

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **A study of labour migration during the colonial period to the Obuasi mines in Ghana**

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Accepted 19 May 2014

Migration has been part of human existence since creation. Many people migrate for various reasons underlying which is the element of survival or the search for an improved situation. It sometimes seems to be the only logical and rational thing to do when one is faced with situations that border on survival and is also faced with making a choice. The southern Akan forest of Ghana has a long history of receiving many labour migrants from all the other parts of the West African sub-region. Many of these migrants came to southern Ghana to work in the cocoa farms belonging to the Akans. A huge chunk of these migrating labourers came from mostly the northern parts of the country. People also came from as far-off territories as Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria etc. to work in the rich gold mines of Obuasi in Adanse. Many reasons advanced by various scholars to explain the cause of the labour migration have credited economic reasons as the major factor that compelled the influx of migrants to economically vibrant southern Ghana. This article seeks to contribute to the continuing discussion on labour migration in West Africa. It will also establish that there were other equally compelling and motivating forces that influenced people to migrate.

**Key words:** Migration, Labour, Obuasi, Adanse, Gold mine, Northern Territories, Ghana.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Labour migration according to Panofsky (1960) refers to the movement of wage earners from areas of subsistence agriculture to areas of wage employment, both in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. In much of West Africa this applies to the short-term, often repeated trip towards the south in order to satisfy discontinuous labour needs. Gold mining happens to cause one of the greatest demands for labour in the south when the north is best able to spare some of its manpower. In the words of Mansell Prothero, (1957) migration movements 'have been a feature of Africa in the past and are one of its most important demographical features at the present day' (Anarfi, 1982). International migration within West Africa, and between the region and the rest of the continent, dates back to time immemorial (Arhin 1978). The trans-Saharan caravan routes are among the earliest evidence of major interaction between West and North Africa for trading and exchange of scholars (Boahen 1966). Ibn Batuta, writing in the fifteenth century, and Leo Africanus, writing later in the sixteenth century, both made mention of the peaceful

movement of people across ethnic boundaries (Batuta 1929; Africanus 1896). The presence of Europeans on the West Coast from the 1400s onwards disrupted the then existing north-south movement of people and goods. However, the contact with Europeans created new patterns of movement, first through slave trade and later colonisation, within the sub-region and with the rest of the world (Boahen 1966). The new dynamics that emerged continue to the present day.

Migration studies conducted in West Africa in the late 1950s and 1960s attributed economic factors as mainly responsible for labour migration. Prothero for example, points out that central to labour migration in the Sokoto province were two related issues—overpopulation and a limited land resource base. He notes that 'the economic motive was shown to be outstanding in the reasons for migration...'. Kirk-Greene (1956) also concluded that the "Hill Tribes" of Northern Adamawa (Nigeria) migrated to acquire tax-money and that young men in particular, migrated in order to purchase material goods like clothes and shoes. Similarly, Skinner's (1965) study of the Mossi

of Burkina Faso showed that their mass migration to southern Ghana and the Ivory Coast was motivated by economic reasons. (Abdul-Korah, 2008). In a seminar in Dakar, in April 1972 on "Modern Migration in West Africa", participants recognised that in Nigeria, a general movement of people, mainly migrant labourers were from the savannah north and the coastal forest. Samir Amin (1974) explains that "of the regions which benefitted from the contributions of a permanent migration, Southern Ghana is outstanding". He further stated that the migrants who were predominantly unmarried young male adults went into agriculture and mining in the areas of attraction. Mabogunje (1972) identifies a similar pattern and explains it as a natural reaction to the geography of West Africa which is such that the southern forest is more favourable to economic development than the Savannah north. In a recent study on migrants from Burkina Faso, Cordell and others posits that the reasons why Burkinabe migrated and continue to migrate are not static but change over time and space. Abdul-Korah (2006) shares similar sentiments when he demonstrated that migration is a complex phenomenon and that the reasons why people migrate are not static. Similarly, Manchuelle (1997) in his study on Soninke migrants believes that 'existing economic and demographic models of migration can only identify why people decide to move, but they cannot alone explain the reasons for mobility itself.

In the northern Ghanaian context, attempts to explain the migration phenomenon have always centred on theories of overpopulation, land shortage, taxation, lack of resources, and 'bright lights', which compelled northerners to migrate to the south in search of wage labour. Nabila, for instance, argues that overpopulation on a limited land resource base in northern Ghana made it advantageous for people to migrate and that out-migration provided an escape-valve from the stringent survival system. (Nabila, 1974). Moreover, Brukum (1998) believes that the colonial state was solely responsible for the underdevelopment of the north.

According to Abdul-Korah (2008) studies conducted in the 1960s on labour migration are majorly development-oriented (also see, Hilton 1966; Hunter, 1967; Dickson, 1968; Thomas, 1973; Plange, 1979; Songsore, 1983). Essentially, what these studies tried to do was to view labour migration as a direct result of a calculated colonial policy to under-develop the north. Songsore and Denkabe (1995) for example, argue that the present underdevelopment of the northern sector of the country has been the result of a deliberate colonial policy to deprive the north of development by turning it into a labour reserve to serve the interests of the southern cocoa and mining industries, and the metropolitan economy. Therefore the prevailing texts on migration, especially the works of Caldwell (1969); Hill (1963); Crisp (1984); Songsore (1983) and more recently, Songsore and Denkabe (1995) and Dumett (1998) have emphasised mainly on the role of the state in shaping the

processes of migration.

