

## Mining Morals, Muck and Akan Gold in New York City

### Abstract

Among Akan spirit preachers at shrines in New York, gold, so central to Akan integrity and wealth, and gold weights, once used to measure gold dust and now the epitome of West African artefact, are at the centre of fluid and contestable moral topographies, appealing to spiritual forces and Akan values and ethical codes surrounding economic responsibility and social obligation in a get-rich-quick New York marketplace. Remaking Manhattan's ethical geographies, from the standpoint of a transnational Akan morality, occult narratives contour the landfill sites of Staten Island and the Ghanaian rivers and forests polluted by cyanide, sulphuric acid and other mining chemicals in Obuasi, the centre of gold mining in the Southern Asante Region. A map of muck and morals is plotted as shrine discourses about gold provide a critical commentary on the moral conventions of wealth creation, accumulation and desire among a diasporic community.

### Key words

Akan spirit preachers, gold, wealth, New York

It is widely accepted that West African witchcraft beliefs are forces of moral critique and flourish as commentaries on the 'corrupt' workings of the global economy and on the 'immoral' conduct of wealthy patrons in the African postcolony (Niehaus 2001; Ashforth 2005; Geschiere 2013). Among Akan spirit preachers (abayifo) practising at shrines in New York, witchcraft beliefs and demonised rumours are at the heart of emergent moral orders that make a distinction between geographical cartographies and Ghanaian moral topographies, shaped out of the experiences of life in New York City. Such an evaluation is happening at a particular moment of economic vacillation as the pursuit of great riches and excessive materialistic consumption is both publically admired and disdained. While the illegal escapades of Wall Street magnates and billionaire financiers have been widely documented, Ndjio (2008) points to new capitalist practices which straddle the lawful and the illicit and which embody the ambition of many African "subversive" entrepreneurs to "reinvent" the "ethical" codes of global capitalism and encourage a new ethos of accumulation (2008:5). Ndjio, for example, notes the rise of the feymanja in Cameroon, mainly disenfranchised youth, who have become emblems of African "economic

adventurers” (Abbink 2012:11). Likewise in Ghana, the popularity of Sanwara, or internet scamming among Ghanaian youth, who often endure dire economic circumstances, has not gone unnoticed by Akan shrine preachers as young fraudsters consult ‘juju men’ in Ghana and enact ‘fetish rituals’ in order to compel their victims to hand over their bank account details. The desire of Sawara criminals for spiritual wealth known as sikaduro, or ‘blood money’, ties into a central tenet of popular Akan occult discourses where the immoral or ‘selfish’ accumulation of wealth is often associated with witchcraft practices and money that is magically created ‘out of nothing’. At shrines in New York, whether a desire to win lotto jackpots or a pressing hunger for an easy life, selfish money refers to ‘dirty’ or ‘quick’ wealth and an occult affluence that appears to be “disconnected from hard work and production and spent on pleasure-seeking” (Garritano 2013: 189). The witch (obayifo), a member of the extended kinship network, is believed to be a greedy and bitter woman who targets the riches of her more prosperous relatives (Meyer 1998). She selfishly hoards her own wealth but always craves more. She frightens the loved ones of her victims as the price paid for the enjoyment of good fortune and a life she secretly covets. She vengefully attempts to hinder her sufferers’ financial opportunities and cause misfortune (Rattray 1927; Debrunner 1958). Alternatively, she can trick her unsuspecting prey by posing as a benefactor or philanthropist into accepting her satanic help with the instant promise of luxury brands of clothes, expensive cars and mansions (Garritano 2013). Once in her clutches she bribes ‘indulgent’ individuals into committing evil deeds. She may threaten to kill her victims if they resist. In other words, although money may have a liberating effect for its owner, it can lead also to an asocial denial of community and of wider social and economic responsibilities (Lentz 1998). Witchcraft speculation is talk about people when they are not present, and it stretches to encompass individuals at ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ as wealth can contribute to their health, or bring about their demise, money being perceived as both a blessing and a curse.

