



The political economy of natural resource conflicts in Ghana: The case of the Songor

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to studies that assume that self-interest is the primary factor motivating African leaders in natural resource conflicts, we argue that successive Ghanaian governments have intervened in these conflicts by attempting to balance the imperatives of national development, neoliberal reforms, and regime survival. This argument is based on an analysis of the struggles over access to the Songor – a salt-yielding lagoon in south-eastern Ghana – as an outcome of the social contradiction engendered by the pursuit of high modernist development aspirations within a framework of neoliberal austerity. In Ghana, successive governments have deployed the coercive apparatus of the state on behalf of private investors in their struggles with community members over access to the Songor. Drawing on interviews, focus group discussions, policy documents and media reports, we argue that the fate of the communities around the Songor illustrates the infringement on economic and cultural rights of local communities when such rights clash with the developmental aspirations of national elites. The resulting economic and social dislocations experienced by the affected communities have been implicitly accepted by the government as the necessary price to pay for development of the salt industry in Ghana. The Songor case also illustrates a fundamental paradox of neoliberal development where the state is expected to abandon its economic role, but the private sector is incapable of filling the gap without substantial material support from the state.

1. Introduction

The nexus between national politics and local struggles over access to natural resources is an important but underexplored aspect of such conflicts. National governments are not passive actors in these conflicts but intervene in ways that further the developmental goals of the state. While our understanding of the local dynamics of resource conflicts have been greatly enhanced by existing studies (Langdon, 2010; Langdon & Larweh, 2017; Lawer, Lukas, & Jørgensen, 2017; Obi, 2010; Omeje, 2004; Siakwah, 2017), there have been relatively fewer attempts to connect these insights to the overarching project of national development (Lawer and Ablo, 2023; Torvikey et al., 2024). The sprawling literature on natural resource conflicts generally focuses on the impact of these conflicts on macroeconomic and political stability (Collier and Hoeffler, 2005; Humphreys, 2005; Nie, 2003). On the other hand, the political economy literature has traditionally focused on the national level, addressing broad trends such as democratisation, elections, or sectoral reforms (Appiah and Abdulai, 2017; Arthur, 2010; Ninsin, 2006) with

conclusions that are not directly applicable to analyses of communal struggles over natural resources.

In this article, we address this gap by providing an analysis of the decades-long struggle over the Songor, a salt-yielding lagoon in south-east Ghana, that emphasises the developmental ideology of the state and the alliances and interests that develop in the pursuit of this project. We trace the character of the conflict and highlight the different ways in which the state has intervened in the conflicts in line with the political interests of government officials and their corporate allies. In contrast to studies that emphasize self-interest as the primary motivation of African leaders in natural resource conflicts, we argue that successive Ghanaian governments have intervened in natural resource conflicts in ways that reflect their attempts to balance multiple, often incompatible interests, including national development, neoliberal reforms, and regime survival.

We highlight the social contradictions engendered by the pursuit of development agenda underpinned by high modernist aspirations within the constraints of a neoliberal policy framework and show that the

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promotion of private sector as “the engine of growth” since the advent of structural adjustment policies have provided justification for the deployment of the coercive apparatus of the state on behalf of corporate interests in their struggles with community members over access to the Songor. The resulting economic and social dislocations experienced by the affected communities have been implicitly accepted by the government as the necessary price to pay for development of the salt industry in Ghana. In the current iteration of the conflict, the government has tacitly approved of the total enclosure of the lagoon by Electrochem Ghana Limited (hereafter EGL), leading to violent clashes as community members attempt to ward off dispossession.

The study draws on focus group discussions (FGDs) with twelve small-scale salt winners, interviews with four local opinion leaders, one journalist, and twenty-five Songor residents, as well as the analysis of online news and archival material. These methodological tools, alongside our anchoring anticolonial and interpretivist leanings, provide the lynchpin to understand how successive Ghanaian governments have tended to gloss over the grievances of local communities, to side with companies in igniting, exacerbating, and sustaining a conflictual situation in the Songor area. In the next section, we establish the political economy context for the struggles by elaborating on the social contradictions engendered since the 1980s by Ghana’s pursuit of development within a framework of market fundamentalism. This is followed by an exploration of the issues at the heart of the struggles over the Songor in the third section, while the fourth section provides a critical discussion of how politics makes these issues more salient, and so worsen the conflicts. We conclude by briefly reflecting on whether and how the Songor resource conflict can be ameliorated in the current hegemonic context.