Gold mining has had a long history in Africa. (Junner, 1935; Hopkins, 1973) Africa is the world's largest producer of gold (Agbesinyale, 2003); and according to estimations by Maponga, the continent hosts 30 percent of world reserve base. (Akabzaa *et. al.*, 2007). After the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand district of the Transvaal region of South Africa in 1886, mining operations grew continually from the 1890s and South Africa is now the world's largest producer of gold. (Agbesinyale, 2003; Illife, 1995) West Africa in particular has been a major gold mining area for many centuries with activities dating back to the beginning of the fifth century. (Songsore *et. al.*, 1994; Boahen, 1966).

The earliest available records indicate that the forest peoples of modern Ghana mined gold for several centuries before the Portuguese landed on the Guinea Coast of West Africa. Several of the impressive forts that dot the coastline of modern Ghana from Axim to Accra were built originally to facilitate the gold trade. (Buah, 1980). Ghana is ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the global league of producers and the second, only after South Africa, in Africa. (Tsuma, 2009).

The huge European interest in Ghana's gold and other natural resources culminated finally in the colonisation of the territory by the British imperial powers in the nineteenth century. Developments later led to two marked gold rushes referred to as the "Jungle Booms". This led to proliferation of mining companies from Europe into the Gold Coast to prospect for and mine gold in the gold-impregnated areas. One of the auriferous areas that attracted the mining companies and later, migrants was Obuasi in the Adanse traditional area. (Ofosu-Mensah, 2011). Historically, labour migration from within the West African sub-region has played a major role in Ghana's mining industry. Available records suggest that before independence, the industry experienced labour migration from Nigeria, Burkina Faso and as far 'a-field' as Mali, Niger and Chad. Many migrants eventually engaged in various sections of the industry, and made significant contributions to the development of the emergent post-independent Ghana as well as communities that surfaced with mining. Internally, many indigenous people also drifted to mining centres lured, in part, by employment, economic opportunities and services that the industry offered. In spite of the several scholarly and policy studies undertaken over the years on the mining sector in the sub-region in general and Ghana in particular (e.g. Akabzaa, 2000; MacDonald, 2001; Aubynn, 2006; Gibb, 2006; Aryee *et al.*, 2003; Yelapaala and Ali, 2005; Tscharket and Singha, 2007), certain aspects such as labour migration has not received much attention. This article argues that apart from economic forces that compelled people to migrate to other areas in West Africa in search of greener pastures, there were a host of other factors that contributed to the migration of people from the Northern Territories of Ghana as well as other parts of

the West African sub-region to work in the Obuasi mines. This paper's primary concern is to interrogate related issues and explore the prevailing debates.

## METHODOLOGY

Using as a principal source of data for writing this article, the researcher conducted a twelve-month field work in Adanse between 1998 and 1999. The researcher visited a number of people and interviewed them five times each. This article was also written primarily with the utilisation of primary source archival data from the Public Records and Archival Administration (PRAAD) of the Republic of Ghana. The researcher also interviewed and made use of published literature on mining in Ghana to cross-check, evaluate and supplement the archival and oral data collected. These were in the form of journal articles and books.

## Context

Obuasi is a household name in Ghana and is synonymous with gold not only because of the long history of gold mining associated with the township but also because of the quantity and quality of gold produced there. Until recently, the Obuasi Mine accounted for over sixty percent of the total gold production in Ghana and was undoubtedly the single largest gross foreign exchange earning industrial establishment in the country. Obuasi's underground mine is presumably the single richest mine in Africa. It has often been said that "Ashanti Goldfields Company Ltd. (AGC) is Obuasi and Obuasi is AGC", because the growth and development of Obuasi is intricately linked to the mine. Obuasi and its environs are part of AGC's extensive Obuasi prospecting concession, which covers an area of about 200 sq. km. Apart from the operations of the AGC; there are no other large-scale mining activities in the area; presumably because the AGC's vast concession leaves no prospecting grounds for competitors. However, artisanal gold mining, which reportedly predates mechanised gold mining by over 500 years, still goes on, even though the AGC has concessionary rights over the entire area (Quarshie et al., 1980; Junner, 1932). For a detailed description of Obuasi, See Ofose-Mensah Ababio "Traditional Gold Mining in Adanse" in *Nordic Journal of African Studies* Vol. 19(2) 124–147.

The history of migration in the mining industry in Ghana dates back to time immemorial when many ethnic communities that existed mainly as tribes and/or kingdoms used gold not only as a medium of exchange to trade various goods and services but also an embodiment of the power, wealth, and influence of various tribal groups or states (Hilson, 2002). In fact, many of the wars that occurred in the West African

sub-region before the arrival of Europeans and likely up to the mid-nineteenth century were, in part, deeply rooted in the search by some such states to not only extend their influence and territorial boundaries but, even more importantly, secure lands rich in minerals. Militarily weaker states, almost always at the mercy of the stronger, powerful and more organised states, were either forced to flee from agricultural or mineral-rich areas, or forcibly annexed and into victorious kingdoms. (Nyame et al., 2009).

Modern mining in Obuasi in Adanse evolved from a small operation owned by local merchants into a multinational company with properties in gold-endowed African countries. (Ayensu, 1998). Before the arrival of the Europeans, in Ghana, local people were engaged in the mining of reefs, in addition to panning gold from streams. Available records indicate that the first concession involving the present mine was obtained on 4th June, 1875, by Monsieur Marie Joseph Bonnat in the area (Junner, 1935; Quashie et al., 1981; Ayensu, 1998). However, it was not until the end of the 19th century that the idea of an orderly commercial approach to gold mining in the Gold Coast began to gather momentum. Two Fante merchants from Cape Coast, Joseph E. Ellis and Joseph E. Biney, began the modern story of Ashanti Goldfields Company when in March 1890, they laid claim to a concession of land area totalling 265 km<sup>2</sup> (Minerals Commission, 1991; Deeds to Obuasi lands, 1890). A mine named the Ellis Mine was subsequently developed.

