

From Mining to Shop Keeping; the New Way of Life of Gold Miners in Ghana

Seth Amofah^{1*}, Lily Agyare¹, Kingsley Adu Koranteng² and Emmanuel Junior Bioh³

¹ School of Governance, Law and Society, Tallinn University, Estonia

² Department of Geoinformatics, University of Tartu, Estonia

³ Department of Real Estate and Land Management, University for Development Studies, Ghana

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Mining Towns
Livelihoods
Urban Identity
Informal Housing
Ghana

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the closure of a century old commercial gold mines has changed the main source of livelihoods and social relations in Obuasi, Ghana. Two years after the mines were closed and almost all workers laid off, there was a paradoxical increase in new luxury residential houses nestling all around the town, and at the same time, there was no certainty in economic stability. Using qualitative research approaches, it was discovered that, the main priority of the laid-off mine workers was to build their own houses as symbol of continuity, the same as they enjoyed when they lived in the company's housing estates. As much of the severance money was invested into getting private housing, less was left to pursue and sustain economic and livelihood continuity. The study presents a mixture of economic and identity ambiguity amongst the former miners and the town.

1. Introduction

Mining has employed millions of people over centuries. It has turned hamlets into cosmopolitan cities overnight. Mining in itself is capital intensive, just as its reliance on the intensity of labour. It therefore requires investors willing to put their money into it for the sake of profit and at the same time, workers willing to risk their lives to bring out the mineral resources (Burrell, 2017). Needed workforce seems so easy to be magnetically attracted to mining areas. Balmer (1975) and Ofosu-Mensah (2011) describes how rural men and boys rush to migrate to areas discovered with mineral resource.

There is a relationship between the decline of mining activities and the collapse of the town in which the minerals are being mined. Burrell (2017) accounts of the closure of all coal mines which were once the pillar of major towns and counties in the Britain. The changes these towns went through after the closures of the mines have surfaced in the Ghanaian premium gold mining town of Obuasi.

The intersection between Obuasi and discoveries made through former mining town literature is that, there is limited hope of where the next household livelihood source will be coming from. There is however a gap in literature between the closure of mines, the development of new housing and underpinning economic livelihood of the people and the town thereof.

*Corresponding author E-mail address: seth.amofah@artun.ee

Cite this article as:

Amofah, S., Agyare, L., Koranteng, A. K., & Bioh, E. J. (2021). From Mining to Shop Keeping; the New Way of Life of Gold Miners in Ghana. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences*, 4(4), 19-30. <https://doi.org/10.33422/JARSS.v4i4.543>



Literature mention less about informal business avenues as sources new source of livelihood for former miners. Based on empirical investigation, this paper presents a high degree of uncertainty in the livelihood ventures taken by the workers. The paper answers the questions:

- What are the new sources of livelihoods for former miners in Obuasi, Ghana?
- To what extent does the use of severance package for building housing affect sustainable livelihood for the former mining town of Obuasi?

2. Closure of the Obuasi Mines

As it is the case in many African economies, one of the industries keeping the Ghanaian economic bloodstream running has been the extractive industry of which gold mining is the topmost. Ghana is second to only South Africa in the production and export of gold in Africa. The precious mineral is the second largest foreign exchange earner for the country after cocoa, yielding about five billion US Dollars into the national economy (Bermudez-Lego, 2016). Utter (1993) has reported that, Ghana possesses seventy per cent of West Africa's proven gold reserves. Out of this reserve, about seventy per cent of the gold is mined in the deep underground mines of Obuasi (Taylor, 2006). The size and output of the mines has remained relevant from the beginning as the largest operating gold mine for over a century (Hilson and Potter 2005:119; Ayensu 1997; Taylor 2006).

The town, Obuasi, has gone through different stages of transformation over the century. The mines brought many migrant workers from different regions of the then Gold Coast (Ghana) and other parts West Africa during the colonial era (Ofosu-Mensah 2011; Ayensu 1997). These migrants who came into the town in search of work settled in nearby villages bordering the mines making it multicultural even in the early twentieth century. The town has been branded around the mines such that it is impossible to separate the two from each other. Gold mining is interchanged for Obuasi and vice-versa. The visibility of environmental degradation of surface and underground mining on the mountains and hills within the town are physical reminders of legacy and cost of mining.

