

Mining gold in Ghana: debate

10,000 miners, 10,000 votes: politics and mining in Ghana

Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu

Introduction

In their article ‘Governing access to gold in Ghana: in-depth geopolitics on mining concessions’, Luning and Pijpers (2017) discuss important political issues around mining in Ghana. Using the companies Keegan and Newmont as units of analysis, and drawing on insights from geography and anthropology, the authors call for an alternative approach to geopolitical issues in mining. They point out that mining concessions are sites of governance that involve economic players – that is, mining companies and artisanal miners/*galamsey* – and political authorities positioned at national as well as local scales (*ibid.*: 761). Of greater interest, the authors argue, is the kind of relationship that has developed between established exploration or mining companies and *galamsey* operators. The authors point out that the maintenance of such a relationship, though uneasy, is necessary in ensuring continuous mining in the areas where these mining companies are located.

This commentary focuses on an aspect of the article that deals with the issue of *galamsey*. Drawing on historical events, I discuss some key characteristics of artisanal mining and miners and the issue of hybrid governance, involving traditional and modern authorities in mining in Ghana.

Galamsey in historical context

Galamsey, a corruption of ‘gather them and sell’, has long been a main method of extracting gold and other minerals in Ghana. From the precolonial period to the present, *galamsey* operators have been requesting land from chiefs or traditional rulers for their mining activities. In earlier times, the recognition given by chiefs to people who engaged in such mining, and by people to chiefs when giving them a share of whatever mineral was mined, was a way of minimizing conflict. The introduction of colonialism and later the attainment of independence gradually changed these relationships. From the first decade of the 1900s, some notable signs of control of *galamsey* operations emerged. First, the defeat of

Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu is a research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, and is an affiliate research fellow at the Centre for Gender and African Studies, The Free University, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Email: santewusu@ug.edu.gh

Ashanti in the Yaa Asantewaa war of 1900–01 encouraged the British to venture into the interior of Ghana (at that time called the Gold Coast). Earlier reports of travellers and missionaries about gold, such as those by Bowdich (1873) and Ferguson (see Arhin 1974), among others, interested the British who sought to colonize the interior for purposes of exploiting its natural resources. Britain's interest in this gold was also a result of the closure of some South African mines during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902 (Lentz and Erlmann 1989).

These two factors influenced and facilitated the gradual takeover of mining from the chief/*galamsey* partnerships. Prior to the Minerals Ordinance of 1936, which vested ownership of all minerals of the Gold Coast in the Crown, Joseph Chamberlain, in his confidential dispatch of 7 February 1902, had already conferred these mineral rights to the British Crown.¹ Correspondingly, from 1902 to 1936 there were several European mining firms that started prospecting for gold in Ghana,² normally on lands that ranged from 26,000 to 72,000 square feet in size and included various geological features such as rocks, bare ground or rivers.³ The 1936 Ordinance, which followed about three decades after Chamberlain's dispatch and at a time when European companies were already entering the mining scene, further enabled the colonial administration, rather than chiefs, to grant concessions – and these were to mining companies rather than *galamsey* operators.

The gradually increasing domination of these companies led to tensions between chiefs, colonial administrators and mining companies. Chiefs, understandably, did not take kindly to these developments.⁴ Fearing that gold mining by European companies would endanger the steady flow of royalties to their coffers (Ntewusu 2018), they set more store by their existing ties to *galamsey* operators than by new ties to companies supported by the colonial government.

After colonialism, the post-independence Ghanaian state failed to take into consideration these pre-existing, and long-lasting, relationships. On the contrary, the new constitutional arrangements gave the government more control than before over resources and mining rights and sometimes concessions were given by the government without the consent of the chiefs. These developments partly account for the readiness with which chiefs gave land to *galamsey* miners: it was part of a political/mining challenge through which they intended to win back their earlier role as owners of the land. As Luning and Pijpers point out in their article, the contemporary organization of gold mining confirms the lasting importance of local authorities as they team up with gold miners to govern sites (2017: 771).

¹Public Records and Archives Administration (PRAAD), Tamale, NRG 8/23/24, 'Minerals', 1942.

²PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/23/10, 'Prospecting rights (Gold Coast Selection Trust)', 1938–41.

³PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/8/23/9, 'The Minerals Ordinance', 1938; PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/23/16, 'Application for prospecting rights', 1938; PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/23/17, 'Exclusive prospecting licence', 1938–41.

⁴PRAAD, Tamale, NRG 8/23/21, 'Exclusive prospecting licence, Dokrupe', 1939.

War without results: political talk and the reality of mining on the ground

In June 2017, several print and electronic media carried a story about the ‘declaration of war’ on *galamsey* operators by the government of the Republic of Ghana. In the words of President Nana Akufo-Addo: ‘I understand the *galamsey*ers say if I want to go by the dictates of the law, they will vote against me and my party the NPP at the next elections’ (Takyi-Boadu 2017). The president is aware that miners have a deep suspicion of politicians’ propensity to see them as nothing more than ‘votes’. This fear of electoral loss is evident in the case of Newmont: ‘the company cannot easily ask the government to remove all these people, because they represent 10,000 votes. Moreover, considering the artisanal miners’ determination and conviction that they have the right to mine, forbidding artisanal mining would create serious tensions in the mining areas’ (Luning and Pijpers 2017: 771–2).

