a sustainable income' – working on the lake can offer regular and satisfying earnings.

According to Katungi, the situation is similar to that of gold mining. 'It is good that you come from Buhweju,' he told us, 'because the things that happen there also happen here.' For example, the promise of 'good money' offered by fishing and gold mining pushes many young people to leave school and start working. But the problem, as Katungi pointed out, is that 'fishers spend money like soldiers': that is, they quickly spend what they earn as if they were celebrating having survived a war.

These words echo those of a famous gospel singer, Julius Muhoozi, who composed a Runyankole song dedicated to fishers that was released in the 2000s, '*Ababariya Mwebare*'.⁸ As Muhoozi told us in an interview, in many ways, '*Ababariya Mwebare*' is autobiographical.⁹ Before becoming a famous musician in western Uganda, Muhoozi was a fisherman on Lake George. In the early 1970s, when he was little more than a teenager, he lived a life that he later regretted: looking for women, drinking, arguing with everyone, and spending money in an 'extravagant' way. By his account,

⁷ Field notes, 4 February 2020.

⁸ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7qTQOITRwY>>, accessed 12 July 2020.

⁹ Interview with Julius Muhoozi, Mbarara City, 27 January 2022 (File 220127_002).

discovering his faith helped him abandon that life. After all, in the Bible fishers were the first to be loved and chosen by Jesus Christ. Indeed, Andrew, James, John and Peter, the latter one of Jesus's favourite apostles, were fishers. Muhoozi wrote the lyrics of 'Ababariya Mwebare' many years after his experiences of fishing on Lake George, when he was already married with children, to encourage his fellow fishers to never lose heart and to change their lives, as Peter did when he met Jesus Christ.

Much has changed since Julius Muhoozi wrote the gospel song dedicated to his fellow fishers. Today, the bars of western Uganda are regularly filled with the lyrics of the latest hits by pop singers such as Sheebah Karungi and David Lutalo. In the video for her song, 'Tomorrow', while sunbathing on a palm-fringed beach, Sheebah expresses the idea that living in the present is better than waiting for an uncertain future: 'Gotta live for today because I don't know tomorrow, wanna do what I want coz I don't know tomorrow ... Better do what you want because you don't know tomorrow.'¹⁰

David Lutalo's message in 'Enjoy your money' is even more explicit and, to some extent, better articulated: 'Enjoy your money ... Life is short ... so choose to be happy every night and day.'¹¹ In the accompanying video, images of men eating and drinking while offering money to young women alternate with images of young people, including Lutalo, dancing in an aircraft cemetery, an apt symbol of a disillusioned generation confronting the false hopes of a shared modernity. In a context where few people feel they have scope to change things, and in which the only certainty seems to be the continuity of the current political regime, Lutalo seems to play with the stereotype of people who live without worries, squandering money to have fun, as if it were not a concern for them. In some way, his song counters the presidential narrative of the 'wealth creator' by offering an alternative view: wealth should indeed be created through hard work; however, it should not be accumulated but enjoyed ('Eat what you work hard for,' goes one lyric). This should be true for all, Lutalo repeatedly says, regardless of gender or age.

Although they carry different meanings, and can appear opposed, these songs represent different sides of the same coin. As Julius Muhoozi told us, for fishers, drinking and eating abundantly after a hard day's work is a way of celebrating life. Fishers celebrate life because they perceive their existence on small wooden boats, floating on the water at night, as one of constant danger ('Being over the water scared them, thinking any time, anything can happen,' recalls Muhoozi). As with fishing in other African contexts (Fontein 2015: 128), dangers include the presence of animals such as hippos that can become aggressive and attack boats; fishers can also be caught by surprise in heavy storms. This sense of precarity is shared by gold miners, who work in dangerous contexts underground. This is one of the reasons why the 'excessive behaviour' of both fishers and miners is sometimes compared to that of soldiers, who are also perceived to conduct dangerous work for the promise of a regular income – in some cases augmented by additional activities – and who are often characterized by their extravagant spending when they return safely from military operations. It is better to celebrate life and enjoy the present than regret not having done so, some of our interlocutors explained.

¹⁰ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjMRdfuSiUY>>, accessed 29 January 2024.

¹¹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBtX-3S3qwA>>, accessed 18 July 2020.