In the process of mapping the human cost of the excessive accumulation of wealth in the global economy, spirit preachers excavate a rich vein of Asante gold in the country and its diaspora, particularly in New York City. Bortolot (2003) illustrates how Akan gold is an intricate component of Akan belief, an earthly counterpart to the sun and the physical manifestation of life’s vitality. McCaskie (1981) records how in nineteenth century Asante, for powerful individuals, the private accumulation of wealth was a public duty and social status measured in gold. Those who had reached a particular level of wealth displayed this with the adornment of gold (McCaskie 1981). In its celebratory aspect, like other Akan

artefacts, gold transmits what Labi (2009) translates as abakwasen, meaning important information about values, incidents, beliefs and philosophies (2009: 43). If a person accumulated substantial wealth, they were made an abirempon, a businessman or entrepreneur that meant “Big Man” (McCaskie 1981: 143) and were awarded the elephant tail, a way of encouraging the creation of private wealth for public recognition (McCaskie 1981). Worn around the waist, the elephant tail signified that its wearer surpassed all others in terms of the ownership of gold and the possession of civic power (Wilks 1975; Leyten 1979; McCaskie 1981).

Among the Ghanaian diaspora today, the display of wealth and artefact becomes illustrative, as Fumanti (2013) demonstrates, of a uniquely Akan aesthetic that allows Ghanaians to reassert their ontological presence in the world and renders them “realised in linguistic terms, through proverbs, mottoes and wise sayings” (2013: 200). The exhibition of wealth and its associated artefacts, writes Fumanti (2013), also allows individual Ghanaians to reclaim their place in the world, to assert and reassert their moral, economic and social identity in strange and alien settings (2013: 217). People want to show their success and symbolise it through the wearing of kente cloth inscribed, for example, with proverbs and adinkra symbols (Fumanti 2013: 209).

While the cornerstone of Akan artefact lies in its visibility and public display in order to observe economic success (Fumanti 2013), wealth also remains, on the one hand, “the kind that feeds the people”, but, on the other, “the kind that eats them” (Ferguson 2006:73). Among Akan spirit preachers in New York, in response to such ambivalent moralities concerning wealth accumulation, exclusion and aspersion, a moral politics is conducted using shrine objects to probe the ethical landscape of New York City. In this process, the urban sub terrain conflates with the mysteries of wealth production. It is common at Akan shrines to see objects such as gold weights, the epitome of West African artefact, in the shape of small figurines – animals and humans depicting various actions – often mass-produced objects bought by relatives in Ghana or from street vendors uptown in Harlem. Made from brass, and originally used to measure gold dust, they are produced in bulk for the tourist market in different types: geometric patterns, seated Paramount Chiefs and depictions of people engaged in both everyday activities and intimate acts (McLeod 1971, 1987; Garrard 1980). Rattray (1927) listed over fifty-three Adinkra sayings and messages, which relate to the morality of the gold weight. For example, the proverb for the mythological, backward-facing Sankofa bird encourages one to learn from and correct the mistakes of the past (Rattray

1927). Also a miniature golden crocodile with two heads and tails but only a single stomach represents a proverb concerning the “futility of struggle within a group” (see also Garrard 1975:19). The gold horned antelope figurine speaks to the uselessness of after-the-fact regret (see also Bassing 1970; Appiah 1977). Although of no economic value, gold weights remain important to shrine priests because they symbolise moral laws like, ironically, “the ones? Marvel Iron Man lives by” and signify to shrine clients that although the shrine may look “bank poor” it is strong and has good character.

Yet in New York, these valuations are increasingly confounded by the disruption and displacement of gold-based accumulation to extend in new directions. For “moral topographies are always in a process of becoming and are intimately connected to the past and to peoples’ wishes and fears” (Trovalla 2011:77). Among shrine preachers, public space has become privatised to produce complex, moral representations of sacredness and dirt. Moreover, the shrine construction of cognitive maps, questions the very etiquette of New York’s millionaires and the industrial philanthropists who founded New York’s infrastructure. In New York City, occult narratives discovered at spirit shrines about gold and the accumulation of wealth are part of a wider cultural reinforcement of moral personhood and ethical responsibilities and obligations. These allow for a negotiation of morality among Ghanaians across a global, historical and industrial landscape. This encompasses the ‘immoral’ trading of slaves in the nineteenth century, gold mining in West Africa by large corporations, as well as the ruthless acquisition of money and alleged business circumvention of moral codes and working practices in Manhattan today.