2. Neoliberal hegemony and the pursuit of development in Ghana

The emergence of EGL as a major player in Ghana’s salt sector and the ensuing conflict between the company and local communities along the Songor highlights the contradictions between the pursuit of ‘high modernist’ development aspirations and struggles for economic and cultural rights at the local level. Seen as a hallmark of modernity and a prerequisite for development, Ghanaian governments since independence have displayed an enduring ideological commitment to large-scale projects. Dating back to the early years of independence, these mega projects – including industries, dams, ports, and other massive infrastructural works – were pursued by the first generation of African leaders as part of efforts to ‘bridge the gap’ between the newly independent countries and the economically advanced countries of the west (Akyeampong, 2023). These projects also had a strong symbolic resonance, and their completion were often proudly commemorated, for instance, with the issuance of postage stamps (Fuller, 2015). Beyond their symbolic functions, these projects also constituted an essential element of the post-colonial state-building project that statesmen of the era believed would cement the economic foundation for their nations’ political independence during the heady and uncertain ‘moment’ of African independence (Adésinà, 2009; Cooper, 2008).

However, the era of the African developmental state was short-lived, and since the 1980s, bold developmental visions have been supplanted by the neoliberal policy framework that has severely narrowed the scope for state economic action. The advent of the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), implemented under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, marked a major turning point in developmental thinking and practice in Africa. A key feature of the SAPs was their fundamental assault on the African state as the foremost organ of development, as manifested in the downsizing of the state and sharp reductions in public investment and social spending (Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999; Stein and Nissanke, 1999). The wide-ranging reforms under the SAP signal the ascendancy of the neoliberal orthodoxy that has since reshaped national politics and global

institutions to conform to the interests of corporate and financial elites (Alami et al., 2023; Akolgo, 2023).

Neoliberal orthodoxy has substantially transformed the context within which development is pursued. This radically altered context has several key distinguishing features that are crucial to understanding the nature of the resource conflicts between EGL and the Songor communities. First, there is an insistence on ‘small states’ as a precondition for economic efficiency. The claim that the state impedes development is premised on the assumption that the state is deficient both structurally (i.e., it is administratively unwieldy) and operationally (i.e., it is staffed by incompetent or corrupt officials). This ideological aversion to the state is a general feature of neoliberal thinking, but when applied to Ghana and other African countries, it is premised on grotesque stereotypes of corruption and congenital incompetence (for a critique of these stereotypes, see Mkandawire, 2015; Zeleza, 1989), which in turn is taken to justify continued external interference in the domestic affairs of African countries (Akpome, 2021).

Second, market-based solutions are purveyed as the *obvious* and omnipotent solutions to economic as well as political and social problems. Having cast the state as inherently flawed and an impediment to development, the private sector is celebrated as less encumbered by the red tape that hobbles state action and is believed to be better at allocating resources and personnel. Within this framework, the private sector is seen to have displaced the state as the primary agent of development. This logic has been used to justify the enormous political power that corporations and other private economic elites continue to wield over their governments, especially in the West (Evans and Sewell, 2013).¹

Finally, calls for retrenchment do not uniformly apply to all facets of the state. Indeed, the coercive arm of the state is rarely targeted for downsizing by neoliberal advocates. This is no accident, for neoliberalism is sustained by ‘the reconfiguring of state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent’ (Bruff, 2014: 155). That is to say, state violence, or the threat of it, is frequently invoked to induce acquiescence or dispel dissent to draconian neoliberal policies (Graeber, 2010). Even when physical violence is not threatened, government actions, such as the recent imposition of a controversial tax on mobile money, has raised concerns that in addition to the traditional instruments of coercion, ‘the growing array of digital tools at the disposal of governments may encourage abuse of power and citizens’ rights. A strong state is required to push through these policies in the face of public opposition.

However, despite its control of the instruments of coercion, the state must build alliances with key actors because it cannot rely exclusively on force. This has led to the emergence of a pattern of collaboration similar to that described in the traditional literature involving key local actors – including traditional rulers, educated elites, and small traders – who played integral roles in the establishment and enforcement of colonial rule (Asante, 2018; 2020; Cooper, 1994; von Hesse, 2024). The role of traditional leaders in such arrangements has always been crucial but has changed over time. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the British established what Mamdani (1996) has described as ‘decentralised despotism’ through the indirect rule system that enabled them to maintain control over the vast hinterland at little expense. Historically in Ghana, however, the dynamics of local-level politics was such that ‘decentralised despotism’ was hardly absolute because of the agency of a diverse range of actors who often challenged both the traditional rulers and the colonial government (Johnson, 1972). In recent work on Northern Ghana, Wiemers (2021) demonstrates that (neoliberal)

¹ It must be noted, however, that in Ghana, government-business relations have been historically tense, and local private sector interests have not been able to systematically hold sway over public policy (Tangri, 1992). Individual businessmen or women may enjoy substantial privilege or preferential treatment but there is no equivalent of a corporate lobby in Ghana.

development projects are still adapted, contested, and reshaped by local conditions, actors, and events.