The dangers fishers face come not only from wild animals and unpredictable weather but also from humans. Night raids by armed Congolese fishers are common, especially on Lake Edward, close to Lake George, whose waters are divided between DRC and Uganda.¹² In addition, there are also threats from Ugandan authorities, especially the UPDF-FPU. Between 2017 and 2020, 2,000 fishers were arrested and more than 50,000 boats and their equipment were seized or destroyed by the UPDF-FPU, particularly around Lake Victoria. In the process, violence and bribery were common. In 2019, the parliament of Uganda passed a motion inquiring into the conduct of the UPDF, in response to claims of torture suffered by fishing communities at the hands of the FPU.¹³ Echoing the experiences of fishers, less than a week later, gold miners requested that parliament halt military interference in the mining sector.¹⁴

In 2020, UPDF-FPU commander Nuwagaba admitted that about a third of the 150 soldiers it had employed since 2017 had been court-martialled or removed from the army for various offences (Monitor 2020). Politicians, journalists and human rights activists have raised concerns about how the proposed remedies for illegal fishing have become part of the problem. Others have noted how the successful bush war President Museveni and his comrades led in the 1980s had turned over time into 'a guerrilla war against its own citizens' (Johnson 2021: 87). With the decline of the moral authority of the liberation struggle, patronage and coercion have become perceived as the regime's *modus operandi* (Reuss and Titeka 2017).

Situating miners within agricultural Buhweju

Central to understanding the association between miners and *ababariya* in the economy of Buhweju is the position of agriculture as the foundation of people's livelihoods. In parts of the district, coffee and tea are grown as cash crops, but bananas (*matooke*, plantain) are at the centre of household economies and cultural life.¹⁵ The idea that a householder should have a plantation or at least a garden with banana trees is widespread.

Uganda is a leading banana producer, although since the 2000s production has dropped dramatically, from 10.5 million tonnes in 2002 to 4.3 million tonnes in 2016, for a variety of reasons including variations in land use as well as rainfall and temperature (e.g. Sabiiti *et al.* 2016). It is estimated that banana plantations occupy 30 per cent of the country's arable land and that 75 per cent of Ugandan farmers grow bananas.¹⁶ Production is aimed at both the export and the domestic markets. Bananas

¹² Field notes, 15 August 2022.

¹³ See <<https://www.parliament.go.ug/news/3926/parliament-launches-inquiry-updf%E2%80%99s-conduct>>, accessed 5 December 2022.

¹⁴ See <<https://www.parliament.go.ug/news/3937/busia-gold-miners-want-parliament-halt-updf-interference>>, accessed 5 December 2022.

¹⁵ Bananas are split between dessert and cooking bananas. Dessert bananas are referred to using the English word 'yellows', a term by which farmers group different subtypes of bananas including, for example, *bogoya* (Gros Michel). Cooking bananas are called *matooke*, also known locally as *enyamwonyo*. This type of banana can be consumed as a food only after it has been steamed or boiled. *Matooke* is the staple food par excellence in much of southern Uganda.

¹⁶ See <<https://www.promusa.org/Uganda>>, accessed 1 May 2022.

are the main staple food in southern Uganda, consumed as a savoury food and a dessert, and in alcoholic drinks. Locally, they also play important symbolic roles, being at the centre of collective ceremonies and rituals.

Most banana crops are cultivated on a small scale in the southern and western regions of the country. Here, bananas belonging to the East African highland banana subgroup (*Musa acuminata*) find optimal conditions for growing – namely, a tropical climate and relatively fertile soil. However, annual production is low compared to other countries and peasants have to confront pests and diseases, land fragmentation and declining fertility, and poor infrastructure for transport and sales (Mawejje 2004). As Edward, a farmer-teacher in Nsika, the growing administrative centre of Buhweju, notes, there is no stable market in the district, especially for *matooke*.¹⁷ Prices fluctuate depending on the season. This situation benefits those who own the largest parcels of cultivated land. In a context in which each family owns at least two to three hectares of land (although some young people do not even have one hectare), having more than ten hectares means being well-off. Peasants with more land can rely on cheap labour and respond better to peaks in demand, compensating in the low seasons with more extensive diversified production.

To address difficulties in the agricultural sector as a whole, in 2013 Museveni dismantled the National Agricultural Advisory Services and launched a national socio-economic transformation programme managed by military personnel, headed by his brother, Salim Saleh. The programme was named ‘Operation Wealth Creation’ (OWC) and is still active. Its primary objective is to transform smallholder farmers into small-scale industrialists, encouraging the use of sustainable and efficient technology and techniques.

