

“When I saw the elephants”: extraction of minerals and gendered precariousness in the Acehese landscapes.

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Abstract

In the wake of the 2004 tsunami and the peace agreement in 2005, people of West Aceh, Indonesia, returned to normal life after decades of warfare and violence. Female-centred agriculture resumed and the all-male clientelistic networks intensified their rash exploitation of new and established assets, such as gold and logs. In this paper, I draw on a long-term ethnography in the men’s world of artisanal gold mining and I explore matrifocal tendencies, gender relations and their entanglements with the utilization of local natural riches. In particular, I unpack a set of contradictory dynamics that characterize a cohort of young rural Acehese men. Specifically, I analyse their Islamic piety, their disposition towards hetero-normative conjugality, their consumption-oriented behaviour and their urges to disengage. My objective is to demonstrate that stop-and-go ventures in the racialized and gendered hubs of natural wealth allow these men to fulfil their manifold needs better than agriculture. I also want to highlight that the access to “men’s natural resources” comes at a high cost emotionally, mentally, physically and professionally, which is much higher for those who are poorly connected to the political elites.

Keywords: Indonesia; Gender; Environment; Natural resources

Harmful gender dynamics in a resource-rich region

As a male scholar in his early thirties, who studied the gold and semi-precious gemstone rushes in the outer Indonesian region of West Aceh, part of the province of Aceh, I often found myself in a man’s world of young fortune-seekers with a rural background that tapped into the economy of natural resources. It was not only the strong Islamic piety of Acehese people and their growing alignment to the behavioural templates of global Islam that encouraged me to fraternize with men and hindered my connections

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with women. The political and economic contingencies, in particular those related to the cyclical extraction of wealth from the forests, played a key role too. Men alone rushed after precious non-agrarian commodities, thrived on gold and stones mining, and ran the financial and health risks related to the artisanal recovery of such minerals¹.

Today's post-conflict and post-tsunami West Aceh is one of the poorest and most corrupt Indonesian regions, as well as an ecological time bomb. In this western corner of the country, the chronic deficiency of jobs and infrastructure increased the pressure on the abundant forestal commodities and rendered the forests highly contested and politicized loci, ruled by few powerful patrons and claimed by numerous rivals. Such highly speculative manipulations of the biomass were comparatively mild in West Aceh until the end of the conflict (1976-2005). However, they gradually escalated in the last decade and, regrettably, their most recent developments are reminiscent of the common Indonesian chains of socio-ecological lacerations, that were investigated, among others, by Tania Li (2014), Paul Gellert (2010) and John McCarthy (2006).

Since the 19th century, two gendered models of land entitlement and access co-existed and mirrored the matrifocal tendencies of the Acehnese society (Siapno 2013, Siegel 2000). Mobile men used to pioneer the high-yielding economies of pepper and other valuable crops in "frontier enclosures", while women often stayed home and tapped incomes from their own farmland. Such dichotomy functioned as an exemplary outline for rural communities, while delayed marriages, recurrent divorces, and mobility of family members, including females, were commonplace in everyday life, especially in the countryside and during the conflict.

While gendered mobility and flexible matrifocal patterns are well established, new contradictory practices have manifested since the wartime. On the one side, the utilization of the natural resources, namely timber and minerals, has become more and more racialized and gendered, and thus reserved for the clientelistic circles of men, which outsiders and women fail to affiliate with. On the other side, even if small-scale agriculture still constitutes the prerogative of women and most of the female villagers continue to inherit portions of their kin's land upon marriage, the cultivation of cash crops has increasingly represented a gender-balanced occupation. Agriculture is also a handy, albeit low-yielding, possibility to make ends meet in

1 I draw this paper from my recently completed doctoral research (2012-2016) and subsequent field trips that centred on the concepts of extractive work and the temporalities of the booming economies of gold, semi-precious gemstones and other natural riches in the Acehnese district of Aceh Jaya, Indonesia. I would like to thank Aynal, Darmansyah, Putra, and Syahrul, as well as Kristina Großmann, Michaela Haug and my colleagues at the Department of Human Science for Education "Riccardo Massa" (University of Milano-Bicocca) for their constant support.

times of unemployment (Vignato in press).

