

## Original Research Article

# The Persistence of 'Clandestine' Mining Crafts in Côte d'Ivoire : An Ethnography of the Conditions of Emergence and the Process of Institutionalisation as Explanatory Factors

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**Abstract:** The issue of "illegal" artisanal gold mining is a concern for the state of Côte d'Ivoire. To resolve this phenomenon, measures ranging from awareness-raising to the creation of repression brigades have been taken. Despite these actions, the practice remains. This paper aims to analyse the factors that explain the persistence of 'illegal' artisanal mining in rural Côte d'Ivoire, based on a case study of the sub-prefecture of Hiré, an area where the practice of 'illegal' artisanal mining is developing asymmetrically to that of legal exploitation. The study is essentially qualitative. For data collection, interviews were conducted with different groups of actors who participate in the production system in artisanal mining. The results of the study show that the persistence of artisanal mining is the result of a social innovation that has emerged territorially by establishing itself while leading to a social transformation.

**Keywords:** Persistence, artisanal mining, clandestine, social innovation, social transformation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mining has been the focus of human attention for centuries. Like minerals such as nickel, manganese, copper, diamonds, cobalt, etc., gold is the subject of as many geological, political, economic, cultural, environmental and social interactions.

The practice of artisanal gold mining in Côte d'Ivoire originally did not require prior authorisation from the state and was practised freely. However, in view of the increase in gold mining at national level, the Ivorian authorities opted to liberalise it by issuing a decree "on the regime of artisanal and semi-industrial gold and diamond mining in Côte d'Ivoire [1]".

<sup>1</sup>(Decree n°84-1061 of 13 September 1984). This sets out the legal provisions relating to the artisanal extraction of gold by issuing authorisations for gold panning activities. These regulations have made it possible to draw up the following balance sheet : between 1985 and 1988, the State counted approximately 400 gold miners with a production of

The implementation of this mining policy has encountered a number of obstacles, including : production that is deemed insufficient in terms of tax revenue and contribution to the national economy. A lack of institutional supervision of Ivorian artisanal miners and government inactivity in the face of artisanal mining practices (Official Journal n°40 of Thursday 27 September 1984).

Faced with this situation, artisanal mining did not cease to be practised until national reforms were introduced by the international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank) as a cure for diversifying economic resources and promoting local economic development. In addition to these recommendations, there are international, regional and sub- regional imperatives for the efficient management of gold mineral resources. These include: the fight against poverty, the adoption of "a new strategy adapted to the realities and needs of change in the world of the 21st

two hundred and fifty kilograms of gold (250 kg) officially declared.

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century" (UN, 2000). Adherence to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). Approval of the African Mining Vision (African Union, 2009) and application of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) community mining code. At the local level, this global policy has resulted in the development and revision of the Ivorian mining code to regulate gold mining activities. However, in its application, this mining legislation comes up against the practice of artisanal mining, which has traditionally been maintained and continues to expand freely and even asymmetrically in relation to the provisions of Ivorian law. This phenomenon is characterised by "illegality" and "clandestinity" with regard to the Ivorian mining code and impacts the national economy in terms of taxation; society from the point of view of criminality; the environment due to the degradation of the soil...

Illegal" and "clandestine" artisanal mining is prohibited throughout the country. As a result, the state has drawn up a national programme for the rationalisation of gold panning (PNRO). The application of this mining legislation to all offenders is today the subject of repression by the BRICM (identification, clearing, destruction of illegal sites and the arrest of gold panners) and the installation of local technical committees responsible for monitoring this programme (CTL). The implementation of these measures has led to the following results: the identification and launch of repressive actions of some 429 illegal gold panning sites cleared, closed and 66 gold panners arrested in 2016. (PNRO, 2016).

Despite these state actions, we are witnessing a recolonisation of the sites by the mining operators. Out of a total of 133 sites cleared and closed, 22 are being recolonised in the Bagoué region and 06 expansion sites in the Haut Sassandra). Illegal gold panning in the sub-prefecture of Hiré is not different from this phenomenological reality observed throughout the territory. "The persistence of clandestine artisanal gold mining in Côte d'Ivoire where the phenomenon, although illegal, has been growing for about twenty (20) years." (Goh, 2016).