Thus, the deployment of the state's coercive forces to quell local protests and advance the interest of EGL illustrates the ambivalent role of the state under the neoliberal regime as well as the social contradictions it engenders. The state is expected to be minimalist in terms of its role in the economy and social provisioning but to exert its maximal coercive powers if the interest of private capital is at stake. The use of state security apparatus to repress local agitations against EGL suggests that while the developmental initiative under neoliberalism has shifted to the private sector, the state is still required to subsidise the private sector. This situation gives state actors plausible deniability in the resource conflicts and ensuing violations even while the apparatus of the state is mobilised to repress local movements opposing state-sanctioned private projects, as has been the case in the Songor conflict.

3. History and issues in the struggle over the Songor

The Songor is a salt-yielding lagoon which is also a habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna and an ecological infrastructure that supports fisheries and livelihoods. For more than 400 years, the Songor which measures 13 km in length and 8 km in width (Manuh, 1992) has remained an important communal resource. The expansive basin of the Songor covering some 35 communities is home to about 90,000 people whose livelihoods primarily hinge on salt winning and fishing on the lagoon (Langdon and Larweh, 2017). In 1784, a French explorer named Iisert who provided a comprehensive description of the salt industry in Ada revealed that each household in the community at the time had associated huts that were dedicated to storing salt collected from the lagoon (Dickson, 1969). This is an indication that salt winning was a community-wide livelihood activity.² The salt industry in Ada was primarily artisanal and managed locally in an open-access arrangement (Sutton, 1981). Men, women, children, and persons who were previously slaves collected salt from the Songor without any restriction, permit, or qualification. The economic and cultural significance of the Songor and the salt economy to the people of Ada can therefore not be overstated.

Over the past half-century, however, the Songor has become a political battlefield for various competing interests. Since the 1970s, large-scale salt production by private companies emerged alongside small-scale salt production by the Songor residents much to the displeasure of the indigenes (Secretaries Committee of the Ada Songor Cooperation, 1989). Attempts by the state with the support of the private sector to (re)develop the Songor have been met with resistance because of fears of dispossession given earlier experiences in Ada and elsewhere. This fear is justified given the history of capitalist development and neoliberal policies that have had negative consequences for the poor (Lawer and Abo, 2023; Martiniello, 2019). The first of these was the allocation of concessions to Vacuum Salts Limited (VSL) which was owned and operated by the Appenteng Family and Star Chemicals Ltd in the 1970s to win salt from the lagoon. The concession covered two-thirds of the lagoon, with only a small portion reserved for the traditional council for their ritual performances and traditional supplications.

Shortly after the first privatisation of the lagoon, conflicts erupted between the indigenes of the Songor basin and the companies mainly over attempts to monopolise the lagoon through the construction of dykes, embankments, and the stationing of armed guards to prevent the locals from accessing the lagoon (Secretaries Committee of the Ada Songor Cooperation 1989). It took the death of a pregnant salt winner from Bornikope, one of the contiguous Songor communities who was shot and killed in a raid by the police on local salt winners for the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government at the time to

intervene and place a ban on the companies barring them from operating, albeit for a short period. The following quotes from our respondents recall this episode:

The conflict started around 1974 when the state granted leases to one Appenteng under the name Vacuum Salt Limited (VSL) and Star Chemicals Industries Limited. We [Songor residents] were by then operating in the Songor Gbajaa [open access] only to hear that the Songor has been given to an individual to monopolise the production of salt. This started the incidence of police harassment in Ada as Appenteng with the support of the government mobilised the police to guard the concession. People started protesting. A police raid on small-scale salt winners in 1985 led to the killing of a pregnant woman by the name of Margaret Kuwornu (Interview, Bornikope, 10 June 2023).

That fateful 17 May 1985 when Maggie was shot, the police were expelling the people not to enter the salt lagoon. The people were resisting so the police started to fire warning shots, and a bullet hit Maggie who was by then calling for water to drink (Interview, Bornikope, 10 June 2023).