The viability and the prospects of the then Ashanti Goldfields Company (AGC) contributed to its merger with the intercontinental gold mining giant, AngloGold of South Africa in 2004 to become AngloGold Ashanti Limited, the world's third largest mining corporation (AGA, 2016). A decade after the merger, fluctuations in global gold prices and unstable electricity supply in Ghana affected the mining industry. The blackout and plummet in international commodity prices caused a drastic reduction in mineral revenue. Cost of production increased and revenue went down. The company described this as "*unaffordable financial losses*". AngloGold Ashanti took a decision from its global headquarters in Johannesburg, South Africa, to shut down the Obuasi operations by the end of 2014 for restructuring purposes and look for other partners in the future.

This unexpected decision hard-struck Obuasi as the folding up of the company led to the retrenchment of almost all the over five thousand workers. The lay-offs meant that, workers residing in the company's three thousand plus housing units would have to relocate. This brings into mind the conditions of mining towns after the mines are gone never to return again. The African example of the Zambian Copperbelt which served as the backbone of that nation's economy after independence could not hold on to its promising future when it was trembled by market crises from the 1980s (Ferguson, 1999). The towns became wretched and helpless. However, in the early 1990s when Eastern European countries such as Poland, Ukraine, Russia and Romania shutdown or restructured unproductive coal mines, strategies that would make the mining towns relevant were put in place to reduce the negative impact (Haney and

Shkaratan, 2003). The strategies included municipal governments taking over mines properties that were abandoned for the use of the municipality. Also, the closed mines were converted into tourist destinations. The new status of Obuasi reignite the question of future of towns built around mines and other industries. This paper highlights the general living conditions of the former workers with emphasis on the new sources of livelihoods of the ex-miners and their families.

3. Former Mining Towns

Throughout the history of industrialization, many cities, got urbanized and had full of life. They however became *deurbanized* shortly after industrialization started changing face (Martin et al, 2016). This has been a common trend in different parts of the world. The early ages of post-colonial Africa concentrated much on industrialisation in the pursuit of economic development. Urban employment in many countries were driven by the mining arm of the industrial revolution. According to Ferguson (1999), the mineral rich African countries improved beyond countries that were in the same middle-income emerging economies category of the time such as Turkey, Philippines, and Thailand. In Zambia for example, the life of the people living in the Copperbelt region where mining was the main way of life experienced accelerated growth which went ahead to influence the fortunes of the country in comparison to its peers (ibid).

The economic and social development was made possible because of the high prices of the minerals on the world market. The greater focus of sub-Saharan African countries to rely on mineral deposits to attain modernity after their independence exposed them to the mercies of the global trade trends. The fall of the prices becomes disastrous for the agro-mineral economies of African and other third world countries who rely on unprocessed and unrefined raw materials. This is where the vulnerability sets in.

Knapp and his co-editors observed and wrote that:

“When mining finally become economically unfeasible, or when the wider politico-economic systems that created [it] ... broke down, mining villages were abandoned unless their inhabitants had other means of support, or unless the level of production was reorganised to suit the needs and resources of a...society” (Knapp *et al* 1998, p16).

Reporting the effect of the early days of the shock experienced South African mines, Rajak (2011) depicts a disturbing picture of how in July 2009, Anglo America’s announcement of sixty-nine percent in decline in profit for the first half of the year led to eleven percent of labour cut by the end of the year. This move was in anticipation of saving the company from eminent collapse. This is a common practice of many mining companies around the world. Once they notice challenges and high production cost, workers are usually the first target of elimination to save the situation.

In the plutonium mines of Russia and the United States during the cold war, Brown (2013) writes of how the one highly respected workforce and the associated privileges disappeared and the difference that previously existed between the residents of the nuclear production areas and their farmer-neighbours disappeared due to abandonment of the nuclear weapon. Unemployment, desperation, regret and sorrow mix up in the faces and the actions of the former workers when they realise they are no more going to enjoy what they had. The demise of the mining activities in a town causes the subsequent death of the town itself. Knapp *et al* (1998) remark that, such places become unliveable and the best thing that the inhabitants can do is to escape to other places for other opportunities.

