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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Of "*Akankyemaa*" and Beyond: Gender and Mining Income Disruptions in Late Colonial Asante

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Abstract

Historical analysis of Ghana's late colonial mine communities has been extensive and overwhelmingly dominated by organised and politically active male mineworkers. Questions regarding the linkages between formal and informal mining actors and cultural ideas in the broader mine communities have remained inadequately explored. This article makes a timely investigation by critically analysing a range of governmental and corporate archival documents and situating the discussion within the context of expansive literature on Asante, and complemented by oral histories. It centres on the Asante/Akan term "*kankyema*"—a sociocultural phenomenon which women transformed towards economic ends to navigate the late colonial political economy's mining income disruptions. The article argues for the essential need to centre marginalised voices in understanding diverse agencies in African mining history and for a deeper reflection on the potentialities of contextual sociocultural ideas—notably, how marginalised actors invoke and evoke their capacities over different times.

Keywords: West Africa; Ghana; mining; gender; local history; decolonisation; culture

In the mid-1940s, the British multinational mining company Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (AGC)—which had operated Asante's Obuase mine in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) from 1897—faced the task of navigating the bumpy late colonial capitalist business terrain.[1] The challenges

[1]Names such as Asante, Kumase, and Obuase are the accurate Asante renderings and are conventional among historians. They are therefore used in the body of the text. However, in places where they appear in historical archives, names of institutions, or companies, their English forms as applied during colonisation or as officially adopted after independence are maintained. While this article studies gender and informal issues in mining communities under decolonisation, the business perspectives of the period in Africa have been explored widely. See Sarah. E. Stockwell, *The Business of Decolonization: British Business Strategies in the Gold Coast*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); L. J. Butler, "Business and British Decolonisation: Sir Ronald Prain, the Mining Industry and the Central African Federation," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 35, no. 3 (2007): 459–84; Andrew Cohen, "Business and Decolonisation in Central Africa Reconsidered," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no. 4 (2008): 641–58; Ayodeji Olukoju, "The Pressure Group Activity of Federated Chambers of Commerce: The Joint West Africa Committee and the Colonial Office, c. 1903–1955," *African Economic History* 46, no. 2 (2018): 93–116. Others have also recently examined the aftermaths of these colonial-era mining giants and their postcolonial track records, including a view on environmental justice and historical pollution. See for example Pei Man Jessica Wan, "Environmental Justices and Injustices of Large-Scale Gold Mining in Ghana: A Study of Three Communities near Obuasi," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 1, no. 1 (2014): 38–47; Iva Peša, "The Power of Pollution on the Central African Copperbelt," in *Texture of Power: The Copperbelt in the Long Twentieth Century*, eds. Florence Bernault, Benoît Henriet, and Emery Kalema (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2025), 499–510.

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included devising strategies to manage workers' activism spurred by post-Second World War economic hardship and growing anticolonial discontent in general. The firm shared these difficulties with members of the Gold Coast Chamber of Mines, a front consisting of multinational mining interests. Duncan Sandys, then a member of the AGC's Board of Directors, reported after visiting the company's West African mines in 1947, the various challenging industry developments and potential opportunities for the firm to navigate them. One interesting reference Sandys made was how women in the mining communities—outside direct participation in mining—had been agential in shaping male African mineworkers' protests. Unlike previous decades, where women in Asante and, generally, the Gold Coast and the broader West African region were direct participants and even dominated gender representation in certain aspects of gold extraction, this trend experienced a reversal, albeit sometimes temporarily, in many contexts over time.[2] In some parts of Asante, this reversal occurred in the mid-twentieth century, partly due to the industrialised nature of gold mining on the one hand and changing socio-cultural gender norms concerning work on the other.[3] Regarding the latter, Asante society under colonialism saw strong patriarchal dominance and masculinisation of the various aspects of society, including expression in gendered work choices.[4] While these gendered developments offered women fewer opportunities both socially and economically, women have been shown to have demonstrated resilience in navigating various barriers in colonial society. There is significant coverage of gendered issues in precolonial and colonial Asante, particularly in the areas of cocoa production and distant trade, where women navigated conjugal challenges and broader sociocultural obstacles regarding power, property ownership, inheritance, and the sharing of pro ductive income.[5] Relatable and much wider issues have equally been explored in other contexts across colonial Africa.[6] This paper focuses on shedding light on late colonial women's experience in Asante's

[2]Regarding women in precolonial and early colonial gold mining, see on the Gold Coast, Raymond Dumett, *El Dorado in West Africa: The Gold-Mining Frontier, African Labor, and Colonial Capitalism in the Gold Coast, 1875–1900* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 73–74; Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital: Mechanized Gold Mining in the Gold Coast Colony, 1879–1909* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018), 101–13. For other West African contexts, see Robyn d'Avignon, "Primitive Techniques: From 'Customary' to 'Artisanal' Mining in French West Africa," *The Journal of African History* 59, no. 2 (2018): 179–97; Philip D. Curtin, "The Lure of Bambuk Gold," *The Journal of African History* 14, no. 4 (1973): 623–31; Katja Werthmann, "Gold Mining and Jula Influence in Precolonial Southern Burkina Faso," *The Journal of African History* 48, no. 3 (2007): 395–414.

[3]On industrialised gold mining, see G. Keith Allen, "Gold Mining in Ghana," *African Affairs* 57, no. 228 (1958): 221–40.

[4]On male dominance in Asante society under colonialism, see Jean Allman, "Be(Com)Ing Asante, Be(Com)Ing Akan: Thoughts on Gender, Identity and the Colonial Encounter," in *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention*, eds. Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 97–118. Similar developments, often expressed in the synergies or contestation between efforts by indigenous rulers and colonial officials to control women, are widely studied across Africa. See Moses Ochonu, "Masculine Anxieties, Cultural Politics, and Debates over Independent Womanhood among Idoma Male Migrants in Late Colonial Northern Nigeria," *Interventions* 13, no. 2 (2011): 278–98; Sacha Hepburn, "Women in Kenya," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 20 Sep. 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1607; Teresa A. Barnes, "The Fight for Control of African Women's Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 3 (1992): 586–608; Hamilton Sipho Simelane, "The State, Chiefs and the Control of Female Migration in Colonial Swaziland, c. 1930s–1950s," *The Journal of African History* 45, no. 1 (2004): 103–24.

[5]On the general agricultural sector, and particularly the cocoa economy as well, see Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807–1956* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), chs. 16 and 19; Jean Allman, "Rounding up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante," *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 195–214. Women also engaged in trade outside their communities, see T. C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850–1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), ch. 4; Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante, 1896–1996* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001), 111–13.

[6]Several titles exist, but on domestic labour, sex work, and women's mobility into urban centres in late colonial Africa, see, for example, Luise White, "Domestic Labor in a Colonial City: Prostitution in Nairobi, 1900–1952," in *Patriarchy and Class: African Women in the Home and the Workforce*, eds. Sharon B Stichter and Jane Parpart (New York: Routledge, 2019); Kenneth

Obuase and Konongo mining communities by discussing *kankyema*—a sociocultural phenomenon which evolved to involve contract cooking operated by women—as a unique innovation in these mining contexts.

Since the agency of women was equally significant in the late colonial Asante mining sector, despite their predominant absence in the workplace, this article makes a timely addition to Asante historiography and African mining history in general. Firstly, it fills existing knowledge gaps about female agency in late colonial Asante and Ghanaian mining communities by exploring women's strategies in navigating the unfavourable conditions of indigenous patriarchy and the late colonial economy. This bridges the gaps in studies about how women in Asante innovatively navigated sociopolitical change, from how precolonial inclusive Asante society later evolved into one characterised by male dominance, to the colonial encounter and many other disruptions afterwards.[7] The paper, therefore, situates female agency within the broader purview of anticolonial resistance and beyond. It particularly contributes to how female agency across Africa catalysed anticolonial resistance, but also inspires the quest for economic and political liberation beyond the colonial encounters.

Existing historical analysis of Asante and largely Ghana's mine communities have been both extensive and overwhelmingly dominated by organised and politically active male mineworkers.[8] After the Second World War, the Gold Coast witnessed increased anticolonial protests and the mobilisation of the working class, such as mineworkers. Mining history has thus extensively explored workers' activism and their linkages with decolonisation. The scholarship mostly focused on theories of African mineworkers' agency and class identity and confrontations between the colonial state and this incipient working class.[9] As a result, this valuable historical research has revealed little or nothing about the role of women in mining communities. One might conclude that women were, at this time, invisible in male-dominated Ghanaian mining communities. Yet historical research has proven that that was not the case in equivalent communities in South Africa and the Central African Copperbelt.[10] As this article will demonstrate, women were indeed central to socioeconomic changes in late colonial Asante and, for that matter, Ghanaian mine communities.

