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WOMEN AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE AGAINST ILLEGAL SMALL-SCALE GOLD MINING, GALAMSEY, IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *Illegal small-scale gold mining in Ghana has caused severe environmental damage, yet state interventions have often failed to stop it. This paper examines how women in Akyem Asunafo, an Akan farming community in the Atiwa West District, resisted prospective mining by drawing on cultural ideals of women as custodians of land and future generations. The study uses primary and secondary sources. It combines historical analysis of African women's environmental activism with a case study of Akyem Asunafo, drawing in particular on field research and focus group discussions with women in the community. The paper finds that the resistance of Asunafo women was not incidental but culturally grounded and historically resonant. Drawing on Akan idea of Asaase Yaa, matrilineal land custodianship, and women's moral responsibility to protect life and livelihood, the women joined community opposition to reject mining proposals. Their resistance was shaped by clear evidence from nearby communities where mining had destroyed farms, polluted water bodies, and threatened the future of children and the community. The study shows that women's environmental activism in Ghana is deeply rooted in history, culture, and everyday responsibility. The case of Akyem Asunafo demonstrates that collective resistance by women can be a powerful force in protecting land, livelihoods, and community futures where formal institutions have fallen short.*

KEYWORDS: Historicise, Resilience, Environment, Collective Resistance, Activism, Culture, Akan women, Galamsey.

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[1] *Asaase* is the Akan word for 'earth/land' while *Yaa* is the Akan name given to a female who was born on a Thursday. So, literally, *Asaase Yaa* implies that the earth/land is a female who was born on a Thursday. The choice of Thursday rather than any other day may be said to be grounded in the Akan philosophy of life/belief system which finds expression in other cultural practices, e.g., burying the dead (returning the physical part of a person to the ground), traditionally on Thursday.

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INTRODUCTION

Artisanal small-scale gold mining (ASGM) has been practiced in gold-producing countries for decades. ASGM may be defined as the use of rudimentary tools and equipment or light machinery by individuals, families, or small groups to extract minerals legally or illegally as a livelihood strategy (Geological Survey of Sweden, 2022). In Ghana, ASGM, properly so-called predates colonialism. However, there has been the introduction of heavy equipment in ASGM in recent years in Ghana. The devastating effects of artisanal small-scale gold mining with heavy equipment, also known as *galamsey* in Ghana, has been most felt by communities situated around major gold mining sites in the country (Yeboah 2023; Azumah et al. 2021; Aboka et al. 2018; Dwomoh & Owusu 2012). While some people may be quick to distinguish licensed ASGM and unlicensed ASGM, limiting the term 'galamsey'

to the later only, we make no distinction between the two. This is because there is practically no difference either in the methods employed (use of heavy equipment and dangerous chemicals) or in their devastating effects on the environment.

In the past decade, many voices in Ghana, including the Ghana Medical Association (GMA), the University Teachers' Association of Ghana (UTAG), the Media Coalition against galamsey, and the Trades Union Corporation (TUC), have cried against galamsey and called on the government to either completely stop it or properly regulate it because of its devastating effects. For instance, between October and November 2024, the TUC, UTAG, and GMA threatened to go on strike if the government failed to stop galamsey or declare a state of emergency in galamsey-affected areas (Graphic Online, October 10, 2024). The cries for the eradication or regulation of galamsey activities have mainly stemmed from the effects (felt by these communities) of wanton destruction in the ecosystem by the miners, including the pollution of major water bodies and the destruction of farmlands and livelihoods without any compensation as well as the destruction of forests and natural vegetation. Galamsey also affects the social fabric of these communities, including child labour that engenders a disruption of formal education (school dropouts and teenage pregnancies) among the youth in such communities. In examining the impact of illegal mining on the Ghanaian youth in the Kwaebibirem District of the Eastern Region of Ghana, Dwomoh & Owusu (2012) affirmed the destruction of the environment and high rate of teenage pregnancy in communities such as Apinamang, Adankrono, Topremang, Akwatia, Kade, Wenchi, Soabe, and Takrowase. In similar research, Azumah, Baah & Nachinaab (2021) also assert that, due to poverty, children between the ages of 15 and 17 who should be in the classroom are lured to mining sites around Obuasi in the Ashanti Region. In a review of the environmental and human health issues that arise from mining in Ghana, Aboka, Cobbina & Doke (2018) identified destruction of wildlife habitats, depletion of soil nutrients, and threats to the quality of human life as well as to human health due to the uncontrolled use, during galamsey operations, of dangerous chemicals such as mercury.

A relevant question to ask is, 'how or why has the Government of Ghana allowed this menace to go on unchecked, especially when the country has well-crafted rules/laws that seek to regulate mining in general?' Indeed, the galamsey menace has become a major talking point in national affairs and partisan politics persistently for about two decades now. Within the past decade, two different government regimes have attempted to find a solution to the galamsey menace. Whereas the NPP-led government (2017-2025) instituted several military-led operations such as *Operation Halt and*, *Galamstop*, the NDC-led government (2012-2017;

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2025-) has also introduced several anti-galamsey operations. Nevertheless, there appears to be a lack of suitable arrangements or programmes that aim at finding solutions to the problems of galamsey. At best, the few collaborations between government and stakeholders, especially the traditional institutions, may be described as poor.