Post-mining towns are quick to be described and easy to be fit into “ghost towns” (Rajak, 2011). Cities that have been packed with people in their thousands suddenly become empty and all of its inhabitants disappear. Rustenburg was described by Rajak as a ghost town after the massive layoffs by Anglo Platinum. Informal settlements which houses the non-miners become the first and immediate alternative for post-mines towns. Such kind of settlements are shack in nature and lack water, sewage, waste management and other basic infrastructure. Yet, it turns out to be the lifeline for the former workers. They would have learnt to adjust to these off-the-limit conditions with their children who might be experiencing such a situation for the first time in their lives. Haney and Shkaratan (2003) also agrees that, migration is inevitable anytime a town loses the mines. However, the authors were emphatic that, most of the migrated miners return after few months or years of departure even when the mines is not reinstated. In Romania, the reasons assigned by the returnees was that, they did not fit into the new towns they moved into or did not find any good jobs there.

The future of cities with extractive minerals become uncertain as the resources get depleted. This cast clouds on the sustainability of sources of livelihoods when the mines are closed. Since the mines serve as the spine for the communities around it and contribute to their growth, any bad fate that befalls it has a higher consequence on the communities and its economy. What is common throughout literature about former mining towns is that, unemployment, social instability and vulnerability is eminent almost everywhere. Diversions of housing and social assets from the mining enterprises to local municipalities in Russia and Ukraine, according to Haney and Shkaratan (2003), saved the enormous dilapidation such useful properties to the betterment of the general society. The case of Obuasi contributes in bridging the literature gap in a twenty-first century response to major mines in Ghana.

4. Research Approach

This paper is carved out of wider research on the topic “*The Impact of Closure of Gold Mines on Residential Land Use and Livelihoods in Obuasi, Ghana*”. As Ghana’s oldest and largest commercial mines shuts down, it becomes prudent for this study to find out how the town goes through the transition. A researcher’s knowledge of the study area became an important factor in the ethnographic studies (Crowley-Henry 2009; Whyte 1993). It is important for a researcher’s role and background to be included in thinking through the study. Some of the researchers’ childhood memories of growing up as dependents of miners in the company’s housing estate made them enviable to their peers who lived outside the mines. It has influenced the choice of methodology and the motivation of the study. We see this as an obligation to build on literature of mining and former mining towns in Ghana. This paper mainly present the findings of the question pertaining to livelihood and economic sustenance in post-mining Obuasi.

4.1. Data and the Empirical Study

The paper dwells on field work carried out in 2017 and 2018. The research used ethnographic approaches in the form of observation and semi structured face-to-face interviews with twenty former miners to gather array of first-hand data including factors influencing their choices to build with their severance money. An interview with a chief one of the communities and an official of the Obuasi Municipal Assembly, which is the local government, to get their perspective on the “new” Obuasi. The observation and conversations were also used to gather practical information.

This study is subject-specific; laid-off workers of AngloGold Ashanti Obuasi mines during the shutdown of operations of the company in 2014. A sample size of twenty ex-miners was used for the study in order to acquire detailed information from each of them over the study period.

The total population of former miner in the study area was difficult to determine since there is no official record of who left the town and who remained after the closure. Therefore, convenient sampling and snowballing was the most appropriate method. About thirty-four people were nominated in all and twenty were contacted for the interview. Convenient sampling was used to select the chief of one of the communities and the official from the local government. In order to get a diversified data, the snowballing considered variations such as age, skills and profession in the mines.

Considering that the duration of the field works were relatively short, the researchers used the most appropriate and workable approach to collate as many accurate data as possible within the available time. The study used multiple data collection techniques. This was to ensure quality and somewhat guaranteed accuracy of data provided. This approach is potential in studying people and the meanings attached to social timelines (Sanjek, 2000). In searching for the reason why the people were doing something and how they did it, interviews and observation were the best way to gather the data needed. The field work started with the observation of movements, conversations, and activities. A general observation by driving around to see how busy the town was without the mining activities was conducted.

Interview was the primary sources of gathering information. It provided the respondents a better way to share their experiences and freely discuss their views on specific questions as directed by the interview guide. The interviews provided an avenue to elicit information from the former miners on different themes focused towards the objectives of the research. All responses were simultaneously into a field note book to be better used with follow up questions where clarity was needed. Voice recorder was used after consent of the interviewees were sought. The main language used throughout the interviews was Asante Twi dialect of the Akan language which was subsequently translated into English language for analysis.