Little, *African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa's Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Emily Lynn Osborn, *Our New Husbands are Here: Households, Gender, and Politics in a West African State from the Slave Trade to Colonial Rule* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).

[7]On precolonial female agency in Asante, see Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995): 481–508. For broader connections with the position of women in precolonial West African society, see Cyrelene Amoah-Boampong and Christabel Agyeiwaa, "Women in Pre-Colonial Africa: West Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 1–13. On decimated female power due to militarised kinship, see Emma Kathryn Cleveland, "Patriarchy, Spirituality, and Power: An Examination of Gender Division in Asante History in the Former Gold Coast during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Era," *African and Asian Studies* 14, no. 3 (2015): 210–25. See also, T. C. McCaskie, "State and Society, Marriage and Adultery: Some Considerations Towards a Social History of Pre-Colonial Asante," *The Journal of African History* 22, no. 4 (1981): 477–94. For women's navigation of the colonial cash economy and patriarchy, see Allman, "Rounding"; Austin, *Labour*, ch. 16.

[8]Jeff Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles 1870–1980* (London: Zed Books, 2017); Paul S. Gray, *Unions and Leaders in Ghana: A Model of Labor and Development* (Buffalo, NY: Conch Magazine Limited, 1981); Michael Nimoh, "A Study of Labour Unrest in Ghana (1900–2008)" (PhD dissertation, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2014); Don Robotham, *Militants or Proletarians?: The Economic Culture of Underground Gold Miners in Southern Ghana, 1906–1976* (Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1989); Carola Lentz and Veit Erlmann, "A Working Class in Formation? Economic Crisis and Strategies of Survival among Dagara Mine Workers in Ghana," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 29, no. 113 (1989): 69–111.

[9]See Crisp, *African*; Gray, *Unions*; Nimoh, "Labour"; Robotham, *Militants*; Lentz and Erlmann, "Working."

[10]Francesca Pugliese, "Mining Companies and Gender(Ed) Policies: The Women of the Congolese Copperbelt, Past and Present," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 8, no. 3 (2021): 100795; Jane L. Parpart, "The Household and the Mine Shaft: Gender and Class Struggles on the Zambian Copperbelt, 1926–64," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13, no. 1 (1986): 36–56; Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, *Bana Shaba Abandonnés Par Leur Pére: Structures de l'autorité et histoire sociale de la famille ouvrière au Katanga 1910–1997* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2001).

Male-focused analysis about late colonial Asante and Ghanaian mining has consistently missed the opportunity to detail inclusive voices and actors who functioned on the non-mining sides of the industry. This is unlike the new wave of research that adds to the inclusive discussion of precolonial and early colonial mining by interrogating female experiences within and at the peripheries of mining and various gendered implications. Some illustrate women breaking barriers by taking a more active part, particularly in artisanal and small-scale mining, as well as in the large-scale sector, shattering the perception of the industry as a "masculinised" space.[11] It is essential to emphasise that precolonial and early colonial mining in Ghana significantly featured women of diverse backgrounds, with a greater number of women in Asante labouring under family mining groups.[12] Also, a female ruler like Queen Yaa Asantewaa, who led a war against British colonialism, is on record to have had, among other reasons, an economic stake in gold mining to protect.[13] However, the industry's transformation in response to industrialised techniques by the mid-twentieth century meant increased productivity, which indirectly limited non-industrial forms in which women mainly participated.[14] Again, the ultimate challenge to women's direct participation in mining in some parts of Asante was how it necessitated the dominance of colonial mining regulatory mechanisms. These laws, also traceable in some other colonial societies—provided an enabling environment for the operation of large and predominantly foreign companies—indirectly stifling indigenous initiatives.[15] The "new" technology and industry "norms," predominantly European, coalesced with local sociocultural ideas to widen female domesticity within some mining communities. This observation, similarly held by the colonial order in other parts of Africa, was rooted in ideas of males as "providers," demonstrating the consistent implications of existing gender norms on work in general and mining in particular, with ramifications for people on different scales.[16] Among such implications are the foundational sociocultural barriers whose residues sometimes shape recent cultural stereotypes about gender and work

[11]On the research in other parts of Africa, see Asanda Benya, "Going Underground in South African Platinum Mines to Explore Women Miners' Experiences," *Gender & Development* 25, no. 3 (2017): 509–22; Patience Mususa, *There Used to Be Order: Life on the Copperbelt after the Privatisation of the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021); Eddy Tshidiso Maloka, "Khomo Lia Oela: Canteens, Brothels and Labour Migrancy in Colonial Lesotho,1900–40," *The Journal of African History* 38, no. 1 (1997): 101–22; Gavin Hilson et al., "Female Faces in Informal 'Spaces': Women and Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Africa Journal of Management* 4, no. 3 (2018): 306–46; Katja Werthmann, "Gold Rush in West Africa: The Appropriation of 'Natural' Resources: Non-Industrial Gold Mining in South-Western Burkina Faso," *Sociologus* 50, no. 1 (2000): 90–104; Doris Buss and Blair Rutherford, "Gendering Women's Livelihoods in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining: An Introduction," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 54, no. 1 (2020): 1–16; Deborah F. Bryceson, "Artisanal Gold-Rush Mining and Frontier Democracy: Juxtaposing Experiences in America, Australia, Africa and Asia," in *Between the Plough and the Pick: Informal, Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in the Contemporary World*, ed. Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (Acton, Australia: ANU Press, 2018), 31–61. On Ghana, see, Francis Arthur-Holmes, "Gendered Division of Labour and 'Sympathy' in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Prestea-Huni Valley Municipality, Ghana," *Journal of Rural Studies* 81 (2021): 358–62; Natalia Yakovleva, "Perspectives on Female Participation in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining: A Case Study of Birim North District of Ghana," *Resources Policy* 32, no. 1 (2007): 29–41; Francis Arthur-Holmes and Kwaku Abrefa Busia, "Occupying the Fringes: The Struggles of Women in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining in Rural Ghana–Evidence from the Prestea–Huni Valley Municipality," *Gender Issues* 38, no. 2 (2021): 156–79.

[12]Dumett, *El Dorado*, 73–74; Mark-Thiesen, *Mediators*, 101–13.

[13]The queen claimed a mining concession was supposedly bequeathed to her ruling jurisdiction in the late nineteenth century in "Obuase," different from the famous mining town under study. See T. C. McCaskie, "The Life and Afterlife of Yaa Asantewaa," *Africa* 77, no. 2 (2007): 151–79.

[14]Dumett, *El Dorado*; Allen, "Gold."

[15]On Ghana, see Ishaq Akmey Alhassan, "Our Resource, Others' Wealth: The Origins of Legalized Discrimination against Local Goldsmiths in Ghana," *Ghana Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 121–35. For other colonial contexts, see Benjamin Rubbers, "Mining Towns, Enclaves and Spaces: A Genealogy of Worker Camps in the Congolese Copperbelt," *Geoforum* 98 (2019): 88–96; Pugliese, "Mining"; Parpart, "Household." Concerning colonial India, Khaitan rather provides a different scenario during the Second World War when women were temporarily engaged in the colliers, unlike before. See Urvi Khaitan, "Women Beneath the Surface: Coal and the Colonial State in India During the Second World War," *War & Society* 39, no.3 (2020): 172.