The Atiwa districts in the Eastern Region of Ghana are known for their rich and vast forest coverage. For instance, the Atiwa Forest, which has been identified for future nomination for a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, is located in this district. Additionally, the forest is a source for many important rivers whose tributaries support lives and livelihoods (drinking water, farming, fishing) in communities downstream (outside the district). Unfortunately, the Atiwa districts are also known as notorious galamsey hubs in the country. Galamsey is so rampant that the forest covers are fast being depleted, and water bodies, particularly the river Birim, have been heavily polluted with dangerous chemicals such as mercury through alluvial mining. This notwithstanding, Ansah (2020) reported that there was a sole community/town called Asunafo within the district that had never been mined, not because of any government intervention but purely by the community's own anti-mining effort. This revelation necessitated the study of the Asunafo community to understand the story behind the success of their anti-mining effort, even when the government has failed.

Asunafo is an Akan community. The concept of environmental conservation may seem modern, but many ethnic groups, like the Akan, have long-standing practices that reflect traditional conservation values. In Akan culture, the earth is revered as a feminine entity, *Asaase Yaa*, symbolising a nurturing mother who provides for all living beings. This belief grants women significant roles in environmental conservation, formalised through gender-specific responsibilities. For example, women are tasked with maintaining household cleanliness, while queen mothers hold authority in selecting chiefs to manage clan lands. Moreover, Akan women serve as custodians of family lands, with children inheriting land matrilineally. This cultural framework highlights the importance of women's roles in preserving the environment and managing natural resources. Thus, in Akan culture and possibly elsewhere, women have been linked with keeping the environment. How is this traditional role utilised in environmental activism in modern societies? This paper discusses the role of women in environmental activism with particular focus on the role of the women of Akyem Asunafo (in the Atiwa West District in the Eastern Region of Ghana) in the fight against galamsey.

Women and the Environment

Globally, women have been known to be involved in environmental actions. According to Strumskyte et al (2022), the analysis of the NGOs that were admitted to the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties in Glasgow in 2021 (COP26), projects how women in civil society are represented in climate negotiations at the international level. Nevertheless, much of women's environmental activism occurs outside formal platforms. Strumskyte et al. report a situation in 2018 where over 100 indigenous women in Ecuador petitioned the president of their country in a 'Mandate of Amazonian Women Defenders of the Jungle of the Bases against Extractivism' to end all oil and mining activities in the Amazon rainforest (Amazon Watch, 2018). The following year, in 2019, a women's activist group in Brazil, Brazil's National Articulation of Ancestral Indigenous Women Warriors (ANMIGA) organised the first Indigenous Women's anti-extractivist March that brought about 2500 women from 130 indigenous groups (ANMIGA, n.d.). Across Africa, many women have been involved in

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environmental activism either through formal (e.g., CSOs, NGPs, academic research, and advocacy) or informal platforms (e.g., community women groups). Why do women often get involved in environmental activism, particularly in Africa and Ghana?

The Etymology of the common phrase, "*Mother Nature",* is a good place to begin when it comes to understanding the universal connection between women and the environment. On the global landscape, we can trace the Greek origins of the term *Mother Nature* to the Greek goddess, Gaia, who was believed to be the first Greek god and the personification of the earth. She was also believed to be the mother of everything that was to come out of the earth, beginning with the Sky (*Uranus*) and the Sea (*Pontus*). The role of Greek civilisation and philosophy in modern Western civilisations has led to the general acceptance of the notion of a feminine earth by all major Western civilisations (Leeming, 2010). In Africa, historians such as the celebrated Cheikh Anta Diop have chronicled how the African continent itself was regarded as feminine as illustrated in Kinisha's quote below:

"In the book Kemetic of Afrika, celebrated Senegalese historian, the late Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop, asserts that the ancient name of Africa was Alkebu-lan, meaning "mother of mankind " or 'Garden of Eden'. The name Alkabulan, he writes, was used by the Moors, Nubians, Ethiopians, and other indigenous people. This theory aligns with Kemetic (Egyptian religious) and Ethiopian texts that anoint Africa as the genesis of creation." (C. Kinisha, The Away to Africa Newsletter, 2023)

The use of *Mother* to denote the continent of Africa by its indigenes, according to African historians such as Diop, gives an indication that African women's roles pertain to the soil and animal and plant produce, as well as the nutrition and nurturing of the clan. These attributes in a sense, justify the unbreakable bond between African women and their environment. This bond fuels the intuition that helps them foresee potential dangers that may affect their children (i.e., future generations) and their environment.

