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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.05.008>

# Shifting Discourses of Vilification and the Taming of Unruly Mining Landscapes in Ghana

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**Summary.** — This paper explores the expulsion of >4,500 Chinese diggers and operators from Ghana’s central gold mining areas during a series of raids and swoops enacted through military, immigration, and police and intelligence forces in 2013, arguably to conceal the state’s own failure to sanitize and revitalize a stagnant and neglected artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASM) sector. I draw upon feminist social theory and political ecology to unravel processes of social exclusion that legitimated violent action against a social group rendered both invisible and wholly othered within a remarkably short period of time. The discursive production of less-than-human mining subjects—first the Ghanaian *galamsey* miners, then the Chinese operators—enables a highly politicized landscapes of power characterized by authoritative ordering of unruly mining spaces. The “making” of demonized, unworthy Chinese miners epitomized the forceful disciplining of these spaces in the absence of more inclusive and genuine development policies. Observed processes of subject-making seem to propagate the sector’s informality and perpetuate the distance from the state’s idealized depiction of a responsible modern miner. The case study demonstrates that exclusion and exploitation of those targeted as not belonging nourishes elite capture and pervasive rent-seeking. Understanding the processes of subjection at work further suggests that better regulation of ASM in itself will be insufficient to move beyond the current impasse and support true partnerships and genuine politics of recognition and belonging.

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**Keywords** — subject formation, political ecology, informality, exclusion

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector in the global South is plagued by persistent informality. Governmental efforts to formalize and regulate millions of men and women miners without a license have by and large failed, even in countries like Ghana and Tanzania that have undergone waves of attempted regulations. Informality now seems to characterize the sector as a permanent rather than transitory feature (e.g., Banchirigah, 2008; Hilson, 2013; Siegel & Veiga, 2009; Verbrugge, 2015a). In Ghana, the tenacity of informal gold mining, involving an estimated one million artisanal and small-scale gold operators, driven by both poverty and opportunistic entrepreneurship, has been explained on the basis of ineffective policies and administrative inefficiencies (Banchirigah, 2008). In the case of Tanzania, the powerful and wealthier mining elite and those who embody the essence of an entrepreneurial miner have succeeded in the formalization process while the masses of ordinary diggers continue to operate in an ambiguous space between legitimacy and illegitimacy (Fisher, 2007). Hilson (2013, p. 54) goes as far as explaining persistent inequality and the bureaucratic hurdles associated with obtaining a legal license throughout sub-Saharan Africa as purposefully “created” by donors and host governments in order to prioritize foreign investment and large-scale mining projects at the expense of millions of unlicensed miners. Yet, persistent informality in ASM is not only the result of fiscal, legal, and administrative shortcomings, purposeful or not, but rather a structural impediment that results from a combination of exclusion and exploitation and serves the interests of the sector’s dominant strata, as exposed for instance in the case of the Philippines (Verbrugge, 2015a).

Social exclusion, marginalization, and uneven power relations are pervasive features of informal mining. Social exclusion, as defined by Beall and Piron (2005), refers to

“a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights; it derives from exclusionary relationships” (cited in Fisher, 2007, p. 738). In ASM, such exclusion is most visible through the undifferentiated stereotyping of artisanal miners as social and environmental criminals enmeshed in spheres of illegality (e.g., Fisher, 2007; Hilson, 2013; Hilson & Potter, 2005; Tschakert & Singha, 2007). In Ghana, informal and unregistered artisanal and small-scale miners, known and branded as *galamsey* operators (Armah, Luginahh, Taabazuing, & Odoi, 2013), have been repeatedly accused of pilfering gold, disturbing and degrading landscapes without environmental rehabilitation, disrupting social life due to drug and alcohol usage and prostitutes, and contributing to the militarization and influx of fire arms into the mining sector. In public and policy discourses and in the media, an anti-*galamsey* rhetoric portrays these unregistered local miners typically as “threat”, “menace”, “headache”, and “reckless environmental polluters”, requiring a “lasting solution” (Hilson, 2013; Tschakert, 2009). In such socio-cultural narratives (Adger, Benjaminsen, Brown, & Svarstad, 2001; Roe, 1991), *galamsey* miners are assigned the

\*I am grateful for funding for the reBuild project from the National Science Foundation (NCH # 0909447) that has allowed me to conduct research in Ghana over that least six years and observe the shifting discursive landscape with regard to local and foreign small-scale miners. I am particularly grateful for insightful conversations and valuable lessons learned from my Ghanaian research collaborators on the reBuild project and partnering community members in the mining areas around Dunkwa-on-Offin, constructive feedback I received from two anonymous reviewers on an earlier version of this paper, and enriching debates at a conference in Canberra in November 2015 entitled “Between the Plough and the Pick: Informal Mining in the Contemporary World”. Final revision accepted: May 13, 2016.

role of “villains” whereas the police and military forces are seen as heroes and defrauded farmers and concession holders as victims.

