



## Original Article

# The political economy of transitory mining in Ghana: Understanding the trajectories, triumphs, and tribulations of artisanal and small-scale operators

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## ABSTRACT

While artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) and its impact on socio-economic development have produced voluminous studies, knowledge of the underlying migratory dynamics of artisanal miners remains incomplete. Using Ghana as a case study, we explore the trajectories, adaptation responses (“triumphs”), and implications (“tribulations”) associated with ASM operators. Based on in-person interviews, participant observations, and mining-site visits conducted from 2005 to 2012, the study reveals that several factors influence how migrant miners strategically “hop” from one mine to another – a phenomenon we describe as “transitory mining” – to exploit low-yield gold (and, to a lesser extent, diamond) deposits. We find that miners are forging strong bonds with host communities by sending pre-mining negotiation teams and employing extended family networks to arrange mutually beneficial agreements with local actors. These strategies and techniques lower the entry barriers into ASM by facilitating access to mineral-bearing lands. Even though transitory mining has increased mineral discoveries and personal incomes, we examine how such “triumphs” are hindered by vexing “tribulations”. First, there are growing human security threats posed by armed thugs who prey on miners and mining communities as well as police raids of illegal mining that often involve violence. Second, the deleterious environmental impact of transitory mining continues unabated.

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## 1. Introduction

Migrant miners, both internal and trans-border, continue to fuel the economically significant – but largely informal – artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa. Ghana – like Sierra Leone, Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and many other African countries – is endowed with valuable minerals, such as gold and diamonds, which may be extracted via ASM techniques. Concomitantly, the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are afflicted with weak regulatory regimes on natural resources, sluggish economic growth, high levels of unemployment and poverty, a dearth of business and livelihood opportunities, and high population growth. In recent years, however, strong international demand and rising global commodity prices have boosted the extraction of a wide variety of natural resources from Africa (Grant et al., 2013a,b; Malpeli and Chirico, 2013; contributors to Grant

et al., 2014). Most notably, gold prices have witnessed a substantial increase over the past dozen years, rising from an average of US\$ 270 per ounce in 2001 to nearly US\$ 1800 per ounce in early 2012, before levelling out at the US\$ 1300– to US\$ 1400-per-ounce-range in 2013. This has served to continuously attract new entrants, especially domestic and cross-border migrants, into the ASM sector. Ghana is an evocative example of such trends, for the country's ASM sites are teeming with people of diverse identities in terms of nationality, ethnicity, age, and gender who possess differing skills, capital, and interests in their efforts to extract gold or diamonds (or gold and diamonds; see for example Nyame and Grant, 2012:170–171) from weathered saprolitic horizons, geologically-recent sediments in streams and river valleys, or hard rock (un-weathered bedrock) materials. According to a senior government official, these ASM sites have been known to create new towns populated by Ghanaians and foreigners, supported by mining activities and their myriad economic spin-offs:

These artisanal miners come from both Ghana and surrounding countries. The activities may start in a small way at one site and then within a short time, there are lots of people. Take Kuu in northern Ghana, for example, where there was not even a single hut or house a few decades ago ... [has] become so big that it is

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now probably the largest illegal mining site in West Africa with people from Ghana, Burkina [Faso], and other countries operating at the place. Now, it is very difficult even for government to drive them [*galamsey*] away.<sup>2</sup>

Even when world mineral prices were relatively low in the early 2000s, it was estimated that Ghana's ASM sector – both legal and illegal sides included – comprised as many as 200,000 to 300,000 participants (Hilson and Potter, 2003:250; Aubynn, 2006:227). As the 2000s progressed and mineral prices rose, so too did the number of ASM sector participants in Ghana, growing to roughly 500,000 individuals (Nyame et al., 2009:10; Tschakert, 2009a:24). Both indigenous and migrant miners are involved in ASM activity, though evidence gathered in gold and diamond mining areas<sup>3</sup> across the country suggests the latter group forms the majority at most mining sites in Ghana. The distinction is occasionally made between miners who hail from a locality or near a particular mining area and those who do not. In practice, however, it becomes very difficult to distinguish between the two types of participants at some ASM sites since some indigenes, once initiated into mining, later move and become migrants in other mining areas. Though variable, the proportion of migrants to indigenes was very high at most sites in the present study.

Several scholars, such as Kesse (1975), Adepoju (2005), Nyame and Danso (2006), and Nyame and Grant (2007), have noted that the historical record and documentation of migration within ASM sectors across West Africa is thin despite the conventional belief that the phenomenon has been occurring for decades – if not centuries. Following the seminal work conducted by Swindell (1974) on ASM sector migration in Sierra Leone, recent scholarship has sought to address this gap by focusing on more contemporary trends in West Africa.<sup>4</sup> This growing collection of scholarly and policy-oriented studies emphasizes the importance and governance challenges of the ASM sector and highlights the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impacts of ASM activities throughout the region (see for example ILO, 1999; Akabzaa, 2000; Hilson, 2002, 2003, 2006; Amankwah and Anim-Sackey, 2003; Hilson and Potter, 2003; Banchirigah, 2006, 2008; Luning, 2006; Nyame and Danso, 2006; Yakovleva, 2007; Nyame et al., 2009; Tschakert, 2009a; Grant et al., 2011, 2013b; Maconachie and Hilson, 2011a; Malpeli and Chirico, 2013). Ghana is a regular case study in such scholarship owing to its reputation as a magnet for cross-border migrants and a generator of internal migration as well as the importance of the political economy of mining in the country. Put differently, mining and migration are primary concerns of the Ghanaian government and have become infused with economic development discourses generated by politicians,