5. Reporting the Findings and Discussions

In this section, the findings of the study have been elaborated under two key themes of severance packages and the economic activities in post-mines Obuasi, and living into the future without mining.

5.1. Severance Packages and the Economic activities in Post-mines Obuasi

When AngloGold Ashanti started to lay off the workers, different factors were considered in determining the amount of money each person was due as take home package. The trade union (Ghana Mine Workers Union) negotiated on behalf of the workers. Some of the factors considered during the negotiation included the number of years of work, title or position in the workers' units, salary level at the time of the redundancy, number of years left before retirement, health condition a staff had suffered through the mines among others. The severance packages of the informants in this study varied from each other. For the purpose of this study, the Bank of Ghana forex exchange rate of 3rd April 2017 has been used for all conversions from the Ghana Cedis (GHS) into the US Dollars (USD) and Euro (EUR). On this base date, the exchange rate stood at USD 1 for GHS 4.23 and EUR 1 was exchanged for GHS 4.57.

The respondents were made of senior staff and junior staff workers of the mines. Their severance packages ranged from as high as GHS500,000 as take-home money to as low as GHS10,000. The rank, number of years of service and closeness to retirement age were some of the factors that accounted for the received by the laid-off miners. The only senior staff who participated in the study received an amount more than twice the amount of the junior staff of the same service years. This means that, he can have a better life than all the other junior staff members if they are all using the money for the same purpose. Aside the financial package,

there was no other benefit from the company. This means that, the amount given to a worker becomes his new lifeline going into the future until he or she finds another source of sustainable income.

All the participants admitted to the use of part or the whole of the package to build, complete already started houses or purchase their present homes. The cost of renting a house is relatively higher in urban regions of Ghana. Obuasi is infamously known for expensive living cost because of its mining legacies. This might have influenced the workers to build their own homes so that they would not have to pay any rent to anyone in the future. Living in prestigious company housing, the miners preferred to transition to their own houses after leaving the mines on retirement or early retirement, which ever it may be called. That is a way of continuity of the privacy they enjoyed and would not want to go back to the compound houses where many people lived. It also would make them maintain the middle class status they achieved during their working days and the associated respect that came with it. More than half of the respondents started the entire building process in 2014 and have lived in the completed houses since at least, the end of 2016. This proves that, the severance packages have really formed the major source of housing finance for the majority who could not have afforded to easily own homes without extra financial sources.

After the completion of the buildings, if there were residues, the men part of money to their wives to start trading. The study discovered that all the respondents who had wives gave some of the money to their wives to start trading. The rest were invested into food and cash crop farming to ensure sustainability. Others purchased cars out of it. Some, for the fear of losing the money through trading financial investment schemes such as treasury bills and fixed deposits and other interest yielding investments.

One respondent has been quoted as:

“I received GHS200,000 [.....] I invested in GHS90,000 in this house. I gave some to my wife to start the sales of provisions. I bought a taxi.... expanded my cocoa farm, sponsored my son abroad to study and I invested the rest in a fixed deposit accounts. I rely on the quarterly returns from the bank investment to take care of myself and my family.” *56 year old former underground blastman for 35 years.*

This respondent felt the sense of freedom associated with being his own man rather than an employee of a global company. His ability to do more could be attributed to the amount of money he took home. Because it was huge, in the average Ghanaian standard, he could implement many plans within a short period after his redundancy, unlike many other colleagues of his. It was clear that, people who received more money could do more after the housing projects. The main household expenses as gathered in the study were payments related to utilities bills, health, school fees and housekeeping. The utility bills and health care cost are new expenses which was not incurred during the former miners' times in the company housing and that was fast depleting the remaining portion of their money. In the mines, they lived in detached or semidetached housing which were almost free of charge with full services, water, electricity, health care, leisure centres and other gratified services including free food packages during Christmas and other festive seasons.

Petty trading in the Ghanaian social and economic settings are the preserve of women to a larger extent. Many women are involved in petty trading ranging from table top trading to selling in market stalls and shops. Petty trading is a way a woman supports her husband who is expected to do a skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled job. In the Ghanaian culture, it is the responsibility of a man to take care of his household. The wife would just work to support the household income. In the current Obuasi case, since the miners did not have much money left

to start any large business for themselves, they opened shops for their wives. They then joined them to operate the shops. So, the former miners have created a new kind of partnership between themselves and their wives. When someone approaches the shop to buy anything, the wife would be the first person to attend to the customer. The husband will mostly get involved if the wife is busy. Therefore, the husbands' presence in the shops seem as if they are working, but in reality, they are present to pose as if they are working because their wives run the trade.