While the state intervened on the side of the Songor residents due to Maggie's death in 1985 and banned VSL from operating, it made a U-turn to revalidate the contract a year later (Manuh, 1992). It must be noted that by 1986, the hitherto Rawlings-led PNDC which was purported to be socialist had made a sharp move to the right and was already implementing the SAPs (Langdon, 2016). The revalidation of the contract conformed with the private sector orientation of the SAPs even though it was inconsistent with the ideological inclinations of the government.

Yet, local protests persisted, fuelled by the surge of anger following the death of the pregnant salt winner and the subsequent revalidation of VSL's contract. In November 1989, the PNDC government contracted a Cuban technical consulting team to conduct an inquiry into the issues and develop a plan for managing the lagoon. The work of the Cuban consultants culminated in the development of the Songor Master Plan in 1991 (see Government of Ghana, 1991). The plan noted and provided that since the lagoon represents "the biggest prospective of salt producing body in Ghana ... (with a) production capacity of over 1,200,000 tons per year (...) this capacity is enough to afford operation of the different concerned parties. This means that if the (...) solutions being proposed are accepted, then the source/basis for the conflict in the area will be removed" (Government of Ghana 1991: 4). The plan thus recommends that access to the lagoon for salt production should be shared between private companies and the local salt-winning communities, which are organised into cooperatives.

Langdon and Garbary (2017) noted that the Songor communities embraced the plan because it not only recognised the importance of the Songor in their lives, but also ensured they would not be dispossessed of their lands and rights to win salt. In 1992, the government enshrined this master plan into law as PNDC Law 287, which held the Songor Lagoon in trust for its rightful owners – the Songor communities. It is important to note that the law did not state that the government had compulsorily acquired, confiscated, or forcefully seized the land, but was to become a steward, with a provision ensuring that these communities could not be excluded from discussions about the lagoon's development.

Even before the Master Plan was finalised and while inquiries were still ongoing, the state had to cancel VSL's contract once again as its measures to quell the protests were failing. Consequently, the state officially took over the concession at the end of 1989, operating under the name "Songor Salt." Since then, the state has jointly exploited the Songor Lagoon together with the salt winners from the surrounding communities within the lagoon basin (see Langdon and Larweh, 2017). However, state control of the VSL concession was not meant to be a long-term solution given the limited role that had been assigned to the state since the SAPs. Thus, it was only a matter of time before the state eventually handed control of the concession back to private investors.

² For a detailed account of how salt is produced in the lagoon or its trade, see Sutton (1981).

That time finally came in 2020 when the Akufo-Addo-led New Patriotic Party (NPP) government decided to award three restricted salt mining leases to EGL for the commercial “mining” of salt, encompassing approximately 40,000 acres of land and lagoon surface area in and around the Songor Basin (Atta-Quayson, 2023a) inspired by its flagship industrial policy christened “One District One Factory Policy”. This decision however resulted in a resurgence of protests and conflicts over the Songor like those of the 1970s and 1980s.

Contrary to the provisions of the Songor Master Plan, which allows local communities access to parts of the lagoon for salt production in any development endeavour, Electrochem’s Business Plan (see [Electrochem Ghana Limited, 2020](#)) supporting the concession granted by Ghana’s Parliament does not include a shared arrangement with the local salt-winning communities. Instead, it advocates for the removal of artisanal salt producers from the area:

“Artisanal salt winning has been one of the main sources of livelihood for the people of Ada for well over 400 years (...). Currently, they are unable to win much salt from the lagoon because not much water enters the lagoon for evaporation (...). Despite the uneconomic nature of the industry, it has been very difficult to persuade the people to look for alternative sources of livelihood. Yet still, it must be possible for the company to get the artisanal salt producers out of the way, because their activities run counter to the modern salt winning that the company is embarking upon” ([Electrochem Ghana Limited, 2020](#): 32).

Rather than having a shared arrangement in line with provisions in the Songor Master Plan, EGL intends to provide alternative livelihood activities for the local communities:

“The Ada people are equally good farmers involved in food crop cultivation, livestock keeping, and fishing. The solar salt-producing technology that the company intends to use will afford the fishermen the opportunity to fish in the ponds all year round. Again, the company will draw water from the nearby Volta River to irrigate the farmlands, enabling them to farm all year round. Their produce could be sold both on the local market and in the subregion. It could also be exported to European and North American markets. This strategy provides a very lucrative alternative source of livelihood (...) to get them to abandon artisanal salt winning completely” (EGL 2020: 32”).