In this paper, I will concentrate on unmarried or recently married Acehnese men who failed to find stable wage work, did not migrate to towns or Malaysia, and turned to extractive jobs and agriculture for a living. Such cohort of people aspired to reach adulthood through hetero-normative conjugal partnerships, and to become the breadwinners of pious Muslim families, as is often the case in urban, rural or mobile Indonesian societies (Boellstorff 2005, Elmhirst 2011). Therefore, they hoped that mining gold and gemstones, a fruitful source of fast money, would allow them to put aside some money and secure marriage. Equally important, these men also happened to desire the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the Acehnese urban youth, and of their migrant fellow miners of Javanese origins, that, like in other Southeast Asian contexts, consisted of consumption habits and prolonged courting (Keyes 2012, Naafs 2012). Simultaneously, they endured the manifold inequalities and frustrations inherent in the hierarchical rings of resource utilization.

My point is that such specific dynamics paved the way toward poverty, exclusion and gendered precariousness of the men who I encountered during my fieldtrip. Firstly, these men often felt they were neither starving nor becoming well off. Despite working day and night as miners, partaking in fortunate gold rushes, or being just about to begin new ventures in the mountains, they “remained poor,” (*miskin terus*), with uncertainties about the future. Drawing on Gerben Nooteboom’s scholarship on Indonesian poor (2015, 2016), here I suggest that poverty and affluence are not static figures but dynamic trajectories. Accordingly, people fluctuate from wealthy periods to non-prosperous times, appreciating their social protection nets and expressing their agency. Second, in post-disaster Aceh, even those Acehnese who were technically entitled to access the “racialized” social land of natural riches, faced dire economic and social exclusion. Such exclusion frameworks were structured by power relations, specifically the clientelistic ones of the “cronies’ economies” that extracted wealth from the underground. Here I build upon the literature on Indonesian inequalities based on class and race (Aspinall 2011, Hall 2011). Third, I suggest that Acehnese men, at the intersection of marriage dreams, demanding tasks and urges to disengage, are exposed to “gendered” stress and precariousness.

The (re)emergence of new all-male clientelistic networks

In the last decade, despite its agrarian and mineral assets and pro-development planning efforts, post-conflict and post-tsunami West Aceh averaged some of the weakest figures on education, employment and economic performance of the province of Aceh since the peace agreements signed in 2005 (*Badan Pusat Statistik* 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2017, *Badan Pusat Statistik*

Provinsi Aceh 2016, 2017).

First, the end of post-disaster relief, that distributed economic help using a scattergun approach, left a financial vacuum that was slowly replaced by a profoundly unequal and corrupt political regime. Unfortunately, such regime wiped away most of the political commitments to community-based, shared and environmentally sustainable prosperity that peace negotiators agreed on. So much so that, a large amount of the wealth that streamed from the gold mines of the Gunong Hujeun, once a renowned mineral spot that attracted fortune-hunters from outside Aceh, did not percolate outside the ring of few prospectors.

Second, as many political scientists have pointed out (Aspinall 2009, Avonius 2009, Sulaiman 2012), the Acehnese pro-independence armed group (GAM) did not win the war on the battleground but succeeded in reaching favourable concessions at the peace talks. In other words, after the cease fire and although the attempts to secede from Indonesia were unsuccessful, most of the former top commanders of the GAM became “legalized” and were then appointed local administrators of the new autonomous province. By means of their unprecedented political leverage, and offside of their main administrative assignments, these men could ride the crest of the material reconstruction of Aceh and transform into prominent contractors, who brokered multimillion-rupiah projects and obtained good business from building roads, bridges and other infrastructures.

Specific to the West Acehnese district of Aceh Jaya, the recently appointed local leaders ventured into entirely new territory in the history of the province. Just when international NGOs began to retreat from the region, they designed a systematic low-cost and low-technology mining industry in which they acted as the undisputed financiers of the many mining expeditions, retained the premium share in the profits and claimed the exclusive right to access the richest gold locations. These groups of men also handled the imports of skilled miners and basic mining technologies, such as drills, grinders and mercury, from the Javanese provinces. Simultaneously, they recruited flocks of male fellow villagers and cronies, who became pitmen, ancillaries and brokers in the gold distribution chains.