This study is based on the theory of social innovation. It defines social innovation as 'an intervention initiated by social actors to respond to an aspiration, meet a need, provide a solution or take advantage of an opportunity for action in order to modify social relations, transform a framework for action or propose new cultural orientations' (Saucier *et al.*, 2006; 389-390 quoted by Assogba 2010). In this article, we will analyse the clandestine mining industry by taking into account the components of social

innovation. These include: a new response to a social problem; a social purpose; a plurality of actors; successful experimentation; and institutionalisation.

This contribution is divided into three points. The first point presents the socio-historical context of the emergence of 'clandestine' gold mining in the study site. The second point addresses the question of the organisation and institutionalisation of clandestine mining activities. The last point deals with the local social transformations brought about by the practice of clandestine mining.

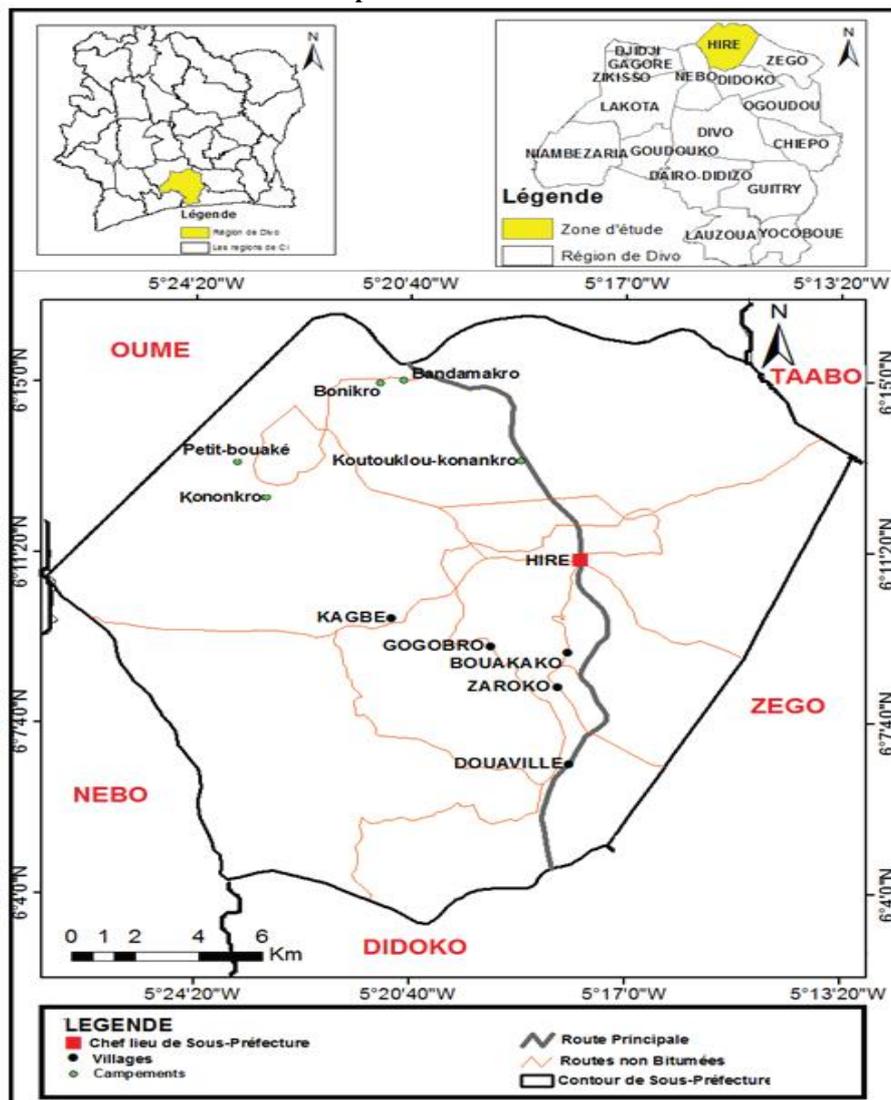
## METHODOLOGY

The study is essentially qualitative. In terms of approach, the ethnographic approach was favoured. The latter focuses more precisely on the daily life experiences of individuals by attempting to better understand the social practices in which they are embedded. This study will be based on the discourse of individuals involved in the practice of mining crafts. This approach is supplemented by data from observation, field surveys and documentary research. These tools have enabled us to understand the perceptions and representations that form the basis of clandestine artisanal mining. Similarly, downstream, they provide us with elements of analysis relating to the social transformations brought about by this gold mining practice.