One of the respondents however had his own drinking bar where he sold beer and hard liquor, whereas another operated Over the Counter (OTC) chemical shop. There is a ready market for the liquor because many people would want to drink something strong when they are stressed up or even over joyous. The former miners who see themselves as not working spend time drinking from the bar operated by one of their own. The OTC operator was had no hospital nor pharmacy work experience in the mines. He was rather with the water treatment department. He started this business about five years before he left the mines. He did it as part time job in his private residence. He took some courses during his leave periods and obtained the required licence to commence the business. He decided to expand this business now that he can work for himself full time. He stated that he works at least twelve hours each day since the shop was at the entrance of his house and he could close it whenever he felt like going away. That is a symbol of independence and freedom sensed by working for one's self.

Driving commercial vehicles was another common economic activity noticed through the observation. Through observations, the researchers joined one of the respondents who had converted his saloon car into a taxi to make extra money for his family. He worked about twelve hours a day. He loaded from different parts of the town to the central station. The miners easily converted their cars originally bought for their private use into taxi when they realised, they needed to find extra sources of income. Taxi drivers are not among the most respected professionals on the social ladder. Therefore, most people would buy the car, usually used or second hand, and give it to drivers to operate it for them and take sales from the drivers at their agreed period being it daily, weekly or monthly. Therefore, when mineworkers who were the envy of their peers begin to go into driving taxis, it brings to bare the urgency of their needs without a recourse to the respect thereof. They drove their own cars for commercial purposes partly because they don't trust the drivers they might give the car to. The drivers normally give excuses to the vehicle owners why they could not meet the agreed sales amount. They might give excuses such as bad patronage, faulty vehicles and even arrest and fine by the traffic police. When such excuses are cited by the drivers, it is the vehicle owner who loses. This could be the reason why the former miners have decided to drive their own vehicles in order to avoid the cheat that could come as a result of giving the vehicles to other drivers. In the current situation where the former workers are not very sure of the future, they want to protect all sources of income they have now with all their strength.

Farming was also a common source of livelihood to residents identified through the study. Some invested their monies in cash and crop farming for commercial purposes. Other respondents also stated that they were engaging in small crop and vegetable farming so that they could have constant food supply to their household directly from their farms. Over half the Ghanaian population are employed in the agriculture sector since independence (GSS, 2012). However, it contributes very less to the national economy. The reason being that, most of these farmers practice subsistence farming where they produce for themselves and their households only. They sell the little excess to their neighbours to take care of their basic needs. Cash crops such as cocoa, oil palm, coffee and citrus are the ones most farmers grow for commercial purposes. The miners from Obuasi have combined food crops and cash crops. Food crops such as vegetables, cassava, plantains and other staple crops are what they cultivate because it takes short time to mature. They usually serve the needs of the family even in case

of financial difficulties. These crops are also planted at the backyards of the houses for easy accessibilities during preparation of meals.

Majority of the study participants, the former miners, were involved in works far from their occupation they were engaged in the mines. They had all joined the majority of Ghanaians in the informal sector (Hart 1973). There was no trace of mines or para-mining activity in the business the respondents are engaged in. It could be because of the financial commitment needed to go into such activities. Mining and para-mining mining business would also need licenses and sometimes professional qualifications which most of the workers likely would not have. The few people still found dealing in mining in post-AGA Obuasi are largely involved in illegal mining (*galamsey*). These people encroach on the concessions of AGA to mine the gold ore. This business is highly dangerous for the people who engage in it and the environment as well. Since the beginning of 2017, the government has been clumping hard on people engaged in this business. As people who are respected by their communities, most the former mineworkers do not want to engage in these illegalities even though they have the skills and the business yields profit very quickly.