History tells us of how an Akan female monarch, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, exploited this position in the 19th century to lead the Asante people to rebel against British colonialism in Asante (part of modern-day Ghana). How is this cultural position exploited by the women of Akyem Asunafo in their advocacy against illegal small-scale gold mining in their community? This paper draws on such historical collective resistance by women to examine the role Asunafo women played in the community's effort against galamsey in a galamsey-endemic district. It historicises women's involvement in environmental activism in Ghana and emphasises women's contributions to the rural and agrarian fight against land degradation and exploitation of natural resources such as gold. In other words, the paper draws on primary and secondary research, using a case study from Akyem Asunafo in the Atiwa West District in the Eastern Region of Ghana, to investigate the application of collective resistance in a way that is rooted in history

The paper aims to demonstrate that historically, the role of African women in environmental activism is a natural posture that is prevalent in many African cultures. Although subtle in the everyday affairs of their communities, African women tend to escalate their resistance, resulting in revolutionary movements when patriarchy clearly demonstrates weakness and/or failure to protect lives and livelihoods (Bhullar, 2025; Kuumba, 2006; Oriola, 2020). In discussing how Africans respond to systemic failures in human rights protections, Bhullar (2025) emphasises that women's resistance often emerges when patriarchal systems collapse

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under socio-political or economic pressure. Similarly, Kuumba (2006) shows how women in African cultures use cultural practices to challenge patriarchal failures, asserting agency in revolutionary ways. Finally, in reflecting on women's resistance and social change in Africa, Oriola (2020) highlights how women in African cultures have often mobilized, historically, to lead resistance against institutions, e.g., colonial, neo-colonial, and patriarchal, when traditional structures fail to deliver justice and/or protection.

Background

In their chronicle of the government of Ghana's efforts at curbing the galamsey menace, Hilson et al. (2007; 2020), cited in Yeboah (2023:458), indicate that attempts to stop illegal mining started in 1989 when the Small-Scale Gold Mining Law, PNDC LI 218, empowered the military to fight against illegal mining. Since then, many more government interventions and attempts to stop galamsey have not yielded the desired results. For instance, in 2006, when concessions belonging to large-scale mining companies were encroached upon by illegal miners, the government of Ghana came under pressure to find answers to resolve the galamsey menace. This led to the establishment of a military effort, *"Fight Against Illegal Mining or Operation Flush Out*". However, it did not resolve the problem. Not long after that, Chinese migrants got involved in galamsey and introduced the use of heavy equipment in galamsey, which had always been characterised by the use of simple hand tools. The government responded to this new dimension to galamsey by commissioning a five-member *Inter-Ministerial Taskforce* (Boafo et al., 2019), which included representatives from the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, the Ministry for the Interior, and the Ministry of Defense, to clamp down on illegal small-scale mining. Their task was to arrest and prosecute both Ghanaian and foreigners involved in galamsey, seize their equipment, deport non-Ghanaians, and revoke the mining concession licenses of Ghanaians who have subleased their concessions to foreigners. According to Boafo et al. (2019), though the number of illegal miners was reduced, the activity did not stop.

The seeming helplessness of the government in dealing with galamsey led to the formation of the Media Coalition Against Galamsey in 2017, a crusade by journalists to fight illegal mining. The government responded with the establishment of another task force, *Operation Vanguard*, which was a joint Military-Police Taskforce to end small-scale mining. Unfortunately, Operation Vanguard did not achieve the desired results. Consequently, in 2019, the Ministry of Environment, Science, and Technology and Innovation set up the *Galamstop Taskforce* in support of *Operation Vanguard,* but still, there were no notable results. The latest of the state's efforts came in 2021 when *Operation Halt I* and *II* were formed to deal with galamsey, which by then had been taken to hitherto unmined forest reserves and water bodies. Between *Operation Hall I* and *II,* the National Alternative Employment and Livelihood Programme was launched by the government to reduce illegal mining. Unfortunately, these interventions and military operations have not stopped illegal mining because, according to Hausermann and Ferring (2018) cited in Yeboah (2023:459), "some corrupt members of the security taskforces and others who were under the control of 'big men' with political power provided support to both locals and foreigners engaged in illegal operations for personal gains.

Why were government efforts not yielding the desired results? While many factors may be outlined, an important factor that is less discussed is Ghana's land tenure system. In Ghana, traditional rulers, chiefs, and not the government, own the lands in their jurisdictions. In many Ghanaian traditional cultures, the chief holds the land (of his people) in trust for the dead (who

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bequeathed it to the living), the living (who possess it currently), and the unborn (the future generations of the land) (Addo-Dankwa, 2004). This means that chiefs are accountable/answerable to their own people, and not to the government, which may be outside the traditional jurisdiction of chiefs (Ayinpoya Akafari et al., 2021; Afriyie et al., 2016). It is important to note that these traditional/customary laws are protected/enshrined in the 1992 Constitution of Ghana. Therefore, it is legal for chiefs to deal directly with the (prospective) illegal miners through land acquisition arrangements without reference to any government agency. This may lead to situations where the traditional jurisdiction of chiefs and the authority of the government are in conflict. Consequently, there have been many reports and allegations that suggest that chiefs have been involved in leasing or selling outright lands in their communities to illegal miners.

Realising that both entities and traditional authorities in Ghana have failed to deal with the galamsey menace in neighbouring communities, the historical/traditional custodians of the natural resources of the land, the women of Akyem Asunafo, took matters into their hands to protect their families and livelihoods. Historically, women in Africa have stood up to protect and defend their lands and people from foreseeable doom whenever the ruling men appeared to be unable to perform that function anymore or adequately. In the next sections that follow, we discuss the role of historical women (Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana in 1900, the Aba Women of Nigeria in 1929, and the late Wangari Muta Maathai's exploits in Kenya) in collective resistance and, use their experiences as a resource to discuss the role of women in the fight against illegal small-scale gold mining in Asunafo, Ghana.