With regard to the population surveyed, the interviews were conducted on the basis of the opinions of all the actors directly involved in artisanal gold mining in the sub-prefecture of Hiré. A total of 34 individuals were interviewed, distributed as follows: 03 mine managers, 03 landowners, 20 workers, 03 representatives of the local administration (the mayor's office), 05 members of the village chieftaincy.

The study took place in the sub-prefecture of Hiré from 5 to 26 September 2020 with a return to the field from 15 to 21 March 2021 to update the data. Hiré is a locality in the south of Côte d'Ivoire and belongs to the department of Divo, Loh-Djiboua Region. Hiré is the capital of a commune. The population of the sub-prefecture of Hiré is estimated at 50,734 (RGPH, 2014). There are six major villages in the commune which are: Gogobro, Zaroko, Bouakako, Kagbé, Hiré (Yré wata), Douaville. The indigenous owners of the area are the Dida of Vata. They have welcomed many other ethnic groups, mainly the Baoulés Godai, one of the fifteen allies of the Dida, and nationals of the sub-region, mainly the Burkinabés. The commune of Vata is a major producer of coffee and cocoa, but also of gold and many food products.

**Location Map of the Sub-Prefecture of Hiré**



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. The Emergence of Clandestine Gold Mining

Artisanal and clandestine gold mining is the result of a social dynamic linked to several factors. From a diachronic point of view, gold in the sub-prefecture of Hiré has been mined artisanally since the pre-colonial period. According to the documentary sources consulted and the information gathered from the populations interviewed, the beginning of gold mining cannot be dated exactly. However, it can be dated to the period from 1920 to 1940. This era marks the genesis of gold mining in the sub-prefecture of Hiré.

The presence of gold ore in the Birrimian chain of hills from Hiré to Galebo and the socio-economic functions of gold among the Akan, which is perceived as a strategic element within this society (Chauveau, 1978), constitute the historical stakes of its exploitation.

In fact, gold in this locality, populated by indigenous Dida, was mined in an artisanal manner, but this was intensified by the arrival of Baoule non-natives from central Côte d'Ivoire. But at the end of the 1940s, this practice became more dynamic. The traditional exploitation of gold will be slowed down in favour of a semi-industrial exploitation induced by the arrival of French miners followed by Burkinabe and Malian allogeneous workers (Kouadio, 2016).

Alongside this mining economy, which remains the basis of the original formation of the settlement of the sub-prefecture of Hiré, it is worth mentioning the existence of the agricultural activities that punctuate this local economy.

Thus, after the closure of the semi-industrial mines, the main economic activity was agriculture. Initially based on a rural subsistence economy, the production of cash crops such as coffee and cocoa, as in other forest regions of Côte d'Ivoire, remained the focus of rural communities after independence. The

reconversion of former miners and migrants into the creation of farms to the detriment of the mines led to the extinction of gold mining practices.

From 2007 onwards, in a national context of military-political crisis and diversification of economic resources to promote development, the state of Côte d'Ivoire has allowed the creation of mines. This is the context in which the Bonikro gold mine exploitation and processing plant in the sub-prefecture of Hiré was created. However, this initiative is not without effect for the local population. Indeed, several transformations have been observed as a result of the mineralization of the soil observed during the mining prospection. As an immediate consequence, we are witnessing the asymmetrical development of clandestine gold mining by the rural population, which continues to expand locally.

According to our investigations, this behaviour is the result of a combination of several factors which are at the origin of its emergence. These include: the growth of agricultural production in the sub-prefecture of Hiré due to a recession caused by a shortage of cultivable land as a result of the establishment of the mining industry. In addition, the ageing of plantations caused by the fall in the cost of purchasing agricultural products. In addition, there is the quest for mineralised soil in order to extract gold, which is socially represented by mining craftsmen from other localities and the rural population as a symbol of wealth, hence the ideology of rapid earnings and social success. In response to these rural concerns, the practice of artisanal gold mining presents itself as an alternative to the rural economic changes in Hiré.