The Ellis Mine, the first modern mining operation started in 1890 at Obuasi by three Fante businessmen had a recruited a labour force of about two hundred. (Dumett, 1998) There was also a sizeable body of labourers who migrated to Obuasi to search for jobs in the Ellis Mine from the south western Gold Coast states of Ahanta, Aowin, Gwira and Nzema. (Interviews with Opanyin Brenya and Nana Donkor, 1998) The Cote D'or mining company and Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (AGC) established by Cade and Associates in 1895 and 1897 respectively relied on labourers from the above named states. Employment of labourers by AGC which took over the rights and liabilities of Cote D'or mining company was initially direct. However, from 1908 the mode of labour recruitment into the Corporation changed. When there was labour shortage, management informed their employees of the existence of vacancies. The labourers passed on the information to interested relatives. The prospective miners then queued for selection and recruitment on a specified date at the Corporation's premises. (Ibid) Medical personnel among the expatriate staff went round the queue to examine and recruit people who were physically fit for the job. (Ibid) From 1930 the selection and recruitment of labourers was done at the Labour Control Office at Obuasi. The Process of selection at the Labour Control Office was not different from the previous one done at the AGC premises. (Ibid).

Many of the semi-skilled and unskilled labourers were migrants. Some of the unskilled labourers came from Liberia and Sierra Leone. These labourers were known to the Akans as *Kru* and *Tsakli* or *Bassa* men. (Interviews with Mallam Buraimah and Opanin Akuoko, 1999). Among the migrant workers from the neighbouring colonies of the Gold Coast, the most hardworking men were the Kru from Liberia. They had a long experience in a variety of skilled and physically arduous jobs. They had no objection to working underground and were ready to work for longer hours. They normally returned home after six to twelve months of labour. (Ibid; Information from Nana Bonsra Sakrayire).

The AGC did not experience any serious shortage of surface labour in the early stages of its operations. The chief difficulty of the Corporation was how to maintain a labour force for the dangerous and unpleasant underground work. By the middle of 1909, there was a labour shortage in the Gold Coast which was described as "acute". (Thomas, 1973) The 1910 Annual Report of the West African Chamber of Mines showed that "all the local supply of native labourers was exhausted and the industry was faced with a serious shortage. (Ibid). Similarly, Adepoju (2005) on his study on patterns of migration in West Africa pointed out that in many cases, indigenous people or the local labour force were either unwilling or unable to supply the labour requirements.

This problem came about as a result of the fact that the people of Adanse and most of the Akan migrant mine labourers resented underground work. They believed that underground mining was associated with unfriendly spirits. In addition they viewed underground mining as a low status activity associated with slaves and therefore degrading. (Oral Interview)

The people of Adanse could reasonably subsist on the cultivation of traditional food crops (yams, cocoyams, cassava, bananas, plantain and green vegetables) supplemented by hunting and fishing. Consequently there was no pressing need for them to sell their labour to Europeans to be able to earn a living. (Ibid).

Most men from the Akan forest states valued their freedom and independence of action too much to want to stay on the pay roll of the mining companies for a long time. The people of Adanse and the other Akan migrants who settled among them were interested in the lucrative rubber business in the early twentieth century hence their negative attitude to underground mining. (Willcocks, 1904). Besides, the notion of payment according to a fixed wage per unit of time was unknown in traditional Adanse society. (Oral Interview 1999; see also Rattray, 1929).

Low wages paid to the unskilled labourers were not the only unattractive features of the mines. The tasks assigned to the labourers were also arduous, dirty and dangerous. Local women who were employed as porters by the Corporation to carry the ore to the crushing plant performed one of the most difficult tasks. (Oral Interview

1999).

The shortage of underground labour was worsened by the cocoa boom of the 1930s. The rapid growth of the cocoa industry created new income opportunities, many of them more attractive than the work in the mines. Labourers who offered their services to carry cocoa beans from the Adanse forest to the coastal towns for transshipment could earn between 10 and 15 shillings a day as against 4 shillings a day in the mines. (Thomas, 1973)

The reduction in the supply of Kru labourers as a result of the development of rubber plantations in Liberia and the unwillingness of the Akans to work underground made AGC consider the importation of unskilled labourers from the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast. (Szerezewski, 1965). The Acting Governor of the Gold Coast commenting on the labour shortage in the Colony and Asante stated that:

Foreign labour was unavailable and no reliable labour could be obtained from Ashanti where the people are strongly averse to any form of systematic work and therefore the only alternative was labour from the Northern Territories. Adm 56/1/84. 24 July 1909 26 Jan 1920 PRAAD (Accra).

The Northern Territories were deemed by the Colonial Regime to have little direct economic value. Climatically the Northern Territories experienced only one rainfall season. As a result northerners could not develop the production of any significant export staples. Before annexation of the area, the main economic activities in the Protectorate were subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, handicraft production, hunting and fishing on a small scale. (Dickson, 1966). For this reason the Colonial Government thought it necessary to use the men in the north as labourers to work on the mines and other sectors in the south to prevent seasonal idleness of its inhabitants. Governor Guggisberg speaking at Salaga in 1920 commented:

Every man of the Northern Territories is worth his weight in gold for the mines for private enterprise and for development of those schemes the completion of which are necessary to secure progress and development. Speech by Sir Gordon Guggisberg on political service Reorganisation June 1920. Also his speech at Salaga on 11 March 1921. PRAAD (Accra).