The Yaa Asantewaa Battle (The War of the Golden Stool)

The Ashanti Empire was a pre-colonial West African state that emerged in the 17th century and occupied most of what is now southern Ghana, and, like most pre-colonial African territories, was governed by a patriarchy. The Ashanti Empire was rich in gold and had an enviable royal heritage. During this period, the northern territories traded in slaves through North African routes reaching Europe, but by the 1800s, the growing presence of the British in the Gold Coast attracted more of the slave trade to the south (Perbi, 2004). The Ashanti Empire satisfied the growing demand for slaves by the British, becoming a major exporter of enslaved people. This led to more trade relations with the British, who eventually sought to dominate the Ashanti Empire and control its resources. The power struggle led to several wars and the eventual deposition of King Agyeman Prempeh of the Ashanti Empire, who was exiled by the British (Perbi, 2004). These events brought despair amongst the remaining kings of the region who were contemplating surrendering to the British. It was at this point when the patriarchy was clearly engulfed in their fear of the British who had deposed and exiled their king; when they were utterly disarrayed to the point of considering surrender to the British that Yaa Asantewaa, at a council meeting of the chiefs of Ashanti kingdom, rose to declare her readiness to mobilise the women of the land and go to war with the British since the men were too afraid to stand up. She reminded the kings of the courage of their ancestors and vowed to rise to the task with her fellow women, with or without the support of the men. It was Yaa Asantewaa's declaration that compelled the men to find their courage once again, come together under her leadership, and go to war with the British. As shown in Figure. 1 below, Yaa Asantewaa stands as a historical symbol of women's courage, leadership, and collective resistance in the defence of land and community.

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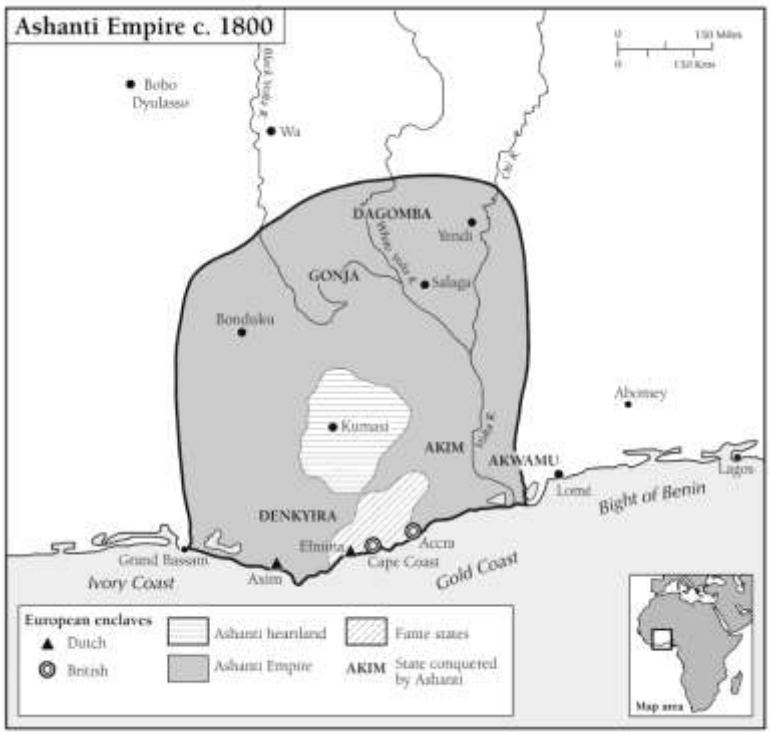
Figure. 1: The image of Yaa Asantewaa of Asante Kingdom.

Source*: Yaa Asantewaa UK, History page*

Figure. 2: Map of Ashanti Empire

Figure 2 situates the Ashani Empire geographically and helps to frame the historical setting within which Yaw Asantewaa's resistance emerged.



Source: Quintana, M. (2010) *Ashanti Empire or Asante Kingdom, (18th to late 19th Century)*

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Although they lost the battle, this event aptly demonstrates how Nana Yaa Asantewaa defied the conventional belief that only men went to battle by leading both the men and women to fight through her radical activism (Buah, 1974). In examining the revolution that came about due to the courage and vision of Yaa Asantewaa in 1900, we will be able to appreciate the influence that women in pre-colonial Africa wielded in serious situations. Upon realising that the other kings were afraid and unwilling to act against their enemy, she naturally observed the need to turn her initially subtle position on the situation into a full-on revolution (Buah, 1974). Also, it is important to note is that rather than attempting to silence her, the patriarchy showed great respect for and valued the stance of Yaa Asantewaa and was, in fact, inspired by her to the extent of going into battle with her as their leader (Buah, 1974). The unopposed response of the patriarchy to her call for an uprising justifies the arguments that, as much as women mainly played supportive roles in their communities and left most of the day-to-day governance to the patriarchy, they were fully aware of the state of affairs at every given time.