[16]Samuel Heimann, Kristina Johansson, and Wilhelm Tosser Franklin, "Gender in Industrial Mine Work and Organizations. A Review of an Expanding Research Field," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 16 (2023): 101371; Andreas Kotsadam and Anja Tolonen, "African Mining, Gender, and Local Employment," *World Development* 83 (2016): 325–39. On colonial mining

in mining and, therefore, deserve keen research. The existing literature on Ghana's late colonial gold mining mostly focuses on how men were affected by this mining regime, neglecting women in the discussion. Although some contributions on Asante feature female participation in economic activities in their oral histories in deepening understanding about both men's and women's experiences, they still lack women's perspectives from their own voices and "standpoints."[17]

The existing gap demonstrates the need for more comprehensive approaches to mining history in Africa that encompass both shifting gender relations and the distinct roles of women and men within the industry and in mine communities at various times. Doris Buss and Blair Rutherford have shown that women's agency has been significant, directly and indirectly, in mining across Africa from precolonial times to the present.[18] In Ghana, in particular, several authors have conducted focal studies in recent times. These, among many others, include those on gender roles, increasing female participation, and advocacy for the gender mainstreaming of policy and research in artisanal and small-scale mining across the country, given its new female involvement outlook, which is becoming central, as it was in some precolonial contexts, but with more female agency.[19] However, looking back into the past, it remains necessary to capture the missing details of the contextual experiences of women, as well as their implications for the wider industry and evolving sociocultural ideas that informed their changing role, in order to decentre knowledge that has overprivileged the voices of masculinised actors in disruptive mining contexts. Ultimately, centring women here enables understanding of female agency even in a period when they were formally denied a direct role in formal mine labour by the legal enforcement of patriarchal gender norms. This will demonstrate how female agency shaped the broader context of mineworkers' political activity and participation in the general dynamics of decolonisation.

This article utilises a post-Second World War mine canteen initiative as an entry point to identify and analyse female agency. When mining companies sought to address workers' dietary needs, the resultant canteen system was opposed and boycotted en masse across the Gold Coast. These protests, G. Keith Allen shows, were orchestrated by women domiciled in mine communities with a traditional practice of food provision and marketing.[20] They offered tailored culinary services to a predominantly male migrant mine population. However, their financial and social relations with male mineworkers went entirely unrecognised by mine companies. The companies were myopically focused on a simplistic economic interpretation of the cost of food provision to mineworkers when introducing these meals that were "subsidised" up to half price, without recourse to the broader social and cultural context of the Gold Coast in general, and gendered relations in mine communities in particular. In stepping away from the class-dominated analysis of previous scholars, this article demonstrates female agency in delivering food supplies and indirectly initiating these protests. It, therefore, highlights how women of the vibrant Asante mining communities of Obuase and Konongo navigated

binaries, see Robyn d'Avignon, *A Ritual Geology: Gold and Subterranean Knowledge in Savanna West Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 7.

[17] On some of these works on Asante, see, for example, Emmanuel Ofosu-Mensah, "Gold Mining and the Socio-Economic Development of Obuasi in Adanse," *African Journal of History and Culture* 3, no.4 (2011): 54–64. On "standpoint" theory, see Kristina Rolin, "Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the Study of Power Relations," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 218–26.

[18] Blair Rutherford and Doris Buss, "Women and Mining in Africa," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 13 Dec. 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.1415.

[19] See Yakovleva, "Perspectives"; Elizabeth Koomson-Yalley and Justice Richard Kwabena Owusu Kyei, "'We Are Mine Workers': Feminists' Political Economy in Artisanal and Small Scale Gold Mining in the Talensi District, Ghana," *Journal of Rural Studies* 95 (2022): 140–47. Jennifer Dokbila Mengba, Raymond Aitibasa Atanga, and Constance Awinpoka Akurugu, "Small-Scale Gold Mining and Gender Roles: Critical Reflections on Socio-Cultural Dynamics in North-Eastern Ghana," *SN Social Sciences* 3, no. 4 (2022): 1–32; George Ofosu, Mabel Torbor, and David Sarpong, "Gender and Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining: Exploring Women's Livelihood and Occupational Roles in Formalised Settings," *Journal of Rural Studies* 96 (2022): 121–28. On female participation in precolonial/early colonial era gold mining, see n2.

[20] Allen, "Gold."

the challenging intersections shaping mineral extraction, changing cultural norms about gender and work, and the broader late colonial Ghanaian political context.

The analysis uses a range of governmental and corporate archival documents, including population statistics, reports, and correspondence. These records originate from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department's Accra and Kumase branches, Churchill College Archives at Cambridge University, the London Metropolitan Archives, and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Library. The records are critically examined, with an understanding of their contextual mediums of production. Some are products of the colonial archives, with the inherent challenge of representing marginalised voices. They were, therefore, carefully examined with awareness of their incompleteness and complemented with oral histories.[21] Oral histories helped capture diverse lived experiences about *kankyema*. Through this, the paper sheds light on what has not hitherto been the subject of sustained scholarly analysis. Doing this also helps to decentre the voices of privileged actors within late colonial society, repositioning the colonially marginalised and capturing diverse actors under a single historical framework.[22] Particularly, the late colonial capitalist hegemony sidelined the voices of women in these mining communities, barely preserving them in written records. Even those that reflected were partly refracted through the minds of the predominantly male colonial officials or mining company officers, who misunderstood or poorly related to colonised women's experiences. It is, therefore, not uncommon that a critical archival record cited in this article about women's culinary activities is in a male's voice, imparting masculine biases, cultural inappropriateness, and even the overarching colonially exclusive and differentially oriented language of difference used in expressing the condition of the late colonial female subject.[23] The next section historicises the *kankyema* movement, followed by how practitioners navigated the late colonial mining economy.

Historicising *Kankyema* and its Economic Turn

The Asante Twi terms *akankankyemaa* [ʌ*k*ɑŋtʃɪmɑː] (plural) and *ɔkankyema* [ɔ*k*ɑŋtʃɪmɑ] (singular), derive from the word *kankyema* [*k*ɑŋtʃɪmɑ].[24] In the wider Asante and Akan society, the term loosely describes a "culturally unsanctioned love relationship." Within the study context, some people attempted to redefine it to encompass individuals involved in an informal contract cooking agreement, often between a woman and a man, where the former regularly provides culinary services to the latter for an agreed-upon fee. Here, women rarely used the term for men whom they provided culinary services, although it is gender neutral.[25]

Back to the term's broader social meaning, there were qualifications such as *kankyema nsɔwdo* [*kaŋtʃɪma* ŋ*sɔwd*ʊ] or *kankyema nsɔsoɔ* [*kaŋtʃɪma ŋsɔsʊɔ*]. Nsɔwdo and nsɔsoɔ mean "extra" in the

[21] Rodney G. S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* (2006), 215–33; Jessica Wagner Webster, "'Filling the Gaps': Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in The American Archivist, 1938–2011,'" *The American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 254–82; Lorenzo Bosi and Herbert Reiter, "Historical Methodologies: Archival Research and Oral History in Social Movement Research," in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 118.

[22] Nathan Sowry, "Silence, Accessibility, and Reading Against the Grain: Examining Voices of the Marginalized in the India Office Records," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8, no. 2 (2012); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[23] On colonial difference, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[24] Asante is used ethnically and linguistically. For the former, it is part of the Akan matrilineal West Africa group that conglomerated in the seventeenth century to resist other domineering Akan groups such as Denkyira. Fante, another Akan group, speaks the Fante language, which is partially intelligible with Asante's Twi language. See Limpu I. Digbun, "The Asante Factor in the Political Reorientation of Northern Ghana," in *The Asante World*, eds. Edmund Abaka and Kwame Osei Kwarteng (New York: Routledge, 2021), 57–73; Patrique deGraft-Yankson, "Of the Akan People: Colour and Design Education in Ghana," *International Journal of Education through Art* 16, no. 3 (2020): 399–416.

[25] Most of the interviewees referred to *akankyemaa* as the women involved in this practice, but others referred to both men and women.

