

Introduction

At the end of March 2013, bands of enraged miners stormed the streets of Obuasi, a legendary gold-mining town in the Ashanti Region of southern Ghana. As they fired guns into the air, passersby dove for cover, shopkeepers closed their doors, and residents fled the town. State military personnel met the miners in the street, exchanged gunshots, and arrested several of the protestors. In retaliation, the miners smashed and shattered two cars of the local mine management. They also threatened to kidnap the children of mine officials who attended the mine's primary school, forcing the school to close for days.¹

This particular clash was only one instance in ongoing heated conflicts, merely a fragment within a history of violent confrontations between artisanal miners and the state military, which intermittently reinforces the mine's policing of its property. These small-scale miners are locally called *galamseys*.² They operate, often illegally, in the shallow streams and in the depths of the mud within the 100-square-mile concession of transnational mining giant AngloGold Ashanti (AGA), which runs an underground mine in Obuasi, operational since 1897.³ Obuasi, effectively a company town, holds the third-most-plentiful gold mine in Africa, after two voluminous deposits that lie near Johannesburg, South Africa.⁴ The *galamseys*, who are mostly Ghanaian, mine for gold at the margins of the formal mining operation, using traditional tools and methods, with pick axes, panning techniques, and little machinery. They claim ancestral and national rights to the gold, and they harbor great fury over an extremely profitable corporate mining industry that they feel only further impoverishes, displaces, and disinherits them.

In this clash, the military arrived at the behest of the mine and executed a flashout, a form of policing intended to cleanse the mine's property of the

galamseys. Military personnel traveled to Obuasi, popularly called Ghana's Golden City, from the nearby city of Kumasi, capital of the Ashanti Region, to sweep the principal sites of the galamsey operators. They arrested some and destroyed their equipment. The military personnel also used bulldozers to seal some of their underground pits with soil and rock—chillingly, trapping twenty-seven galamseys underground. They were buried alive—"in the belly of the earth," as people said—for two days, before national security forces rescued them. Soldiers pulled their enervated bodies, still alive, to the surface. Locals and media reports also voiced worry that some remained trapped underground, where presumably they perished.⁵

Yet the matter in dispute is not merely about earthly things—soil, mud, gold, and bodies. It is also thoroughly suffused with matters metaphysical and spiritual. Off the official news records, in private conversations, many in town described the forced burials as a kind of improper sacrifice, offered principally to certain spirits in exchange for facilitating or hastening the production or the appearance of gold. Other acts of violence were often interpreted in similar fashion.

In local systems of ritual reckoning, various spirits preside over the gold or otherwise interact with it. Many ethnic groups in southern Ghana, including the Asante, fall within the canopy ethnic group of the Akan and speak various mutually intelligible dialects of Twi.⁶ In Akan and other cosmologies that prevail in this ethno-cosmopolitan, spiritually plural mining town, gold carries an energetic frequency that resonates with some spirits, some deities, and with the omniscient creator deity. This predominant belief in the spiritual nature of gold is also true for those from groups originally from the northern regions of Ghana, as many miners are, as well as for those who primarily identify as Christian (common in southern Ghana) or Muslim (common in northern Ghana). In the Akan system of belief and nomenclature, this divine creator is called Nyame (also Onyame), the ultimate generator of all that is, seen and unseen or only partially seen. Nyame is all-knowing, all-seeing, and benevolent. In gendered and more anthropomorphic form, Nyame is conceived as male and as lord of the sky. In this rendering, his consort is Asaase Yaa, the supreme Earth goddess, who also intimately resonates with gold.⁷ However, neither is thought to produce gold or to provide access to it for worshippers in response to rituals considered improper or illicit. The supreme deities may provide wealth, usually by working through the intercessory deities, in exchange for unselfish and religiously proper offerings or prayers. Rather, it is lower forms of spirits that may respond with gold to unethical rituals performed by those seeking wealth. Any such gains tend to dissipate in short order, however, as they are derived through injustice and falsehood; that is, the rituals that generate such fruits are not aligned with the highest orders of what is just, pure, and true.

In Akan and other local belief systems, as in many other places throughout time and across cultures, gold is a physical representation of conscious spirit. As

such, the metal occupies a material space of high forms of divine consciousness. Spiritual adepts often interpret appearances of gold, in essence, as tangible referents for variations of transcendental fire or light, spirit or soul, which ordinarily remain shrouded in everyday life. Gold's allure commands mysterious and magnetic power for polities, for religious communities, for systems of cultural valuation, and for moral economies—that is, economies based on a sense of rightness or fairness, rather than exclusively on market principles.⁸ As some *abosom* (Akan deities, who have emanated as discrete beings out of the creator; sing., *obosom*) explained through some of their Obuasi-area *akomfo* (Akan priests and priestesses; sing., *okomfo*) during my ethnographic research, gold has an energetic frequency of a very pure spiritual constitution, yet it carries no consciousness of its own. Rather, it acts as a substance of empowerment, protection, prestige, value, and amplification of multidirectional connection—like a telephone, or a microphone—between humans and some beings in the spiritual realm.⁹