Yaa Asantewaa proved how women knew when to mobilise their voices and sometimes spark revolutions whenever there appeared to be an obvious demonstration of ignorance or complicity on the part of the patriarchy that put the entire land or community in harm's way. The fact that this battle is a prominent event in Ghanaian history is an indication of the historical and cultural importance of women's voices and the acceptance of activism spearheaded by women in Ghana. This is derived from a natural belief in the power and relevance of the intuition of women due to their historical role as the custodians of the land and its natural resources. Within the context of this paper, the collective resistance of women in the fight against *galamsey* in Akyem Asunafo is rooted in the same premise as Yaa Asantewaa's uprising.

Aba Women's Rebellion of 1929

In the book, *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, which provides a reinterpretation of colonial experiences of Africans between 1800 and 1900, the author, Albert Adu Boahen asserts:

In Nigeria there occurred what colonial historians have called the Aba Women's riots of 1929, but it should be termed the Aba Women's rebellion. This was touched off by the imposition of direct taxation and the introduction of new local courts and especially of warrant chiefs. (Adu-Boahen, 1987:79))

This estimation by Boahen is reiterated by other Afrocentric historians, and rightly so, because the term 'riots' undermines the justified proportionate response of the Igbo women of Ikot Abasi, Calabar and Aba to the preposterous taxes imposed on them by the Colonial Administration through warrant chiefs appointed by the British authorities. "Rebellion" is a more appropriate term to describe the collective resistance of the Aba women against the oppression of the warrant chiefs and their coloniser from November to December 1929.

A concise account of the Women's Rebellion of 1929, according to a February 2022 article by award-winning educator and acclaimed social justice advocate *Chizomba Imoka-Ubochioma (UAF, 2021),* highlights the resounding significance of the rebellion as it is characterised by the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates by the British to form Nigeria in 1914. According to the article entitled *The Aba Women Riot Of 1929*, the British appointed warrant chiefs to carry out the local governance of the people following the unification, and as time went on these chiefs, who ultimately prioritised the interests of the colonial authority,

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began to oppress the people by subjecting them to harsh conditions, unlawful seizure of lands, and the imposition of "special taxes." These "special taxes." imposed on the Igbo market women were the straw that broke the camel's back. The women were fully aware of the immediate and long-term implications of such an unreasonable demand, and so rather than give in and subsequently lose their livelihoods, they decided to band together and fight the oppression. They took their protest to Calabar, Ikot Abasi, and Aba and made their stance clear to the oppressive warrant chiefs and their colonisers. The protests were reportedly met with shootings, which provoked the women to attack European-owned stores and banks, break into prisons and release prisoners, and burn down the native courts that were run by the colonial administration. There is some speculation that these aggravations were over-dramatised but nonetheless the rebellion became so intense that the colonial troops and the police got involved. They fired shots into the mob, leading to the deaths and injuries of some of the protestors. These clashes, which went on for about two months, involved over 10,000 women according to historic accounts and led to the resignation of some of the implicated warrant chiefs and the withdrawal of the "special taxes," allowing conditions to ease back into normality in the marketplace. (Imoka-Ubochioma, 2022). Figure 3 illustrates the historical memory of the Aba Women's Rebellion and reinforces the scale and significance of women's collective resistance against oppressive authority.

Figure 3. Aba Women's Rebellion of 1929.

Image Source: *BBC, as reproduced in Umuigbo*

The Aba women's rebellion, in spite of the fatalities incurred, was beyond successful and went on to become a symbolic moment in Nigerian history that marks the celebration of strength and courage amongst Nigerian women. Serving as a prime example of women's activism for fairness and the restoration of order in African societies, we can draw on this historical landmark as a reference when presenting a case for women who are actively joining forces today to protect the environment and its natural resources

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Exploits of Environmental Activist, Wangari Muta Maathai[1]

An article published by one of the leading organisations focused on environmental preservation, *One Earth*, provides a suitable starting point as we delve into the exploits of the late Wangari Muta Maathai, a Kenyan Environmental Revolutionist. In the words of Jean Schueman, a writer with *One Earth*,

Wangari Maathai was a woman of firsts. The first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree, the first female department head at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize." (Shueman, 2023)

Also worthy of note is the fact that she is not just the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize; she is, in fact, the first environmentalist to be awarded the prestigious honour. Born in 1940 to Kenyan parents, Wangari Maathai grew up learning from her mother to revere the environment, especially the trees, and this training stayed with her throughout her lifetime. At first glance, it seems quite random that such training is passed down from mother to daughter, but considering the earlier case made in this paper regarding the natural connection between African women and nature, it becomes clearer that this passing down of love and reverence for the natural environment to Maathai falls in line with the cultural context of Mother Nature in Africa. As Maathai grew older, her appreciation of the environmental issues that posed a threat to Kenya's ecological landscape became more profound. She cultivated a thorough understanding of the long-term environmental and sociological effects of deforestation, which was on a rise, and she made it her core mission to prevent it from getting out of hand and take practical steps towards repairing the damage that had already been done. She equipped herself with knowledge and political influence every step of the way by being actively involved in national issues, always putting the well-being of the Kenyan people – especially women – first.