Despite being a technological and economic novelty, artisanal gold mining, and to some extent also the quest for semi-precious gemstones that followed, revived the scheme of exploitation that both the rebels and regular troops had adopted during the wartime. Such scheme was characterized by the intermittent activation of logging hot spots and the smuggling of timber commodities from the forested war theatre to the rest of the country and beyond. Notwithstanding their very short production cycles and spotty nature, these hot spots fuelled a prosperous extra-legal economy that allowed GAM combatants to pay for their weapons and, ultimately, increased the personal wealth of few fortunate people from both sides. Equally important,

men who were high ranking and had achieved prestige in these hierarchical, militarized and patriarchal circles settled the small percentage of the revenues to be re-distributed to their allies. As it happened, all-male armed squads ruled the unsafe landscapes of Aceh and a handful of men dominated this speculative war economy.

The politicized manipulation of the natural assets

Although they relied on different technologies and addressed specific production chains, both the war and the post-disaster economies resulted in the creation of speculative clientelistic networks that coagulated around the exploitation spots and capitalized on natural riches. Drawing on the notion of “political forest” adopted by Nancy Peluso and Peter Vandergeest (2001) and on political ecology research that follows the same path, I argue that the West Acehnese circles of combatants and, a few years later, of local administrators, shaped the landscape by designating exploitative “special areas”. In particular, they set a number of enclosures that synchronized with the shifting distribution of logs and the occurrence of minerals, and often overruled pre-existing vernacular entitlements. For instance, gold prospectors promoted the destruction of private orchards and protection forests to make room for their mining sites.

It was through such systematic exercise of power that a bunch of stakeholders negotiated the criteria of access and exclusion. Unsurprisingly, in a context where the Acehnese warriors clashed against the “Javanese invader” for three decades, the criteria of exclusion were primarily racialized. In other words, the GAM members and district politicians successfully attempted to territorialize the Acehnese forest as the landscape “for the Acehnese people”, whose riches were to be shielded from Javanese interference. This framework matches the dynamics of “racialized entitlements” that characterize many pioneering explorations in the Indonesian fringes (Li 2000, Tsing 1993).

Notwithstanding the undeniable importance of racial belonging in shaping the trajectories of commodities utilization, access to precious minerals and other assets was also prefaced by gender. As it turned out, both the war and post-disaster non-agrarian economies generated work spheres that women could not fully penetrate. During the conflict years, women, as men, were hit by extensive resettlement programs and rampant violence, but seldom handled weapons. Also, they never took part in logging expeditions but supported men who were fighting by parenting the children and farming subsistence crops. As for the period after the peace agreements, women could not dig for gold or gemstones. From a male viewpoint, they were thought to disrupt miners’ labour and thus formally banned from the mines. Often, instead of becoming piece-workers in the subsidiary economy of ore grinding, many of them opted for migration to town or growing cash

crops by their villages, an occupation that the fast economies of the minerals could not fully eradicate. Interestingly, the partners of the Javanese migrant miners were also aware of the impossibility of working down the pits and the little gains of the ancillary economy, and seldom relocated to West Aceh. They rather chose to stay in Java, benefiting from the remittances.

The co-existence of female-centred agriculture and men's extractive work

While women were absent from the logging and mining environment, and seldom ventured alone into the forest, they could be always found in the operose and rural landscape, in the strip of land between the Indian Ocean and the primary forest. They not only cultivated crops in their established paddies and rubber gardens, but also cleared new farmland, alongside men, and opened oil palm and vegetable plots, which were meant to respond to the growing demands locally for food and the global appetite for plant oils.