More broadly, gold is matter of prime importance to this society, lying at the crossroads between the economic and the metaphysical, the mundane and the transcendent. Spirits govern the gold, and, in many ways, the spirits are sovereign. All legal and political forms, all cultures of labor, operate in dynamic tension—and, at times, co-creation—with the numinous and the transcendental realms. Here, gold's sacred dimensions as spirit and body (matter) also bespeak its mystical integrative alchemical capacity to make the spirit a body and the body a spirit, a transmutation that at once marks and collapses the domains of signifier and signified, concept and referent, in fine dialectical fashion.

Fires of Gold lifts the veils of the key social dramas at play and explores the deeper cultural reckonings of violence, labor, spirits, and the rebirth of sovereign power in the gold fields of Ghana. The ethnographic stories stand as prisms for an extended meditation on the powers of gold in these cultural spaces—in the enigmatic shadows of mining conflicts, in the corridors of soul-craft, in the anchoring of law, in the torrents of economic struggle, and in the fashioning of novel politics. The book explores contemporary violence and uncovers the often hidden effects of the mining industry, which is widely lauded, internationally, as an economic success in one of Africa's most celebrated democracies. However, within Ghana, mining is regarded as the poisoned chalice of the contemporary economy—at once the most lucrative sector and the most socially disruptive.

A few central inquiries animate the endeavor: What are the critical legal and political paradoxes, new cultures of labor, and powerful forms of spiritual vitalities that often lie concealed in the shadows of the mining industry? How do these oft-observed phenomena unsettle and complicate Ghana's wide reputation as a rule-of-law success story for Africa? More broadly, what do these social worlds reveal about theories concerning transformations in forms of power, spirit, and sovereignty in Africa and beyond? At a fundamental level, what are the embodied

ethnographic implications for the classical philosophical triad of the city, the soul, and the sacred?

Here, I use *city* in the figurative sense of the public, or the polity, the political sphere—not in the sense of urbanized worlds specifically. The classical philosophical triad is found, among many other places, in ancient philosophy. It has been conceived to demarcate various domains of power, transcendence, politics, selfhood, values, community, and being-in-the-world. The foundational political and ethical questions of how people define and reconcile their struggles over these realms have beset cultures and societies throughout history. My invocation of the triad in this case is to show, ethnographically, how these mining struggles manifest and evince newfound forms of politics, ethics, and authority with respect to the demarcation and reconciliation of these often conflicting domains of the classical triad.¹⁰

At its most basic, *Fires of Gold* advances two central arguments. First, significant forces and sources of power that lie outside of the formal legal systems have arisen to police, adjudicate, and otherwise govern this theater of struggles. The centrality of these forms, which often are more vital than official bodies of government, reveals a reconstitution of sovereign power. The principal informal authorities at stake in this story include the mining company; the gamamsey miners' association; civil society advocacy networks for those adversely affected by mining; and various African, Islamic, and Christian religious figures. I argue that these figures are shadow sovereigns—that is, sovereign-like authorities that function alongside formally instituted legal and political systems.

The abundance and significance of these shadow forms in the nation's sovereign constellation undercut the popular claim that contemporary Ghana is a secular rule-of-law exemplar. It is not that the state's legal regimes are absent or nonfunctional in these spaces, as one might infer. Rather, legal orders surround and, at times, give rise and shape to these shadow sovereigns, which sometimes undermine enshrined legal rights and institutions.¹¹ Yet these novel forces also can function as a supplement that *enhances* the strength of formal legal regimes and statecraft. Further, shadow sovereign realms increasingly serve as innovative domains of political resistance, spiritual empowerment, and economic livelihood. As such, they furnish new modes for the effective reclamation of imperiled entitlements, such as rights to property, labor, security, and even life itself.

Second, the book argues that the spiritual powers at play are much more significant than one might think at first glance, in that they anchor the powers of shadow sovereigns and of others—and fuel contests and collaborations among those in the gold fields. Vital spiritual forces thoroughly permeate the ranks of shadow sovereigns as well as the broader dynamics among miners, politicians, activists, lawyers, and many others. In a profound sense, spiritual powers suffuse all forms of authority in this theater, whether those forms are enshrined in law or

otherwise. Spirits also perpetually threaten to unseat or obscure power and legitimacy. Prominent ritual authorities and their spiritual connections furnish crucial symbolic power for those navigating, among many other things, the novel cultures of casual labor among the *galamseys*, who often enjoy much *de facto* collectivized power vis-à-vis the corporate mine. This artisanal mining force starkly contrasts with conventional portrayals of hopelessly diffuse, precarious labor power in deindustrialized or under-industrialized settings around the world. The spiritual realms, often in surprising ways, help to account for this collective power. More generally, spiritual fields serve as critical nexuses for labor politics and for refashioning sovereignty. They help to link forms of economic value and ethical values to deep-seated cultural systems of referential truth and justice. These linkages, in turn, help to create—or co-constitute—the ostensibly secular transformations in law and statecraft, in sovereign power, and in political economy.¹²