Fante and Asante (Twi) languages, respectively. The extras may refer to the addition of consensual sexual services to the dietary provision, which some mineworkers labelled "*kankyema* up and down."[26] While *kankyema* within the study context could involve sexual relations, potentially resonating with the wider social meaning in Akan society at the time and even today, many were entirely free from such attachment and were often carried out by both married and unmarried persons in response to the disruptive shifts in mining work towards the male gender, which left women to venture into the informal economy. The period, therefore, saw *kankyema* being stretched to assume an economic form by married and independent men and women without necessarily carrying some of its sociocultural meanings as a prelude to marriage and/or slipping towards sex work. This new idea about *kankyema,* therefore, differs from *mpena, sikunu*, or *siyere*, loosely translated as "affianced" in Akan society.[27]

Kankyema took a more overtly economic form, given its frequency and the number of participants, including married and unmarried men and women who neither pursued marriage relationships nor engaged in commercialised sex work. Even among the unmarried male and female participants, the economic drive generally meant that many participants had no marital intentions and expectations beyond their fundamental culinary contract. This observation challenges one of the earliest mentions of the term in Ghanaian popular music. The 1970s Highlife song titled *Kankyema* by then-Kumase-based Vis-à-Vis Music Band has a few lines translated as:

> Beyond *kankyema* is marriage
>
> Unless the woman is not in love with the man
>
> Or she is already married[28]

The exceptionalism of the mining context warrants further assessment in relation to the highlife song quoted. Essentially, the composer captures the significance of female agency within the practice by illustrating not just the right of the woman to choose with whom she could establish a relationship independently, but also the ultimate authority to marry or reject that person. However, the contour of its broader context requires critical examination as the new phase of *kankyema* defied the song's assumption that it is a means to an end that would result in the marriage between participants, except that the woman involved was married or did not like the man. It is fair to argue that *kankyema* in the mining communities became an economic end in itself, in which it was possible but not inevitable that marriage would occur even among unmarried persons, and to talk about the fact that married persons also participated for exclusively economic reasons. Thus, the economic (r)evolution of *kankyema* challenges marriage as an integral end-part of the practice, whether perceived or expected. This perspective contributes to the understanding that a nuanced appreciation of social and cultural norms at any given time is crucial in evaluating work and gender relations. While one may argue that socioeconomic realities sometimes necessitate a subversion of the cultural underpinnings of society, it is also essential to recognise this as part of the plasticity of cultural norms.[29] In other words, some cultural norms have the inherent potential to subvert what has been predominantly thought and held about them because times of disruption activate their full potentialities and latitudes.

The "modern" *kankyema* practice probably emerged at a point when migrant workers to the Akan regions, including miners, construction and railway workers, and other seasonal male migrants,

[26]Interview with Gilbert S., Obuase, 1 Jan. 2020.

[27]J. O. Anane, *Advanced Akan Dictionary* (Ghana: Prisebs Business Services, 2000), 58, 118.

[28]Selected portions of Asante Twi lyrics translated by the author from the song, Vis-A-Vis *Kankyema*, Obi Agye Me Dofo (Kumase, Ghana: Brobisco House of Music-KBL 068, 1977), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOF56GAivPY&ab_channel=AntonioLucente, accessed 22 Oct. 2020.

[29]Rita McGrath, Ian MacMillan, Elena Yang, and William Tsai, "Does Culture Endure, or is It Malleable? Issues for Entrepreneurial Economic Development," *Journal of Business Venturing* Special International Issue 7, no. 6 (1992): 441–58.

increased, both in number and in the duration of their stay.[30] For those who worked in the mines, their employment involved daily shifts, and they often had little time to cook for themselves. While provided with food during their working hours, no culinary provision was made outside this period, especially for the miners living beyond the mining compounds. Many, therefore, began engaging informal contract cooks. There were other instances where miners established contracts with women already living in the compounds or homes where they rented accommodation. In fact, some mineworkers sought accommodation from relatives or acquaintances and, therefore, engaged in the culinary services of the house owners' partners. These meals, which were vital for mineworkers' sustenance, were provided upon return from work. After quizzing a former mineworker from the Upper East region, now domiciled in Konongo, regarding the essence of *kankyema* to his survival working at Konongo Gold Mines in the late 1950s, the man in his late eighties declared with a loud voice: "without *kankyema*, hunger will kill you."[31]

This "modernising" context of *kankyema* further highlights its social-economic nexus, limits, and differences from other relationships within Akan societies. Ghana's first lawyer, John Sarbah, writing about Fante laws in the late-nineteenth century, referenced *sarwie*, "a custom of forfeiture" among spouses. It expanded within the context of increased migration to the coastal regions and urbanisation, and referred to the act of forfeiture of any economic undertaking made during a relationship when unmarried parties are separating.[32] A *subpoena duces tecum* served to the Asante king's chief linguist in 1948 to assist a case of separating partners received the response that, unlike Fante society, *sarwie* was culturally untenable in Asante.[33] Despite their differences, the conditions of *sarwie* and the economisation of *kankyema* both reveal how migration, urbanisation, and changing political economies shaped sociocultural ideas in wider Akan societies.

The business was informal and without a standardised valuation. The varying levels of the mineworkers' pay and the negotiations between the parties influenced the amount paid. In one interview, Maame A., an octogenarian, used an Akan proverb: "*Wo abɔmu na ɛkyerɛ wo adɔ*," to emphasise that "the quality and quantity of the food provided was proportional to one's income" and how much the mineworker was willing and able to pay.[34]

Mine Companies' Indirect Relations with *Akankyemaa*

While women in late colonial Asante mining communities faced the implications of technology and cultural ideas on gold mining, they also encountered the indirect impacts of decisions and policies of colonial mining capital. Serving as the umbrella organisation for most mining firms at the time, the Gold Coast Chamber of Mines (GCCM) championed the idea of introducing a canteen system, which workers would access using credit vouchers. General Spears, then chair of AGC Board of Directors, considered this effort a useful one, especially at a time when he was always seeking strategies to contain working-class unrest. Duncan Sandys, also a board member, visited the mines in 1947 and offered a critical evaluation of these canteens following their boycott, which the AGC estimated at £46,000

[30] Women's participation in the food trade is not new in Asante, as this goes back to the nineteenth century. It has mostly been analysed along with the cocoa booms in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but less in the context of gold mining. See Austin, *Labour,* 305. An exception is Kuusaana's focus on migration and the broader informal economy of late colonial Ghana, but with inadequate depth on female agency in mining. See Mariama M. Kuusaana, "Migration and the Production of Informal Economies in the Gold Coast," in *African Economic History*, eds. George Bob-Milliar et al., (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), *xlvii*, 68–83.

[31] Interview with Baba G., Konongo, 19 Nov. 2019.

[32] John Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Laws: A Brief Introduction to the Principles of the Native Laws and Customs of the Fanti and Akan Sections of the Gold Coast, with a Selection of Cases Thereon Decided in the Law Courts* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1897).

[33] Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD), Kumase, ARG 12/3/4, Abina Kunkuma (Plaintiff) vs Kwame Achemfuo (Defendant), Supreme Court, Asante Division; Suit No. 2/1948.

[34] Interview with Maame A., Konongo, 25 Nov. 2019.

cost.[35] Sandys disfavoured the project's benefit after projecting its economic returns and noted that workers would still strike even when offered subsidised meals. Interestingly, his analysis discounted the essence of community women's tailored culinary duties in sustaining mineworkers. Unfortunately, he labelled them as racketeers, price inflators, and preparers of perfunctory meals, as quoted below:

> The earning of the lowest-paid mineworker would be sufficient to provide him with an ample diet, were it not for the extortionate practices of the native food dealers. This food racket is run mainly by women…who buy up scarce food, cook it in a rather perfunctory [?] fashion and resell it to the mineworkers at the pithead at shamelessly inflated prices. The men buy this food largely on credit and sooner or later get themselves seriously in debt.[36]

Sandys did not only miss the importance of the wider mine community women to mineworkers in economic, social, and cultural terms. As it often happened in such colonial contexts, the tone of cultural disrespect, racialised thinking, and othering of the colonised can be deduced from above. He also failed to consider the general economic and political context. While the canteen boycott's economic basis is clear, it does not explain the roots of the conflict, neither does it capture the experiences of the women—who have previously been described as having "vested interests" nor their long tradition of food selling in the mining communities.[37] Indeed, an understanding of the broader sociocultural context would suggest that the *kankyema* business was central to these events. As mentioned earlier, many mineworkers would have struggled to meet their dietary needs beyond the mine if not for the intervention of the economisation of *kankyema*.

In the broader context, the boycott occurred against postwar economic hardship and the shortage of consumer goods across the Gold Coast. Similar hardship-induced anticolonial resistance was sparked by struggling ex-service personnel who faced police brutality on 28 February 1948 when petitioning the governor for their unsettled benefits. The mining canteen boycott was, therefore, the beginning of a series of boycotts of European products that were to follow.[38] The postwar economic challenges dragged on for years, as seen in the testimony of a unionist about the cost of living in the mining communities in 1953:

> The cost of living in the Mining Area is in fact extremely high. The Workers are wild with discontent. It must be admitted that population in the mining area are solely concerned with mining and available farms are not sufficient in the area to meet the demand of food supplies. Consequently, the price of food stuff is exorbitantly high, resulting in high cost of living. Recommendations have since been made to the T.U.C [Trades Union Congress] on this matter and the demand of the mining unions for wage increase has the full support of the Trade Union Congress.[39]

Some of the women involved in *kankyema* business had to find ways to access scarce sources of consumables by resorting to the shadow economy, especially immediately after the war, when supplies were particularly limited. They, therefore, had to raise their charges before making a profit. Sandys,

[35]London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), London, CLC/B/015/MS1417/095, Letter to the Secretary of Gold Coast Chamber of Mines, 1 June 1951.