### 3.2. From the Organisation to the Institutionalisation of Clandestine Extractive Activities

First of all, it is necessary to recall the legal texts governing mining in Côte d'Ivoire and to show the clandestine nature of artisanal mining in Hiré. Gold in this locality is mined illegally and clandestinely, unlike the mining industry which carries out its activities after

obtaining mining titles granted by the State. Indeed, the creation of artisanal mines is not subject to any prior authorisation as recommended by the Ivorian mining code in Article 1: "the owner of the subsoil in Côte d'Ivoire is the State of Côte d'Ivoire" and in Article 5 of the same code: "any individual or legal entity, of Ivorian nationality, may carry out an activity governed by the present law on Ivorian territory on condition that they obtain a mining title or authorisation beforehand". (Ivorian Mining Code). This provision does not seem to apply in full in Hiré, where artisanal mining is the sum of interactions between rural actors without reference to the regulatory mining framework.

The genesis of this activity lies in a group of actors made up of non-native migrants from Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea, indigenous Dida and non-natives from various regions of Côte d'Ivoire. This heterogeneous population forms the basis of the socio-professional organisation of a gold mining site by defining a set of statuses and roles in which these actors are involved.

The institutionalisation of the practice is based on relations of access to land between artisanal miners and landowners. The latter, as holders of customary land access rights, authorise the creation of an artisanal mine, either through a rental contract or through the sale of the mine operator or mine manager to carry out any extraction activity. He is either the owner of the site because he belongs to indigenous lineages or families ; or an entrepreneur who has acquired a plot by purchase.

Organised in a pyramid, the relationship between landowners, mine managers and workers is as follows: "There are people who pay for the land like the big boss. At the top of the pyramid we have the landowners. "We pay taxes to have access to the mine in return for production packaged in bags. For a maximum of ten bags, three bags or two bags are destined for the mine owner, depending on the initial commitments. The latter (landowners), on a contractual basis, allocate and delimit areas, and regulate conflicts between mine managers and between gold miners.



**Photo 1: View of an artisanal gold mine**

At the centre of the structure, the team leaders are individuals who either hold the investment capital or have professional mining experience. They are mine operators. They are in charge of the mine. As such, they participate, organise, finance production, recruit workers, provide medical care for workers, define the terms of payment for workers. In short, they provide the workers with everything they need to ensure production, the daily monitoring of the mine and define the basis of remuneration according to the type of contract : either monthly or on the basis of performance.

At the base of the pyramid we have the workers. "When we come, there are others who go down into the holes. They-they are especially, they are

there, they dig, they fill the bags, there are others too, they pull and bring out the bags" Two categories emerge from these comments. It should be noted that both are part of the production system. These workers who go down into the pits have the task of digging and extracting the stones obtained from crushing the rocks. Others are responsible for bringing up the ore from the pits using ropes tied to plastic containers made from drums and then packing them into bags.

In addition to the workers who exploit the ore underground, there are others whose task is to collect the earth and stones from the pits, crush them and wash them using crushing machines connected to motor pumps, as shown in the image below.



**Photo 2: A shredder**

In addition to this collective production organisation, there are also craftsmen who work independently. "Here! My work consists of recovering the gold-bearing sand from the mine's rejects" "I work with my little brother. We work for our own account", as this gold digger emphasises, to evoke a mode of exploitation of an individual and liberal nature. Indeed, this method of alluvial extraction consists of recovering the nuggets by washing with a tarpaulin. With the authorisation of the landowners and the team leaders they access the site, they work collectively and liberally in small family units from the slag heaps rejected by the miners.

From a structural point of view, the practice of clandestine mining crafts is presented as a response to local social needs, instituted with a view to improving and diversifying rural economic activities previously based on agriculture. In contrast, the institution of artisanal mining in Hiré is not the subject of a social consensus. "Innovation processes are largely marked by opposition, contradictory debates and confrontations' (Gaglio, 2011). This pivotal stage in the trajectory of completion of a social innovation requires an adaptation of the actors followed by a diffusion that is observed through social changes. Thus, what do we retain of the controversial interactions arising from the introduction of new rural economic practices, in other words, what are the social transformations induced by the

clandestine exploitation of gold at the spatio-temporal level?

### **3.3. Local Social Transformations Linked to the Practice of Clandestine Artisanal Mining**

Clandestine artisanal mining is the subject of conflicting interactions between a section of the local population and that of artisanal miners. According to Alter N (2000, quoted by Gaglio G, 2011: 56-57) "innovation maintains an always problematic relationship with order" and "secondly, innovation processes are punctuated by beliefs". From an ideological point of view, the exploitation of gold is perceived by part of the local population who have been settled for more than a century as a negative practice which has caused the upheaval of the social order established in the local scale. It is indeed: the new social use of land which impacts the primary economic activity of the sub-prefecture of Hiré, in particular agriculture. This constituted the first source of income for the populations, to which hunting is added, whether practiced collectively or individually with hunting dogs. In addition to these two activities mentioned, there are others that evolve at the expense of agriculture. Among others; these are crafts (sewing, hairdressing, car mechanics, bicycles, motorcycles, etc.) and trade (sale of food, cosmetics, clothing).