In order to establish these two central arguments, the book explores the many dimensions of mining conflicts in Ghana, including the complex spiritual contests and ritual relations that animate them, the clash of property regimes involved in them, the ways in which they often elude the formal court systems, and the shadow sovereigns that figure prominently in these struggles. Recently, Obuasi has been the site of bitter controversies surrounding drastic labor retrenchments, destructive surface-mining practices, violence against the *galamseys*, and a more general sentiment that the mining company, AGA, is not reciprocating, not enhancing life in the town or the nation.¹³ It is currently the site of Ghana's most acute mining conflicts, following the dispossession and destruction of many indigenous farmlands and streams, the declining political and spiritual legitimacy of traditional rulers, the forcing of much mine labor into temporary status (casualization), soaring youth unemployment, and the rise of an increasingly organized and militarized shadow labor force of *galamseys*. Increasingly, foreigners, especially from southern China, are operating with or alongside the Ghanaian *galamseys*.¹⁴ Artisanal miners are one key symbol of the new face of global extractive labor. Kindred forms of informal, small-scale mining currently account for an estimated one-third of Ghana's gold production, as well as an estimated 80 percent of the world's gold output.¹⁵ Ghana now ranks as the second-largest gold producer in Africa, and as the tenth-largest in the world. The Obuasi mine has been a key generator of the gold that confers this stature upon the country.

Amid much devastation, one central form of sustenance for people is spiritual life, which is deeply imbricated with the spiritual relations to gold, the economic mainstay of the town. Members of all faith traditions in town relate to the spiritual nature of gold, each in their own religious vernaculars and through their own respective protocols. Each tradition holds significant sway over the mining communities, and an understanding of the spirits behind the gold prevails throughout each of them—but through different codes and symbolic valences.

In this realm, we witness shades of the spiritual economies among mine laborers, natural resources, and lands found in many classic anthropological works, not least among them Michael Taussig's and June Nash's famous works on Bolivian tin miners.¹⁶ Spirits and other numinous dimensions also inhabit much of the more recent anthropological work on mining, which offers a true wellspring of deeply creative, significant studies.¹⁷

While it might be tempting to view the spiritual matters in this book as sites of subjugation and resistance within local cosmologies and moral economies, this is not simply about miners using mystical powers against oppressive mine lords or against a monolithic, antagonistic state. All parties at play, including corporate mine officials and state authorities, draw upon transcendent sources of empowerment, with varying degrees of temporal duration, economic success, and moral consequence. Here, the spiritual powers that relate to the sacred nature of gold also reflect and intensify more general dreams and nightmares for those in town, concerning labor politics and conflicts over sovereign wealth. Both state and traditional authorities are supposed to hold their respective resources "in trust" for their subjects, governing them to collective benefit.¹⁸ However, these authorities often violate this trust, by many local lights. Spiritual undertones and repercussions abound. What is more, those within the various groups in this study—the mining company, the state, the miners, the union, the activists, the lawyers, the politicians, the religious authorities—utilize the spiritual powers both in contest and in concert. At times, they use the powers to foster solidarity or to underwrite a cooperative endeavor; at other times, they use the powers to compete as individuals or as subgroups within larger collectives or social bodies. The spiritual forces here are multifaceted and multidimensional. Sources of spiritual power stand behind and, variously, stabilize or disrupt forms of rule, whether those forms are shadow sovereigns or officially—that is, legally—constituted.

Notably, this spectrum of visibility applies to the formal legal regimes themselves—not only to spirits or to shadow sovereigns. Legal orders shape the contours of mining contests and of life, even in apparent legal vacuums, in zones where legal signals seem to fade. The mining violence and the shadow forces might *seem* merely to defy a properly functioning legal order. However, the background rules of the legal and economic systems at play actually give rise to—and even perversely incentivize—the forces and violence, the interplays of subjection, displacement, and dispossession. Shadow sovereigns are given life in relation to law. Further, they function in relation to law at all times, even when they are flouting or circumnavigating legal orders, and even in spaces where law appears, to the untrained eye, to be absent. In many ways, the mining violence evinces not a legal system broken down but rather a heavily liberalized legal system that is working all too well.