Acehnese society has a long tradition of separating the female-centred rural world from the male-dominated mobile realm of faraway frontiers. According to the traditional matrifocal scheme of Acehnese self-sufficient rural communities, agriculture was a women's asset. Women used to own the land inherited from their mothers when they got married, and they provided for the needs of their families by farming rice and crops, with little aid from men. Yet, men were not completely absent from agricultural spheres. As is often the case in the Southeast Asian countryside (Andaya 2006, p. 104, Cramb 2009), also in West Aceh, un-mechanized agriculture called for labour-intensive seasonal chores, such as rice harvest and rubber tapping, that male and female peasants performed mutually in order to keep pace with the agrarian cycles. Such cooperation between men and women, that was common since the nineteenth century (Siegel 2000), still took place in the more recent times that I studied, when many Acehnese pitmen used to call off their duties to assist their mothers and wives in harvesting rice.

However, it was not until the mineral bubble burst, causing a large unemployment gap, that men whose kin had access to land turned to agriculture and often transformed it into a year-round occupation. Since then, gender-balanced groups of villagers began to share the moderate but secure yields of the agrarian "slow economy". Meanwhile, West Aceh gradually shifted from the self-subsistence of the conflict years to producing a limited amount of cash crops, to be exported to Sumatran urban centres².

2 The transformation of agricultural dynamics was particularly late in the West Acehnese region in comparison to the districts of East Aceh, where farmers have enjoyed better irrigation infrastructure and technological equipment since the 1960s.

Even after agriculture underwent the timid scaling-up that created new opportunities for men, it was considered a second-choice occupation, which men and women usually preferred to avoid. Despite tough conditions, unskilled rural work was paid about 10,000 Rupiah per day, an amount equivalent to less than one Euro, that would barely cover the average daily expense for the cigarettes of a male smoker. As many West Acehnese people told me, agriculture, driven by the comparatively high rates of oil palm kernels, promised good yield results in the long term, but did not pay off quickly³. Of course, the money of such slow-paced economy collided with the much quicker temporalities of logging and mining. As I personally witnessed, during the most fortunate expeditions, loggers and pitmen happened to earn a million rupiah or so (about 60 Euro) in a matter of days.



Figure 1. Once a goldminer, this recently married Acehnese man has been working in agriculture for a few years. Here he talks with his wife, whose family owns some farmland, about planting chillies and other crops. Krueng Sabee, Aceh, Indonesia, August 2017 (Photo: Giacomo Tabacco)

In post-disaster West Aceh, the traditional exclusion of men from agriculture tended to be replaced by more nuanced dynamics. On the one side, a matrifocal tendency still existed and most of the women that I encountered owned at least a piece of land or a small orchard. However, in today's cash economy, such enclosures and the yields they brought in were often measly compared to the numerous material necessities of the household. On the other side, men understood agriculture as second-choice work and disliked

3 In the last couple of years, the global prices of natural rubber collapsed. Thus, the crops that, together with oil palm, constituted the backbone of West Acehnese rural economy were patchouli bushes, areca palms and rice.

rural life. They also knew that agrarian jobs were often the only available occupations in the out-of-the-way district they resided in, especially after the mining economies slowed down, and thus took such jobs, at least temporarily.

Peasants who sought fortune, with dreams of conjugal partnership and urges to disengage

The biography of Nurdin, a long-time friend of mine who was 25 when we first became acquainted in 2013, is an emblematic example of a young man's life in post-disaster West Aceh. Like most of his peers in Krueng Sa-bee, he is the offspring of a family of farmers. Throughout Nurdin's childhood, his mother and his maternal grandmother possessed a couple of wet paddies each, a few rows of areca palm by their houses and a small plantation of rubber trees up in the nearby mountains that they diligently farmed to provide the household with food and cash. However, at the peak of the conflict in the early 2000s, the Indonesian army forcibly displaced Nurdin's family and most of the other villagers to coastal camps, in order to dismantle resistance's support networks in the countryside. In those months, the unguarded houses and granaries were repeatedly raided by rebels and army personnel, and agricultural land became unproductive and was abandoned until the tsunami and the end of the hostilities. As for Nurdin's father, he took part in frontier logging expeditions, despite not being directly implicated in GAM's resistance, but was killed in a log truck accident well before the displacement events, whilst his two sons were still young.