[36]Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, SPRS 3/1/48, Directors, 1947.

[37]Allen, "Gold."

[38]Colonial Office, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast, 1948* (London: HMSO, 1948): 36–42; Bianca Murillo, "'The Devil We Know": Gold Coast Consumers, Local Employees, and the United Africa Company, 1940–1960,'" *Enterprise & Society* 12, no. 2 (2011): 319.

[39]PRAAD, Accra, file number omitted in author's notes, Statement by J. K Tettegah, AG General Secretary of Gold Coast Trade Union Congress, 11 Jan. 1953.

Table 1. Kankyema's possible earnings against number of clients

Number of Mineworkers	15% of average monthly income (West Africa/Ghana Pound, £) per mineworker over different years in payment for food only *kankyema*		
	Average monthly income, 1947 (£3.5s.0d)	Average monthly income 1955 (£8.12s.2d)	Average monthly income, 1961 (£10.16s.0d)
1	£0. 9s. 9d	£1. 5s. 10d	£1. 12s. 4d
2	£0. 19s. 6d	£2. 11s. 8d	£3. 4s. 8d
3	£1. 9s. 3d	£3. 17s. 6d	£4. 17s. 0d
4	£1. 19s. 0d	£5. 3s. 4d	£6. 9s. 4d
5	£2. 8s. 9d	£6. 9s. 2d	£8. 1s. 8d
6	£2. 18s. 6d	£7. 14s.11d	£9. 14s. 0d

Source: Computed by author using comparative archival sources to strike the average wage of an underground mineworker based on PRAAD, Accra, RG7/1/2046, Ghana SGMC Minutes of Board of Directors, 1961 and Colonial Office, *Colonial Reports Gold Coast 1953* (London: HMSO, 1954): 17. See also, Afrifa Taylor, "An Economic History of the Ashanti Goldfields Corporation, 1895–2004: Land, Labour, Capital and Enterprise" (PhD dissertation, London School of Economics, 2006), 103.
Note: Conversion into West African Pound/Ghana Pound verified via https://www.retrowow.co.uk/retro_britain/old_money/sterling_calculator.html. Decimals above 0.5 of a penny was rounded to 1 penny (applied to rows 1-6 under 1955 column only).

only witnessing the impact of this broader political-economic development on mineworkers' earnings, described the work of the food sellers (by implication, *akankyemaa* inclusive) in his report as an "extortionate" act that left the mineworkers in serious debt.[40] The potential income of the *kankyema* business computed in Table 1 (below) provides an indication of their possible earnings, which, in economic terms, challenges the argument of the mining company official. This shift of blame to women during economic hardships has been explored by Abena Asare in the context of Ghanaian market women. She argues that whenever there is an economic downturn, market women become targeted, and their often-praised skills vanish into thin air, with the national government shifting the blame of economic hardship towards them.[41] In this case, even mining company officials, after failing to link the local informal economy towards an inclusively positive end in the industry, blamed women for earning a living with their culinary ingenuity. This observation about difficulties with entrepreneurial initiatives, according to some institutional theorists, is attributed to poor linkages between formal and informal institutional guidelines, norms, and regulations, and these have longer historical antecedents in Ghana.[42]

The boycott highlighted the solidarities of the mineworkers that transcended the mining community that the mining companies often conceived. In contrast to this conflict, mineworkers accepted a miners' market that the AGC introduced with subsidised products in the 1950s.[43] During that period, the AGC also sought to meet the dietary needs of migrant mineworkers with products from their places of origin in the hope that this would increase the likelihood that they would remain in the mining towns for extended periods.[44] This move further confirmed the significance of culinary affinities, which mineworkers relied upon among *akankyemaa*. The on-site and on-shift dietary provisions the company sought to introduce were indeed insufficient to replace the essential culinary services

[40]SPRS 3/1/4/8, Directors, 1947.
[41]Abena Ampofoa Asare, *Truth Without Reconciliation: A Human Rights History of Ghana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 67.
[42]Colin C. Williams and Abbi Kedir, "Evaluating Competing Theories of Informal Sector Entrepreneurship: A Study of the Determinants of Cross-Country Variations in Enterprises Starting-up Unregistered," *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* 19, no. 3 (2018): 158.
[43]LMA CLC/B/015/MS1417/095: Letter from Secretary to General Mines Manager, 1 Jun. 1951; Fish for wholesale, 29 Feb. 1952; Mine market, 5 Mar. 1952.
[44]SPRS 3/1, Griffin's Report on visits to the Northern Territories, 20–29 Mar. 1952.

which mineworkers needed after work. The *akankyemaa,* therefore, continued to deploy their household culinary skills, now upgraded into a significant commercial activity, that could not be easily truncated.[45]

This reveals the complex linkages between mineworkers' direct and indirect interests within broader mining communities. Mirta Lobato argued that any study of the working class that downplays the place and position of women tends to lack a full understanding, even of a masculinised working environment.[46] This is indeed true about the Asante mining communities. An industrialised sector that had almost eliminated artisanal mining meant that women selling food to mineworkers was one of the few remaining ways to earn an income from mineworkers and, indirectly, from the operations of gold mining companies. Samuel Ntewusu and Ishaq Alhassan have broadly examined the regulatory background to this shift. They have highlighted how colonial land and mineral ordinances in the 1930s crippled the hitherto traditional rulers' capacity to control and lease lands for mining activities as a new colonial regulatory regime emerged to favour foreign industrial capital and overshadowed local initiatives surrounding mining.[47] Indeed, the criminalised artisanal mining practices would persist or resurface from time to time, depending on the place and time and the level of effectiveness of enforcement, even until today.[48] However, male mineworkers in places like Obuase in the late colonial period, unlike their female counterparts, who were unable to easily and directly participate in mining, still had the extra opportunity of selling labour to the booming industrialising mining firms such as the AGC with its expanding application of sophisticated mining technology and much deeper underground exploration.

Coupled with the colonial state regulations that curtailed a lot of artisanal mining efforts, this switch in Obuase was less disruptive for male labour, whose artisanal skills and openness to learn remained vital in the gradually industrialising, yet labour-demanding, mining sector.[49] It was within this context that mineworkers across the country, who apparently benefited from the provision of "cheap" food in their company canteens, nonetheless boycotted them, something that can only be explained by understanding their familial and conjugal relations—a broader sociocultural issue beyond workplace dynamics and contestations with capital, as well as women's integral place in the changing politics of late colonial Ghana.

Doing *Kankyema* and Navigating Sociocultural Barriers

Some women negotiated *kankyema* business with miners in response to the limited job opportunities available for them. While some struck arrangements with neighbours or co-household members, others who sold food at the mining sites encountered mineworkers with whom they entered *kankyema* agreements. For example, an Akan woman from Konongo who combined mine-site food vending and *kankyema* in the 1950s explained how she, then a young unmarried woman, negotiated the business with two migrant mineworkers: "While selling food at the mining site, the men came to discuss

[45] Interview with Gilbert S.

[46] Mirta Zaida Lobato, "Women Workers in South America (Nineteenth-Twentieth Centuries)," *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 38 (2014): 205, 214–16.

[47] Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu, "10,000 Miners, 10,000 Votes: Politics and Mining in Ghana," *Africa* 88, no. 4 (2018): 863–66; Alhassan, "Our Resource."

[48] Gavin Hilson and Clive Potter, "Why Is Illegal Gold Mining Activity so Ubiquitous in Rural Ghana?," *African Development Review* 15, nos. 2–3 (2003): 237–70. On the timescales and background to the major resurfacing of illegal and artisanal small-scale mining, see Paul W. K. Yankson and Katherine V. Gough, "Gold in Ghana: The Effects of Changes in Large-Scale Mining on Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM)," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 6, no. 1 (2019): 120–28; Gavin Hilson and Chris Garforth, "'Agricultural Poverty' and the Expansion of Artisanal Mining in Sub-Saharan Africa: Experiences from Southwest Mali and Southeast Ghana," *Population Research and Policy Review* 31, no. 3 (2012): 435–64.