In the gold fields, power is anchored in forms that are both earthly and transcendental, visible and invisible—or alternately flashing and fading from view, like

reflections in water, figures in flames, or silhouettes in a half-lit room. Cultural beliefs and social practices that many are wont to disregard as outmoded—or, at least, as ancillary dimensions of so-called universal political, economic, and legal means—are, in fact, critical sites of labor, subjectivity, and social revitalization. Here, informal mining groups, spiritual jurisdictions and topographies, and other key cultural forms abound in the shadows of the formal legal and political systems. They wield tremendous power and legitimacy that received modernist wisdom would deny them. These forces operate in unobvious and vital ways, generating new forms of value and values that are irretrievably enmeshed in—and yet irreducible to—the cultural repertoires at play.

These shadow authorities operate, ambivalently, as forces of beneficence and terror—at once governmental and exceptional, earthly and otherworldly—and exercise sovereign-like rule over territories and populations. The legal system itself is founded on parallel jurisdictions, on the dual existence of a colonially constructed customary law and a liberal state legal regime. The struggles and collaborations among these shadow authorities are fashioning the economic, cultural, and social lives of the Ghanaians who inhabit their worlds. This is especially so for those who sense that their lands, labor, and sources of livelihood have been sacrificed to a mine and to a state—to conceptions of sovereign wealth—that do not offer them viable sources for future life. Multivalent sacrificial logics fuel reckonings of destruction, deprivation, and dispossession. Further, these logics crucially empower the bold spirit of those who seek to labor for land and gold—themselves imbued with spirits and, at times, governed by them—and to claim forms of entitlement that state and traditional rulers often no longer secure for them.¹⁹

Here, we witness a boldly charted pursuit of justice on the part of the displaced, the dispossessed, the retrenched, and the superfluous miners, in order to address the perilous labor of their existence. Theirs is a slow insurgency, conducted in a theater of shadows, at once in the goldfields, at the ruler's palace, in the realm of the transcendental, and in the interstices of the sovereign polity by means of simulations of laws—or of laws repurposed and redrawn. This reveals the complex ways in which dispossessed or imperiled persons and casual laborers—outside of formally recognized political structures and often outside of formal employment—are organizing themselves into new structures of potent political action. They are doing so in deep relation to various domains of the spiritual realm that exercise jurisdiction over these territories, substances, persons, and relations. Understanding these dynamics and cultural formations is important for apprehending the workings of contemporary global extractive regimes. And it is essential for making sense of the worlds being partially remade by capitalism and the distinctive forms of law, politics, and sovereign power in the twenty-first century. The figures of this text craft a new cultural politics of labor and of law at the heart of a growing African economy, one that, on pain of their flesh and blood and spirit, levels a forceful claim on the future.

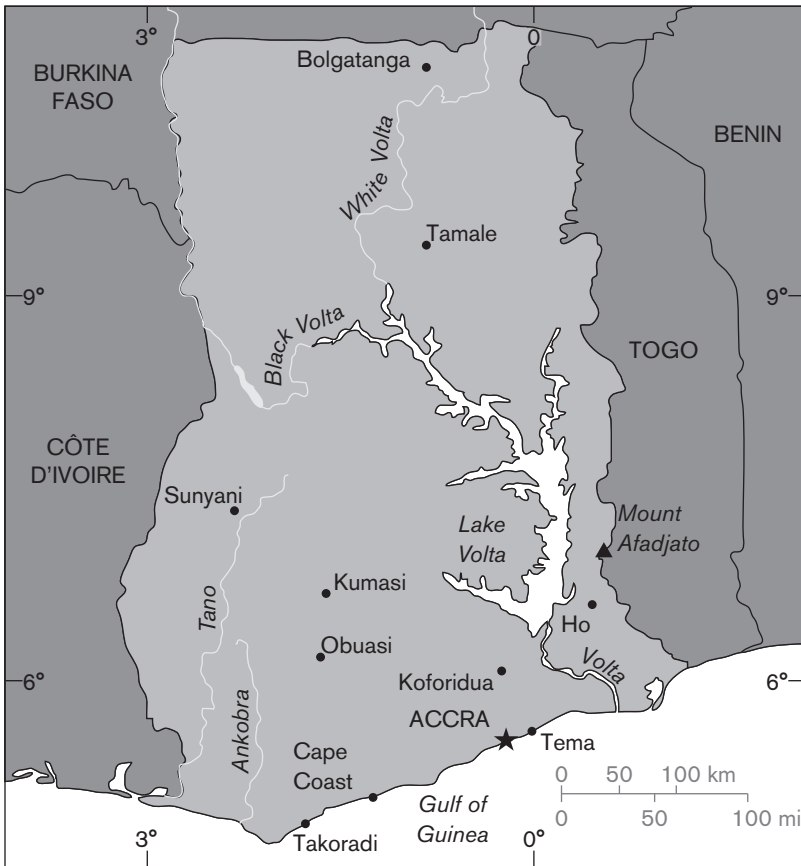
THE GOLDEN CITY, IMPERIAL ECHOES,
AND THE PUBLIC EYE