Nurdin and his peers gambled on the "frontier capitalism"

Nurdin spent his childhood and adolescence in a violent milieu. At that time Aceh was at war and the systematic privation of people's basic needs and human rights was the norm, especially in the countryside and for those Acehnese who could not afford to flee. Then came the tsunami, the peace agreements and the massive reconstruction efforts that allowed Nurdin to receive free vocational education and get a good job in the building sector. It was in this fortunate period that he met his first girlfriend, fell in love with her and planned marriage, the couple wished to celebrate as soon as Nurdin succeeded in putting aside the adequate capital to pay the bride's dowry.

However, Nurdin's professional career and his dreams of a stable hetero-normative partnership were bound to stall. In a matter of few years since the tsunami, the reconstruction-related jobs gradually decreased, as did the recovery funds, revealing fragile economic structures, lack of political planning and inadequate investments to create jobs in the long term. Such ad-

ministrative failures rapidly reversed the post-disaster euphoria and swelled the ranks of the many people already out of work.

As I have mentioned above, soon after these events and aside from the agricultural revival, West Acehnese men resumed their traditional occupation of “frontier capitalism in motion” that had been slightly disrupted by the overwhelming focus on the re-building of the region. Once again, these ventures were marked by a sequence of brief speculative seasons, consisting of the more visible and fast extraction of gold and semi-precious gemstones, and in the extra-legal and often hidden smuggling of ivory and logs. The intermittent economic exploitation of these short-lived “eldorados” served as a temporary, albeit effective, instrument to bridge the severe employment gaps and to foster limited prosperity for many Acehnese men, even for those who occupied the lower sections in the hierarchy of the resources’ utilization.

Forced to postpone his conjugal plans by socio-economic circumstances, Nurdin trusted that the racialized and gendered landscape of riches would bear fruit for him, being Acehnese and a man, and did not seek a new career abroad, as a number of his peers decided to do. He remained at his widowed mother’s place and became a keen hunter for gold and other minerals in the nearby mountains. After all, especially during the gold boom, miners who worked under local investors could build nice nest eggs and usually earned much more than their fellows who worked construction overseas.

The stimulation of rash consumption as a result of fast money for men

One night, as he was looking back at his life over a cup of coffee, Nurdin confidentially told me that an episode he experienced a couple of weeks before indelibly marked his biography and induced retrospective consideration. While he was scanning the forested slopes for logging sites with a bunch of companions, he came across a large herd of wild elephants. On that occasion, the sight of so many animals and the attainability of their valuable tusks instilled into his mind the belief that the West Acehnese forest was a landscape worth exploring further.

In other words, he concluded that the potential yield of hunting natural commodities outweighed the disadvantages of working in a profoundly hierarchical and thus unstable environment. He also explained to me that the ivory tusks he saw materialized his hopes of becoming the head of a pious Muslim family and of affording a better education for his children than the sporadic one he received. As Nurdin told me, he was committed to becoming “someone with responsibilities,” self-disciplining his behaviour and transforming into a householder who could provide for his wife and spoil his children. In doing this, he was reiterating the pattern laid down by global Islam that had been partly imported to Aceh from outside, and had

easily taken root in post-disaster society. This line of thinking made him even more determined to carry on with mining and to keep an eye out for other rumoured forestal assets.

Eventually, Nurdin and his friends gave up seizing the ivory, mainly because they could not afford to bribe the rangers that patrolled the area and had not got the equipment to poison so many elephants. On one hand experiencing the understandable delusion of missing the opportunity of setting money aside for marriage or other sensible necessities, Nurdin and his peers were also disappointed for frivolous reasons. On one night, they failed to secure some pocket money, a rare and very appreciated commodity in the village economies, wherein the little cash that got to the household quickly disappeared. Such pocket money could have been used to gain a new handset, to partake in the local volleyball championships and to lounge about a food stall with girls in the busy streets of Krueng Sabee, a coastal town located half an hour from Nurdin's out-of-the-way village.

As it turned out, the mining environment and all the other hubs of natural resource utilization that I visited were sites wherein two antithetical dynamics became intertwined. On one hand, men appreciated that in the Acehnese rural society they had to attain adulthood through alignment to the exemplary stereotypes of Muslim masculinity, and that premarital or extramarital sexual relations were out of the question. To do so, they worked hard, disciplined their bodies and acted as prudent managers of their capital. On the other hand, most of the Acehnese men, especially those who could afford it from their partaking in frontier capitalism, also liked squandering their money on outings and goods, relieving themselves of their long term responsibilities.