5.2. Living into the Future Obuasi without Mining

A town that had known only mining for over a hundred years would find it difficult to adjust when the mines disappear all of a sudden. Observation around the mining estates, installations and other parts of the town revealed various degrees of dilapidation. The famous staff club houses and leisure centres were weedy and so silent. The housing areas were also weedy and leaves from trees littered the whole area. There were evidence of vandalism and break-ins. The north mines and estates had been approved to be handed to the government but that had not completed yet. That could be the reason why the destruction level is quite high than the properties in the south mines. Possibly because no one was keeping an eye on them in the transition period. The participant from the Municipal authority mentioned that the Municipal government had plans to convert some of the facilities into a campus for the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, so that the town could easily be revived by the student activities that would follow as a result. It was also said that, some of the housing facilities would be renovated to accommodate some of the employees of the municipal authority.

However, few houses looked clean and different from the others in the various housing estates. Drawing closer to these houses, it was observed that, they were occupied. Further probe revealed that most of them were young squatters who had broken into some of the hundreds of vacant properties. Some of the residents were also part of the few limited maintenance staff kept to work on the essential equipment and services of the company. These people included the staff of the AGA Hospital which is now being operated as a public commercial health facility.

Furthermore, the residents and the former workers were inquired through this study to speak about their anticipation of the future of Obuasi. The respondents had varied opinions on how the life in the town looked and how it would affect the immediate and far future. There was however a common trace of doom in their responses for the future if nothing was done. Answering the questions, *'how do you see the future of this town without the mines'*, all respondents passionately had something to say. Words such as disaster, village, collapse, ghost town, dying and revive were repetitive in the descriptions.

In the minds of the people, they felt empty and they saw the town to be empty because there were many men doing nothing or doing jobs that have not been their profession for so long. If one is engaged in drilling long holes underground for the extraction of one of the most precious metals in the world for over twenty years, such a person would likely see himself or her

colleagues as dormant if they suddenly begin something new in the end of their working age. The respondents above aged fifty-five years did not want to be working in the mines anymore, even if it reopened sooner, as the study revealed. They however wanted to see men dressed up each day and going into the mines. Anything short of that was considered worse.

One of the findings of the study was related to cost of living and economic reliability. Obuasi is one of the most expensive towns to live in Ghana because of the mines. When the company closed down, it did not change that condition. It possibly raised prices even higher because people got much richer out of the severance package overnight. Now that most people have used their monies for things that are dear to their hearts, it has been realised how expensive to live in such an economically hyped town without a certain income.

“Obuasi will collapse if the mines doesn’t revive soon. The standard of living is becoming too high and there is no economy to hold it. The government has to do everything possible to revive the mines once again.” 53 year old former underground supervisor for 29 years.

Economic challenges are not the only issues the town is facing now. Some people were of the view that, each town is destined for a specific activity just as each individual is destined to achieve something specific in his or her life. An Obuasi born man did not mince words when he called the mines as a natural gift of the people:

“The mines has been our destiny. Obuasi is always and has always been better with the mines. You see how we have been falling apart now. If the mines is not revived, the town will totally fall apart into something unrecognizable.” 48 year old former tailings dam worker for 22 years.

The above description depicted a sense of natural bond between the people and their land. It could be understood as, the local people believe that, the reason why they were created onto that part of the world and to that particular land was to own and mine the minerals buried in it. Therefore, if the mines have been completely shut down after a century of operation, then, their binding element has been broken causing mass migration and rendering the native people powerless.

Identity crisis seem to have hit the town. One of the ex-miners was straight forward on calling the town as place without identity. He compared the town to a bat in an Akan adage which is neither a mammal nor a bird.

“Most people are now relocating to Kumasi to start trading. They [Kumasi residents] are experts in trading so that is the best place for that. We are miners we cannot just pretend to be traders now. We are in the category of a bat, we have no known identity; we are neither birds, neither are we a mammals”.

Considering the pride, the people take in the mining legacy they enjoy, it is really difficult to admit that they have to forget and move on with the new way of life. Aside the traditions and identity problem, the issues of the local and national economy were a concern of a 57-year-old over the counter (OTC) medicine seller who was a supervisor at the water treatment plant at the mines. He was much concerned with the revenue that went to the state from the operations of the mines that is no more going. Security of the town going into the future was also on the minds of the respondents. One captivating response given by a 44-year-old former miner, a hard liquor seller at the time of the study was:

“If Obuasi doesn’t get the mines back, it will turn into a jungle, only the strongest will survive. People are drinking their heads off every day. Even though that is my source of livelihood now, I feel bad for my colleagues who come around to drink

all day long. Look at what the young boys are doing. Look at the ‘galamsey’ menace. Did you hear that John Owusu (a management member AGA who was run over by a car in an illegal miners’ flash out operation in February 2016) was killed because of galamsey? The government would have to bring the mines back before we all kill each other.”