Undoubtedly, some farmers have benefited from OWC. Those who have opposed it or have ignored military directives, however, have suffered heavy consequences. For example, farmers in 2015 were arrested in Bushenyi district (of which Buhweju was part before becoming an independent district in 2010) for not following the procedures recommended for preventing the spread of banana bacterial wilt (Amanyisa 2015). Several years after the start of OWC, some experts believe that this operation has negatively affected production and productivity in some of Uganda’s agricultural sectors, such as tea farming (Twongyirwe *et al.* 2020).

Bananas and other cash crops have been cultivated for generations with little or no government support. If anything, the problem of rural poverty that initiatives such as OWC try to address is how to deal with the profound disparities that exist in Ugandan society, and which are reflected in Buhweju’s inhabited landscape. To describe economic differences in Buhweju, people who attended our focus groups underlined, for example, how houses were built, the number of children in each family and household, their possessions and their level of education. They stressed that the majority of people in Buhweju live in wattle and daub houses; some have tin roofs but not cement floors. These houses are surrounded by small plots of cultivated land where families keep a few goats and sheep. Families can have up to six or eight children and struggle to educate them. In stark contrast, the houses of wealthier people are made with bricks and cement, coated iron sheets and metal doors, and have television sets. From the perspective of our interlocutors, as conveyed in focus

¹⁷ Interview with Edward, 30 January 2019 (File 190730_001).

group discussions, wealthy people are those who own land, cars and cows. Typically, they work for the government or have businesses beyond the boundaries of the district. At home, they drink milk, use tables and eat with forks. Their land is more fertile because they can rotate crops, leave fields to lie fallow, and buy fertilizers. They have no more than four or five children, who complete their education in private schools and may go to university.

It is specifically in the discourses of the wealthier social classes in Buhweju that the *ababariya* narrative finds fertile ground: that is, among those who benefit from the workers whose behaviour they criticize. The experiences and words of Daniel and Valentin exemplify this type of discourse. Daniel, a man in his late thirties who lives in Akashozi and has a secure job working as a civil servant, is among those who consider banana cultivation a good source of income. During the high season, he can earn up to 700,000 shillings a week (US\$180) cultivating fifteen hectares of land. This figure rises if one takes into account Daniel's production of *waragi*, an alcoholic beverage that is made in small illegal distilleries along local riverbanks. He estimates that his earnings would be even higher if the land he inherited from his father were not scattered in small parcels across the district and shared with his siblings.

However profitable, agriculture is not the only activity Daniel carries out with his family and the support of local hired labour. Around 2016, a group of miners found gold on a plot of land that Daniel cultivates with bananas. Daniel was happy to give miners the opportunity to dig pits in exchange for a percentage of their profits and a fixed sum for each open pit, around 500,000 shillings (US\$130). For some years, this was a profitable income, which did not cost him physical effort. As he pointed out, searching for gold is tiring and risky. Many families rush into gold mining – or renting land to miners – but in so doing risk endangering their crops. Moreover, even when they earn good sums, they cannot save much because 'they work and eat just like fishers [*ababariya*]'.¹⁸

In Daniel's view, the problem with *ababariya* is that they do not have a 'culture of selling'. By invoking a 'culture of selling' he stresses that miners are simple consumers; they do not try to own the means of production by becoming 'businessmen' like him. Making a comparison with fishing, he stressed that only boat owners get rich. Usually, labourers spend all the money they earn on the day they are paid.¹⁸ The same happens in the mines. As he emphasized, only those who are in brokerage positions can hope to make money. Labourers share money made from gold mining equally, regardless of their role, age or gender. Thus, no one can be richer than anyone else within the same group. Daniel's younger brother Joseph is a broker: he buys gold from miners and resells it at a higher price to gold buyers from the city. In addition, with the profit he makes, Joseph finances a team of miners who excavate his land and share their gold with him. Therefore, he earns his share as a member of the team and as the owner of the land, with additional profit as a gold broker.

Others have benefited from gold miners more indirectly. Valentin is a trader in his early thirties and, to use Daniel's expression, is one of Akashozi's residents who knows the 'culture of selling'. Although he was not born in Buhweju, he owns a small shop in Akashozi. He originates from Mbarara, the main city of a neighbouring district. Unlike many young miners and peasants from Akashozi, he studied business and

¹⁸ Interview with Daniel, 27 January 2020 (File 200127_002).

administration at university. He arrived in Akashozi in 2018 to attend a wedding. Observing the pits in the banana plantation where Daniel's lot is also located, Valentin realized that he could do business by buying and selling goods to the miners. Having no money to start any activity, he joined the miners hoping to build up capital.