In most of the cases, such forms of consumption-driven fun and pleasure did not actually disrupt marriage dreams and, on the contrary, they overlapped with them. For example, boys could flirt with girls, by chatting at food kiosks and text messaging, without calling off their "official" courtship. Gold and stone mining, and logging too, offered a perfect combination of advantages. First, such activities brought in capital for future marriages and everyday cash for disengagement. Secondly, because they were often characterized by residential or semi-residential schemes, resource extraction allowed many Acehnese men to temporally leave their rural communities, to free themselves from the many chores at home, and to escape the strict social control at their villages.

Work ethics, fatigue and hazards

In West Aceh, like everywhere in the world, artisanal mining is a tough occupation. It is financially hazardous for the financiers. During the last mining season, although production costs were much lower than those required

in industrial mining, investments to run a single shaft stood at around 2 million Rupiah per week (about 100 Euro). It is no coincidence that many financiers merged and created cooperatives that allowed them to share the most expensive tools, such as the diesel generators and the pneumatic hammers.

As for the miners and the technicians, however, the risks were not economic. In fact, these workers did not invest money to take part in the gold rush: the Javanese travelled to Aceh at the expense of their bosses, while the local miners could easily reach the mining spots with a borrowed motorbike or even on foot. In addition, financiers provided their employees with complimentary food, cigarettes and lodging during the entire duration of the mineral recovery. The hazards that affected the workers were essentially physical.

First, underground digging is intrinsically dangerous. During rosters of more than 6 hours, the “hammer-ers”, the most exposed miners who worked at the bottom of the shaft, struck the hard rock, absorbed the vibrations generated by their hammers, and breathed in shards of dust and stone. Work was not easier for the surface labourers, who had to manually lift the heavy ore from the underground tunnels and pre-grinder it. As a result, the great majority of the miners who I encountered viewed gold mining as a particularly tiresome profession, and seldom worked at the mines for more than a couple of consecutive months.

Secondly, malaria, an endemic disease in the Acehnese forests, afflicted all the miners, who often became infected because they stayed overnight by the pits without adequate protection. In fact, they were cyclically forced to suspend their tasks to be hospitalized for a couple of days at nearby dispensaries and receive symptomatic therapies. In addition, numerous professional accidents threatened the lives of the workers. Frequently, the wooden scaffolding that punctured the tunnels got weakened by the humidity of the underground water and sank under the weight of the mountain and the vibrations of the hammers of adjacent passageways. The recurrent land collapses caused injuries and killed dozens of men. Nurdin and the other miners that I interviewed correctly dubbed the mining enclosure “graveyard of less fortunate fellows”.

In spite of the many financial risks and health hazards, concerns tended to fade away as soon as the prospectors and the miners had gold or stones in their hands. After all, the rich mineralization of the West Acehnese subsoil guaranteed good profits for those who joined the clientelistic networks of gold exploitation. In a matter of few weeks, the average financier could earn up to 100,000,000 Rupiah (about 7,000 Euros), while the employees got around 10,000,000 Rupiah (about 700 Euros). Accounting for the overall economic performance of the 2007-2014 mining season, it can be estimated that the main entrepreneurs, thanks to uninterrupted investment, gained

the equivalent of the value of a handful of medium-sized cars or agricultural properties worth over 2,000 hectares. As for the luckiest miners, they managed to set aside about fifty million Rupiah, equivalent to a couple of motorbikes, a small piece of farmland and countless treats of little monetary value but high emotional worth.