Obuasi is a town of many faces and symbolic ambivalences. The town is coursing with gold, christened with dust, and fraught with social unrest. The Obuasi mine was pivotal to the economy and the sacred power of the storied Asante Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Later, the mine was central to British incursions and, ultimately, to colonial overrule.²⁰ Obuasi sits about forty miles southwest of Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti Region and the site of Manhyia Palace, the ritual and political apex of the Asante Kingdom. Since the onset of industrial mining in 1897, Obuasi effectively has been a company town—run first by Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (AGC), and then by the corporate successor, transnational mining giant AngloGold Ashanti (AGA), which took over in 2004. The Obuasi mine has served as a pillar of the country's neoliberal economy, heavily contributing to Ghana's leading status as a gold producer for Africa and the world.

Although precise census data are elusive, the most recent governmental statistics state that there are around one hundred seventy-five thousand people who live in the Obuasi municipality. The town of Obuasi lies wholly within the concession of AGA, by which the national government confers exclusive rights, recently renewed in a ninety-nine-year lease, to harvest gold within its territory. The makeup of the town is truly ethno-cosmopolitan, as well as religiously and spiritually plural. Obuasi rests in the Ashanti Region, in the sub-region of Adansi.²¹

Over the course of its centuries-long life with an operative mine, the town has drawn laborers from all over the country. This especially has been so during this past century, with the town's operation of an industrial mine. Over its lifespan, mine owners or managers have drawn laborers from elsewhere—particularly from the Northern Region of Ghana, sometimes by force. The Asante Empire's slave-acquisition campaigns and also the British colonial-era practices of forced labor coercion echoed the notorious "South African model" for creating mine laborers through capture and servitude.²²

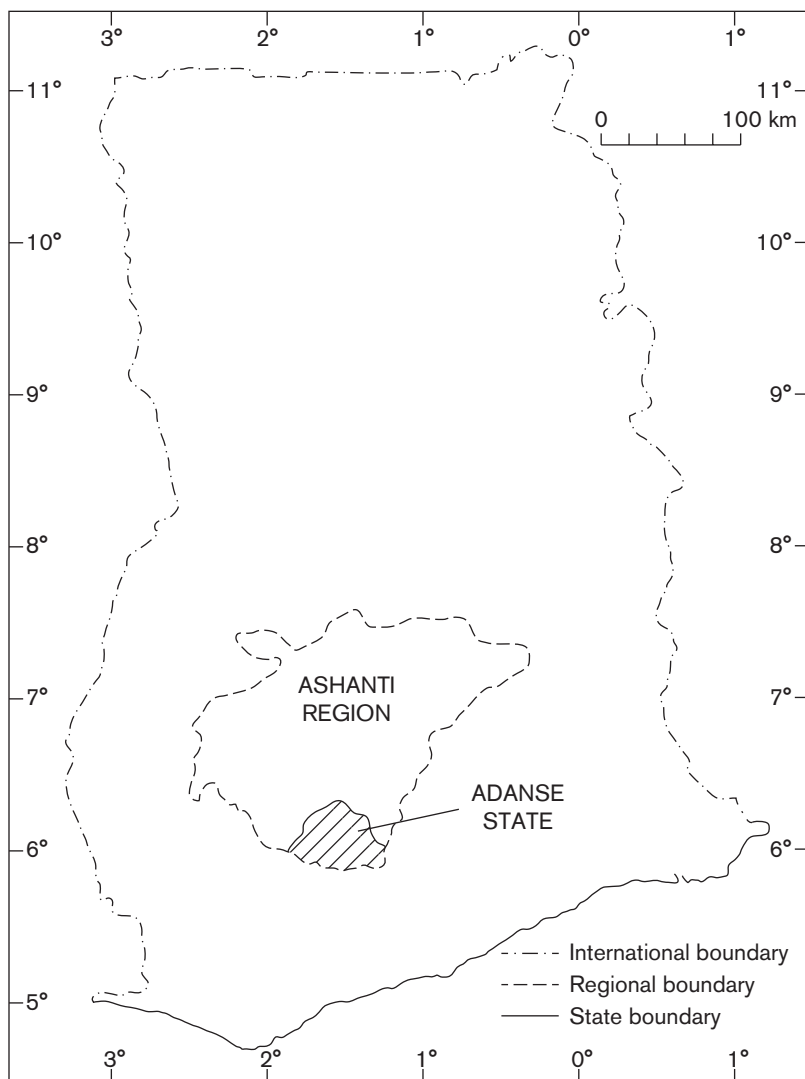
In the struggles for independence from Britain, nationalist control of natural resources—principally gold—was a key mobilizing factor and political platform. In the midst of these many complex and devoted statist protectionist efforts, in which newly independent leaders from the first president, Kwame Nkrumah, through long-running head of state, Jerry Rawlings, strove to protect Ghana's gold and other resources from the depredations of neocolonial markets (often populated and dominated by white financial interests), Ghana found itself in the throes of crushing sovereign debt and the aftershocks of a global recession. Consequently, in 1986, Ghana became the first site of structural adjustment reforms in Africa, inaugurating the neoliberal era on the continent. In exchange for favorable debt refinancing, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiated dramatic



MAP 1. Ghana, showing Obuasi, near Kumasi, along with other principal cities.
 Source: "Ghana," From *The CIA Factbook*, 2012. U.S. Department of State website.
<https://www.state.gov/p/af/ci/gh/> (accessed April 18, 2019).

