

Myths and Superstition in the Small Scale Gold Mining Industry of Ghana

Addei, C and Amankwah, R K.

University of Mines and Technology, Tarkwa. Ghana

Abstract

In most parts of the world, there are several inexplicable happenings and these are generally shrouded in myths. In the mining industry of Ghana, especially the artisanal and small scale gold mining (ASGM), miners have several habits and conventions based on superstition and myths. Such superstitious beliefs and myths govern the selection of people to work in mining pits, gold processing, working and resting days as well as specific rituals to perform at specific times through the life of the mine. For example, women in their menses are prohibited from entering into mining pits and areas where gold is handled for fear that the gods seeing an 'unclean' person will withdraw the gold which is believed to belong to the gods. Though there are several beliefs and myths that influence the operations of the miners most of these have not been documented. This paper, thus presents certain beliefs and myths that govern the activities of small scale gold miners in Ghana.

1. Introduction

A myth is a means of explaining some actual or imaginary reality which is not adequately understood and so cannot be explained through normal description (Mbiti, 1969). Myths are intended to communicate and form the basis for a working explanation about something. In societies without written records of ideas and events, myths are often the most effective means of keeping ideas circulating from one place to another and from one generation to the next (Quarcoopome, 1987). In many parts of the world and in several industries, myths exist to explain specific issues that defy scientific or logical reasoning. There are a lot of myths about the inherent powers wielded by the earth, large trees, cemeteries, sacred groves, mountains, rivers and rocks. Thus, specific protocols have to be observed when any activity is conducted on or close to such places or bodies.

The gold mining industry in particular, has several myths and superstitious beliefs. In the Americas, myths developed by the Apaches and Cocopah Indians exist about the Superstition Mountains and the Lost Dutchman's Mine (Anon, 2010). In the small scale gold industry in Burkina Faso, miners are not supposed to whistle when panning gold. Whistling is known to evoke dwarfs to the site who, according to the myth, may cause gold to vanish.

In Ghana myths exist about a place called Kumadiosea, Akrokeri in the Ashanti Region, where a shaft collapsed in 1905 and in 1932 an accident occurred on the refurbished mine in which an estimated sixty miners died in an underground tunnel. It was believed that the demands of the gods were not met before mining began. Oral traditions indicates that early miners in underground mines in the now AngloGold Ashanti Mine in Obuasi and the defunct

Prestea Mine met small creatures purported to be dwarfs in underground tunnels and in some cases hens and chickens. These spirit beings saw the miners as intruding into their private spaces and miners had to pacify them in order to work safely.

The first heap built by the defunct Teberebie Goldfields could not be leached due to problems of lixiviant percolation. Though the metallurgists thought that it had to do with the binder used, some opinion leaders were of the view that it was because sacrifices had not yet been made to the gods of the land. To satisfy both schools of thought, a cow was sacrificed while the binder was changed to Portland cement. On other mines, new earth moving equipment have been rendered irreparable after unidentified white men were seen using them on a night shift.

Some major activities of artisanal and small scale gold miners in Ghana are to a large extent informed by superstitious beliefs and myths. Each major activity such as prospecting/mining and processing of the precious metal are controlled by specific beliefs. Since mining activities take place around large rivers, sacred groves and forests, the belief that these bodies have inherent supernatural powers, demands that specific set of rules be observed. These myths help in the ASGM industries in some positive ways such as ensuring good environmental stewardship and observation of rest cycles. There are, however, negative impacts such as finding a spiritual instead of scientific meaning for occurrences, wastage due to excessive sacrifices and fear of the unknown. Despite the great impact these myths and superstitions have on the small scale mining industry, available literature on the subject is scanty and it is necessary to document information on the subject. This investigation thus, focuses on some of

the myths and superstitions that govern the actions and inactions of artisanal and small scale gold miners in Ghana. The paper highlights the myths that promote or reduce productivity and taboos that prevent the involvement of women in specific tasks.

2. Field Investigations

Field investigations were conducted to obtain information from artisanal and small scale gold miners. Questionnaire was administered and interviews were conducted among miners at Tarkwa, Prestea, Kwankyeabo, Keniago in the Amansie West District and Ntobroso, Aniamoah in Antwima Mponua District. Others are Dunkwa-on-Offin, Kyekyewere, Buabenso in the Upper Denkyira District, Nyadoam and Asaman in the Assin North District and Konongo (Fig 1). The selected areas constitute more than 75% of the ASGM in Ghana and thus constitute a good representation of the activities. In all one hundred miners were reached with questionnaires. Media reports were critically reviewed.