Valentin worked hard for three months and saved 500,000 shillings (US\$130), a relatively small sum compared with the 1 million shillings (US\$260) others claimed to be able to earn in a single day. However, he was not discouraged; with this money he started buying 'yellows' (dessert bananas) from farmers working in nearby fields and selling them to miners in the new trading centre of Akashozi. He accumulated more money and, with his brother's support, he went to Ibanda city to buy drinks to sell to thirsty miners. He soon became the owner of a small shop.

Similarly, a bar owner in the same village also took advantage of the 'gold rush' in Akashozi before activities were stopped in 2021. To attract clients, he regularly invited girls from Ibanda city over the weekends. Many miners ended up spending more than they actually earned, becoming indebted. When they were unable to repay their debts, money lenders – usually the same shop owners where miners bought drinks – took their land. As a result, Valentin explained, 'some find themselves working on behalf of those to whom they have pledged their land. This creates hatred and tension; some indebted persons prefer to change village rather than find themselves in this frustrating situation.'¹⁹

'Gold mining gives false hopes,' Valentin commented, thinking of his success and the failures of many miners. In fact, those who work in the mine get used to earning 100,000 shillings (US\$25) or 200,000 shillings (US\$50) a day – when they find a good gold vein – and spend this money quickly. For these *ababariya*, as Valentin called them, it is difficult to go back to the hard life of farming, waiting four or five months before harvesting and then receiving a small amount of money. Similarly, they are not attracted by urban jobs. In a month, an apprentice earns no more than 100,000 shillings (US\$25), while more experienced workers, employed in restaurants and hotels, for example, rarely earn more than 300,000 (US\$80). Stories like the one mentioned earlier by Rose were not uncommon during our stay in Uganda. The thread connecting these stories is that of young workers not being paid for months or receiving less than they were expecting, living with the constant threat of being fired for any reason by their wealthy urban employers.

According to Valentin, gold mining is not, to use his word, 'sustainable'. By 'sustainable' he means 'something that do[es] not fade away quickly'. In this view, 'gold mining is not sustainable, because when they [the miners] get the money from there [the mines] they immediately finish it; they don't invest in something else'. For Valentin, as for Daniel and other farmers and traders from Buhweju, the real profits are made from trade or cultivation, particularly of bananas, tea and coffee. What they omit to say is that, first, not everyone owns land; many can only work for others as labourers, including widowed women with dependants, and payments consist of very little money or local products such as bunches of bananas. Second, urban jobs are not only poorly paid, but also often precarious due to unreliable employers and stiff competition. Moreover, the 'sustainability' of Valentin's and Daniel's activities – and

¹⁹ Interview with Valentin, 7 January 2020 (File 200127_001).

their 'culture of selling' – has heavily depended for several years on the unsustainable 'false hopes' of gold miners.

Those who are employed as labourers recognize that only gold buyers make any real profits. While not disavowing the *ababariya* narrative, they tend to emphasize other aspects of their work, especially the suffering and patience it requires. Johnny and Nicholas – two twenty-year-old miners nicknamed 'the teachers' since they always work together and are the most educated people in the pit in Akashozi where they work – describe mining as a strategy of 'survival', to use their word, as well as that of those who attended our focus groups. 'We are suffering,' they admit. However, they accept this suffering because they need money to buy new clothes and shoes – to some, an extravagant expenditure – and to pay rent in Ibanda, where they both attend university courses with the partial support of their families.²⁰ Hard work, however, does not necessarily lessen their enjoyment or 'excessive behaviour'. In this regard, there is a common saying in the local Runyankole language that we have heard peasant miners use to explain the ethics of 'excessive behaviour': 'You work like a dog, and you eat like a rich person' (*Nokoora nke mbwa norya nka omugiga*). This saying focuses on two connected issues: hard work and maintaining the appearance of being rich. Hard work is rewarded with the possibility of denying one's poverty and living beyond the strict limits imposed by the conditions people find themselves in, even if only temporarily, by eating expensive food and drinking in local restaurants, or buying shoes, clothes, phones or even motorbikes. As in the case of young Kenyans who aspire to a middle-class lifestyle, in Buhweju too 'one-off displays are seen to convey economic achievement' (Lockwood 2023: 478). For Maurice, a twenty-four-year-old farmer from Ekyaro village, behind 'conspicuous consumption' there is, however, imitative behaviour that disguises failure. He clarified his view with an example. As the owner of a few hectares of land where he cultivates bananas, Maurice likes to relax by taking a break at the village bar. Here, he meets friends – young people like himself, but poorer, who work in the goldmines because they have few alternatives or because they need to combine their money from farming with gold money.