### **Concealed dirt, wealth and immorality**

Among growing waves of Ghanaian migrants to the United States since the 1980s, especially, in the last fifteen years, Akan spirit preachers are often unregistered aliens and immigrants who also work as street vendors, store assistants, waiters and entrepreneurs to supplement their income as shrine priests. The “fetish priest”, a derogatory term used by shrine critics in New York, is, however, viewed with much suspicion. Pentecostals especially believe Akan preachers to be conmen and fraudsters. However, there is also a fear held, even by shrine detractors, about the potentially dangerous power of “bad juju” and the satanic magic of the “fetish priest”. Others believe that shrine preachers encourage the pursuit of revenge and crime through the selling of evil talismans and occult medicines, and perpetrate the desire for blood money rather than curtail it. Although there are few shrines found today in New York,

in response to the hostility they provoke, shrines remain deeply secret places. This is not least because shrine clients come to the shrine for a variety of clandestine reasons – amongst other issues, cocaine addiction, debt, and relationship troubles. The fear of being exposed as a client of the shrine or, worse, being accused of witchcraft, is a taboo subject that is rarely spoken about in public, and means that shrine practices remain largely invisible.

Fieldwork was originally conducted among Akan spirit shrines in Dormaa-Ahenkro, Ghana. Keeping in touch with shrine priests I was able, over a period of many years, to trace their movements as they, or people associated with my research on witchcraft, migrated to the United States and Europe. Six years of fieldwork was subsequently undertaken among shrines hidden throughout Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx. Akan preachers trace the origin of their spirit shrines to the same Asante shrine gods, which are found throughout the Akan Region of Ghana (Goody 1957; Field 1960). Yet, because of their illegal status, Akan preachers cannot return home in spite of the fluidity of persons and wealth around them. In a sense therefore, they attempt to hold morality ‘in place’ at their shrines.

Sonny arrived in New York in 2001. Sonny found his shrine god (obosom) in Lower Manhattan, crossing the Atlantic, bobbing in a gas canister on the small waves of the East River. Calling to Sonny, who pulled him out of the water with a fishing net, the spirit (sunsum) of the god was disguised by Sonny in a Jack Daniels bottle stuffed with twigs and leaves, and taken on the subway to his permanent altar, a small makeshift space, disguised behind crates in the basement of Sonny’s apartment building in Bedford–Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Here Sonny is possessed by the god on regular occasions and speaks with his voice during these times. During possession, Sonny carries his shrine god in a brass pan. This enables Sonny to communicate with the god. While the shrine god is well versed in fighting evil and of upholding Akan goodness in New York City, Sonny tells how the god needs additional help in fighting crime. Despite having one of the lowest crime rates in the United States, New York is portrayed at the shrine as it was in the 1970s, a hyper real city of drug addicts, pimps and prostitutes on Skid Row, on the verge of moral collapse, where people slept on the subway and on the streets in the Bowery down on the Lower East Side. In order to protect his god from the delinquency found in the city, Sonny wraps the whiskey bottle containing the shrine god in kente cloth, embodying of strong Akan values. In addition, to help the god in his fight against witchcraft and evil, found at the shrine is a gold weight or magical suman (talisman).

Hidden in a brown paper bag, the miniature Akan gold weight depicts a couple having sex. The sunsum, or spirit, of the gold weight is believed to be “the child” of the god, *a* born and bred New Yorker, whose sunsum is described, by Sonny, to be so powerful that ordinary people cannot look at the gold weight without becoming blind. Believed by Sonny to be able to track witchcraft, the sunsum of the gold weight can also smell out corruption and is well versed in “Yankee” dreams including the private pursuit of money and material dreams. Knowing much about gold, the suman has the ability, to drill down into the depths of human despair and into the debris and flotsam discovered at the core of New York life. Here is revealed the figure of Satan and his followers who pursue profit at any cost.