According to the rural actors interviewed, the mining activity in Hiré is at the origin of the losses recorded at the level of agricultural production by the peasants because of the scarcity of cultivable land and labor for the benefit of the craft industry. Mining without however omitting the destruction of the natural resources that it generates precisely the excavation of the grounds for the creation of the underground galleries which return these grounds impracticable with agriculture and hunting. As well as the pollution of waterways observed by the use of chemicals used in the leaching of gold ore such as mercury which constitutes an obstacle to fishing, flora and fauna in the locality.

The institutionalization and persistence of clandestine artisanal mining in the face of the beliefs and representations of local actors is the subject of a screening of uncertainties and obstacles in order to put the envisaged response to social needs.

Thus, the effects generated by the practice of artisanal mining in terms of social transformations will serve as basic elements for analyzing and discussing the sustainability of this practice.

The persistence of artisanal gold mining in Hiré in a clandestine manner is linked to the norms and values that are socially recognized and shared in a consensual manner within rural communities.

Overall, these are positive values relating to gold mining practices at Hiré. It is in fact a question of appearing socially as a rich person, who can have serious property at the work of gold panning : "a person who lacks nothing"

As one worker put it : "I did mechanics in Abidjan ; but I came to join my brother at the mine in order to have money to relaunch my activities in the garage" the exploitation of gold thought from this angle translates a socially recognized acceptance as a springboard allowing rural actors to mobilize financial resources for subsequent investments. Ideologically represented as a quick and immediate means of earning income despite the accidental risks it entails ; artisanal mining is only limited to the financial aspect it provides. This activity makes it possible to partly solve the problem of local unemployment by recruiting workers without taking into account specific skills. As one mine manager put it: "everyone can work in my dama", that is to say that he accepts any individual presenting himself for work on his mining site.

We can note the development of income-generating activities related to the practice of artisanal mining resulting from a reconversion of rural actors as adaptation strategies (Small trade on the sites ; creation of shops, restaurants, bars, housing construction, etc.) from income obtained directly or indirectly from artisanal mining activity.

At the social level, we are witnessing a redefinition of individuals with reference to extractive practices. The mining artisan is socially assigned to the value of wealth. The "rich" in Hiré is no longer the one who owned large plantations, but rather the operator of gold and material goods. As a result, the gold fever arouses a rush of populations towards the deposits both locally and outside the sub-prefecture of Hiré. These motivations are at the origin of the demographic pressure that is observed locally with the presence of migrants from other regions of the country and those from the sub-region. However, this increase in population is not without effect at the spatial level.

An urban dynamism linked to a recurring demand for housing can be seen through the formation and extension of neighborhoods through the construction of new housing such as that at the station. "Before, our fields were on the road to Kagbé. But today with the discovery of gold ; all these spaces are subdivided and people have built houses" reveals a landowner who was previously a peasant and has now converted to real estate with the income from the rental of this land by mining operators.

In addition, the habitat with the advent of extractive activities is experiencing changes in the typological point. Initially collective, the trend of individual type housing due to the lack of land, the reconversion into new economic activities generating monthly income and the expansion of urbanization.

## CONCLUSION

Clandestine artisanal mining is a widespread practice throughout Côte d'Ivoire. This particularly in the sub- prefecture of Hiré dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. However after its interruption for several decades; Artisanal gold mining is experiencing a renewal. Born in a state economic context of diversification of resources and development at the national level; clandestine artisanal mining is developing in parallel with that of the mining industry without however having recourse to the standards of the Ivorian mining code and is expanding locally. This expansion is the result of a constructive and coercive itinerary that starts from its emergence linked to the identification of the social needs of rural actors to end up with its institutionalization at the local level.

Admittedly, this practice, now locally instituted, is the subject of conflicting interactions between state actors and rural populations because of its negative impacts observed at the socio-environmental and health level; however, it remains an economic alternative initiated by rural actors in the context of local development. Based on this fact, this territorialized innovation must therefore be taken into account as a vector of development by involving all the actors at the national level in order to rethink mining

development at the national level in a participatory manner.

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