EGL continued by arguing that this plan will pave the way for the local salt winners to “abandon artisanal salt winning completely and leave the place for the company to operate” (EGL 2020: 36). While EGL’s business plan acknowledged the importance of salt winning to the economy of Ada, it made no provisions to include local communities in the salt industry, contrary to the provisions of PNDC Law 287. Regardless, the Minerals Commission and the political elite of Ghana’s parliament approved the plan and awarded the concession. This shows a radical transfer of governments stewardship to Electrochem. Several violent clashes leading to injuries and death of residents protesting the enclosure of the Songor have since been reported ([Agbove, 2022](#); [Ghanaweb, 2023a](#)).

In the face of divisions within the communities, resistance against EGL has intensified since 2022. Whereas the paramount chief of Ada and some of the chiefs’ favour EGL, the youth groups, some chiefs, and traditional priests are against the concession in its current form. These divisions have fostered counterdemonstrations in Accra, one for and another against EGL in 2021. First, some indigenes claiming to be the custodians of the Songor Lagoon on January 27, 2021, embarked on a demonstration to protest the salt mining lease granted to EGL, observing that the lease ignores the economic plight of the locals whose livelihood depends on the Songor ([Jacobs, 2021](#)). A resident in the Lagoon basin notes that:

The Songor lagoon is the pot for all Ada people. That is where we all go to get food. So now that they have given the whole thing to one person, how will we survive? We are therefore saying that we will not agree to the lease, so the government should take it back so that we will have our freedom to go there whenever we want to harvest the salt ([Jacobs, 2021](#)).

Earlier, some youths of Ada held a demonstration to declare unflinching support for the Ada Traditional Council (ATC) and EGL (see [Botchway, 2021](#)). The demonstration was also against people they said were working against the interest of the youth concerning the salt project. These demonstrations supporting various factions in the Songor Salt debacle raise questions about the various interests in salt farming in the contested area. Below, we categorise and highlight the major issues in the struggle over the Songor.

3.1. Struggles over ownership, size of concession and boundaries

For several years, a major object of struggle over the Songor is the contentations about ownership. The Ada customarily considers the *Tekperbiawe Clan* which is the lineage of the founder of the Ada state and its traditional priest, the *Libi Wono* as the owner and protector of the Songor. This custom allows the *Libi Wono* to hold it in trust for the whole community where every Ada has open access to the resource. However, the Minerals and Mining Act of Ghana places jurisdiction over mining concessions under traditional areas led by paramount chiefs and minerals underneath the earth in the custody of the President of Ghana. [Langdon \(2016: 62\)](#) argues that residents of mining areas are protesting “the right of the president to arbitrarily award concessions to companies and therefore strip the people living in these areas of their land [and] their natural resources.” While the Ada expected any arrangements or negotiations concerning the Songor and its adjoining lands to include the *Libi Wono*, respondents revealed that the *Libi Wono* was sidelined in these negotiations. He and his people have sworn to protect the sanctity of the lagoon and save it from people they refer to as ‘strangers’ who they say are not the owners of the Songor. A common position established during a focus group discussion (FGD) held in Bornikope captures this point:

From time immemorial, the paramount chief had a very remote role to play when it came to the Songor [...]. But he has forgotten this role, and, by being the paramount chief, he dealt directly with the investors and government, sidelining the actual owners of the lagoon. He took over *Libi Wono*’s position (FGD, Bornikope, 10 June 2023).

[Nartey \(2022\)](#) found that a section of the indigenes of Ada are decrying attempts by the government and the traditional authority, who they say do not have any right over the Songor to connive and transfer its ownership right to a private capitalist investor.

Another related issue in the protests over the Songor concerns the size of the concession and disputes over the concession boundaries. First, residents are criticising the government for approving a concession covering approximately 40,000 acres of land and Lagoon surface area to an individual. They argue that the government should have confined EGL to the old concession area where VSL and the government operated, to allow residents to also win salt from the *Songor Gbajaa*. Secondly, residents of Ada have accused EGL of claiming areas that are not part of the concession. While EGL has deployed armed guards and policemen to protect its concession, residents have argued that the company’s armed guards and the police harass them in areas even outside the concession area. The concession area has thus become subject to differing interpretations as the concession agreement lacks clarity regarding specific geographical boundaries.