[49] Allen, "Gold"; Ntewusu, "10,000 Miners"; Alhassan, "Our Resource."

with me whether I could be their ɔ*kankyema*. I took them home to get my mother as a witness, while they also brought another witness. Some [women] could have up to five men they cooked for."[50]

Witnesses were vital participants in all such agreements. Their presence served to guarantee payments which men retrospectively made after receiving their salaries, either fortnightly or at month's end. The nature of the payment disadvantaged women seeking to venture without initial capital. Also, while witnesses were common, their presence also reflected sensitivities regarding this work, which affected single and married women differently. Some single women considered entering the business more straightforward than their married counterparts. Respondents, such as Akua A., an Akan woman from Konongo, noted that some men, including her gold mining husband in the 1960s, barred their partners from engaging in *kankyema* business, but this was not true of all married people.[51]

After travelling to Obuase from Nandom in the Upper East region of Ghana to work in AGC's underground timbering operation in 1965, Gilbert S. contracted a married Dagomba woman as his *kankyema*. He employed her exclusive culinary services until a year later, when he returned to his hometown to get married and had his partner join him.[52] Mr Ussif O., a former mineworker born in Konongo to a Burkinabe Mossi father and a Ghanaian Dagomba mother, shared another perspective about negotiating *kankyema* services during the 1960s, when he worked in Konongo mines. He related to male insecurity and its impact on their partner's participation in *kankyema* and the ease of negotiation: "Some husbands did not agree for their wives to be *akankyemaa*. It was easier to negotiate with single ladies.… The husbands were reluctant because if the single man is richer than you, the chances of losing your wife to them was higher."[53]

Alhaji F. A., a Bissa (Busanga) man born in Obuase to parents from the Upper East Region in the late 1940s, remembered that his mother served as *kankyema* for a few Bissa miners and that her pay supplemented his father's salary as an underground gold mineworker, providing for the upkeep of the family, especially at times when his salary proved insufficient.[54] Being able to establish this business with many miners, in this case, reflects the ease of recruitment facilitated by shared ethnic, cultural, and nutritional affinities. It was difficult for an average *kankyema* to recruit such high numbers due to the various sociocultural barriers they had to navigate.

Initially, it was local Akan women who dominated the business. However, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, some of the growing number of newly settled migrant women joined the trade. Cultural, dietary, and customary diversity, as noted earlier, implied several sensitivities for practitioners to navigate. For example, while snails are a source of protein in Akan society in general, some ethnicities from the northern regions of Ghana do not enjoy them. Therefore, some male workers would, when contracting *kankyema* workers, inform them of their culinary preferences or choose women with their shared cultural and nutritional affinities.[55] It is believed that some mineworkers refused to take meals prepared by women during their menstrual cycle because they ascribed to certain mystical beliefs tied to, especially, underground mining work. Adherents of this view often found supernatural interpretations of the frequent accidents and injuries to which they were exposed. In 1963, a mechanical fault at AGC's Anyinam Shaft sent a cage carrying workers underground into free fall, causing at least seventeen casualties. The company raised a memorial beside Obuase's largest mosque (Figs. 1 and 2, below), which it bequeathed to the community under General Edward Spears more than a decade earlier.[56] This was not only the place where most of the Muslim mineworkers living in the *Zongo* (migrant quarters) worshipped, but it was also a site for the local branch of the

[50] Interview with Maame A. K. (pseudonym), Konongo, 23 Nov. 2019.
[51] Interview with Akua A., Konongo, 25 Nov. 2019.
[52] Interview with Gilbert S.
[53] Interview with Ussif O., Konongo, 25 Nov. 2019.
[54] Interview Alhaji F. A. (pseudonym), Obuase, 26 Jan. 2019.
[55] Interview with Gilbert S.
[56] Edward S. Ayensu, *Ashanti Gold: The African Legacy of the World's Most Precious Metal* (London: Marshall, 1997).

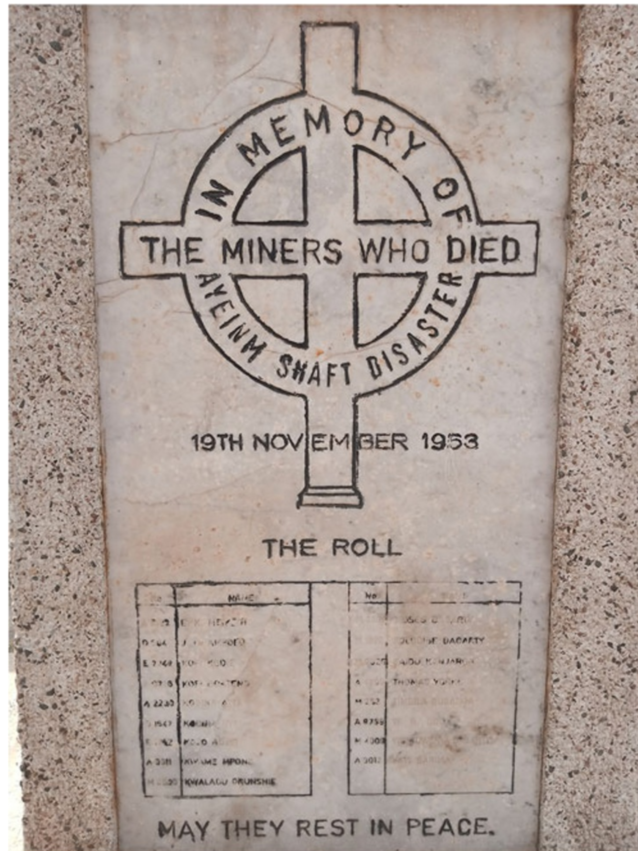

Figure 1. Casualty roll of the 1963 Anyinam Shaft Accident Memorial
Source: Photograph by author, Jan. 2019.

Mineworkers Union's regular meetings.[57] Seeing this monument for the first time heightened the stories some newly arrived mineworkers heard about the risks and dangers surrounding underground mining work.[58] As a result, some believed metaphysical support would improve their chances of survival, and it is said that some mineworkers in Obuase and Konongo carried talismans and occasionally visited spiritualists to protect themselves.[59] This observation parallels that of mineworkers elsewhere in Africa at the time, characterised by widespread mystical rituals, cultural and dietary preferences with spiritual implications, and a belief in the power of charms to dispel evil forces.[60]

Then existing cultural ideas about gold mining and its linkages with safety and security equally had other interpretations. One woman attributed her husband's involvement in accidents in the mines to his alleged multiple sexual partners, noting that "*amena mu adwuma mpɛ efi*," to highlight underground mining as "a sacred business."[61] This idea about sacredness is strongly tied to the community's worldview about gold, which Lauren Coyle Rosen demonstrates persists in present times, especially

[57]LMA CLC/B/015/14170/109, Mines Correspondence Outward, AGC Intelligence Report, No. 9, 1962.

[58]Interview with Kojo A. (pseudonym), Obuase, 1 Jan. 2020.

[59]Conversation with Mallam S., Konongo, 17 Nov. 2019; Interview with Oduro A., Konongo, 15 Nov. 2019.

[60]F. Rodseth, "The Native Mineworker: His Gremlins and Superstition," *South African-American Survey 1955–1956*, ed. Henry M. Moolman (New York: South African-American Survey, 1955), 65–69.

[61]Interview with Safia K. (pseudonym), Obuase, 18 Dec. 2019.

Figure 2. Full view of the 1963 Anyinam Shaft Accident Monument
Source: Photograph by author, Jan. 2019.

among small-scale miners.[62] It was, therefore, not unusual to see a societal view that could connect a mineworker's infidelity with bad luck at the workplace, which in turn was associated with the chance of his being involved in accidents.