When they go over there [to the bar] maybe they see me coming from the banana plantation and I have money. I drink. Therefore [they drink too] because they want to imitate [me]. They copy what I'm doing from me. So, they end up drinking beer [and running out of money].²¹

Thus, the economic gap between these young men – however small it might appear externally – is not simply illusory (Lockwood 2023: 480), but it is clearly perceived and reaffirmed by the simple fact that when miners (predictably) use up their money they go back to work. At the same time, Maurice was also aware that 'farmers too can behave like *ababariya* . . . Whatever job you do, if you don't invest or save you will end up with no money. And they will call you *ababariya*.'

Others do not see imitation as the crucial aspect of *ababariya* behaviour. Rather, they stress the sense of precarity and uncertainty in their own present, of their own

²⁰ Interview with 'the teachers', 21 January 2020 (File 200121_002).

²¹ Interview with Maurice, 21 January 2022 (File 220121_003).

existence, as well as impatience to see their imagined futures fulfilled. 'Tomorrow is tomorrow' (*nitubala erya lenga*) and, alternatively, 'things for today are for today' (*ebye lizoba nebyelizoba*) are common Runyankole expressions used to justify the fulfilment of small pleasures in the present, notwithstanding the economic constraints one might face. 'We can't keep on waiting for a dream,' a single middle-class woman in her early thirties told us in Entebbe to explain the reason behind what she defines as a 'party mentality' that, according to her, many of her contemporaries share. When your daily experience is poverty and you have nothing to lose, or you do not expect any change in your future, then you want to enjoy life, even for just one day, she commented.

Scovia, a young woman, manages with her family the bar in Ekyaro that Maurice goes to, a bar not dissimilar to the Kenyan rural *pap* described by Schmidt (2024: 101): that is, 'a social arena where predominantly unmarried men and women from different areas met to enjoy dances ... music, sexual encounters, and other recreational activities'. She noticed that miners do not drink in isolation but in the company of friends and colleagues. Those who are part of a mining team cannot avoid spending the money earned together because, as a young Catholic priest in Buhweju explained to us, they must demonstrate that they are loyal to the group, that they are united, and that they do not want to have more than or be above the others. Thus, what appears to some people as an imitative attitude, others interpret as a form of reciprocity between members of the group or, depending on the circumstances, as a form of competition similar to that observed in the context of fishing. Indeed, male peasant miners often offer drinks to girls in the hope of winning their favour in exchange for establishing a relationship. New clothes, phones or motorbikes make them more mobile and attractive, increasing their capacity to plan and build their futures. Female peasant miners can be flattered by their colleagues and obtain additional income support by accepting or requesting money from lovers. Men can compete for the same woman or an already married woman. Such situations can expose women to accusations of prostitution. Outsiders see women's mere presence in mines or bars as immoral, a situation similar to many other African contexts (e.g. Bryceson *et al.* 2013).

Forms of reciprocity between members of the same group or family are not free from their own ambivalences. Some people spend all their money on alcohol even if they know they have responsibilities at home, or precisely because of those responsibilities. In this regard, they resemble the young Kenyan men who find refuge in the *jo-pap* – that is, a place 'where they do not have to fear being confronted with the expectations of their wives and children' (Schmidt 2024: 101). Indeed, the behaviour of *ababariya* is considered one of the many ways of being irresponsible and inconsiderate (*okwhuzya*), as opposed to being responsible and caring (*obuzonani-zibwa*). Working hard all day but returning home with empty pockets, having squandered all one's daily wages, is often deemed irresponsible behaviour. Thus, one of the accusations levelled at the miners who allegedly behave like *ababariya* – especially men – is that they eagerly 'eat' all their gold money while pretending not to have family responsibilities. It is important to stress that, during our interviews and focus groups, most interviewees pointed out their efforts to sustain their families or build new ones. 'I bought land, married a wife. I planted a banana plantation, coffee among others,' a man who started mining at the end of the 1990s told us during a