This aim of this article is to shed light on one aspect of the complex and entangled processes of social exclusion that, I argue, plays a fundamental role in perpetuating informality in the ASM sector—shifting discourses of vilification based on dynamic identity constructions. This particular aspect mirrors one of the three dimensions of social exclusion proposed by Gore (1994) for sub-Saharan Africa and employed by Fisher (2007) in the case of artisanal mining in Tanzania, namely unequal power relations between miners and elites and processes of subordination along the lines of social identity (the other two being exclusion from access to and rights over mineral resources, and exclusion from decision making and governance structures). Fisher (ibid) focuses largely on the multiple and more or less subtle ways particular social groups are disadvantaged in or subordinated through labor relations in ASM, for instance in patron-client relations, specifically women and children. She argues that a too narrow focus on structural and legal exclusion risks obscuring pervasive and exploitative power differentials between mining elites, claim holders, pit owners, and the masses of mobile yet seemingly invisible diggers. Along similar lines, Verbrugge (2015a) highlights the need to recognize the heterogeneity of miners in informal sector activities, including external financiers, entrepreneurs, and armed rent-seekers, as well as the role of the state, and to more explicitly reveal processes of differentiation, subordination, and exploitation.

This article contributes to a small body of literature on the role of identity construction and subject-making processes as part of subordination in the ASM sector as well as to the broader discussion of the political ecology and forms of contestation in natural resource exploitation. Using Ghana as a case study, this contribution examines how discourses of vilification shifted within just a couple of years from ostracized *galamsey* miners to Chinese operators, in a country that is otherwise known for its notable track record of good governance in comparison to other nations on the African continent. At the core of Ghana’s long-standing anti-*galamsey* rhetoric was an institutionalized practice of misrecognition toward a form of livelihood that, albeit officially promoted in governmental poverty reduction plans, was repeatedly insulted, devaluated, and “othered” as deficient, inferior, illegitimate, and dangerous (Tschakert, 2009). Yet, since the early 2000s, large numbers of Chinese small- and medium-scale operators (~50,000) penetrating the country’s ASM sector have replaced the local diggers as the vilified group at the bottom of the social pecking order that stereotyped the deviant Other. In 2013, swoops and raids against Chinese operators, enacted by military, immigration, police, and intelligence forces, ended with the expulsion of >4,500 miners, the largest repatriation effort of a single nationality in Ghana’s history.

This particular demonstration of state power has been described as “extremely pedestrian” and “a façade aimed at pacifying an agitated public” (Hilson, Hilson, & Adu-Darko, 2014, p. 203). Although the state and the media may well have fabricated and endorsed a shifting discourse of vilification in order to deflect attention from years of disappointing lip service to effectively regulate and support the artisanal and small-scale mining sector, such an interpretation overlooks the discursive mechanisms and subject-making processes that were at play, reflective of Gore’s (1994) second dimension of social exclusion. I argue that such a superficial interpretation of the state’s response to dealing with the mushrooming Chinese presence and growing influence in Ghana’s ASM

sector obscures the power dynamics that made this spectacle performance and enactment of social exclusion possible. It also obscures the role that the expulsion may have played in reproducing informality and fortifying the power hierarchies that favor the status quo.

Given the highly volatile environment in Ghana’s ASM areas and the inherent difficulties and bodily risks of collecting primary data on a violent expulsion, this article approaches the complexity of social exclusion from a theoretical perspective, supported by observations and unstructured conversations with Ghanaian colleagues and collaborators as part of annual fieldwork in the areas around Dunkwa-on-Offin, District capital of Upper Denkyira in Central Region. This fieldwork was part of a 2010–15 research project entitled “reBUild” on land fragmentation through ASM and the emergence of an environmentally-induced skin disease. During that time, the team had ample opportunity to observe and discuss the growing influx of Chinese miners with rural communities partnering on the reBUild project. By and large, communities affected by Buruli ulcer, the skin disease under investigation, depicted Chinese miners as environmental and social criminals who transformed community territory into moon-like landscapes prone to disease, even though Chinese mining operations had become an important employment opportunity for local miners lacking starting capital or equipment themselves. The research team happened to be in Dunkwa during the June 2013 raids and witnessed the round-up of intimidated Chinese men and women at one of the collection points. We also witnessed a Chinese male suspect being chased by Ghanaian military on the grounds of the Dunkwa High School, and Chinese hats ducking quickly around mining sites when the research pick-up trucks drove by. Our nightly debriefings added our own subject-making discourse to those propagated in the villages, by governmental officials, and the media.

The following account is an attempt to make sense of an unusually violent expression of social ordering in Ghana’s core ASM landscapes. Rather than conducting interviews with mining subjects during or even after a time of authoritative state ruling, I employ feminist social theory and political ecology to unravel the subject-making processes that appear to have legitimated this violent action against a social group that was rendered both invisible and wholly othered within a remarkably short period of time. My aim is twofold. First, I explain how the government, the media, and the public discursively produced “less-than-human” Chinese miners, subjecting them to distinct processes of social exclusion. To complement existing scholarship on power relations and social identity as drivers of social exclusion (e.g., Fisher, 2007), I draw upon feminist social theorists to demonstrate how misrecognition, status injury, and the construction of less-than-humanness paved the ground for violent evictions. Second, I illustrate how such “subjection in action” occurred in highly politicized landscapes of power, not just at the level of discourses. I rely on work by (feminist) political ecologists on subject formation and subjectivities and describe how the expulsion of the Chinese miners not only epitomized the forceful and urgent “taming” of unruly mining spaces through authoritative ordering but also boosted the state’s vested interests in perpetuating informality in the ASM sector.

I construct the paper’s key arguments throughout six main sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a snapshot of discursive media depiction of the 2013 raids and mounting criminalization in Ghana’s ASM sector as well as a brief overview of the origin of Chinese miners in Ghana. In Section 3, the paper discusses Ghana’s stagnant ASM sector and opportunistic ASM-China business partnerships,

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