Wangari Maathai's husband was elected to represent the Lang'ata constituency in parliament in 1974, and during his campaign, he promised his constituents to secure jobs for them during his tenure in office. This was the backbone of Wangari's social and political initiatives. She drew from her desire to promote a green ecology as well as her wish to create jobs by establishing her first tree planting organisation, Envirocare Ltd. The organisation aimed to get ordinary people involved in planting trees to preserve the environment. This initiative, however, was not sustainable due to a lack of funding, but it started the historic journey of Wangari Maathai, the environmental activist. Despite the failure, Envirocare Ltd opened the doors for Wangari to interact with major stakeholders in the UN, and earned her a platform to speak to the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) about the need to plant trees. She gained the support of the NCWK, and to mark World Environment Day in 1977, the NWCK marched in a procession from downtown Nairobi to the outskirts of the capital city, where they planted trees in honour of some historical community figures. This marked the launch of Wangari's new initiative, the Greenbelt Movement. Maathai ventured further into politics, and while facing some setbacks along the way, she managed to occupy the positions of vice-chairman and subsequently chairman of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) between 1979 and 1982. This office helped her strengthen the policies and programmes of the Greenbelt Movement. (Maathai 2006:156-163)

[1] Our account of Wangari Muta Maathai's life is based on her memoir (Maathai 2006) and on London School of Economics (nd)

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The Greenbelt Movement

The founding of the Greenbelt Movement in 1977 came as a response to the concerns of rural Kenyan women with regard to the environment (Muthuki, 2006). Again, it was the women in the rural areas who were most affected by the ensuing environmental degradation. They were forced to go through unbearable conditions in order to gather basic household needs such as food, water, clay, and herbs. The long distances they needed to cover in some instances put them in harm's way as well. This direct effect that was felt by them is, in retrospect, what gave Wangari's mother the foresight to teach her daughter to value and protect the natural environment. Wangari was fully committed to alleviating the conditions of the women and put the Greenbelt Movement to work immediately. Her tenure as chairman of NCWK cemented her role as an activist for women, and paved the way for the forging of partnerships with international stakeholders such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women. Through this network, she was able to raise significant funding to run tree planting programmes that would eventually transcend the borders of Kenya and cover other parts of Africa. The Greenbelt Movement evolved into the Pan-African Greenbelt Network with representatives in at least fifteen African countries. Wangari stepped down from her position as chairman of the NCWK to focus solely on the environment since the government of Kenya felt that the activities of the Pan-African Greenbelt Network should be separated from the NCWK because the former focused on the environment rather than women. Wangari's success as chairman of the NCWK and her interventions with the Greenbelt Movement demonstrate her crucial role in the mobilisation of women, as well as in taking initiatives as an activist for the environment. She is a prime example of what women can do with the right leadership, organisation and just cause (Maathai, 2006: 168-179).

Maathai's Environmentally Driven Rebellion against the Government of Kenya

Maathai would go on to thwart one of the biggest infrastructural development projects of the Kenyan government on the grounds of environmental degradation, but that would not be her first act of rebellion against a state institution. In 1988, she became more involved in politics by organising voter-registration exercises through the Greenbelt Movement and pushing for democracy amidst stringent measures put in place by the incumbent government to restrict the mobilisation of groups of people. In spite of her efforts, the government went on to retain power through what Maathai believed to be electoral fraud. Shortly after the election, she learned of the government's intention to construct a 60-story complex in a major recreational park, Uhuru Park, in the heart of Nairobi. In order to protect the park, Maathai opposed the project, writing letters to various stakeholders in the media and the government to prevent the construction from taking form. She even urged the British High Commissioner in Nairobi to convince a major stakeholder in the project, Robert Maxwell, to call off the construction. This started a slew of attacks from the government officials who were in support of the president. She was maligned by harsh criticism and even referred to by the President of Kenya as insolent for not taking the back seat as a woman. This did not faze Maathai, who went on with her protests, leading to other voices joining in, but it did not stop the project from breaking ground in December of 1989. Her victory, however, came a year later when the foreign investors withdrew from the project due to media coverage of the debacle being largely in favour of Maathai's position. After the project was officially terminated, she became a target of the government and was subsequently arrested without any substantial charge. There was intense pressure from the international community on the government of Kenya to either substantiate their charges against Maathai, or grant her freedom. This led to her release after serving only a

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day and a half in jail, and the subsequent dismissal of the case. Following her release, she embarked on a hunger strike to release political prisoners who were a part of her movement. She was supported by women who were mostly mothers of the prisoners. Although the strike was met with brutal assault initially when it was held in a corner of Uhuru Park, it again garnered international support, which forced the government to condemn the brutal actions that led to Maathai being knocked unconscious and hospitalised. The strike persisted in spite of the setbacks, and the prisoners were eventually released the following year (Maathai 2006:180-228)