In the 1920s the Northern Territories were designated as a labour reserve for the supply of cheap labour for the mines and general labour in the cities in the south. The Colonial Government adopted a method of direct and indirect compulsion in recruiting labourers from the Protectorate. Instructions were first issued from the colonial Governor to the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Territories for labour. The Chief Commissioner in turn relayed these orders to his District Commissioner, who also passed the instructions to the local chiefs, the middlemen of colonial policy. These political officers were at liberty to use force to recruit labourers. (Adm 56/1/319

PRAAD Accra). The chiefs of the Protectorate collaborated with the Colonial Government and recruited a sizeable number of young men to work in the Gold Coast and Asante. Apart from the use of force, incentives were also provided for chiefs who provided the most labourers. In March 1921 the commissioner for the southern province had talks with chiefs on labour and told them that “the men who supplied most labour would be attended to first in the matter of wells and their villages.” (Sanitary Condition of the Mine in the Gold Coast and Ashanti Report, 1924; See also C.S.P. Official Diary PRAAD Accra). The period of recruiting labour from the north was between September and March.

The period 1919 to 1924 saw the acceleration of labour recruitment in the Northern Territories. The influenza epidemic of 1918 killed many people in the Gold Coast. The mining areas were badly hit because they were among the places where medical services were almost absent. (Scot, 1956). Notwithstanding the mortality rate of labourers from the north, the mines could not help but recruit more labourers from there (Adm 56/1/84 PRAAD Accra) because Governor Guggisberg’s ten year development plan involved many public works such as the construction of roads and railways and the building of the Takoradi Harbour and Achimota School. (Ibid). When Guggisberg launched his development plan in November 1919 he calculated that a labour force of twenty-seven thousand (27,000) men would be needed and suggested that a special recruiting scheme in the Northern Territories should be organised. (Adm 56/1/184 PRAAD Accra). During that period the cocoa industry also required intensive labour and provided inducements in the form of high wages. Besides, the Gold Coast Government rejected the demand to import labourers from Asia. (Gold Coast Gazette, 1912).

Apart from the efforts by the Gold Coast Government to provide labour for the mining companies, AGC also sent officials in lorries direct to the Protectorate to recruit unskilled labour to work in the mines in Obuasi. (Interviews with Mallam Buraimah and Opanin Akuoko, 1999). Between 1912 and 1916, the AGC continued to recruit in the Northern Territories without government assistance usually sending African headmen who brought back labourers for twelve months’ service, but occasionally supplementing these with European recruiters. This supply, the volume of which is not recorded, must have been supplemented by labour migrating voluntarily from the protectorate. (Thomas, 1973). Apart from the unskilled labourers from Liberia and Sierra Leone and labour from the Northern Territories, even larger numbers of unskilled migrant workers were recruited from the French West African colonies of Niger, Mali, Togo, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) La Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria. (Ibid; also see Report on Mines Department, 1924-25). In the 1913 population census it was reported that the number of African foreigners in the African labour supply in the Gold Coast was 4142. (Cardinal, 1931).

These labourers were predominantly illiterates who performed underground work at the mines.

As workers they were reliable and strong and fairly adaptable without being conspicuous for intelligence. (Gold Coast Annual General Report 1926–27).

Migrant labourers from the above named colonies voluntarily came to the Gold Coast in search of work in the mines and on cocoa farms. In the Northern Province Annual Report for 1923–24, the Provincial Commissioner stated that “the boys from most parts are quite willing to work on the mines.” The high influx of migrant labourers from the Northern Territories and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) towards the end of 1922 was the result of an outbreak of famine. Unlike the Gold Coast, the Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) was densely populated country, poor, dry, frequently hit by famine and with a totally inadequate economic base. It seems that its main function was to provide a large reservoir of labour, part of which constituted about half the unskilled labour force in the Gold Coast. Reports reaching the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Territories spoke of a growing threat of famine in north Mamprussi and Zuarungu districts where villagers were reported to be eating grass and weed. The famine hit Builsa district by the end of August 1922. (Adm 56/1/97 PRAAD Accra). Due to the famine many young men between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five were forced to emigrate to the Gold Coast Colony in search of work in the mines. (Ibid). Migration to southern Ghana provides a safety valve for the densely settled Mossi lands and Northern Ghana. The movement to and from the south can be expected to last as long as the migrants need to maintain ties, to wherever they migrated to.

Another reason which accounted for the immigration was the need to satisfy social obligations like payment of dowry and bride wealth. Before the introduction of money as a means of exchange, dowry and bride wealth were paid to prospective in-laws either in the form of labour or cattle. Some in-laws now demanded cash, hence young men who hoped to marry migrated south to seek employment in the mines. The young men became independent of their fathers, with the introduction of cash as bride wealth. Before then only their fathers owned cattle and used it to control their sons. In June 1922 while touring the Western Gonja District with his entourage, the Chief Commissioner noted a “notable absence” of young men at village meetings. He was told by the Chiefs that they had gone down south voluntarily to work for money. The Chiefs complained that they had to work the farms with old people and children. (ADM 56/1/1315 PRAAD Accra). Plange (1979) states that, as a result of migration in Northern Ghana, “many young able-bodied men were siphoned out of the region. Thus, gradually, communities were depopulated, leading to diminishing returns in production” (Plange, 1979)

Labourers from the French West African colonies also migrated to the Gold Coast and Asante to work in the

mines because of the French Colonial Government's policy of forced labour, oppressive direct taxation, corporal punishment and a brutal military regimentation. In 1916 and 1917 more than 12,000 people left the Ivory Coast for the Gold Coast. Large numbers also left Togo for the Gold Coast in 1910 with as many as 14,000 migrating from the Misahohe district alone. (Boahen *et al.* 1986).