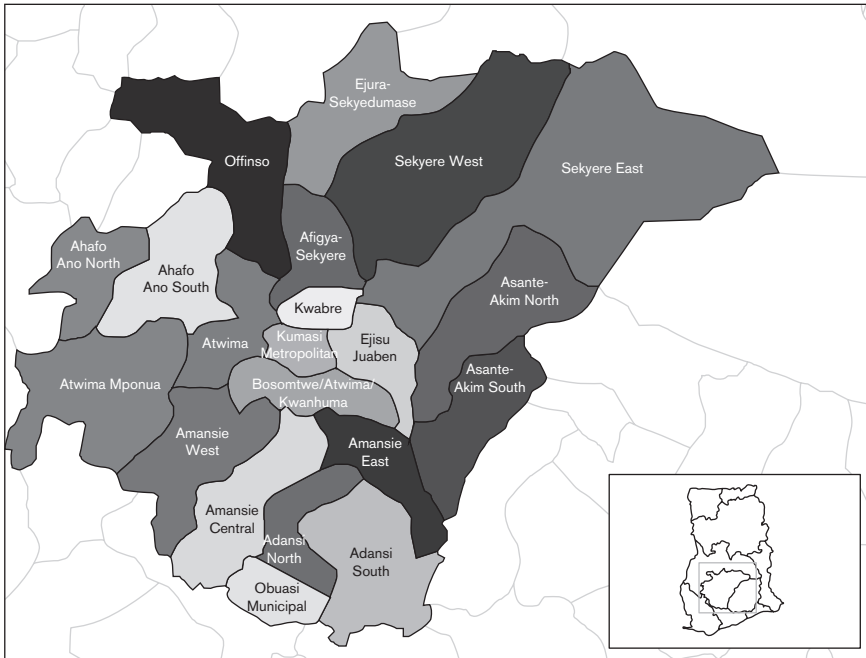
liberalization and denationalization of Ghana's key economic sectors. The gold-mining industry was the first target of denationalization and deindustrialization.²³ The multilateral lending bodies also commanded a gradual move toward a constitutional democracy, a greater level of privatized governmental and economic functions, and the enshrining of putatively impartial rule-of-law mechanisms. All of this, of course, entailed a move away from more state-centered paradigms of government and economy.

A crucial component of the birth of neoliberalism in Ghana was the legalization of surface mining, which has caused untold environmental destruction, human displacement, and social turmoil in Obuasi and elsewhere throughout



MAP 2. The Adanse State in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Source: Emmanuel Ababio Ofoosu-Mensah, "Traditional Gold Mining in Adanse," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 127.

Ghana. Obuasi hosted the onset of this open-pit blasting in the nation. Since the 1990s, AGC (later AGA) has inflamed local populations with its turn to this highly lucrative yet deeply destructive form of mining in the town and its environs. The method has wrought tremendous violence upon local lands, spirits, environments, labor, and lives. Further exacerbating the situation, the shift to surface mining



MAP 3. The districts of the Ashanti Region, showing Obuasi Municipal District, within which Obuasi sits as the capital, in the southern part of the region. Source: “Obuasi Municipal District,” Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obuasi_Municipal_District (accessed April 18, 2019).

has obviated much underground labor, entailing significant casualization and retrenchment of AGA’s workforce alongside further evisceration of an already rather weak and skeletal Ghana Mineworkers Union (GMU). Many among the galamsey ranks in Obuasi tell me that they have master’s degrees in mining-related subjects, such as electrical or mechanical engineering, but now find themselves without work. Many of those rendered jobless or landless—or beset by precarious casual labor contracts with AGA—have drifted into the burgeoning galamsey ranks and, increasingly, have turned to striving for security through accessing the powers of the spiritual realm. They seem to be magnetized by the straightforward attraction of a viable living almost as much as by the lure of the quick riches such work may produce—efficacious labor pragmatics and auspicious spiritual conditions permitting.

Following the flashout in 2013, Ghana’s military assembled, for the first time, a permanent base in Obuasi, and began conducting continual surveillance to ensure that the galamseys did not reappear to resume their work. In the ordinary course of events, galamseys always have returned to reassemble their informal sites of

production, even in the immediate wake of the violent suppression of their activities, whatever the blood and wreckage. Townspeople frequently describe them as an irrepressible force, with stunning devotion to precarious labor that is often interlaced with ritual pacts and spiritual allegiances. Given the soaring unemployment rate, gamamsey mining provides a reprieve, however temporary, from the despair of acute deprivation.