The epitome of concealed dirt is held in the Federal Reserve Vault on 31<sup>st</sup> Street. Gold custody on behalf of the United States and foreign governments is in the vault in the basement. At present, approximately 7,000 tonnes of gold is stored fifty feet beneath sea level, supported by the bedrock of Manhattan. Shrine preachers speak of their gods metaphorically cleaning the streets of New York using pressure hoses to wash away the hoarded gold dust powder that rises up through the subway vents. The contaminated spirits of dishonoured dead ancestors are stamped on the side of gold bars as a protest about the bad death suffered by West Africans at the hands of rich American industrialists. This new imprint replaces standard information about the melt of a bar and when a bar was cast.

Also of special interest to Sonny is that much of Lower Manhattan is built on landfill before Staten Island’s ‘Fresh Kills’, a salt marshland, was converted for similar purposes. Sonny tells of the biggest electronic waste dump in the world in Agbogbloshie, outside of Accra. Here, broken computers and other electronic devices are smashed by young boys for copper. High rates of cancer and respiratory diseases are also found among nearby communities because of the toxic chemicals associated with refuse. Likewise in Manhattan, declares Sonny, at decades-old landfill, waste mixes together with gold to create “diedie... diarrhoea and vomit”. Dirt symbolises physical and moral decay (Van der Geest 1998). Oburu ne ho (he is dirty – literally, his body is fermenting) is a very deprecatory term. Such a person is called obufoo, a habitually dirty person who is not respected and refers in this instance by preachers to a Ghanaian person who is after quick wealth. This type of individual is believed to be obsessed with American consumerism and a materialistic, disposable culture. They metaphorically eat American refuse, the leftover hot dogs, burgers, nuts and frosty Gatorades drinks, bought from carts that mix with other bits of scrap, fluid and crumbs into the streets of the city. Sonny expresses how the dirty entrepreneur is enticed by muck, such as that found

on the sidewalks of New York, which in spite of its grime also sparkles, due to a mineral called mica, a silicate that also shines to make tinted walkways. New York City is also riddled with gems found on the dirty city streets, particularly in the Diamond District. On 47<sup>th</sup> Street, discredited shrine gods, it is said by Akan preachers, scavenge for gold, diamonds and rubies among the garbage. In the cosmological world of the gods, they use pans and other instruments borrowed from the dead spirits of nineteenth century gold prospectors. They later sell stones, via the intermediaries of witches, who in their ordinary, everyday lives, pass these on to the many gem stores found in Midtown Manhattan.

At Sonny's shrine, the spirit of the figurative gold weight previously described has the ability to spot deceitful business practices where, said Sonny, dirty businesspeople bury illicit gold deep beneath the ground in Manhattan. In effect, the figurine acts as the X-ray eyes of the shrine god. It is able to excavate the grime and muck beneath the surface of criminal activity while the god probes business activities in clear view above ground. Dirt, or rather the abhorrence of it, plays a central role in the surveillance by the god of life. To say that someone is dirty and engaged in double-dealing and criminal activities is almost a rejection of the whole person and the threat of an early death (Van der Geest 1998). Atantanee is dirt which is most detestable, coming from inside the body: vomit, phlegm, menstruation blood as described by many shrine gods, urine or faeces (Van der Geest 2002a). Some shrine preachers remember the kruni in Accra whose job it was, at night, to empty shit into buckets gathered from the latrines of private dwellers (Van der Geest 2000b). Van der Geest (2002a) describes the kruni as literally "the people of the night" and the "personification of the Akan horror of shit" (2002a: 24). Shrine preachers cry of "golden shit" and "gold plated faeces" in reference to crooked entrepreneurs who spew up their bad deeds upon confession of their sins, and they repeat how the most crooked businesspeople are thieves who will suffer 'short' lives. In Akan society, any death that cuts short what should be a long life full of accomplishments is a bad one (Van der Geest 2004). Bad death is generally grouped into two categories: atɔfowuo and ammumuwuo. Deaths from lorry accidents, suicide, drowning, and victims of homicides are all atɔfowuo (Crentsil 2005:61). Sonny, in particular, specialises in atɔfowuo, or violent death; how to avoid 'bad' death and the roaming spirit of the deceased; and lessening the repercussions for surviving relatives of a sudden, traumatic death of a person who cannot make their way to meet with the spiritual ancestors, thereby blocking the sharing of prosperity and becoming a source of immorality, dirt and selfishness (Crentsil 2005).