In 1925–27 Chiefs in the Northern protectorate realised their folly in participating in the recruitment of young men from their area for the mining companies and vehemently protested against the mass exodus of the young male population from their area. Instead of waiting to be forcibly recruited for the dangerous and hated underground work in the mines, some young men migrated voluntarily to the south to work in the cocoa farms where remuneration was highest. Guggisberg to Lord Milner 21 May 1920 as quoted in the *Journal of African History* (Britain: 1973) p. 93. With regards to voluntary migration, Abdul-Korah (2008) in his well researched article on the causes of the influx of Dagaaba migrants to southern Ghana between 1936 and 1957 argues that:

Dagaaba men migrated to southern Ghana for two reasons: first, "to see the world" – a world that was "created" for them by the colonial state in the south. Second, to satisfy their taste for European consumer goods, a taste they acquired as a result of the influences of colonial rule. Colonialism had lured these men not only into "wanting" but into "needing" European manufactured goods such as bicycles, towels, walking sticks, hats, and blankets (to mention a few). In contrast to other parts of the continent, colonial taxation and the payment of bride-price were not causes of labor migration among the Dagaaba. (Abdul-Korah 2008)

Therefore from the above statement, one can deduce that the Dagaaba migrant labourers in the Mines at Obuasi went there on their own volition and not under any compulsion unlike those who were recruited to the Tarkwa-Prestea Mines during the colonial period. (Thomas, 1973).

Whenever the mining companies went up north to recruit labour the chiefs expressed their resentment by selecting unfit people as labourers for the mines. The Acting District Commissioner for Western Gonja reported in 1924 that the Chiefs were such "nonentities" that they did not have the authority to order the fit men to go to the mines and therefore sent the weak. (Adm 56/1/276 PRAAD Accra)

## The Mine Workforce

### Semi-Skilled Labour

Artisans like brick layers, carpenters, etc also migrated from Bono-Ahafo, Asante, Akyem, Akuapem, Kwahu and

Accra to Obuasi to work at the AGC. (Oral Interview, 1999) The majority of these skilled labourers hailed from Akuapem because of their special training in skilled crafts at the schools of the Swiss Basel Mission in the area. (Ibid) Fantes from Cape Coast, Saltpond and Elmina also migrated to Obuasi to work at the AGC as skilled labourers. Because of their dislike for the tedious and hazardous underground work, the Akans acquired skills and gradually moved into positions as machine operators, office clerks, carpenters, blast men and chemical treatment men. (Ibid) Some of the Liberians, Sierra Leoneans and Nigerians who came to Obuasi to work at the AGC were also skilled labourers. (Ibid)

Africans were generally employed in semi-skilled or unskilled positions. Apart from conveying sectionalised machine parts from Tarkwa to Obuasi, some of the porters also performed menial jobs such as the clearing of bush at a site before mining activities were carried out. (Oral Interview, 1999). Some of the Kru men removed human waste from the underground to the surface. (Ibid). It was also the duty of some of the strong Moshie labourers from Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) to carry the white supervisors on their shoulders to the work site. (Oral Interview, 1999)

Timber men supplied timber from the bush to be used to support the underground shaft to prevent it from caving in. (Oral Interview, 1999). Carpenters were employed for a wide range of jobs. They roofed the buildings put up by the corporation at the mining site as well as the bungalows and quarters of workers. They also made furniture for the corporation, coffins to bury dead employees and they made special boxes in which gold bullions were kept. (Oral Interview, 1999). These boxes were carried by women porters who walked through bush paths under heavy expatriate and police security to Tarkwa, headquarters of the Gold Coast Mine. (Ibid)

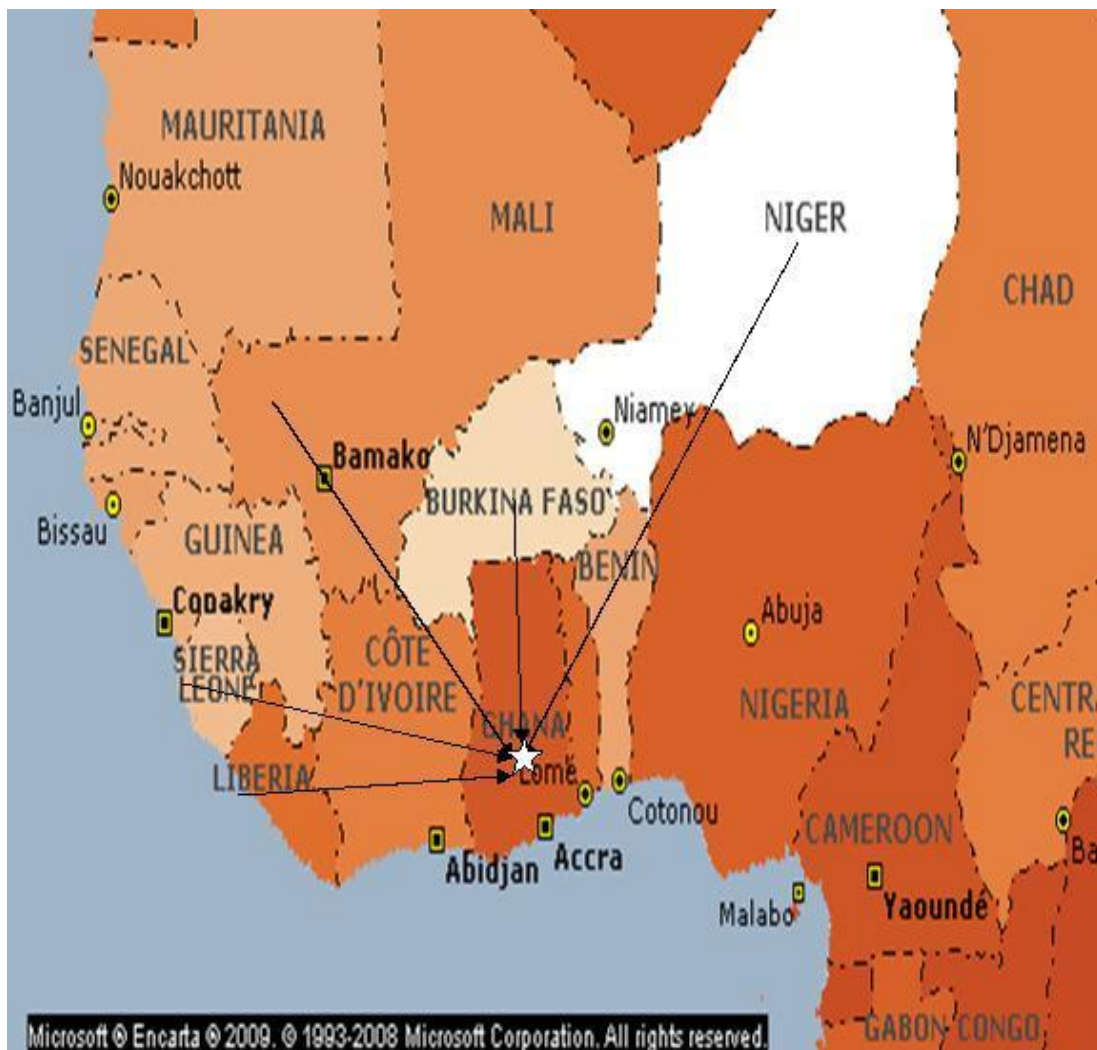
The masons provided shelter for the employees by putting up bungalows and quarters for them. When a leakage was discovered in the underground shaft, the masons made concrete to support the roof. (Oral Interview, 1999)