3.2. Contestation over classification of salt as mineral and management approach

The classification of salt as a mineral by the state is another core issue of contestation over the Songor. As [Atta-Quayson \(2023b\)](#) noted, until the 1980 s, the institutional framework for the mining sector did not recognise salt as a mineral. Residents explain that the government and private companies seeking to strengthen their hold on salt production have since the late 1980 s classified salt farming as a mining process. Governance of the salt industry was therefore brought under the arm of the Minerals and Mining Act just like gold and other minerals. According to the local people, this move was aimed at restricting local people's entry into the salt industry. Our respondents argue that, unlike gold, Songor salt is farmed and harvested on the surface of the earth. Given the new conceptualisation of salt as a mineral, Songor residents now need a mining license to engage in the salt industry. In frustration, a Bornikope resident argues, "The Songor is not like gold. It is renewable. In salt winning, we do not dig the earth as is done with gold. Rather we farm the salt. It is the sun and the water (lagoon) that gives us the salt." (FGD, Bornikope, 10 June 2023). Thus, the continuing bitter struggle over the Songor is also in protest of perceived changes in the resource management approach of the Songor. The Ada communities are protesting the attempt by the government to change the historically practised and time-tested open-access communal resource management to private ownership which entails shutting out the commons.

3.3. Perceived award of political contract to monopolist private companies

Fuelling clashes over the Songor are concerns about what respondents refer to as the award of a political contract by the NPP government to EGL. Some political actors have accused the government of clientelism questioning its decision to provide several tax reliefs to EGL even as the government or the country has no stake at all in the concession ([Ghanaweb, 2020](#)). Others have described the government's action as a clear example of state capture and rent-seeking ([Thompson, 2021](#)). Some residents consider the protest as a fight for their dignity and the right to life. Respondents indicate that they are protesting over the use of the security apparatus by EGL and the Ghanaian government to intimidate them in order to allow capital to accumulate to state and private investors or friends of the government.

Following these accusations and violent protests, Ghana's parliament has directed the joint committees on Lands and Forestry as well as Mines and Energy to conduct a probe into the lease agreement that permitted EGL to embark on salt mining at the Songor ([Okine, 2023](#)). Ghanaians eagerly await the findings of the probe and the actions that would be taken.

3.4. Protest over loss of livelihoods and harmful environmental impacts

A major issue in the struggle over the Songor is the local people's concern about the potential loss of livelihoods and the lack of a benefit-sharing framework. Residents in the communities within the lagoon basin have depended on the Songor for generations, relying on it as a primary source of livelihood, providing them with sustenance and income (see [Langdon, 2010](#); [Langdon, 2020a](#); [Langdon, 2020b](#)). As a respondent noted: "We all win salt and fish in the Songor. That is the primary economic activity for residents in virtually every community within the Lagoon basin" (Interview, Bornikope, 10 June 2023). The Songor residents are therefore protesting against the state-backed capitalist takeover of the lagoon which threatens their livelihood. The fear of losing out on their livelihoods is thus a major issue fuelling the protests that have spanned over five decades. Small-scale salt winners and a section of local communities have therefore committed themselves to defend the 400-year-old communal artisanal salt production practice which serves as the livelihood of over 90,000 people ([Langdon and](#)

[Garbary, 2017](#)). Protests at times led to violent confrontations with the police leading to death and destruction of properties ([Agbove, 2022](#)).

EGL claims that during the brief period of operation, the Songor which used to produce 60,000 tonnes of salt, is now producing between 200,000 to 300,000 metric tonnes after investing over 80 million dollars in the project in a little over two years ([The Ghana Report, 2022](#)). EGL is seeking to boost salt production in the Songor to one million metric tonnes annually to make Ghana the leading producer of salt in West Africa ([Koranteng \(2022\)](#)). The head of Public Relations and Corporate Communications of the company assured the adjoining communities of a continuous source of livelihood from the concession:

We place similar priority on the host community, and the welfare of the people as we do to our business. A lot of people have their source of livelihood tied to mining and the communities along the concession so if the concession has been taken over by the company it's only appropriate that we give them brines that will be solely dedicated to them to mine in a way not to take away their source of livelihood from them ([Koranteng, 2022](#)).

This admission of a potential negative effect of their operation on local livelihoods raises serious concerns about the impact of privatised salt mining and suggests that local protests over potential loss of livelihoods may be justified. In December 2023, an eviction notice was served on small scale salt winners in the Songor basin by the Ada East District Assembly barring them from accessing the lagoon area ([Osei, 2023](#)). Per the eviction notice, over 10,000 salt farmers will lose their ancestral lands and livelihoods ([Ghanaweb, 2023b](#)).

Livelihood loss is related to environmental disruptions of the area. The Songor residents are protesting the harmful environmental impacts such as flooding and displacement emanating from the activities of EGL. Respondents revealed that EGL is undergoing engineering activities in and around the lagoon which is disrupting and altering the natural balance of the lagoon as a sensitive ecosystem. This they say is leading to changes in water flow patterns and the lagoon's landscape which has contributed to increased flooding in the area whenever it rains. Respondents fear that if this continues, it could lead to the displacement of communities living in the lagoon basin. Small-scale salt winners and a section of Songor residents have committed to ensuring that the lagoon remains a common resource for the local communities, and this is one of the main drivers of the conflict over the Songor.