## **Regulatory landscapes and social obligation**

Occult discourses serve to draw attention to the malpractices of 'Big Men' and their moral impoverishment (Shaw, 1997; Parish 2005). Garritano (2013) shows how Ghanaian occult movies "expose the destructive desires of the powerful and wealthy patriarchs who cannibalize vulnerable women and children to maintain their ostentatious status" (2013: 185). A truly powerful person with hard earned wealth meets social obligations. He or she is honest and available to others, a benefactor who has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated, swindled and cheated. Corrupt, African businessmen come to the shrine to repent for their dishonest business practices including, for example, selling dodgy watches, worthless cell phones and fake lotto tickets. These cons, report shrines, produce disappearing dollars or easy money benefiting only the swindler.

Sonny articulated his horror of cheating in an episode that involved a Ghanaian young entrepreneur who once came to a shrine for help with his scams. The youth was a con artist with an unethical mode of accumulation, tricking unsuspecting victims into buying fake gemstones and fraudulent African mining licences. The trickster hid the mock gems, wrapped in paper, in the cistern of a nightclub lavatory. Sonny compared the action of wrapping these ill-gotten stones, though copies, in the toilet to the spiritual abomination of "smothering crap ... the souls of ... ancestors." Sonny recalled in horror the sanitation problems of Accra, which he likened to the moral codes of those who "worship at the altar of the dollar". As Van Der Geest (2002a) declares, in Accra

around most of the public toilets, poor and dilapidated infrastructure for liquid waste management ... deficient management of existing toilet facilities, indiscriminate defecation in open spaces ... irregular collection of liquid waste from septic tanks, as well as from pan latrines (2002a:23).

Sonny contrasts the Accra latrine system with that of the New York sanitation system which, in his words, "ate shit and chop" because it was so efficient and allowed excrement "to disappear without trace" a metaphor he extends to the many criminals and individuals with dubious values in New York, who in his words, "get away with... bad stuff". However, in response to the extremely technologically advanced New York sanitation flushing system, the shrine god also has at his disposal an army of helpers known in Ghana as dwarfs (mmoatia). Little spiritual creatures, described by the Akan as naughty and mischievous, they run about



the sewers of Manhattan throwing “shit that sticks” at corrupt African officials and powerful Ghanaian businesspeople who indulge in excessive material consumption. The dwarfs steal their Master and Visa cards flinging them down subway grates. They make their victims beg for mercy and come to the shrine for help before the contents of their wallets disappear completely. Once humbled, said Sonny, individuals are questioned at shrines about their greed and their shady ethical codes. They are reminded of the Akan way of rectitude and an ethics of business conduct which is allegedly missing. This is especially the case in New York City where, in spite of superb sanitation disposal, supervised by ‘New York’s strongest’, the widespread nickname for the NYC department of sanitation, moral codes remain in the john, American slang for the lavatory.

In New York, sacred discourses at shrines extend to create a regulatory moral landscape in a city seemingly littered with personal demeanours. This generates a spiritual intercourse between the dirty, selfish ‘individual’ and literally the sewage flowing beneath the city. Shrine preachers tell of their spiritual ancestors being swathed in gold, but of also recognising how the excessive accumulation of gold can lead to feelings of craving and envy. “It asserts social values – when it is heard and reflects shifts in credibility and reception” (Whyte 2000: 63). The indulgent display of fortune becomes questionable through narratives about the moral danger of too much conspicuous consumption. The accumulation of material wealth without obligation is equated by many Ghanaians to be “witches gold” or wealth made out of a bargain with the witch, sikaduro, creating a great mountain of dishonesty. Interestingly, some shrine clients believe that such a stash of blood money is hidden in City Hall, eating away at the good character of workers and misleading honest government employees to becoming fiscally irresponsible in return for instant reward.