The blacksmith's task was to mould parts of machines to replace worn out or broken ones. Repair of cars, machines, both underground and surface locomotives was the responsibility of fitters and mechanics (Oral tradition, 1999)

### Skilled Labour

Small numbers of expatriate miners from Britain, renowned for their skills as timber men and blast men were recruited for skilled underground positions. Some of the expatriates worked in the workshops, processing plant, concentrator houses, laboratories and offices. They also did essential supervisory and administrative work. (Oral Interview, 1999; see also Gold Coast Chamber of





**Map 1.** A Map of West Africa showing the migration routes of labourers to Obuasi in Adansi in Ghana. (Microsoft Encarta Atlas, 2009 Edition).  
The Star indicates the location of Obuasi in Adansi, Ghana.

Mines Annual Report 1949-1956; Report on Individual Mining Companies (Ashanti) Gold Coast 1922–1923; See also Report of the Mines Labour Committee Gold Coast 1953). Among them were also engineers. It would be recalled that Cade came to Obuasi with fifteen expatriate workers including his engineer John Daw (Adm 54/25 PRAAD Accra).

The engineers in AGC performed a variety of functions. The Geodetic engineer was responsible for prospecting and identifying areas of possible source of gold. After the ore had been extracted from underground, it was the responsibility of the metallurgical engineer to see to it that the gold in the ore was successfully recovered and melted into bullion. The electrical engineer and his outfit were responsible for ensuring that electricity at the Corporation's premises and other dwelling places of workers functioned efficiently. (Oral Interview, 1999). Some of the expatriate workers were blast men. Their

task was to use dynamite to smash rocks into pieces to enable ores to be removed. Machine drivers also drilled holes to gold impregnated rocks to remove ores. (Ibid)

The expatriate workers because of their skills dominated the administrative positions at AGC, while the Africans were confined to junior posts and unskilled jobs. From 1951, opportunities existed for Africans to earn promotion. A dedicated and hardworking labourer could be promoted to the rank of a headman or chief clerk or a captain. (Oral Interview, 1999). Besides, some secondary school products were also recruited as labourers and started rising to administrative positions. (Oral Interview, 1999). Gradually the administrative positions of the Corporation began to be Africanised. In the 1960s some of the products of the universities of Ghana were recruited as administrators. One Mr. Jacobson Sey Richardson a Fante from Cape Coast became a Public Relations Officer in 1963. (Oral Interview, 1999)

**Table 1.** Rates of wages paid to native labourers on the mine average rate of wage per shift.

Blacksmith	...	3/-	4/
Brick layers	...	3/-	3/6
Carpenters	...	2/6	3/6
Cyanide Hands	...	1/6	1/9
Firemen	...	2/-	2/6
Fitters	...	3/-	3/6
Hammer Boys	...	2/-	2/6
Pump Boys	...	3/-	3/6
Mill Hands	...	1/9	2/6
Rock drill Boys	...	2/9	3/3
Shovellers	...	1/3	2/-
Signal Boys	...	1/6	2/-
Spanner Boys	...	2/-	1/9
Surface labourers	...	1/3	3/-
Timbermen	...	2/-	3/-
Trammers	...	1/6	2/-
Winch Drivers	...	2/6	4/-

Annual Departmental Report 1913. Deposited in the Asafo Research Project Institute of the Institute of African Studies, Legon

There were great disparities in the range of incomes paid to various categories of workers at AGC. The following table shows the rate of wages paid to labourers at the AGC in 1913.

In 1926 labourers at AGC received wages averages from 1s, 6d to 2s per day. The labourers were expected to work nine hours per day for five days and six hours on Saturday making a total working week of fifty-one (51) hours. (Adm/1/188 PRAAD Accra).

### Unskilled Labour

An unskilled labourer underground was better paid than his counterpart on the surface because underground work was the most strenuous duty in the mine. In 1956, underground workers at AGC received 3 shillings a day. In 1959 it was increased to 4 shillings and three years later it went up to 5 shillings a day. (Oral Interview, 1999). The skilled European workers received three shillings a day or 2s. 3 to 3 per day in 1956. In a month they received £3 or £4. (COS 98/23, 1913).