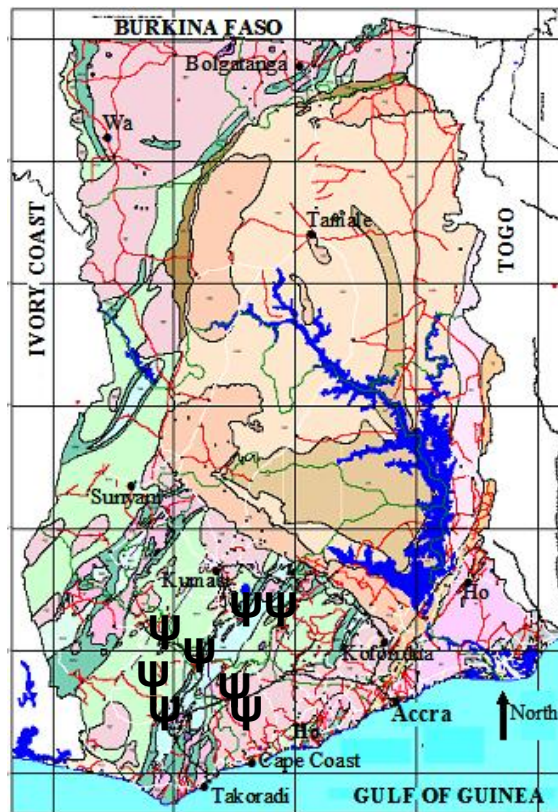


Fig. 1. Geological map of Ghana showing the areas where questionnaire was administered and interviews conducted (ψ)

3. Myths about Gold

Artisanal and small scale miners believe that gold belongs to the spirits. This explains why every lesser god is made of gold. Without gold, the spirits will not reside in the fabricated object and as such it will be useless. Since some Africans believe that spirits reside in trees, rivers, sacred groves, rocks, mountains and the earth, it is believed that these spirits are the custodians of the gold on the land. As a practice, in Ghana, if one wants something from

someone some amount of pampering is required, so also the miners try to appease the gods or the spirits so that they can give them the gold. Fig. 2 shows sheep being slaughtered at the mining site to appease the river god near Dunkwa-on-Offin.



Fig. 2 Small scale miners slaughtering sheep to appease a river god near Dunkwa

As a result, no matter the geological information received by a mining company, there is still the need to pacify the gods before the miners can get the amount of gold they expect. Information from some of the small scale mining sites visited during this study revealed that if this pacification is not done, several inexplicable events may occur. These, according to the miners, include frequent breakdown of equipment (Fig. 3), collapse of pit walls and possible death of some miners, situations that make the land unattractive for work. There is, however, the conviction that bloodshed at a mining site usually lead to higher gold extraction because it is believed that the gods take the dead as a sacrifice.



Fig. 3 Stuck equipment – resulting from refusal to pacify the river spirit

4. Superstitious Beliefs about Gold bearing Rocks and Water Bodies

In Ghana, small scale gold mining is generally carried out close to rivers and streams. Since the earth itself and the rivers are considered sacred, protocols have to be observed. Some Ghanaians believe that the earth is owned by the Supreme Being who has demarcated specific portions to lesser gods. The chiefs and traditional leaders are the custodians of the land and when permission is granted for miners to work the land, they are to observe customs and traditions.

Some of the customs and traditions about the land are sacred days such as Akwasidae, Fofie and Awukudae. On the Ashanti calendar, these days are considered as sacred days for mother earth and the gods, and there should be no mining activity. With the big mining companies since it will be difficult for them to observe these sacred days, sacrifices are offered on their behalf.

In addition to these sacred days, others are observed in respect to rivers around which mining activities take place. Large rivers such as Offin, Pra, Birim and Ankobra have specific rituals and taboos that govern gold mining operations around them. For example, miners who work around River Offin, the river richest in alluvial gold in Ghana, observe specific taboos. One of such is that the name of Rivers Pra and Tano should never be mentioned when around River Offin. The legend is that the three rivers are children of the same mother and River Offin deceived their mother and received a blessing meant for River Pra which made Offin richer in gold. Since then, Pra and Tano have been at loggerheads with River Offin. Other taboos to be observed when working around River Offin include the following:

- No one should defecate around River Offin;
- No one should carry a black saucepan into the river;
- Women should not cross the river on Tuesdays;
- No one should do any farming or mining around the river on Tuesdays as it is a sacred day; and
- No one should lead a goat into the river.

In addition to these taboos, the spirit of the river has a mouthpiece that from day to day inform the people about the decisions of the river and demands sacrifices, usually in the form of sheep in the event of any wrong done (see Fig 2). Such sacrifices are offered only on Tuesdays before 10 am and the meat, prepared without pepper should be eaten at the river's sacred grove (Asoneyeso). Cows may be scarified to the gods, but only on special occasions. All the other rivers also have their specific taboos and sacred days.

5. The Myth about Gold Mining and Processing

A typical small scale gold mining flow sheet begins with mining of the ore which may be prepared by crushing and grinding before washing in sluices. The sluices are lined with corduroy, jute material, miner's moss or astro turf to obstruct the flow of slurry and concentrate gold particles. Alluvial ores do not go through comminution but are scrubbed, screened and concentrated by sluicing. The concentrate in both cases is cleaned in pans and the gold is amalgamated with mercury. The amalgam is then roasted to obtain the gold, which is sold to licensed buyers (Amankwah and Anim-Sackey, 2003). There are superstitions that govern both mining and gold processing.