This respondent makes a case for the town’s need for immediate coordinated effort to breathe new life into the town to make functional again. All respondents expressed much concern for the future of Obuasi. The demise of the mines will affect the moral and traditional purity of the town as many social vices could erupt, the officer of the municipal authority was looking at the official perspectives respectively. The Obuasi Municipal Assembly gets about 20 percent of its revenue from the mines through income taxes and property taxes accruing from the companies housing, industrial and commercial properties. The issue of unemployment is another challenge the municipality is concerned about as they have no good solution outlined at the time of the study.

The residents on the other hand, looked at the issue from the general perspective. Many of the respondents in the study had no intentions to permanently relocate to other towns anytime soon because of their embedded roots within the town and most importantly, their new houses. The interviewees in their forties gave a window for the possibilities to seek for better jobs elsewhere. However, the respondents above fifty years though were the loudest speakers in the current state of the town, were firm in their decisions to remain in the town amidst the miserable pictures they had assumed of the future. Their collective reasons have been that, they are older or getting older and they were not willing to move to any other place to start life all over again.

Therefore, the closure of the Obuasi mines has really created a whole series of phenomena from all levels. Spatially, many houses have been built within a very short time, whereas, almost three thousand housing units belonging to mining company were empty and getting rotten. The new spatial development was not supported by any clear-cut economy. One paradox that is seen in this study is that, though the respondents lament the current state of the town without the mines, they seem to have gained freedom to choose where they want to live and how they want it to look like unlike the company housing. As the former workers miss their constant income, free utilities in a cosy estate housing, they were enjoying the current social life of their new homes and communities. The new development has however created an opportunity for experimentation to test if Obuasi could fit into the list of many informal trading centres in Ghana.

6. Conclusion

This study has revealed that, the recent increase in housing in the town is connected to the closure of the mines. The miners who decided not to migrate, at least not yet, went into building their own houses even before they packed out of the official residence in the mines. They joined the majority (more than half) of Ghanaians living in homes of their own or that of members of their families according to the 2010 population and housing census (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012).

Mususa (2012) has already declared that, mining towns of today are just like any other town. However, Obuasi had a different story. It stood as a definition for an adored mining centre in the Ghanaian contest even though it had its own share of conflict with the communities around. It had created a niche for itself for its mining. However, the closure of the mines has now made the town just like any other. The strong likening of the town to Kumasi, the regional capital and many other towns within the country, for their trading, exemplifies how ordinary it has become. It is therefore not so much marvelling to see underground mining experts working as

anyone else. Obuasi's case may not be at that stage yet but it is quite clear that, without the gold mines and no strategic plan to bring back the town to life as was implemented in the Eastern European countries coal mining towns which were worthless in the early 1990s but later overcame it as outlined by Haney and Shkaratan (2003), the town will hit the disaster of the copperbelt and the plutonium mining towns.

After leaving the mines all the workers who still had some money left in their possession after building went into some form of informal activity. The newly adopted taxi driving job by the former miners fulfils Bromley (1979) assertion that the informal sector provides important services such as transport in countries where there is not enough of those. The ease of entry and exit has made it flexible for the workers to identify themselves with it. As the informal business sector provide a way for people without remunerated jobs to sell to generate income (Bromley 1979 p.1067), the former workers of AngloGold Ashanti Obuasi Mines and their households have identified opportunities in trading of various items from groceries to home decors. The amount of money spent in these ventures were unfortunately low, making it just for subsistence purposes.

It is evident that because most of the miners invested the chunk of the monies into building houses, they were left with little or nothing to rely on as source of livelihood. Majority of the miners have gone into trading of all sorts with their wives as a new way of making a living. Other activities such as farming and driving are also predominant among the workers. As the workers who still declare themselves unemployed sits and lament about the gloomy future of the town they have lived in for many years and call on the government to do everything possible to reopen the mines as soon as possible, they are paradoxically happy about their new homes and neighbourhoods for social reasons as compared to the high rated company housing they lived in.