Witchcraft discourses at shrines concerning accumulation in New York therefore reflect real fears and are a form of reporting allegedly dishonest behaviour. It is both “jealousy and success” (Geschiere 2002: 814). The idea of accumulation is therefore always accompanied by a cluster of narratives about existing relations of obligation and responsibility and also generosity and kindness, the hallmarks of goodness in Akan morality (Fumanti 2013: 204). This produces a certain diasporic narrative that is at once inclusionary and exclusionary (Werbner 2013). In New York, powerful Ghanaians remain wary that given the positions of authority and influence that they have achieved, they may also be seen to be engaging in hidden or illegitimate activities. Or worse, they may be viewed as financial opportunists by less well-off relatives who are secretly envious of their success. This complex positioning of

the relatively affluent person among the transnational kinship networks lead to occult narratives providing a way of negotiating sensitive issues of economic power and its abuse in different social settings (Parish 2005). While, on the whole, wealth and achievement are things to celebrate and display, it is not for those who do not share their wealth responsibly, or for those who do not have the welfare of the community at heart and engage in the obsessive pursuit of money for its own sake.

### **Gold mining in Obuasi**

In addition to exploring the underground sanitation system of New York City, the disruptive geology of gold mining in Ghana is also called upon to explicate Akan views of wealth as emplaced rather than being free-floating values. Particular disgust is directed by shrine preachers, animated by gossip via numerous cell phone calls with extended family members throughout West Africa, towards gold mining corporations in the Asante Region. Corporate power, it is alleged, mimics that of the greedy witch who seeks to strip the cocoa plant of its vitality and life. Likewise, the industrial corporation strips the fertile soil.

Obuasi, the so-called Golden City, a Southern Asante town, is the headquarters of AngloGold Ashanti's Ghanaian operation and the city's entire economy is based on gold mining. This is to the detriment, repeats Sonny, of the inhabitants and the landscape as illegal mining camps devastate the forests. Green (2007) records how open-cast mines have transformed rainforest into malarial swamps and how the farmland and local streams and rivers used for fishing and irrigation are toxic (see also Action Age 2006: 25). Obuasi oranges are cultivated on contaminated land. Standpipes lie broken (see Garvin 2006). Dead fish and animals strew the environment (Green 2007). These days it is not profitable to mine underground, so companies use open-cast mining methods and cyanide leaching to extract gold (Social Watch 2012). The ore extracted from the earth is drizzled with cyanide to separate out the gold in a process called cyanide heap leaching (Green 2007). Cyanide has leaked due to flooding, contaminating local schools and leading to the abandonment of villages (Social Watch 2012). Huge doomsday-like, grey slag heaps pile up behind native villages (WACAM). Sulphuric acid flows from the slag heaps into people's homes (Green 2007). But miners, even in the illegal camps, have no control over what nuggets sell for – that's set in markets in New York and London.

Shrine gossip in New York discloses witches who work as intermediaries for the mining industry and who have made bargains with the devil to corner the market in the selling of

gold bars. Witches, according to Sonny, own local gold trading offices in Obuasi, paying a pittance for locally discovered minerals. They engage in a speculative mania, a feeding stupor, which sucks the financial lifeblood from 'good' investment opportunities and helps to drain the life blood and wealth of local communities. The relentless accumulation of wealth at the expense of social values becomes the key trait of both the witch and the CEO of the large mining corporation. Private conversation about witchcraft among shrine priests in Asante Region, repeated over time to preachers in New York, whispers how these same mining companies employ zombie children in their gold mines – indeed over 350,000 children are believed to work in mines in West Africa (Action Age 2006: 35). Many children today simply drop out of school in order to strike it rich. They can be seen digging the same ditch for six months at a time in order to find gold nuggets (Green 2007). Their lungs are polluted by chemicals which makes their eyes bulge and their noses bleed (Green 2007). Popular occult discourses, at shrines reveal of 'zombies' covered in cyanide dust, their eyes plucked out by vultures as their skin falls off their skeletons. Rumours fly between shrine preachers, aided by modern technology, of how the largest uncut gold bars are hidden inside the stomachs of the wealthiest Ghanaian patrons who practise a type of economic cannibalism and of the mine owner, who strips the worker to the bone, in pursuit said one preacher, of "more cedi", the Ghanaian currency.