The secretary of the gamamseys' unofficial governance organization, the Small-Scale Miners Association (SSMA), reported that their leaders were caught completely unawares. He said that National Security personnel *had* given the SSMA prior notice of the sweep, but security personnel had claimed that the mission was to "flash out" the foreigners who were increasingly involved in these activities, especially the Chinese miners, and that Ghanaians engaged in gamamsey would not be disturbed.

The ensuing violent protest may appear, at first glance, to have been merely a spontaneous revolt of social bandits, or a popular uprising—what the local press variously cast as an "armed gamamsey insurrection," in which they were "taking the law into their own hands,"²⁴ and as a "state of anarchy," with gamamseys "on a rampage."²⁵ In fact, this spectacular violence was borne of much more ordered, protracted conflict grounded in long-running contests over gold and concerning, specifically, a significant breach in the terms of an informal social contract that the local leadership of the gamamseys had forcefully negotiated with the mine. This bears witness to a complicated network of vying sovereign authorities, each seeking spiritual and practical powers to variously organize, undergird, or upend forms of labor politics and moral economies of mining. The gamamseys are a chief shadow sovereign force in this social drama, and their laboring powers, spirits, and significations run through the core of this ethnography. Wealthier gamamseys have tended to assume the stature of economic mainstays in communities with compromised chiefs and other imperiled customary authorities. In these, they have come to function as *de facto* customary authorities, sovereigns in their own rights, moonlighting in the vacant or otherwise compromised offices.

This contract, whose breach occasioned the violence, is grounded in a shadow regime of informal property rights, coded as the "Gentlemen's Agreement." In 2009, four years prior to this particular flash out, the gamamsey leadership, now assembled as the SSMA, received informal permission from AGA to operate on certain parts of its concession—especially in its abandoned pits and waste dumps. In exchange, the gamamsey leadership promised to ensure that its estimated thirty thousand members in Obuasi—a figure that towered over AGA's more modest figure of about three thousand mine employees at the time—would not continue to invade AGA's underground mines.²⁶ Before this agreement, the gamamseys frequently had wielded collective coercive might, attacking AGA security personnel and mine laborers, killing some and driving others mad through spiritual and physical assaults. They also had destroyed mine equipment, setting it ablaze or

smashing it to rubble. In contrast to much that is written in contemporary literature regarding the nearly absent collectivized power of casual labor, all of this aggressive action had significant cumulative effects akin to traditional unionized labor strikes: the *galamseys*, very fundamentally, had disrupted industrial production and had threatened future investment in the mine.

Despite the Gentleman's Agreement between the *galamseys* and the mine officials (and some local politicians, chiefs, state police, and private security forces), violence continues to erupt. The flashout in 2013 crystallizes a host of dynamics that power the pulse of this book. The clash involving the military, the mine, and the *galamseys* exemplifies much broader cultural histories of destruction, dispossession, casualization, spiritual contests, heavy-handed policing, and informal labor collectivization.

Significantly, these patterns of violence in Obuasi contributed to the January 2011 conferral to AGA of the ignominious "Public Eye Award."²⁷ The Berne Declaration and Greenpeace annually organize the Public Eye Awards ceremony in Davos, Switzerland, as a "critical counterpoint to the World Economic Forum."²⁸ In bestowing this award, global civil society groups crowned AGA the "most socially and environmentally irresponsible company in the world" for the year 2010. In particular, the award recognized the contested histories of AGA's Obuasi operations. AGA personnel found the timing particularly ill-starred, as the company had won out over fellow nominee British Petroleum (BP) in the same year as BP's notorious oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, already a clear source of global outrage.

An advocacy organization, Wacam—whose name roughly approximates "you have disturbed me" in Twi—had spearheaded the advocacy campaign that culminated in the conferral of this award. Wacam is a prominent mining nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Ghana—one that generally has styled itself as more grassroots than most other mining NGOs in the nation. In contrast to many other prominent NGOs, which often originated in Accra and are based there, Wacam emerged in mining towns and has carried out most of its activities with leaders and members drawn from mining-affected communities.²⁹ As this movement gained momentum and assumed an active role in the local and national media, the NGO, though small, was able to secure a strong budget for expansion from transnational donors. After Wacam started up in the other main mining town of Ghana, Tarkwa (in the Western Region), it expanded to Obuasi. The Wacam officials first touched base with local advocates in the form of radio station hosts—featured on recently liberalized radio airwaves, a press freshly freed from governmental and mining-company control. Wacam also approached local district assembly representatives—that is, local-level state government officials—from communities acutely affected by surface mining and home to many *galamsey* operators. It was through these initial contacts that the Wacam presence in Obuasi eventually gained momentum in the late 1990s and early 2000s, at which point the Obuasi

organizers—locals themselves—began to hold radio shows to awaken local populations to various wrongs committed by the mine as well as to inform people of relevant constitutional and statutory rights that people scarcely knew they held as citizens. The activists also traveled to affected communities and began to help to organize the gamamsey forces into forms of leadership to dialogue with personnel from the mining company.