It is within this cultural milieu that menstrual blood was also seen by some mineworkers as having disarming powers towards their spiritual fortifications, frowned upon by the spirits of the mineral and its abode, and the general presupposition of discouraging women from mining work. Even from the margins, women's work was equally connected to other ideas of the time, as some tended to deploy spiritual favours aimed at productively shaping their fortunes through contracts with miners of good character and financial standing.[63]

Mystical ideas around blood and gold mining could be traced back to the earlier Akan societal beliefs about the power inherent in blood in general and that of menstrual blood in particular. Robert Rattray wrote in the early nineteenth century that it had the power to disempower a warrior in battle, and Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng further indicate that when people constituted

[62] Lauren Coyle Rosen, *Fires of Gold: Law, Spirit, and Sacrificial Labor in Ghana* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

[63] Interview with Abena N., Obuase, 15 Feb. 2020; interview with Akuah Y., Obuase, 15 Feb. 2019.

wealth in Asante society, menstruation could have been taboo due to "male ambivalence towards the reproductive powers of women."[64]

Kofi Agyekum has also shown that menstrual blood, categorised among others as sexual organs, excreta, and death, was earmarked as an unmentionable taboo and deserved strict euphemising in daily conversations.[65] In his nuanced examination of the theory behind the Akan verbal taboo surrounding menstruation, Agyekum highlights both the negative and positive models. The former, he argues, considers menstruation as "messy, revolting, and polluted" while the latter points to "fertility and societal recognition of the female" and that "male-dominated and gender asymmetrical societies" and cultures perpetrated the negative model's preeminence.[66] Therefore, gold mining, dominated by men at some point, could not be free from entrenched negative ideas regarding menstruation, especially if some historical traces, whether distorted or incomprehensible, could be found as justification. Although the negative connotations associated with menstruation have significantly changed in Akan society, these and other cultural ideas in the past have shaped the economic fortunes of women involved in *kankyema* in mining communities and continue to influence certain people's perceptions about females' participation in mining.[67] The business was therefore sensitive to diverse sociocultural practices and beliefs, which differentially affected women's ability to broker deals because of a range of factors—including those they could or could not control—bolstering or hampering their economic opportunities.

Despite excluding women from mine labour, new roles in the *kankyema* era under investigation allowed them greater agency in general and control over the income they accumulated. Maame W. K., an Asante woman born and raised in Konongo, explained how she engaged in *kankyema* after a divorce in the 1950s. She explained what transpired between her and one of her clients:

> My first husband was a cook in the mines… Because he was a drunkard, I divorced him and started serving as *ɔkankyema*… I had three men I cooked for…I used to send them food myself, but later I introduced my daughter to help… One of the men protested that he wanted me to bring the food personally. I resisted and stopped… I was later told by his neighbour that the man said "he wants me and my food."[68]

Parallel to Jean Allman's descriptions of the impact of the cash economy on gender dynamics and women's power relations with men in colonial Asante, Maame W. K.'s experience highlights her increased ability to earn income after leaving her marriage and rejecting unwanted male advances.[69] The male sexual overtures noted here relate to revelations by recent scholars as a major obstacle to women wanting to invest in subterranean small-scale mining in Ghana, indicating that these are long and persistent problems in the industry, which partly highlights the previous culture of less female participation in small-scale mining across the Asante and wider Akan mining regions of Ghana.[70] Another respondent, however, noted the precariousness of the *kankyema* business, dependent as it was on the decisions and fortunes of migrant workers: "*Kankyema* was a major work for women

[64]Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Religion & Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), 75; Akyeampong and Obeng, "Spirituality."

[65]Kofi Agyekum, "Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo among the Akan of Ghana," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 58, no. 3 (2002): 371.

[66]Ibid., 367.

[67]Ibid., 374.

[68]Interview with Maame W. K (pseudonym), Konongo, 28 Nov. 2019.

[69]Allman, "Rounding."

[70]Francis Arthur-Holmes, Thomas Yeboah, and Kwaku Abrefa Busia, "Dimensions of Women's Mobility, Livelihoods and Vulnerability in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining-Induced Local Economy," *Journal of Rural Studies* 101 (2023): 103061. On Obuase, see Ofosu-Mensah, "Gold Mining and the Socio-Economic Development." Certainly, other barriers have been explored by scholars in these contexts to include a range of safety, environmental, health, and economic factors. See Frederick Ato Armah et al., "Working Conditions of Male and Female Artisanal and Small-Scale Goldminers in Ghana: Examining Existing Disparities," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 3, no. 2 (2016): 464–74.

because it gave us cash to buy clothes and other things…They often paid, but the month my clients returned to the north, they did not pay me, their witness said they were already gone, so I should let go…so I quitted."[71]

While *kankyema* could have been lucrative, the above shows that its informal contractual nature culminated in weak compliance despite witness involvement. In the interviews, none of the participants recalled an instance where defaulted customers were summoned before witnesses or any higher authority to claim payment successfully. However, one woman, who did not participate in the work herself, remembered that fights sometimes erupted when people failed to pay, and it was possible to report such instances to the police or elders, who could help retrieve their money.[72] It can be concluded that, despite its attractiveness as a community-based business, practitioners engaged in a risky venture because they lacked recourse to a system that could ensure their customers honoured their debt. Unfortunately, it was also done outside the remits of the mining companies, despite their awareness of these female entrepreneurs and their linkages with male mineworkers. These experiences shed light on how, despite the low recognition of informality surrounding mining and inadequate harmonisation with the formal economy, local knowledge and cultural ideas historically shaped mining in the past. Furthermore, it also provides a background to the ways in which governance fragmentation continues to be a major issue in the industry, where compliance and other formalising mechanisms and enforcement sometimes fall short.[73]

Although all women entrepreneurs experienced the advantages and risks of *kankyema* work as set out above, their experience varied due to the different social categories they occupied. Industrial gold mining, with its almost exclusively male labour regime, placed all women at a disadvantage due to their gender. However, their varying positions as indigenes or migrants, single or married women, also created inequalities among them. When the AGC established a subsidised miners' market in the 1950s to mitigate unstable commodity prices for its employees, it meant easier access to products if members of such families decided to do *kankyema*, an advantage non-members lacked.[74] A woman whose family combined the roles of farming and mining could, however, access both farmed produce and obtain subsidised goods at the miners' market. Therefore, women's experiences in diverse socioeconomic positions highlight both the shared and different challenges they had to negotiate in their daily economic activities, with significant implications for their income generation. In this respect, the existence of both common and variegated women's experiences helps in understanding women's diverse potential income positions in these gold mining communities.[75] Francis Arthur-Holmes and Kwaku Abrefa Busia reflected on these divides by looking at different women's experiences as direct participants in Ghana's artisanal/small-scale mining, demonstrating experiences of both commonness and peculiarity.[76] This focus on *kankyema* further highlights that many women historically engaged in activities beyond mining with variegated experiences. Therefore, *kankyema* may not have been highly profitable, given the generic and peculiar challenges highlighted. However, practitioners who effectively combined resources, culinary skills, negotiating abilities, and tactically navigated sociocultural barriers could accumulate a meaningful sum of money.

Gilbert S. recalled that after employing a married woman as his *kankyema* prior to his marriage, he did not, when he wed, consent to his wife conducting this business. However, he claimed he fulfilled

[71] Interview with Maame A. K., 23 Nov. 2019.

[72] Interview with Mary O., Konongo, 27 Nov. 2019.

[73] Timothy A. Balag'kutu, "Governance Fragmentation and Agency of Miners in Ghana's Artisanal Mining Sector," *Geoforum* 156 (2024): 104148; Alesia D. Ofori, Anna Mdee, and James Van Alstine, "Politics on Display: The Realities of Artisanal Mining Formalisation in Ghana," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 8, no. 4 (2021): 101014.

[74] LMA CLC/B/015/MS14170/93, Secretary to General Mines Manager, 1 June 1951.

[75] Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity?,'" *The Centennial Review* 36, no. 3 (1992): 437–70; Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell, and Carol Wolkowitz, *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory: Concise Edition* (1st ed., London: Hodder Education, 1997).

[76] Arthur-Holmes and Busia, "Occupying."

her financial needs and, therefore, she did not have to run that particular business. Corroborating this is the resistance posed by Safia K., who came to the mining community later. From the Upper West region, she became the second wife of a senior African mining staffer, joining him in Obuase in the 1970s. She sold food in the mines when they moved to one of the bungalows reserved for senior employees. She, however, indicated that her husband objected to his wives selling food but grudgingly accepted after they persisted. Even with this acceptance, she recalled his subtle hostility to their food vending business sometimes. Safia recounted her regular daily ritual, in which she resisted her husband's opposition and cited extended familial responsibilities as her motivation for this work:

> I sold food at the Anyinam Shaft during mornings and fruits in the afternoon when I was not on cooking duty at home…my [co-wife] also sold food.… [Our husband] did not want us to work…but we resisted as women who had to remit our families back home…. We could not depend on our husband for everything because the responsibilities upon us were many because of the dependents and the unforeseen visitors we often received…. So, our resistance was to his advantage too…because when he [was not] paid, we cooked the family meal with our own money until he pays us back later, which sometimes [did] not happen.[77]