government officials, non-governmental organisations, and international organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations. The political economy of transitory mining often comes to the fore in Ghana, as the government is continually faced with the governance challenges of balancing the economic benefits and environmental drawbacks from ASM activity on the one hand, while seeking to address simultaneously the political interests of communities that depend on ASM activity and assuaging other vital contributors to the national economy, such as large-scale mining firms that often find illegal ASM to be disruptive, on the other. While this body of literature is welcome and has produced some much-needed insights concerning the migration-ASM nexus, the motivating factors that drive migrants to strategically “hop” from one ASM site to another site – a phenomenon we describe as “transitory mining” – require greater elaboration and deeper understanding. A detailed analysis of the Ghanaian case would also assist researchers to comprehend similar migratory patterns in countries where political instability (e.g., DRC) and restrictions on researchers (e.g., Zimbabwe) may deter sustained, on-the-ground research on ASM activity.

Our study of transitory mining is based on a review of relevant secondary sources as well as primary sources such as in-person interviews, participant observations, and mining-site visits conducted from 2005 to 2012. Although logistical challenges prevented us from following migrating groups from site to site, we did visit several mining sites over a period of three-to-four months. For instance, as detailed in Section 4.1, repeated visits over the course of three months to an ASM site near Eguafu in the Komenda-Edina-Eguafu-Abirem District of south-central Ghana provided insights into how transitory miners move from mineral exploration to extraction phases. Specifically, field work for this study was conducted at various ASM sites in western Ghana (i.e., Nanankaw, Wasa Akropong, Japa, Gyedua Kese, Agona Amenfi, Asankran Bream, Kwabeng, Asankran Saa), eastern Ghana (i.e., Akwatia, Akantin, Kobriso), south-central Ghana (i.e., Ayamfuri, Manso Nkran, Abirem, Eguafu), and northern Ghana (i.e., Dokrupe, Kuu). We employed qualitative research methods that entailed 80 semi-structured in-person interviews and discussions with participants in the mining sector, such as government officials, large-scale mining company personnel, and migrant and non-migrant miners, and conducted participant observations at the abovementioned ASM sites. Since legal and illegal ASM participants face similar conditions and challenges (and some had even alternated between operating legally and illegally over the years), we interviewed members of both groups.<sup>5</sup> We occasionally followed-up with interviewees via telephone. We eventually abandoned the use of structured questionnaires when it became clear that some interviewees (e.g., diggers, informal traders, investors/tributors, representatives of ASM associations, mining support service providers such as processing machine mechanics) were unwilling, uninterested, or apparently suspicious of the motives behind the study. On one occasion, miners were antagonistic and prevented us from talking to any of the people present at the mining site. Several miners also complained of “research fatigue”, citing reasons to the effect that they had not benefitted from previous research projects belonging to other researchers or that the “whole exercise was a waste of their precious time”. Hence, we found that informal discussions with prospective interviewees resulted in greater willingness to answer a modest set of oral questions in a semi-structured interview environment. In-person observations conducted in the mining areas also provided important insights and a better overall

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a senior government official at the Minerals Commission, Accra, Ghana, on 16 August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The bulk of the analyses contained herein focus on ASM in the gold sector, though there is some overlap and relevance to the diamond sector given similar strategies and relations with local communities (Amankwah and Anim-Sackey, 2003; Yelapaala and Ali, 2005, 2006; Nyame and Danso, 2006; Nyame and Grant, 2012). Notably, however, the suspected “dilution” of Ghanaian diamond exports by Ivorian conflict diamonds had negative repercussions for many participants in the diamond sector in the latter part of the 2000s. The delays in export procedures were just one of several measures taken by the Kimberly Process (Grant and Taylor, 2004; Hughes, 2006; Grant, 2010, 2011, 2013a,b) to scrutinise rough diamonds from Ghana. The subsequent delays drastically affected numerous artisanal diamond miners at Akwatia in eastern Ghana, as many migrant miners lost their livelihood in mining and trading of diamonds, causing them to begin to leave Akwatia in 2007 (Hilson and Clifford, 2010). Some former diamond diggers and traders ended up in ASM gold sites in various parts of the country (Nyame and Grant, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Zack-Williams (1995), Binns and Maconachie (2005), Grant (2005a,b), Maconachie et al. (2006), Maconachie and Binns (2007), and Maconachie (2011) on ASM in Sierra Leone; and Aryee et al. (2003), Hilson and Potter (2005), Banchirigah (2008), Aubynn (2009), Hilson and Banchirigah (2009), Nyame et al. (2009), and Nyame and Grant (2012) on ASM in Ghana.

<sup>5</sup> It has been estimated that only about 10–15% of ASM operators in Ghana are licenced by the government (Hilson et al., 2007:278; Tschakert, 2009a:24), which was consistent with our pool of interviewees.

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