Tree for Peace

The activism of Wangari Muta Maathai, who went on to become a Minister of State in Kenya, encapsulates initiatives and collective resistance in favour of a cause that promoted a greener ecosystem and social harmony for Kenya and other parts of Africa. 'Trees for Peace' was an initiative aimed at curbing ethnic clashes that erupted in 1993. This initiative was another notable landmark in Maathai's pursuits because it marked a time in Kenya's history when the safety and stability of the people were in peril. Courageous leadership was required to restore calm. Her efforts with *Trees for Peace* seemed to backfire when the government accused her of distributing leaflets that incited Kikuyus against Kalenjins, but what essentially followed was a series of global honours, including the Edinburgh Medal, the Jane Adams International Women's Leadership Award, and participation at the UN's World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. These honours helped maintain the perception of her as a leader of women, a voice for the people, and custodian of the environment. In 1997, Maathai would go on to thwart the plans of the government to privatise the Karura Forest right outside Nairobi. Having caught wind of the government's plans to distribute the forest lands to political supporters, she took Greenbelt's tree planting mission into the forest with another protest that led to arrests and casualties but subsequently forced the government to call off the allocation of public lands (Maathai 2006:235-252).

This was not the last rebellion led by Maathai, giving testament to her resilience as an activist for the conservation of the environment, her lifelong commitment to tree planting exercises and her ability as a leader to garner massive support, not only of women, but well-meaning citizens in general. Her exploits are a modern-day epitome of what the collective resistance of women in environmental activism is all about. Figure 4 highlights Wangari Maathai's global recognition and underscores the wider political and environmental significance of women led activism in Africa.

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Figure 4. Wangari Muta Maathai receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

Source: *Green Belt Movement, The Nobel Peace Prize image page*

Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace in 2004, making her the first African woman and the first environmentalist to win a Nobel Prize. (Nobel Foundation, 2004).

The Women of Akyem Asunafo

Galamsey is an illegal practice that tries to find justification in the fallacy of providing livelihoods for the youth, even though it actually cripples their future by destroying their natural ecology and the moral fabric of their society. Akyem Asunafo is a farming community in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The main formal employment located in the town is teaching (the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and Islamic Basic Schools). Thus, the major source of livelihood in this community is farming, with few people engaged in trading. With this background and surrounded by communities such as Abomoso, Senkubease, and Asamanma, where uncontrolled small-scale mining has seemingly enriched indigenes, the temptation to embrace small-scale mining was strong.

Between 2018 and 2021, when the National discourse on the devastating effects of galamsey was peaking, the University of York, UK, partnered with the University of Ghana (with funding support from the UK Global Challenges Research Fund) to research small-scale mining in the Atiwa West District of the Eastern Region in Ghana. This district is part of the Atiwa Forest range, which was declared as a Globally Significant Biodiversity Area in the 1990s because it contains both plant and animal species that are rare elsewhere in Ghana (and beyond). In addition, the gold and diamond-rich River Birim runs through this region. Unfortunately, the Atiwa area has been described by some Ghanaians as the galamsey headquarters in the country because of the rampant and indiscriminate small-scale mining activities that occur in the area.

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The UK-UG research team discovered that galamsey occurred in all towns/communities within the Atiwa West District, apart from Asunafo. Consequently, the team focused on this community to understand why no mining activity took place in Akyem Asunafo.

From our interactions (interviews, focus group discussions, and observations) with the community, including Madam Akosua Amonoo, Madam Gladys Darkoaa, Madam Ama Sarpong, Mr. Doku Opoku, Mr. Frederick Nana Kwame Atuobi, Baafour Siaw (Ankobeahene), and Kwabena Ntim (Akwamuhene), it was discovered that the women of Asunafo, backed by a few men, had consistently raised objections to even having a desire to prospect for gold on their lands. Looking beyond the apparent potential enrichment small-scale mining promises, and seeing the wanton destruction of the environment and a total decay in the moral fabric of mining communities around them, the women vehemently resisted mining in their community through various means. For instance, they had joined a mining-resistant movement called '*Atuatedom*' (the rebelling group), they constantly held meetings to report any suspicious characters and activities in their community, and they called out any suspected sell outs from the community (including their chiefs and elders). When political pressure was intensified for them to permit people with mining permits from the government to begin mining in their community, the women threatened to strip and go on a naked protest march in the community. Culturally, every woman is believed to be a potential mother in Ghana, and it is a cultural taboo to see one's mother's nakedness. Consequently, stripping naked is one of the key cultural weapons that African/Ghanaian women may employ, often as a last resort, to press home their demands. The threat by the women to go on a naked march caused the pressure to go down.