Since it is believed that gold is a spirit and it belongs to the spirits, before the company starts any mining activity, they make vows to the spirits. It is believed that after vows and sacrifices are made, the rocks will yield gold in abundance (see Fig. 2). In case of decline in production, miners consult the priest-in-charge who normally gives directions though this may not necessarily lead to increased gold production. Geologically, the presence of faults and folds may cause a vein being mined by miners to disappear at specific location due to the change in direction of the orebody. Such discontinuities will normally send the miners back for further consultation.

Traditionally, women are not allowed to work in underground spaces in hard rock mining or in pits in alluvial operations. In addition, a woman in her menses is not allowed to go to the mining sites as it is postulated that river gods see such women as unclean. Furthermore, women are generally not allowed to wash and concentrate gold except in cases where it is a

scavenging operation. The activities of most women at the small scale mining sites are therefore restricted to food supply and porters' duties.

Dogs are not allowed at mining sites as there is a strong belief among the small scale miners that the presence of these animals has the potential to reduce gold recovery. Small scale miners chose carefully the type of people they share mine boundaries with as they believe that some people possess supernatural forces which allow them to draw gold from adjoining concessions onto theirs. If for any reason a miner gets a working site close to that of a suspected 'gold thief' as they are called, some rituals are performed to prevent such gold thefts.

Due to their belief in the spiritual world, most artisanal and small scale miners pay homage to the gods by offering delights such as banana, toffees and gin (Fig. 4) to the spirits by leaving them in specific locations within a pit.

Information from the questionnaires administered indicates that there are several supernatural events and observations that take place in mining pits. According to some respondents, in areas far removed from the domestic environment, sometimes miners see white hens being followed by chicks in the pit. The miners believe that these are spirit beings and offer items as in Fig. 4 so they can continue to work in peace. In order to get abundant gold, there are some pit owners who after observing all these taboos make it a habit to sacrifice a sheep every year to the river gods.



Fig. 4 Sweets for River Spirit

In the processing of very powdery gold, the particles tend to be very fine and may float on the water and report as part of the tailings or waste. Thus, the miners see gold during the processing step but may not find any gold in the final concentrate. Such observations are attributed to interference from gods.

6. Impact of Myths on the Small Scale Mining Industry

Myths and superstitions have had economic and social impacts on the small scale mining industry. Due to the taboos associated with working around rivers and other water bodies, miners who work around such water bodies learn to keep the environment clean. In the small scale mining areas, some days are believed to be sacred as Mother Earth, some rivers and some trees rest on such days and therefore they must not be disturbed. Thus on the day prior to each sacred day, which is generally referred to in small scale gold mining parlance as ‘breaking day’ the miners concentrate and complete more important jobs as they are

compelled to break and also take a rest which is necessary for all humans. Women are not to cross some rivers on specific days. For example, women are not expected to cross river Offin on Tuesdays and any day during their menses. This gives women in the industry extra days to rest.

The observance of all these sacred and resting days, however, affects the productivity of the sector. In addition, sacrifices involve slaughtering of sheep, fowls and in some cases cows which involve huge sums of money. The superstitious beliefs also generally prevent the miners from looking for scientific solutions to their numerous problems and may also influence safety at the sites. For example, a group that has been assured of safety in their operations due to a sacrifice offered may become careless and not take the necessary precautions to ensure that the workplace is safe. The general belief that the shedding of blood could also release more gold may make miners reluctant to rescue colleagues trapped in pits knowing fully well that their death may lead to bumper gold find for them. It is clear from the results of the study that these taboos and beliefs limit the participation of women in artisanal and small scale gold mining activities.

7. Conclusions

This study revealed that the miners in the study area are guided mostly by several myths and superstitious beliefs. To them, gold belongs to the gods or spirits and thus anybody who needs gold should appease the spirits in order to get it. The investigations revealed that the miners observe specific regulations based on the dictates of the priest of the god where the small scale mining activity takes place.

These beliefs have great socioeconomic impacts on the miners and contribute to the observance of specific rest days, environmental cleanliness and people assigned to specific jobs. It was observed that miners tend to regard the spiritual influence more than geological information and in some cases basic safety regulations relating to their activities. The taboos and beliefs limit women's participation in artisanal and small scale gold mining.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all the Artisanal and Small Scale Miners who responded to our questionnaire. Those who deserve special mention are Messrs Festus Kusi-Adomako, Secretary of the National Small Scale Miners Association and Philip Kwaku Treveh, CEO of Elidema (Ghana) Enterprise.

Reference

Amankwah, R K and Anim-Sackey, C (2003). Strategies for the sustainable development of the small-scale gold and diamond mining industry of Ghana, *Resources Policy*, 29(3-4), 131-138.

Anon, 2010, Double take curse of superstition gold, www.burlingtonnews.net/Arizona.

Anon. (2009), www.a-gallery.de/docs/mythology.htm, accessed on 15th September, 2009.

Mbiti, J. S. (1969), *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann Publishers, United Kingdom, 290 pp.

Quarcoopome, T. N. O. (1987), *West African Traditional Religion*, African Universities Press, Ibadan, Nigeria, pp. 24.