Underground workers went to work bare footed and were exposed to injuries and poison. Later some of them bought rubber sandals and wore them to work underground. It was in the 1960s that the Corporation began to provide boots for underground workers. (Oral Interview, 1999) The underground shaft was perpetually damp and some of the galleries were so low that in order to reach his site the miner had to wield his shovel in a cramped position. (Ibid). Generally, the stations and pumping places of galleries were provided with electric lighting but the actual site at which the miner was

required to work was unlit making it imperative for him to provide himself with a carbide lamp. (Ibid; see also Report of the Mine Labour Committee of the Gold Coast, 1953). One of the section of the underground shafts at the AGC mine was uncomfortably hot and the miners experienced difficulty in breathing. The temperature of a particular working place was 95 degrees Fahrenheit – the hottest in the mine. (Ibid).

### Hazards

Accidents were quite common. The most dangerous and treacherous of the accidents which occurred underground was the fall of rocks on the labourers who worked there. As a result of a heavy fall in a stope seven boys were killed instantly between 1923 and 1925 and three others were buried by the sand for forty eight hours. (Cos 19/2/33 PRAAD Accra). Sometimes the rock fell suddenly without any warning. Whenever there was such heavy falls which resulted in the death of employees, nobody was held responsible. (Oral Interview, 1999) The mining Department Report of 1923 to 1924 states that “in each case it was proved that Care had been exercised and the verdicts were accidental death with no blame attachable”. (Gold Coast Annual Reports on the Mines Department 1923–4).

Some of these accidents resulted entirely from deliberate neglect of regulations or instructions on the part of those who were killed. (COS 19/2/33 PRAAD Accra). There were instances also where accidents occurred due to misunderstanding of instructions. On July 3, 1937 five employees of AGC were killed when the



contractor failed to carry out orders of the shaft master before drilling commenced. Barely a month before the above incident took place, Battista Ndori, Idrissa Wangara and Lansina Wangara also met their deaths through drillings into explosives. (Ibid)

Workers at the AGC were entitled to go on leave without pay. New comers were given fourteen (14) days leave while those who had worked for ten years had twenty-one (21) days of leave. (Information from Nana Amponsem, 1999). From 1953 labourers who worked with the Corporation for five years received gratuity of £5. In the sixth year it was increased to £7. (Ibid). AGC was the only mining company which operated a provident fund in the 1950s for its salaried staff who wished to contribute to it. Staff contributed up to ten percent of their salary to which the Corporation added twenty five percent. This was invested in the Gold Coast Post Office Savings Bank and interest accrued was payable to the contributor on his ceasing to be a member. (Report of the Mines Labour Committee, 1953).

When the AGC started operating in Obuasi, labourers were living in villages closer to the town. (Oral Interview, 1999). The Corporation did not build permanent houses for the migrant labourers until 1934 when permanent houses for the employees were constructed. (Oral Interview, 1999; see also Gold Coast Colony Report on Medical Service Department, 1935). In that year a number of quarters for the African employees were built. The rooms of the quarters were very small in size. Each quarter comprised two bed rooms, a kitchen and a bath for headmen. (Oral Interview, 1999). The quarters gave the appearance of an army barracks. During the same period, the Corporation built bungalows for the expatriate workers. The bungalows were separated from the African workers quarters. They were surrounded by beautiful and well attended gardens. The houses were provided with all the essential amenities the middle class European required for comfort. (Ibid).

### Health Care and Recreation

Before 1930 there was no hospital in Obuasi. Anybody who fell sick had to be sent to Dunkwa hospital to be treated. However, in that year the Corporation built a mine hospital at Obuasi for the workers. They had free medical care or treatment when they became ill or sustained injury in the course of work. (Oral Interview, 1999). The Corporation also built recreational facilities for the workers in 1952. Until then, workers did not enjoy such facilities. Separate club houses were built for African and European workers. The junior African workers not permitted to enter the club house for the expatriate management staff, only senior African workers were allowed. (Ibid). The AGC club houses were well equipped with libraries, wireless, refrigerators, comfortable seats and facilities for indoor games. As centres for social

intercourse they were excellent. (Ibid; See also Report of the Mines Labour Committee, Gold Coast, 1953).

### Labour Unions and Labour Unrest

As early as 1898 workers of the Corporation embarked upon the first strike action to call attention to their grievances. The hazardous underground work, low wages and intimidation by European staff among other grievances were the causes of the strike action. Management persuaded workers to stop the strike by promising them salary increment and improved conditions of service. (Crisp, 1984). Notwithstanding the promise management did not set up any procedure for the resolution of workers' problems hence in 1924 and 1925 workers once again went on strike. (Boahen *et. al*, 1986) Since workers did not have any means of redressing their grievances, withholding and withdrawal of labour was the dominant mode of protest and resistance in the mines. From the very beginning of modern mining in Obuasi workers supplemented their low wages by stealing gold and other items such as candles, nails and explosives without showing any remorse because they felt cheated by management. (Oral Interview, 1999).

Workers' consciousness of collective action reached its peak at AGC during the administration of General Spears between 1930 and the 1940s. (Oral Interview, 1999). Most of the strike actions within that period were accompanied by serious acts of violence against managers. Workers who attempted to compromise with management during such strike actions were assaulted. The strikes were unannounced but were well organised and frequently planned. Ring leaders of such strikes were often fired when discovered. (Ibid). When General Spears heard of a rumour of an imminent industrial action he curbed it by diplomatically dissuading the workers. He promised better conditions of service and salary increment. (Ibid).

Racism was one of the causes of strike action at AGC. It took the form of assault or the use of abusive language by the expatriate staff against African employees. (Oral Interview, 1999). Strike actions often had tragic consequences. Racist white supervisors often disappeared mysteriously and were alleged to have fallen down into an abandoned shaft, when it was obvious to management of the Corporation and the colonial Government that they had been murdered by friends of workers who had been victimised by the European supervisor concerned. Further Correspondence Regarding Affairs of the Gold Coast, Parliamentary Paper 3687. Pp. 98–103. In 1949, for example, Kwasi Gyamfi, a surface labourer of the Corporation brutally murdered a white supervisor with a machete for slapping and using abusive language against him. (Oral Interview, 1999).