From the sampled resilience of African women in the fight to preserve heritage, we argue that the women of Akyem Asunafo lived their cultural and traditional roles. Their noncompliance with a proposed small-scale mining in the community between 2019 and 2021 affirms the cultural and traditional roles of women to protect what has been bestowed upon them, the land and its resources for posterity. These roles were confirmed in response by one of the women we interacted with:

Growing up I saw my parents as great cocoa farmers. I also have my family now and we still depend on cocoa farming. When my husband fell sick, it was this same cocoa that sustained us. I can apply for a loan with the cocoa as surety or collateral. How are we going to fend for ourselves and children if we lose our farmlands to mining? What will be handed over to our future generation? Personally, I'm not in support of mining. (Field interview, 2021, translated from original Twi)

Even when they were pushed to make choices between farming and mining, the women were resolute in their response, as shown in the translated interview transcript below:

Interviewer: *Don't you think that mining can ease the hardships in this town?*

Interviewee: *We go about our petty trading and other things just like the other towns where mining is ongoing. There is no vast difference between us. Because most of the miners are not indigenes, they send the monies they make from mining to their origin after destroying our lands.*

Interviewer: *Is there a possibility you will change your mind on the mining?*

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Interviewee: *No, certainly not. Even when the price of cocoa was low, we still engaged in farming, but now that the price of cocoa has appreciated; there is no way the price of cocoa will be reduced to the previous price.*

Interviewee: *We do not only cultivate cocoa but other foodstuffs like plantain, cocoyam, maize and cassava which we also sell to generate money. The natives of the mining towns buy foodstuffs from us. They cannot survive without our foodstuffs because, their lands are no longer good for planting due to mining. We even transport firewood to them, they have lost everything. Even if the price of cocoa goes down, we can still feed ourselves with our foodstuffs.*

In addition to upholding their traditional and cultural roles, the women of Akyem Asunafo availed themselves and embraced every opportunity that pushed for the protection and preservation of their land. The second leg of the Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) project focused solely on this town under the project title, 'Participatory Theatre and the Mitigation of Social and Environmental Harm: A Case Study from Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Ghana.' The project sought to draw global attention to the community's extraordinary resilience and highlight and heighten the conversation on the wanton destruction caused by illegal mining for a decisive action to be taken against the activities by the relevant agencies. The women of Akyem Asunafo participated in the creation, development, and rehearsals of a community-based drama titled, '*Yɛn Daakye wɔ Yɛn nsam*' (Our Future is in our Hands). The play was due to be performed on 21st July 2021. Unfortunately, due to a misinterpretation of the play at the eleventh hour, and in order not to compromise security, the performance was called off just as it was about to begin. This setback notwithstanding, the women of Akyem Asunafo had already demonstrated commitment towards protecting and preserving their land by making time daily from farm work to meet for focus group discussions, interviews, or rehearsals to tell their story to the world. It must be emphasised that these women, who collectively resisted the proposal for mining through theatre, were from a diverse age range; the oldest was eighty-seven (87) years and the youngest fifty (50) years. They defied the danger in opposing strong political forces to enroll in a participatory theatre initiative that sought to draw attention to the community's resolve not to allow small-scale gold mining in Akyem Asunafo.

Figure 5 shows a focus group discussion with women of Akyem Asunafo, whose views formed part of the field evidence on women's resistance to prospective mining in the community.

Figure 5. A focus group discussion with women of Akyem Asunafo

Source: *(Researcher's Field Report, 2021).*

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The women of Akyem Asunafo also demonstrated noncompliance regarding mining in varied ways. The general perception would have been for the women to persuade the men to calm down or compromise their stance; rather, they vehemently opposed the proposed mining by joining an opposition group formed by the men – *Atuatedom.* The mission of this group was to reiterate and uphold the cultural values of the community, that is, holding in trust the land bequeathed to them for future generations, just as their ancestors did. The *Atuadedom* resisted every external attempt made to either coerce or convince the chief and queen mother of the town to agree to the proposal. Their defiance was grounded in evidence of the destruction of cash crop and food crop farms and water bodies in surrounding communities. The women of Akyem Asunafo submitted that they will be failing future generations as custodians of the land should they look on while the environment is destroyed. This is a community that was so 'innocent' in the context of mining. Children were often seen picking gold nuggets from rainwater whenever it rained heavily. Below is a picture of the children's 'gold mine.'

Figure 6 depicts an environmental condition observed during fieldwork and helps to situate the community's concerns about land vulnerability and degradation.

Figure 6. Gully created from rainwater inn Akyem Asunafo.

Source: *(Researchers' field note, 2021)*

Figure 7 captures a field moment involving children in Akyem Asunafo and underscores how mining related activity reaches into everyday community life

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Figure 7. Children of Akyem Asunafo showing the researcher their 'harvest' from the 'mine'

Source: *(Researcher's field note, 2021)*

It is at the core of their fundamental being – if we are to go by history – to mobilise and act when it appears that their leaders and protectors have abandoned their duties and are allowing the worst to ensue. Historicising the role of women in environmental activism is necessary to show the similarity like the situations that compel women to form collective resistance, and justify their actions in such situations as a reflection of who they are as the natural custodians of the environment and its natural resources, according to African history and cultural beliefs.

CONCLUSION

This paper effectively historicises the role of African women in environmental activism, particularly in the context of Ghana's fight against illegal mining. It underscores the importance of cultural traditions in shaping collective resistance and advocacy for environmental conservation. The paper emphasises the crucial role of African women in environmental activism. It highlights their historical contributions to rural and agrarian fights against land degradation and exploitation of natural resources, particularly gold. The women of Akyem Asunafo in Ghana exemplify this collective resistance, protecting their land and future generations from the destructive impact of illegal mining. Their resilience and commitment underscore the cultural and traditional roles of women as custodians of the environment. The paper advocates for recognising and supporting women's activism in safeguarding natural resources for sustainable futures.

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