3.5. Struggle by priestly elites to preserve Songor as cultural heritage

Besides the issues raised supra, is the strive of the Songor residents and priestly elites to preserve the religious, cultural, and traditional functions of the Lagoon and to maintain the identity of the Ada people. The Songor is considered a deity with religious significance and sacred ancestral lands that require preservation ([Reindorf, 1895](#)). There are various portions of the Songor stretch where statutory traditional rituals are performed such as the Yomo, Okormleku, Koluena, Okorhuem. As a respondent indicated, "The Songor itself was acquired through custom and today it is being destroyed. It is a customary land where rituals are performed, and we will guard against its desecration." (Interview, Bornikope, 10 June 2023). According to [Langdon and Larweh, 2017](#), salt itself is central to the identity of the Ada people as evident in the fact that the Songor and its defence are the focus of Ada's yearly festival. They argue that this identity connection is further deepened by the lagoon's central role in the foundational stories of the Ada people. Thus, for some Ada people, it is not only an economic or spatial fight, but also a battle to keep the identity of the Ada people which is strongly tied to salt and the Songor. In sum, the struggles over the Songor are therefore not just about economic concerns over livelihoods, but also a matter of social justice, protest over the management approach of the natural resource, the protection of cultural heritage, an issue of identity, environmental sustainability, and accountability, among others.

4. The political context of the worsening Songor conflict

While the historical struggles over the Songor has persisted, the character of the conflict has evolved in response to dynamics at both the local and national levels. In contrast to much of the existing studies focusing heavily on local factors without making explicit connections to the political economy context, our analysis shows that the current iteration of the conflict over access to the Songor is a manifestation of the contradictions induced by the pursuit of economic development within the constraints of a neoliberal policy framework.

Like other developing countries under the sway of the Bretton Woods Institutions, adherence to market-oriented reforms have become a near-constant feature of policymaking in Ghana and has survived seemingly abrupt policy changes and the varying ideological leanings of different governments. The reinstatement of the VSL contract was one of several important policy shifts in relation to struggles over access to the Songor after the advent of the SAPs. The notable feature of the reinstatement was that it reversed an earlier decision by the PNDC, signalling the triumph of private capital over communal rights in the struggle over access to the Songor. This reversal legitimised the partial enclosure of the Songor by VSL and the creeping dispossession of small-scale salt winners from communities within the lagoon basin. The ongoing efforts by EGL to fully enclose the lagoon can, therefore, be seen as an attempt to consummate corporate takeover of this contested natural resource. Corporate control of natural resources is consistent with the high modernist aspirations that underpin the agenda for economic development envisioned by both national elites, local leaders, and the general population.

Other policy shifts like the reclassification of salt as a mineral under the Minerals and Mining Act have further entrenched the curtailment of communal access to the Songor and created new barriers to artisanal participation in the salt economy. The reclassification strengthened state control of the Songor and imposed a regulatory regime that is hostile to the interest of community members who now need difficult-to-procure mining licences without which they cannot 'mine' salt. Indeed, as Manuh (1992) noted, a government backed report prepared by the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources framed local salt winning as unsustainable and recommended that the Songor should be exploited by companies that are using more 'scientific' methods. This concordance between national development aspirations and the neoliberal policy context is the motivating force underlying the current iteration of the struggle, pitching the interest of community members on one hand against that of the government and private capital on the other. Within this vision of development, the dismissal of 'traditional' or artisanal production as 'backwards' coupled with the 'fetishisation' of modern technology as indispensable to progress, provides justification for the government's support for efforts to subvert the historically open-access communal resource management system in place of one based on private ownership which entails shutting out the commons.

This pursuit of development under a neoliberal policy framework has created opportunities for collusion between the government and private business interests. Several political actors have accused the government of Nana Akufo-Addo of clientelism, questioning its decision to grant a concession of such magnitude to a monopoly investor and at the same time provide several tax reliefs to the company, even though the country has no stake at all in the concession (Ghanaweb, 2020; Thompson, 2021). It is widely speculated that the Mr. Daniel McKorley, the CEO of EGL, was able to secure the concession because of his close relationship with the ruling government. These speculations have been fuelled by perceptions of preferential treatment of McKorley's businesses under the current government. For instance, in 2019, the ground floor of the Kotoka International Airport was rented out for 15 years to McDan Aviation, McKorley's domestic airline company (Ghanaweb, 2022). McKorley has rejected these speculations and insisted that 'attachment to a political party or government in power' is not necessary to achieve business success (Myjoyonline, 6 July 2020).