Attempts to crack down or ‘wage war’ on miners have a boom and bust element, a temporal dynamic. Shortly after a president is elected he will crack down on *galamsey*, but, in campaign time when he needs the miners’ votes again, he will be more tolerant. In 2017 it was time to crack down, but moving towards elections in 2020 we can predict that the president will tone down his rhetoric about *galamsey*. The same modus operandi was deployed by the National Democratic Congress (NDC) government in 2013. After winning the elections in 2012 it got tough on Chinese miners in 2013–14, but it completely backed down in 2016, the year of the next election. In sum, the reality is that the alleged problem of *galamsey* will be very difficult for Ghana to solve. It is deeply woven into many aspects of Ghana’s current reality: from the prevalence of Chinese trade partners, through the importance of small-scale mining in creating jobs in a country suffering from high youth unemployment, to the allegedly close relations between criminal networks and regional police (Burrows and Bird 2017). The stated concern of the president and other Ghanaian actors, including the media, which formed a ‘coalition against *galamsey*’, was *galamsey*’s destructiveness to the environment. The mining operations are said to destroy or pollute water bodies, and the chemicals, such as mercury and cyanide, that are used to extract gold are harmful or deadly. *Galamsey* has also been linked to various forms of crime, including armed robbery, money laundering and prostitution. Since the declaration of the ‘war on *galamsey*’, the joint military and police operations have seized mining equipment from *galamsey* operators, and there have been several arrests and prosecutions. However, a critical evaluation reveals that the environmental rhetoric was mainly used to gain public sympathy for a ‘war’ whose rationale is more complex and multifaceted. In the first place, the declaration of ‘war’ diverted attention from the fact that, over the years, officials in the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources, the Ministry of Environment and the Minerals Commission had been unable to regulate mining in Ghana. The subsequent use of the armed forces and the police against *galamsey* similarly reflected the weakness of institutionalized mining regulation in Ghana. Furthermore, a key fear of the government was that labour had been diverted from farming into artisanal mining, a factor that, it was reasoned, could have negative consequences for food security. Finally, an increasing number of farmers were selling their cocoa plantations to *galamsey* miners. Given that cocoa is one of the country’s major export commodities, this meant that, without a crackdown on gold mining, Ghana would be losing out as a major cocoa supplier in international trade.

In sum, artisanal mining, as Luning and Pijpers point out, is directly linked to politics in Ghana. The fear of losing votes in elections normally causes governments to ease up on *galamsey* operations. This has indeed been the case for several years in Ghana. In the run-up to elections in 2020, the president will need the miners' votes again and this will certainly temper his anti-*galamsey* discourse. This dynamic of boom and bust makes it difficult to have a consistent strategy towards small-scale mining. But it is essential for the government to return to the communities and engage with chiefs and *galamsey* operators. The examples given by the authors, regarding Newmont and Keegan and their relationships with the *galamsey*, show how various forms of coexistence are negotiated. As their article reveals, artisanal miners are not completely powerless, and, in the miners' eyes, the primary authority is not the president or the state-backed company, but the chief.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the financial contribution from the research project 'Society and Change in Northern Ghana: *Dagomba, Gonja*, and the Regional Perspective on Ghanaian History'.

References

- Arhin, K. (1974) *The Papers of George Ekem Ferguson: a Fanti official of the government of the Gold Coast, 1890–1897*. Leiden: African Studies Centre.
- Bowditch, T. E. (1873) *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a Descriptive Account of that Kingdom*. London: Griffith & Farran.
- Burrows, E. and L. Bird (2017) 'Gold, guns and China: Ghana's fight to end *galamsey*', *African Arguments*, 30 May <<http://africanarguments.org/2017/05/30/gold-guns-and-china-ghanas-fight-to-end-galamsey/>>, accessed 24 April 2018.
- Lentz, C. and V. Erlmann (1989) 'A working class in formation? Economic crises and strategies of survival among Dagara mine workers in Ghana', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 29 (113): 69–111.
- Luning, S. and R. J. Pijpers (2017) 'Governing access to gold in Ghana: in-depth geopolitics on mining concessions', *Africa* 87 (4): 758–79.
- Ntewusu, S. A. (2018) 'A social history of gold mining in Bole, northern Ghana: from pre-colonial to recent times', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 17 (2015–17): 1–26.
- Takyi-Boadu, C. (2017) 'War on *galamsey* deepens', *Modern Ghana*, 18 June <<https://www.modernghana.com/news/782965/war-on-galamsey-deepens.html>>, accessed 18 September 2018.