Former mining towns have been identified through literature to become old and deserted in a short while after the mining as addressed by Ferguson (1999). In Obuasi's case however, new houses are being built making the town much bigger and newer. At the same time, little investment is going into businesses that would have easy liquidation and have the potential to bring new form of socio-economic strength and identity. The social status the miners sought to achieve by investing in housing has been foiled by the less respected occupations they have taken now. To ensure uninterrupted livelihood continuity, or maybe limited interruptions when abrupt closures occur, this paper proposes future research into the possibility of converting the old mining site into technical educational centre and how that could transform the identity of the town and economically.

References

- AngloGold Ashanti (2016) *NEWS RELEASE: AngloGold Ashanti Implements Surrender of 60% of Obuasi Concession; Renews Call for Security*. 9th March 2016. Accessed on 3rd March 2017 at <http://www.futureofobuasi.com/>
- Ayensu, E. S. (1997) *Ashanti Gold: The Legacy of the World's Most Precious Metal, Ashanti Gold*. Marshall Editions. London.
- Bank of Ghana (2007) *The Housing Market in Ghana*. Research Department, Bank of Ghana, Accra.
- Bermudez-Lego, O. (2016) *The Mineral Industry of Ghana: 2013 Minerals Yearbook* [Ghana Advance Release]. US Geological Survey (April 2016). Accessed 10th April, 2017 at <https://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/country/2013/myb3-2013-gh.pdf>

- Bromley, R. [ed] (1979) *The Urban Informal Sector: Critical Perspectives, Employment and Housing Policies*. Elsevier.
- Burrell, G. (2017) The role of Coal-mining Towns in Social Theory: Past, Present and Future. *Global Discourse*. 7(4) 451-468 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2017.1332473>
- Crowley-Henry, M. (2009) *Ethnography: Visions and Versions*. In Hogan et al. [eds] *Ethnography and Participation Observation in Approaches to Qualitative Research Theory and its Practical Guide for dissertation Students*. Cork: Oak Tree Press. 37-64
- Ferguson, J. (1999) *Expectation of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ghana Statistical Service (2012). *2010 Population and Housing Census, Summary of Report of Final Results*. Sakoa Press. Accra.
- Haney, M. and Shkaratan, M. (2003) *Mine closure and its impact on the community Five Years after Mine Closure in Romania, Russia and Ukraine*. Social Development Papers. Environment and Socially Sustainable Development Network, The World Bank. Washington D.C. Paper No. 42, June 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-3083>
- Hart, K. (1973) Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Unemployment in Ghana. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 11(1) 61-89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00008089>
- Hilson, G. and Potter, C. (2005) Structural Adjustment and Subsistence Industry: Artisanal Gold Mining in Ghana. *Development and Change* 36(1): 103–131 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-155X.2005.00404.x>
- Knapp, A. B.; Pigott V. C. and Herbert E. W. (1998) *Social Approaches to an Industrial: Past the Archaeology and Anthropology of Mining*. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203265291>
- Martin, R., Sunley P, Tyler P and Gardiner, B. (2016) *Divergent cities in post-industrial Britain. Future of Cities: Working Paper*. Foresight, Government Office for Science, UK. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsw005>
- Mususa, P. (2012) *Topping UP: Life Amidst Hardship and Death on the Copperbelt*. African Studies. Nordic African Institute. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2012.702971>
- Ofori-Mensah, E. A. (2011). Gold mining and the socio-economic development of Obuasi in Adanse. *African Journal of History and Culture* 3(4) 54-64 Available <http://www.academicjournals.org/AJHC>
- Rajak, D. (2011) *In Good Company: an Anatomy of Corporate Social Responsibility*. Stanford: University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804781619>
- Sanjek, R. (2000). 'Keeping Ethnography Alive in an Urbanizing World', *Human Organisation* 59(3): 280-288. <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.59.3.547311j42374034>
- Taylor, A. A (2006). *An Economic History of the Ashanti Goldfield Corporation, 1895-2004: Land, Labour, Capital and Enterprise*. London School of Economics and Political Science, London.
- Utter, T. (1993) 'Gold Mining Potential of West Africa', *Erzmetall* 46(10): 563–72.
- Whyte, W.F. (1993) Revisiting "Street Corner Society". *Sociological Forum*, 8(2): 285-298. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01115494>