The impermanence of “hot money”

The economic significance of artisanal mining has been widely debated within the social sciences. In particular, Jamon Halvaksz (2008), Lorenzo D’Angelo (2014) and Jeroen Cuvelier (2011), who studied the impacts of small-scale mining in the diverse contexts of Papua, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo respectively, emphasized that the extractive ventures usually entail short temporalities and impermanent money for the stakeholders. In other words, low-technology mining follows cyclical trajectories. It is kicked off by the sudden discovery of the mineral deposits, then followed by a massive flow of ore and cash, and it finally dries up because of soil exhaustion. The Acehnese mining bubble observed the same up-and-down shifts and after about five years of extraordinary gold recovery (2009-2013) the gold veins had dried up. In Aceh, people agreed that, at every stage of the production chain, mining revenues resulted in “hot money” (*uang panas*). To Nurdin, for instance, “hot money” meant:

the money that you get easily. Ten, even twenty million Rupiah in a few days. However, “hot money” also represents the money you spend in a hurry. Easy to earn, easy to disappear (May 2014).

As long as the gold mines were productive, such “hot money” streamed to the villages and fuelled the set of mixed financial necessities that I laid out above (for a further discussion of the notions of ‘cold money’ and ‘hot money’ see Schreer 2016, pp. 122, 222). Firstly, it was used to cover the daily expenses of the household, to balance the debts and to deal with the recurrent bad harvests. Secondly, it was spent to have fun and to treat the girls, and set apart for dowries and other long-term projects. In my experience, especially in the mining heydays, the incomes of the miners and the prospectors that were high but intermittent barely kept up with the diverse individual and family needs. It is no coincidence that many miners complained about the money literally disappearing from their wallets.

Sometimes, hard work did not bring any money

Nurdin did not have the chance to experience the impermanence of his earnings. Unfortunately, he was one of the few gold-hunters who experi-

enced the extreme consequences of the informality of the Acehnese mining pattern, the clientelistic approach to resource utilization, and the irregular mineralization of the soil. Such negative consequences built upon the ordinary health hazards and money impermanence that miners had to confront with.

For more than a year, together with his migrant and local co-workers, he hammered underground rocks in shifts of up to 12 hours a day but failed to align with the gold rush and thus did not find the precious metal. In miners’ and prospectors’ words, gold was always “around the corner”, but the tunnel not always deep enough to tap the high-grade ore or too flooded to carry on digging. Under the artisanal mining scheme that I illustrate, employees did not receive a wage but were given shares of the profits by their patrons. In case of unsuccessful explorations, employers did not take the blame for the failures of their enterprises and the miners ended up working for free.

Interestingly, employees like Nurdin, who invested much of their energy for nothing, agreed on the unfairness of such circumstances. They also realized that the basic tunnelling skills they learned and the loyalty they demonstrated towards their patrons would not help them in finding a new job, once gold mining went bankrupt in their region. Nevertheless, as people at the bottom of the mining hierarchy and poorly connected to the political elites, Nurdin and those in the same professional condition had few chances of asserting themselves in front of their bosses or establishing their own shaft. Finally, such volatility of the mining frameworks worsened to the post-disaster chronic lack of permanent, high-yielding and non-agricultural employment, in particular for unqualified rural people.

Conclusion: gendered precariousness

In this paper, I have analysed the gendered dynamics that made up the small-scale cultivation of cash crops and the artisanal exploitation of minerals and other commodities in post-disaster West Aceh. I have highlighted that while agriculture still echoed matrifocal tendencies, the frontier entrepreneurship and capitalism towards logs, gold and semi-precious gemstones revived both the traditional resource-driven mobility of the male villagers, and the clientelistic scheme of the conflict years.

I have argued that the trust of West Acehnese men in the reliability of the racialized and gender forest of riches was not misplaced, and that dozens of them thrived on gold and stone mining, without the disadvantages of long range mobility. However, I have demonstrated that men’s need to fulfil their pressing conjugal expectations clashed with the clientelistic nature and the contingencies of mineral extraction. On the one side, the hierarchical rings of forestal exploitation were often unequal structures of re-distribution of

the wealth that burdened the men who occupied the lower positions in the hierarchy with the financial risks of speculative mining. On the other side, hazardous life at the frontiers exposed men to a different variety of risks, including disease and death.

Finally, I have suggested that village young men often understood hetero-normative conjugality as the necessary condition to reach adulthood, but also to share worldly interests. Thus, they accepted the harmful conditions of frontier mining to finance their planned marriages and to attempt to align, at least in a transitory way, to a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

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