focus group. In a separate focus group, women told us that they are better at saving than men. Some are involved in one or more village savings and loan schemes. With gold money they build houses, buy animals or land, and pay fees – school fees being one of the main reasons for their involvement in gold mining: ‘If it wasn’t for our children, we wouldn’t go there [to the goldmine]’ (*Kuribatari abaana beitu titukagireyo*). But they also gave examples of cooperating with their husbands, with whom they can work together in the mine and share decisions about buying things such as goats or solar panels, or plan the construction of a house. In a few cases, women reported that some husbands do not come to the mines but ‘drink all the money’. Still, they consider gold mining important for their livelihoods and they acknowledge that it can be a key source of income if one plans one’s life and is capable of managing ‘unplanned’ or unexpected circumstances such as finding gold. As one focus group participant put it: ‘Gold mining is complicated, and the life of [the] gold digger as well. If you are wise, gold is very beneficial, but to the foolish, gold is poison.’²²

Conclusions

In Buhweju, agriculture is at the heart of the household economy and maintaining a family, but land is fragmented and the soil is not fertile. Given that agriculture is perceived to be the foundation of people’s livelihoods, how then do they anticipate the future and how does life carry on? Farmers respond to difficulties of land fragmentation and soil infertility by diversifying their agricultural production. For some, however, diversification is not enough. They need to earn cash quickly. In urban centres, life is expensive and work is poorly paid. At times, employers delay paying workers or find excuses not to. In the agricultural sector, work is hard and pays even less. Gold mining offers fast money – faster than cultivating bananas or coffee (and this explains why mining attracts not only the poorest people). Money from gold mining is shared equally, irrespective of miners’ experience, strength or gender. Of course, equality is different from equity (Leach *et al.* 2018), but in a context of deep inequalities such as the one we have examined, miners perceive the payment system as a fair way of redistributing wealth.

Who is looking for gold in Buhweju? Those who have the means to do it by supporting and buying gold from labourers, and usually (but not necessarily) young people – predominantly men but also women – who do not have access to land but need money to be economically independent and start their own families or achieve other personal goals, such as improving their level of education. Being independent also means escaping poverty and closing the economic gap with local elites. Unsurprisingly, the *ababariya* narrative is most common among those attached to these elites, the same people who often financially benefit from artisanal miners. Moreover, the *ababariya* narrative morally justifies police and military interventions to restore an allegedly ‘more sustainable’ economy and environment.

From ‘*Ababariya Mwebare*’ (Julius Muhoozi) to ‘Enjoy your money’ (David Lutalo), ‘excessive behaviour’ tells us something about a hidden cultural and economic worldview in which money is not made to be accumulated, but to be shared and enjoyed. This changes the way one perceives the world itself. Indeed, discourses on

²² Focus group, 20–21 February 2020.

ababariya allow us to see beneath it an ‘anti-economy’ – or rather, to change perspective, to see a different worldview based on abundance, interdependence and the redistribution of wealth, which in turn changes our perception of the economy.

These discourses allow us to grasp the unease of a significant part of Ugandan society that, in the face of neoliberal economic transformation, and after years of political violence and civil conflicts, perceives the precariousness of its own material conditions and existence. As happens among marginal social groups and extractive peasants in other regions of the world (Lahiri-Dutt 2018), the narrative on the anti-economic consumption of *ababariya* can be seen as a way of imaginatively ‘invert[ing] their marginal status and put[ting] themselves at the centre of their own moral universe’ (Day *et al.* 1999: 2). In this respect, the image of *ababariya* partially mirrors the colonial stereotype of the lazy and indolent African who is used to taking natural abundance for granted, a stereotype that in turn echoes colonial approaches to labour in Uganda (Mamdani 1996). However, it is far removed from the more recent postcolonial stereotype of the young delinquent or ‘bad guy’ who lives by expediency in urban contexts (Baral 2016; Pier 2021).

Ababariya cause scandal and create concern not because they are idle or rude, but because they do not immediately translate their hard work into things or commodities that can be accumulated or that are themselves potential sources of profit, such as land, boats, cars, cows and so on. In other words, *ababariya* represent the fear of ‘economic saboteurs’ (Johnson and Bakaaki 2016) who threaten the social and economic order. Their behaviour is a matter of concern for the Ugandan elite because no one is immune to the temptation of acting like them – a temptation that a semi-authoritarian regime, which aims to perpetuate its existence as long as possible and centralize wealth accumulation in a few hands, cannot tolerate.

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