

Underground bread for the price of courage

by Moussa Zongo

The gold mine situated between the villages of Goera and Sindri, some 100 km north of Ouagadougou is one of the numerous gold washing sites in Burkina Faso. Despite frequent rock falls, hundreds of young people flood the shafts in search for the yellow metal. The image is completed by deficient regulations which the merchants do not hesitate to exploit.

Hundreds of huts surround the hangars on top of the hills. It is one of 142 gold washing sites in Burkina Faso. According to the Ministry of Mines, Work and Energy, 200 000 people work in gold washing compared to 7 500 people in the country's fledgling mining industry. Here, similarly to other sites, artisan miners, commonly known as 'goldwashers', use but the most basic equipment. Around the hangars, women and children crush gold ore which is then ground by dozens of mills. The dust which is thus generated does not seem to disturb the workers. Their mud-covered bodies distinguish them clearly from hundreds of merchants who are there too. The goldwashers do not have any masks to protect themselves. Yesterday, a heavy rain has fallen over the area. Thousands of families coming from different backgrounds work here in the most difficult of conditions. A hundred meters further on, the view up to the horizon is rife with huts and piles of earth dug out from the galleries by these primitive miners. One has to be very careful not to fall down any of the gold shafts and get to the middle of the site. In the hangar, some twenty young men sit in front of a shaft. They work for Lamine. The talk of the day is a rock fall at the site in Namissiguima, a community lying further north, that came about five days ago. The accident took six lives. Issaka, who explains the details of the accident, knew one of the victims. He used to work there too. Such revelations, coming regularly, no longer frighten anybody. Rock falls are frequent at the sites. Since New Year, the Nord region itself reported some twenty accidental deaths in the gold washing sites, eight of which in three rock falls from the location at Namissiguima. The site at Sindri-Goera saw two deaths in the two years of operation.

Lamine and his workers claimed a shaft which the initial occupants abandoned because of risk of rock falls. But Lamine does not worry about that. His shaft is 47 metres deep.

Descending into the shaft

The site is located on a hillside. Water from the yesterday's rain drips into the shafts. According to Lamine, it makes the work more complicated and raises the risk of a rock fall. This morning, there are six people who have been working in the galleries for six hours now, despite heavy rain which tendered the soil. How is the work down below? In spite of Lamine's fellow goldwashers' reservations, he agrees to take us down into the shaft. Everyone needs to wear a torch attached to their head. Lamine is the first to take the rope, we follow suite in five metre intervals. Fifteen metres into the shaft, we can see galleries going in different directions. There is a teenager sitting in one of the tunnels, holding a megaphone. Seni is only 15. He enables the miners in the shafts to communicate with the surface via the megaphone. Lamine shows us a gallery that was dug from a neighbouring shaft. The invaders were repelled only thanks to the muscles of Lamine and his men. Fights are frequent among goldwashers, when two separate groups meet in the middle

of a vein. We crawl in a 5-metre tunnel to reach another shaft which goes down. At 30 metres, Lamine and his men had to use their wit to avoid a tunnel that came from another abandoned shaft. They plugged the tunnel with bags full of rubble and metal bars, as, according to Lamine, it may one day cause a rock fall. We are about 10 metres from the workers' location. Lamine warns us: *'From here on in, we have to be extra careful and focused. This is the difficult part'*. We had to get past about three metres of granite. Lamine and his men used dynamite to open this passage. The descent is ever more demanding. No more holes to place feet or hands. The shaft's diameter is larger too. We have to stretch our legs. The rope, which is our main support, is now all wet and muddy. We can hear sounds indicating there is human life nearby, but no possibility of seeing them yet.

Wading ankle-high in water

All is dark except for a little light coming from the workers' torches. We can feel the air is fresher and it is easier to breathe. Lamine signals the proximity of workers. From the bottom of the shaft, we can hear a voice: *'Be careful! The rope isn't that strong here'*. Lamine advises to go down very slowly. *'If the rope snaps, it's very dangerous not only for us, but also for them. At the bottom of the shaft there is only granite'*, he says. After ten minutes of strenuous exercise, we finally put our feet in water that fills the bottom of the shaft. There are six workers who have been here since 5 a.m. Heel bars, sledgehammers, chisels, poles, bags and torches constitute their mining tools. Everyone tries to light the area in front of them with the help of the torches attached to their heads. A man of 20 years of age attempts to fill a 20-litre tank. They need to lower the level of water in order to break the granite and look for gold ore. Others fill bags with pieces of ore and store them in a corridor out of water's reach. Issa rests in a gallery above – he is only 18, he cannot keep up the pace. His cousin brought him here. After several months of digging, their shaft turned out to be 'negative', so Issa's cousin lent him to Lamine. Whatever Issa earns with Lamine will be divided fifty-fifty between him and his cousin. *'Down here, muscles is not enough. You also have to have courage'*, says Saidou, the group's boss. Issa realises the danger. He is often haunted by a vision of rock falls, but he manages to keep it in check. There are no security measures in this hell on Earth. Two weeks ago, Lamine and his group came across a gold vein. Since then, they have been working without pause. It is not prudent to leave the galleries, even to rest at night. *'If you leave the shaft and rest, the people who know you've found a vein will come at night to steal the ore'*, explains Lamine. Yesterday, the group managed to dig out five bags of ore. Lamine says they have been stolen at night. His workers do not believe him. Lamine estimates the ore's value at 3 000 000 CFA francs. He invested however 400 000 CFA francs. Saidou's group is about to blow the granite up. Everybody works hard to knock the chisel in the rock. The dynamite is set up with the most rudimentary equipment. People should now exit and leave the boss alone. It is him who will trigger the fuse and escape the tunnel as quickly as possible. A few minutes later, on the surface, we can hear the explosion which echoes loudly over the site. It is a very dangerous practice, which has been forbidden by mining regulations. Such explosions already caused several accidents on the site.

Deficient regulations

Despite all the risk that goldwashers face daily, they do not earn their bread. They do not collect their wages. The owner of the shaft arranges for food for them until they find a vein. Once

extracted, the ore is divided into two equal parts. One for the proprietor, the other for the miners. If the shaft is negative, *'everybody looks on their own.'* Here, as in other places, the goldwasher can only sell processed gold to the holder of the exploitation right, as stated by the mining code. The Burkinabe syndicate of precious metals (CBMP – *Comptoir burkinabè des métaux précieux*), a state organisation which used to regulate prices in the industry, has put the key to its door under the mat in 2005. The gold trade is now liberalised. Many merchants went into business and managed somehow to turn liberty into monopoly. They have the exploitation rights to many of the sites found with traditional methods by local goldwashers. They have their offices on the sites but deny others the right to run theirs. They impose prices on goldwashers who are forced to sell them their gold under the threat of repercussions from the police forces and private security agents. It is something they cannot understand. Issaka has been in the business since 1977. He is one of the people who found this site in 2007. *'We had to loan money to conduct research. When we discovered gold, the State has given the exploitation right to an external company. Today, we have become their slaves. They only care about gold. If there's an accident, it is us, the goldwashers, who get organised to face the consequences.'* The price of gold varies from 60 000 to 80 000 CFA francs per 6g, depending on the site and the exploitant. On the black market, one can get as much as 100 000 CFA francs. The price for the Goera-Sindri site has been fixed at 60 000 CFA francs. You can take this, or nothing.