Regardless of the personal connection of individual investors, however, our argument is that in the struggle over access to natural resources, private companies enjoy a structural advantage over community members because of the convergence of high modernist aspirations and the preference for the private sector in national development. Despite the neoliberal prescription for the state to relinquish its economic role to the private sector, the state is still expected to heavily subsidise the private sector. This brings into focus the issue of excessive powers of the executive in Ghana. As our findings and that of Langdon (2016: 62) reveal, Songor residents are protesting "the right of the president to arbitrarily award concessions to companies and therefore strip the people living in these areas of their land [and] their natural resources." This excessive power of the executive has the tendency to overtly support capitalist takeover of the Lagoon even at the peril of local livelihoods, while mouthing the 'development' mantra. The deployment of the state security apparatus to quell local protests shows that the success of the neoliberal project relies not on a small state but a big and well-armed one.

The fate of the communities around the Songor illustrates the infringement on the cultural rights of local communities when such rights clash with the developmental aspirations of postcolonial states. As the Songor case reveals, the goal of developing a 'modern' salt extraction industry and the concomitant pursuit of corporate profit have been elevated above local traditions and the people's mode of cultural expression. The integral role of leading members of the community has further deepened existing social fragmentations. The Chiefs of Ada, including the Paramount Chief, Nene Abram Kabu Akuaku III, have publicly backed the project and praised the president for ratifying the lease to Electrochem (Citinewsroom, 2020). As conflict exploded between the community and EGL, Nene Akuaku III led a delegation of Chiefs to meet the president and demand enhanced security measures against 'unscrupulous' community members whom the traditional leaders described as engaged in 'illegal mining'. Like the government, they also claim that the operations of EGL 'brings hope that Ada will see some form of development', including providing 'massive job opportunities for the youth' (Classfonline, 2023). The resulting economic and social dislocations have been implicitly accepted by the government as the necessary price to pay for economic development. The fact that the most influential media houses have not taken up this conflict like they would other causes such as corruption is because, by and large, the high modernist aspirations are widely shared by the general public, the intelligentsia and the media.

5. Conclusion

As we were completing work on this research, a vocal journalist, Noah Narh Dameh, who also doubled as our guide during most of our field visits to the Songor Lagoon area lamentably died in September 2023. Noah was an indigene of Ada, who regularly anchored the premier radio station of his community, Radio Ada, to highlight the challenges of the forceful takeover of the Songor and local resistant therein. Noah's health deteriorated following his arrest and detention under questionable conditions in late March 2023. His week-long incarceration was a reactionary move to curtail his activism and sustained reports about the worrying situation in the Songor. He especially protested the granting of concession to EGL. A local online news platform reported his unfortunate demise thus:

...Dameh's health began to deteriorate following a series of events triggered by his relentless reporting on the controversial lease of the Songhor Lagoon to a single investor. In the pursuit of justice, the journalist had deplored grave human rights violation, including arbitrary arrests, detentions, prosecutions, and brutalities against Ada residents in connection with the lease. The breaking point came when Dameh posted on his Facebook wall the picture of an Ada

indigene in police custody who had been handcuffed to a hospital bed (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2023).

At the time of his death, Noah was under trial at the Tema Magistrate Court for purported defamation. Noah's persecution and avoidable death and other reported cases of gross human rights violations underscore the deadly nature of the ongoing bitter struggle over the Songor Lagoon. The Dameh's story further illustrates our key argument in this paper that the character of Ghanaian politics or the country's political economy have continued to play a fundamental role in worsening the conflict and struggles over access to and control of the Songor. The paradoxical nature of Ghana's political economy, we argue, entails the simultaneous pursuit of two mutually incompatible goals: high modernist development agenda and neoliberal austerity. This explains why successive Ghanaian governments have deployed the coercive apparatus of the state on behalf of private investors in their struggles with community members over access to the Songor.

Thus, to resolve or ameliorate the Songor resource conflict and engender meaningful development in the local communities, the Ghanaian state would have to undergo a significant reorientation in its political ideology. If this happens, an immediate cessation of unilateral granting of lease to private monopolies would be the first step toward bringing justice to the people of Ada. The state can then de-criminalise small-scale salt winning and allow large and small-scale investors to exist in clearly demarcated and enforceable culturally sensitive boundaries.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Eric Tamatey Lawer: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pius Siakwah:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Chika C. Mba:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kofi Takyi Asante:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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