At shrines, stirred by bad news from a homeland that they cannot return to, preachers tell of seeing the spirits of the dead covered in burns as the race for profit ever increases and miners work without sleep for days at a time. Local managers of the gold mines drink with Satan, and put more and more pressure on the worker to mine harder and to increase their productivity of gold bars. The witch also engages in satanic avarice, destroying whole villages to make way for new mining opportunities. She hunts for those affluent businesspeople whose wealth she can shred. One of the main ways of doing this, popular shrine gossip reflects, is through sex: the witch secretes bodily fluid over her victims, which can cause them to lose their minds, as it smells of gold dust. In the hunt of the wealthy for gold, as the witch hunts for sex, the smell of gold dust sends entrepreneurs into a stupor and a frenzy of sexual desire and lust in which they forget about their loved ones and family. Shrine narratives tell of merciless relatives who ask the witch to slash their arms and legs with the "devil's knife" and to rub "satanic" gold dust into the wound, hoping that their blood will turn to gold. This action is at shrines seen as part of a larger mining industry that devalues and destroys social relationships at the expense of the private lust for gold.

The present economic prosperity of New York is taken as proof by many preachers of a terrible legacy built upon a guilty accumulation. This is similar to the Asante mining industry built on the slave labour of children. Indeed, New York is an intricate component of a global landscape of ‘monstrous profit’. This reflects a pattern of dirty relations, Sonny reasons, which is repeated throughout the United States’ trade in both gold and slaves from the Akan Region in the eighteenth century when over 500,000 slaves were exported from West Africa to the Americas. In 1756 slaves made up about 25% of the populations of Kings, Queens, Richmond, New York, and Westchester counties, and New York soon had the largest colonial slave population north of Maryland. Sonny declares how his shrine god, whom he believed to be over two hundred years old, remembers the corpses of hundreds of slaves, bloodied from working in the plantations, their dead souls counting gold for their avaricious masters and the hands of their skeletons bandaged from being in the cotton fields. He calls these “zombie” workers, a reference to the alienated and dehumanised slaves who worked on the sugar plantations, transported from West Africa and the West Indies. He remembers how his god saw the ghost of a small Ghanaian child sitting on a blackened stool outside a large colonial mansion in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, her ancestors ashamed for not being able to help her being beaten and sexually abused by the master of the plantation.

Some shrine preachers believe that particular New York industrialists who knew no ethical bounds and possessed “selfish wealth” received their comeuppance with the loss of family members during the sinking of the Titanic. Recalling the catastrophic destruction of the Titanic – built by the White Star line, whose New York headquarters were at 911 Broadway and due to dock at New York’s Pier 59 just north of 18<sup>th</sup> Street – Sonny explains how cannibals walked the deck of this ship. They fed to human crocodiles the prey of rich aristocrats such as John Jacob Astor whom, Sonny learnt, had drowned in the Atlantic: “All dead...the Astor big man...eaten alive....by ...own greed”. Thousands gathered outside of White Stars offices, waiting for news of survivors. It is also rumoured that human zombies (see also Shaw 1997) roamed New York’s piers, shape-shifting into Satan’s helpers, stealing the cargo and belongings of the Titanic’s wealthy deceased, but making large instant fortunes for those who subsequently harnessed their dangerous powers – rich, New York magnates such as John D. Rockefeller, J.P Morgan and Andrew Carnegie. These same ‘robber barons’ of the nineteenth century, it is held, grew drunk on their illicit power, smoked opiates and consumed vast amounts of liquor. They exploited their Black work forces into believing that they were well off because they were free to earn a wage. The Waldorf Astoria Hotel – built

by Charles Astor, who made his money among other things in cotton trading, and by Moses Taylor, who helped finance the illegal slave trade and whose banking operations evolved into Citibank – helped to create, as one shrine priest argued, a suffering that remains unspoken today. In this scenario, the rich grew bloated from the suffering of others. The Lehman brothers, for example, helped establish the New York Cotton and Coffee Exchanges while Charles Tiffany founded the jeweller on Fifth Avenue based on profits from his ancestors' cotton plantations in Louisiana. They are the original flesh-eating zombies, utters Sonny. They represent how the fortune of New York is built on blood rituals and blood money, and a death-dealing politics that, Sonny exclaims, destroyed the good soul of the African worker.