The workforce of AGC became organised under the aegis of workers union after Trade Unionism was

legalised in the Gold Coast in 1941. (Oral Interview, 1999). In 1945/46 Government lent its support to the formation of trade unions by mine workers to provide a means of redressing their grievances by peaceful means. The 1945/46 Annual Report of the Gold Coast chamber of mines reported that:

the creation and registration of Trade Unions of mining employees is important to the mining industry. It is hoped that they will be so directed as to be a source of help and assistance to all concerned.

In 1945 a Trade Union was formed. It was a loose confederation of mines basically concentrated in the Western Region of the Gold Coast because of the mining activities and railway workers in the area. (Adansi, 1985).

When there was a dispute between workers and management of AGC, representatives of the Union usually came from Tarkwa, headquarters of the mining companies, to AGC premises at Obuasi to settle the dispute. (Interviews with Opanin Akuoko and Mr. Carr, 1999).

The Industrial Relation Act passed in 1958 made it more or less obligatory for every worker in Ghana to be a member of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). A branch of TUC was consequently formed at AGC. (Oral Interview, 1999). Apart from workers union at AGC management also formed Departmental Works Committees each consisting of the Head of Department and about ten employees representing different branches of the department of categories of labour. These committees were encouraged to help and advice on all problems connected with efficiency and safety. (Gold Coast Mine Labour Report, 1953). The existence of these committees was strongly opposed by the workers union on the grounds that they usurped the functions of trade unions and that their formation was calculated to undermine the strength of the union. (Ibid).

Modern mining contributed immensely to the rapid growth of Obuasi's population. Since the first agreement was signed between the first European company (Cote d'Or) and the chief of Bekwai on behalf of the Adanse's; workers from all parts of Ghana and indeed from many parts of West Africa migrated to Obuasi to make a living. As a result, the population of Obuasi increased tremendously (Ampene, 1968). By 1960 Obuasi had become the second largest town in the whole of Asante in terms of population (Tenkorang, 1968; Ghana Population Census, 1960). Available records indicate that modern or scientific mining brought about socio-economic development in Obuasi. Available records do not tell us exactly the population of Obuasi village prior to the start of scientific mining in the area. All that is known is that Obuasi mining consisted of "forty crude mud walled and palm thatched hut". At an estimate of about fifteen people to each house, the population of Obuasi could not have exceeded six hundred (600) persons. By 1931, the population of the area had risen to 7,598. In 1948, it rose to 15,724. The 1960 population census estimated

Obuasi's population at 26,578. The phenomenal rise in Obuasi's population was caused by the attraction offered by the rapid progress of the mines.

## CONCLUSION

Modern mining which superseded traditional mining was different from the latter. It was labour intensive and attracted labour from all parts of the country as well as from outside the Gold Coast. All the above named labourers were categorised into skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. Workers periodically resorted to strike action in pursuit of better conditions of service. The first strike action occurred as early as 1898. The frequency increased in the 1920s and 1930s following the legalisation of trade unionism in 1941.

The most important demand for labour in the Gold Coast during the colonial era came from commercial agriculture and mining. The main export producing regions were unable to supply all the labour they needed from local sources, so extra hands had to be imported from other parts of the country and other West African colonies. This problem came about as a result of the fact that the Akan mine labourers took exception to underground work. They believed that underground mining was associated with hostile spirits. In addition, they viewed underground mining as a low status undertaking associated with slaves and, therefore, socially degrading. Furthermore, the Akan could reasonably subsist on cultivation of traditional food crops. The cocoa boom of the 1930s worsened the shortage of labour to work underground.

The high influx of migrants from Niger, Mali and the Northern Territories towards the end of 1922 was the outcome of an outbreak of famine. Another reason that accounted for this migration was the need to satisfy social obligations such as the payment of dowries and bride wealth.

Migrant workers were actively recruited by colonial authorities. The reduction in the supply of Kru labourers due to the development of rubber plantations in Liberia and the unwillingness of the Akans to work underground made the mining companies consider the importation of unskilled labourers from the north. The Northern Territories were not deemed by the colonial regime to have direct economic value; hence in the 1920s they were designated as a *labour reserve* for the supply of cheap labour for the mines and general labour in the cities.

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## Appendix

Interviews (oral tradition). Interviews with the elders of Adanse and ex-workers of AGC at Obuasi and some bankers in Accra were conducted in 1998 and 1999.

NAME OF INTERVIEWEES	AGE	OCCUPATION	STATUS
Nana Bonsra Sakrakyire II	60	Lawyer	Royal
Nana Ntiako Sakrakyire III	75	Farmer	Royal
Nana Kwabena Amponsem	55	Farmer/Store Keeper	Ex-AGC Staff
Opanin Kwame Appiah	66	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Opanin Kwame Affum	64	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Opanin Kwadwo Donkor	80	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Mallam Buraimah Mahamadu	78	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Mr. Appiah Dankwa	62	Mason	Ex-AGC Staff
Opanin Kwame Akuoko	70	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Mr. Ben Abu	66	Ex-Dep. Eng.	Ex-AGC Staff
Mr. David Hayes	54	Chief Mining Engineer	AGC Staff
Opanin Antwi Boasiako	65	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Opanin Kofi Adansi	76	Farmer	Ex-AGC Staff
Mr. John Carr	56	Industrial Relations Officer	AGC Staff
Opanin Brenya	86	Farmer	Royal
Mr. Albert York	50	Public Relations Officer	AGC Staff