Wacam's securing of the Public Eye Award for AGA was a landmark victory in the history of the organization. This event had ramifications for the Obuasi mine and for the company's informal rule and relations with various groups in town. It empowered activists and other community members, and it shifted the local balances of power between the mine and the gamamseys toward a further emboldening of the artisanal forces. The conferral of the award delivered a hefty blow to AGA's recently lauded global human rights efforts and "corporate social responsibility" endeavors.³⁰

The organizers of the Public Eye Awards express their aim as to incite public ire and to create a cascade of reputational consequences. These consequences may include the prompting of socially responsible divestment or other forms of what has come to be known as shareholder activism. These, of course, increasingly operate in tandem with locally driven efforts of NGOs or grassroots social movements. After the award, AGA faced significant threats of divestment from the parent company.

In nominating AGA for this ignoble award, Wacam drew upon vociferous community mobilization, environmental studies, and various advocacy campaigns from over a decade of organizing in Obuasi and other mining towns across Ghana.³¹ Although Wacam is a resolutely grassroots advocacy organization, the bulk of its funding—and some of the discursive frameworks for its mining campaigns—come from the large transnational donors Ibis and Oxfam-America.

Wacam, in fact, was how I came to know Obuasi, and a few of its local leaders helped me to call it a home during my fieldwork. I carried out this fieldwork in Obuasi in the summers of 2010 and 2011, and then over the course of the calendar year of 2012, so I was there soon before and soon after AGA received the Public Eye Award. While I have kept in touch with key interlocutors over the course of the years since 2012, I returned to Ghana for follow-up field research in the summer of 2018, while finishing this book.

When living in Obuasi for this research, I stayed in the extended family home of one of the journalists and principal activists in town who was then the main local organizer of Wacam. In this book, I call him Kofi. (All names in this book have been changed, unless expressly noted otherwise, in an effort to preserve anonymity.) Kofi is a brilliant and determined writer, advocate, and scholar. He grew up in Obuasi. In many ways, this book unfolded by virtue of the proverbial door of access that he originally opened for me. For a time, Kofi even lived in the house

where I stayed, the house being owned by one of his sisters, Sylvia, on his maternal side; Sylvia is the biological daughter of Kofi's mother's sister, Ann, who also lived in the house. Kofi is Nzema by ethnicity, which is part of the larger Akan group, all matrilineal.

Kofi and other local activists provided my entry points to the subjects about whom I write in this book. Over the course of my time, I developed many friendships and working relationships with a broad range of people in Obuasi—politicians, chiefs and queen mothers, galamseys, pastors, Akan priestesses and priests (*akomfo*), AGA personnel, and many others throughout the town.

I initially entered the town to go deeper into the cultural, spiritual, and social dynamics that propelled many of Wacam's campaigns revolving around the mine's alleged human rights abuses and histories of displacements and environmental destruction. I had first learned about the issues that were besetting mining communities in Ghana in 2007, while I was a law student, working on a summer fellowship in Accra before I started my doctoral program in anthropology. It was my first time in Ghana, and I was immersed in legal research for the Ghanaian chapter of an international environmental justice organization. Among other things, I delved into the mining dramas. Their complexities and mysteries magnetized me—so much so that I returned to focus on the cultures of mining struggles when I returned to Ghana a few years later to begin my long-running ethnographic research.

As this book attests, the study rapidly grew into much more than a focus on law, displacement, environmental justice, and human rights. My ethnographic research extended well beyond those initial confines, which were almost preformulated in my mind by the activist discourses. Throughout, I was aided by the great generosity and auspicious unfolding of many patterns of informal contacts; one conversation or friendship led to another, as the broader picture slowly emerged, took shape, and entered my fields of vision. Whole networks of social dynamics, relations, and phenomena that were at first invisible to me gradually came into view, at times thrown into high relief.

SOVEREIGN SHADOWS AND SPECTRAL LABOR POLITICS

The forms of shadow rule, casual labor politics, and spiritual forces and jurisdictions that I trace in *Fires of Gold* advance versions of law, economy, and sovereign power that run counter to much conventional wisdom about the contemporary world. They reveal deep and reciprocally constitutive interrelations with novel cultures of moral economy, of vital soul-craft, and of political life. This multivalent manifestation of sovereign power, I submit, is neither formal—a privileged, ideal-typical feature of the nation-state, what Max Weber called a “monopoly of the legitimate use