Ghanaian shrine narratives in New York interrogate the moral values of current American millionaires who live on the wealthy Upper East Side. Shrine priests gossip with clients about the securities asset firm run as a massive Ponzi scheme by the entrepreneur and swindler Bernie Madoff. This had led to the collapse in investments of some of Fifth Avenue's most prominent inhabitants in 2008. At the shrine, Sonny questions the honest etiquette of the millionaire Upper East Side dwellers and how they understood, in the past, the notion of “decent” accumulation, given their huge fortunes. He contrasts their alleged unscrupulousness with the moral “honour” he found among Ghanaians living in the South Bronx (Parish 2011). Indeed, casting doubt on the right and wrong doings of the wealthy, ‘secret’ gossip swirls among shrine clients of witches pecking at the skulls of socialites and causing cancerous tumours among the residents of the Upper East Side (Parish 2011). Shrine priests boast that the most cunning witches are taking money away from the “rotten” trust funds of dynastic New York families who seek to evade tax by betting on the ‘pretend’ collapse of currencies, leading to the folding of firms on Wall Street in 2008. It is said at shrines that the government bail-out of financial institutions in the United States appear to subsidise the rich con artist. Money is diverted from “honest” community schemes meant for South Bronx and Harlem and replaced with blood money stained with flesh-eating diseases counterfeited, circulated and contaminated by the witch from secret printing presses hidden in Midtown. These dollar bills will cause AIDS and other diseases among corrupt persons who touch them wherever they are in the world. Shrine clients refer to the elite of Manhattan as “shabby crooks” made to pay by the witch for cheating her “top dollar” on her shares; a woman described how she knew of a number of friends who had lost their jobs because the rich who live in Uptown Manhattan were getting rid of staff who were paid a pittance anyway – but that witchcraft had eaten, like termites, through the structures of their vacation homes in

The Hamptons. Speculation runs amok about the mysterious accounting duties of high-level entrepreneurs on Wall Street, in league with powerful West African swindlers whose number crunching has occult protection and origins in witchcraft (see also Ndjio 2006). Fake gold and silver bullion are traded, it is alleged at shrines, between witches in Midtown who work for counterfeit coin and gem traders who use bullion to secrete their 'evil' throughout the East Coast of the United States.

## **Conclusion**

The ethical geography of Manhattan is explored by Akan preachers from the perspective of a transnationalized Akan morality. While the aesthetic meanings and the 'traditional' Asante customs and values associated with gold and related wealth are drawn upon, occult shrine narratives pursue a more mobile, moral commentary at a particular economic disjuncture in New York, amid the lavish consumption enjoyed by a 'super-rich' of bankers, moguls and tycoons whose wealth appears to come out of 'nowhere'. In this process, as Akan preachers patrol and dissect the economic landscape, the ethical principles of unscrupulous entrepreneurs and the indulgent desire for 'immediate' money, insatiable riches and millionaire status are scrutinised. There is also an assertion of a higher moral ground through Akan preaching and the spiritual denunciation of the ravenous desire for conspicuous consumption. At the same time, occult narratives allow for relatively affluent Ghanaians in New York to navigate their own economic positions vis-à-vis a moral commentary about witchcraft and a wider systemic notion of social obligation and generosity among the West African diaspora. Meanwhile, a suspect business ethos allows for blood money and get-rich-quick business practices to flourish. Such an unethical code, it is held by shrine preachers, helps to undermine the moral fabric of prosperity and encourage further dirty dealing. This produces a filthy sluice of gold plated dirt and trash which stretches from New York to Obuasi. A largely invisible spiritual voice therefore condemns the unethical role played by the accumulation of wealth in contravening the key conventional norms and values surrounding Ghanaian gold, so central to Akan moral topographies mapped at shrines.

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