While some husbands specifically opposed their wives' involvement in the food business, including *kankyema*, others sought to prevent their engagement in other commercial activities in general. This could reflect the potential of such men still holding on to the other meanings they could deduce about *kankyema* in the wider Akan society, and therefore tending to act defensively. Again, it further highlighted the perceived insecurity of the time, with the patriarchal norm of restricting female mobility and their effective participation in diverse economic activities far from the home being abundant. Such restrictions reflected developments in various colonial African societies, where, from the state to the community level, formal state and customary power holders tended to control female mobility, with resistance being the only avenue where some women could do something for themselves.[78]

Similar to Safia's husband's initial position was that of Mr Asonga F., a former mineworker who came to Konongo mines with his wife from the Upper East region in 1956. He discouraged her from working with palm wine producers and sellers because he considered it "unsafe."[79] As indicated earlier, women sometimes resisted such attempts by recourse to the demands of their large extended families, which necessitated the payment of regular remittances. Asonga's wife affirmed her husband's view that she had to cooperate after accumulating enough capital to switch to food vending, a venture that enabled her to fund regular visits to her family at the end of the year and to support her family business back home.[80] As has been noted, these wives who engaged in various commercial activities equally played the role of domestic breadwinners during periods when their mineworker husbands had not been paid, for example, during lengthy strikes or instances of retrenchment.[81]

From recollections such as these, a pattern may be discerned whereby women from Ghana's geographical north, who migrated to the mining communities in their capacity as wives, had, on average, to negotiate with a higher degree of domestic patriarchy to conduct their businesses. However, such married women could still harness ethnic or rural ties to recruit clients, especially within the context already noted about culinary affinities. Some married Akan women faced similar challenges unless they were single, divorced, or had other viable income-generating alternative ventures. The latter was true in the case of some local Akan women's ownership of, or more comfortable access to, family

[77] Interview with Safia K.

[78] On restrictions to female mobility and agency in colonial Africa, see Isidore Lobnibe, "Drinking Pito: Conviviality, Popular Culture and Changing Agricultural Production at the Rural-Urban Interface in Brong Ahafo, Ghana," *African Geographical Review* 37, no.3 (2018): 227–40; Hepburn, "Women in Kenya"; White, "Domestic Labor"; Little, *African Women.*

[79] Interview with Asonga F., Konongo, 15 Jan. 2019.

[80] Interview with Adisa F., Konongo, 18 Nov. 2019.

[81] Interview with Safia K.

land to farm. This permitted them to switch between various ventures in the event that their partners discouraged them from participating in a certain type of work. The land was not only an asset for the diversification and navigation of changing income generation barriers and opportunities in these mining communities in the period, but also elsewhere in Ghana and over a wider time period.[82] It, therefore, remains critical in examining opportunities for inclusive economic diversification in disruptive mining settings.

Aside from sharing these considerations, participants found it difficult to remember the exact amount paid for *kankyema* services. One former mineworker—born to migrant parents in Konongo—who employed a food-only *kankyema* in the mid-1960s estimated the proportion of his earnings that went into the payment. He noted that he paid for the culinary services ranging from £G1 to £G1.10[83] (£G is Ghana Pound), at a time when his fortnight's income was about £G7.6s.0d—which means a little above 15 percent went into meals.[84] Other former underground mineworkers in Obuase reported a similar proportion of their earnings. The 15 percent of an average miner's income is generally used across the board for miner's income that went into paying for culinary services.[85] An *ɔkankyema's* earnings can, therefore, be usefully compared to those of the average male mineworker (Table 1, above).

A participant in Obuase testified about his mother doing *kankyema* for up to six underground mineworkers in the 1950s, who could have been some of the highest earners among the food-only *kankyema* bracket.[86] Another in Konongo noted that she knew people could serve food to five mineworkers maximum.[87] Providing food to six mineworkers could have earned a person a gross monthly income of £7.14s.11d in the mid-1950s, close to the net monthly income of one mineworker. This still meant the net income would be much lower, depending on how they invested in preparing the meals—something former practitioners found it difficult to recall. This cost could be compensated depending on the standpoint of the *ɔkankyema*—being single, married, farming, combining jobs, and who they share culinary affinities. This was the complex web of sociocultural barriers that shaped their chances of engaging the diverse mineworkers within the gold mining communities to generate income.

Conclusion

Analyses of resistance in colonial African states and societies have increasingly understood the diverse nature of such initiatives, reflecting both the overarching nature of colonial rule and its specific impact on diverse sections of African societies. While political opposition was sometimes expressed in riots, boycotts, sit-ins, and demonstrations, many other politicised initiatives were less conspicuous yet also consequential. This analysis of *kankyema* has shown the interlinkages between women's immediate and wider economic goals and how their agency was expressed even in places from which they had been systematically excluded. Such linkages affected mine labour agitations in the Gold Coast in ways that warrant greater academic analysis by linking the informal economy with everyday politics of resistance and highlighting the significant role that gender inequality and relations always play. In the case of the mining canteen boycotts, women provided the vital spark that prompted a nationwide coordinated resistance to a colonial mining directive, contributing to

[82]William Tsuma, *Gold Mining in Ghana: Actors, Alliances and Power* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), 51.

[83]Ghana replaced the British West African pound with the Ghanaian Pound in 1958, followed by the Cedi in 1965. See Harcourt Fuller, "Civitatis Ghaniensis Conditor: Kwame Nkrumah, Symbolic Nationalism and the Iconography of Ghanaian Money 1957 – the Golden Jubilee," *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 3 (2008): 520–41.

[84]Interview with Alhassan A., Konongo, 28 Nov. 2019.

[85]Comparison is made using underground mineworker's average earnings because the greater casual and seasonal labourers mostly belonged to that category. They engaged *akankyemaa* the most, according to respondents. Interview with Ussif O. and Abdallah O., Konongo, 25 Nov. 2019.

[86]Interview with Alhaji F. A.

[87]Interview with Maame K., Konongo, 23 Nov. 2019.

the wider energies of late colonial resistance. However, underlying this development was also how women had unconventionally strategised for survival. These women on the margins of industrialised mining communities in late colonial Asante, were not simply excluded by the gender conventions surrounding industrial gold extraction. Cultural norms, colonial stereotypes, and company officials' poor judgment about the needs and interests of male mining labour came together to exacerbate the economic plight of the growing women's population in the mining communities. They responded by putting their economic ingenuity together to accumulate income through existing sociocultural practices, creating avenues for survival which, when threatened by the 1947 directive, ultimately sparked workers' resistance. Their agency was, therefore, present in spaces from which they had been formally excluded. The liberating function of oral history as presented in this article, enables a deeper analysis of evolving cultural ideas in disruptive times, thereby properly positioning female agency within such a patriarchal context.

The article also demonstrates the essential need to pay attention to the various sociocultural ideas and discussions that inform the everyday lives of people in mining communities in Africa. Analysing *kankyema* in the context of Asante mine societies makes an essential contribution, showing how linguistic and cultural ideas were in the past harnessed in complex and inclusively new ways. It transcended social norms and intersected with economic activities in times of disruptive changes. As a result, *kankyema* was deployed by actors who navigated the changing gender norms surrounding work and income accumulation in turbulent political-economic landscapes, which in turn revealed its full potentialities. It is, therefore, fair to argue that a sociocultural phenomenon like *kankyema* in that context inherently possesses malleable capacities. Such cultural malleability could be related to other female resistance in colonial Africa, such as Kom women in Cameroon using their bodies as weapons of revolt or the 1929 Aba Women's War in Nigeria, when their economic and social rights came under colonial administrative threat.[88] Although female actors doing *kankyema* operated in the background and were not even organised "formally," a general thread could connect them with other female experiences. This connection highlights that female colonial subjects' resistance—be it from the background or forefront—was a sparking force to decolonisation, and it also shows how women challenged more locally-based hierarchies in their quests for economic and political freedom. That African women have always been ingenious in navigating sociocultural complexities is to say the least. Hence, such norms that hold strong gender implications deserve more attention. Such could be explored against disruptive times or otherwise to define them properly and contextually and examine new ways in which female agency invokes the latitudes of cultural knowledge, transitioning them from patriarchal custodianship to inclusive worldviews.

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[88]Henry Kam Kah, "Women's Resistance in Cameroon's Western Grassfields: The Power of Symbols, Organization, and Leadership,1957–1961,"' *African Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (2011): 75; Sylvia Tamale, "Taking the Beast by Its Horns: Formal Resistance to Women's Oppression in Africa," *Africa Development/Afrique et Développement* 21, no. 4 (1996): 15.

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